

### 3. Case Study: Somalia

#### I. Introduction: The Somali Context

An essential point of departure for understanding current manifestations of radical Islamism and jihadi violence in Somalia is an examination of the historical, cultural, environmental, and social context of the country. This section explores key aspects of this Somali context. The core thesis is that *the Somali context has generally tended to inhibit and constrain the rise of radical Islamism* (specifically, Salafi Islam) in both its non-violent and jihadi manifestations. Specifically, the practice of Sufi Islam and its deep integration into Somali culture; the enduring salience of clannism; and Somalia's pragmatic political culture have all inoculated Somali society to some degree from radicalism. Conversely, several newer features of the Somali context, including the diasporization of Somali society, rapid urbanization, and fifteen years of war and state collapse, have eroded some of these inhibitors to radicalism.

**Sufi Islam.** Traditionally, the practice of Islam in Somalia has been described as moderate – a “veil lightly worn.” Islam was and remains integrated into local customs. The strict, conservative *Wahhabist* practice of Islam in neighboring Gulf States was largely unknown in Somalia and considered foreign to Somali culture.

Sufi brotherhoods are the oldest and most widespread Islamic organizations in Somalia, and also cut across clan affiliations. These religious orders are moderate and embrace peaceful co-existence with secular political authorities. The *Qadiriya*, *Salihya*, and *Ahmadiya* sects – found worldwide – are the most influential in Somalia today. Of these, only the *Salihya* sect is distinguished by its involvement in modern politics – it was the sect of Said Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, the “Mad Mullah,” who waged a twenty year war of resistance against British and Italian colonial rule in northern Somalia. It is noteworthy that the two times in Somali history when Islamic identity was successfully mobilized for jihad were both anti-foreign, anti-Christian liberation movements – one, that of Said's anti-colonial resistance and the other a 16<sup>th</sup> century jihad against Abyssinian conquest led by Imam Ahmed Gurey.

**Clannism.** Somalia is a lineage-based society, where virtually all members of society are identified in part by their clan family. Somali clannism is fluid, complex, and frequently misunderstood. At the risk of oversimplification, one can make the case that clannism – especially since the collapse of the state in 1991 – forms the basis for most of the core social institutions and norms of traditional Somali society, including personal identity, rights of access to local resources, customary law (*xeer*), blood payment (*diya*) groups, and social support systems. Islamic identity is one of several “horizontal identities” that cut across clan lines, but in a manner which tends to be subordinate to or which complements rather than challenges the primacy of clannism. Religious leaders are often quite influential, but their authority is generally limited to their own clan. Beyond their clan, their role shifts to that of ambassador or negotiator representing their clan's interests. Likewise, *sharia* law has historically never been a primary source of law, but aspects of *sharia* were assimilated within *xeer*, the indigenous Somali justice system.

Somali sheikhs and religious leaders have traditionally controlled limited judicial functions – typically “family law,” including divorce and inheritance disputes; respected sheikhs are also called upon as arbitrators or peacemakers (*nabadoon*). Despite the ascendance of a political Islamic movement in contemporary Somalia, clannism remains the dominant political logic within which Islamists and *sharia* courts are generally constrained. Because clan is the principal source of individual and household security, it tends to be especially mobilized in a context of state collapse, lawlessness, and chronic insecurity. This works against trans-clan movements like political Islam.

***Pastoralism.*** Historically, most of the Somali population was pastoral or semi-pastoral. Though Somalia has in the past four decades experienced rapid urbanization, an estimated 50-60% of the population is pastoral or agro-pastoral. Pastoral populations are typically difficult to organize politically, for obvious reasons. This constitutes a constraint on Islamist movements seeking to mobilize communities. Pastoral mobility is an additional constraint on any movement seeking to establish a secret base – nomads are quick to learn of movements of strangers on their territory, and will contest any presence they deem contrary to their interests. An important part of Somali pastoral culture is also information sharing – what some have termed the “bush radio.” News and rumors are rapidly spread by word of mouth, making it difficult for both Somalis and foreigners to maintain secrecy.

***Cultural pride/suspicion of outsiders.*** Perhaps more than most societies, Somalis tend to be suspicious of the motives of foreigners and quick to take offense at perceived imposition of foreign values. This can manifest itself in a fierce sense of national pride, as well as in a tendency towards xenophobia. This has historically served to insulate Somali Islam from Salafi influences, which are viewed by Somalis as “non-Somali,” Saudi Wahhabism.

***Pragmatism.*** For a variety of reasons, Somali political culture is exceptionally pragmatic. Some observers link this to the physical environment itself, a harsh semi-arid environment which leaves little margin for error for pastoralists hoping to survive the dry season. Somalis have been especially expedient with foreign ideologies, adopting them when beneficial and discarding them the moment they become a liability. Related to this is a culture of negotiation that permeates Somali society and encourages Somalis to recalculate their bargaining position in partnerships on a daily basis. This aspect of Somali political culture provides little traction for movements based on sustained commitment to an abstract cause.

***Diasporization of Somali society.*** More recent changes in the Somali context – especially since 1990 – are making Somali society somewhat more susceptible to radical Islam. The first is the transformation of Somalia into a diasporic nation. Beginning in the 1970s, growing numbers of Somalis traveled to the Gulf States or Egypt as migrant laborers or students, where they were exposed to Salafist teachings of Islam. Many of the leaders of Somalia’s multiple Islamist groups share this background. Since the onset of Somalia’s civil wars in the late 1980s, over one million of the country’s 8-9 million people fled as refugees, settling in Europe, North America, and in countries in Africa and the Middle East. The diaspora today plays a powerful and complex role in Somalia’s economy and its political life. Remittances total up to one billion dollars annually, keeping the

economy afloat. Many if not most of the key leaders in secular political groupings, Islamist movements and civil society organizations are diaspora members. Some of the hardline Somali Islamists are diaspora members as well. Islamists have successfully recruited young Somali diaspora members to return to Somalia to join jihadi militias.

**Urbanization.** Though Somalia remains a mainly rural society, with about 60% of the population engaged in pastoral, agro-pastoral or farming activities, Somalia's urban centers have exploded in growth over the past twenty years. Mogadishu, which was home to only 40,000 inhabitants in the 1940s, is now a city of over one million. Hargeisa, capital of the secessionist state of Somaliland in the north, is the fastest growing large city in Somalia and is expected to reach one million people in coming years. Several small cities – including Bosaso, Galkayo, and Burao – have also seen dramatic growth since the outbreak of war in 1991. Each new humanitarian crisis and war in Somalia produces another wave of displaced rural dwellers into towns and cities; most do not return to rural life. For a variety of reasons, settled urban populations are easier to reach for Islamist movements, making this growing portion of the Somali population more susceptible to recruitment.

## II. The Context of State Collapse

Somalia has been without a functional central government since January 1991, making it the longest-running instance of complete state collapse in post-colonial history. This unique context of state collapse has been an important factor in the evolution of both non-violent and jihadi Islamic movements in the country.

Over a dozen national peace conferences have been launched unsuccessfully over a fourteen year period, including the sustained efforts of a large UN peacekeeping mission in 1993-95 (UNOSOM). The latest reconciliation effort produced the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which was declared in October 2004. At present, the TFG's prospects do not look good. But even in a best-case scenario, the TFG will possess only modest and loose control over the country. For the next several years, Somalia will remain a *de facto* collapsed state.

**Governance without Government.** Contrary to much of what is written in the popular press, the prolonged collapse of central government has not led to complete anarchy. Important changes have occurred since the early 1990s in the nature of armed conflict, governance and lawlessness, rendering the country less anarchic than before. Contemporary Somalia is without government but not without governance. Armed conflict is now more localized, less lethal, and of much shorter duration. Criminality, though still a serious problem, is much better contained than in the early 1990s, when egregious crimes could be committed with impunity. A variety of local forms of governance have emerged to provide Somali communities with at least minimal levels of public order. Informal rule of law has emerged via local *sharia* courts, neighborhood watch groups, the reassertion of customary law and blood compensation payments and the robust growth of private security forces protecting business assets. More formal administrative structures have been established at the municipal, regional and trans-regional levels as well. Somaliland in the north is by far the most developed of these polities, and has made important gains since the late 1990s in consolidating rule of law,

multi-party democracy, functional ministries and public security. Other sub-state administrations have tended to be vulnerable to spoilers and internal division or have had only a weak capacity to project authority and deliver core services. Collectively, these informal and formal systems of governance fall well short of delivering the basic public security and services expected of a central government, but they provide a certain level of predictability and security to local communities.

***Interests and State Collapse.*** This phenomenon of “governance without government” has been driven by gradual shifts in the interests of key local actors and in the manner in which they seek to protect and advance those interests. The general trend is toward greater interests in improved security, rule of law and predictability. This shift in interests can be traced to the inadvertent impact of the UNOSOM presence in Mogadishu in 1993-1994. Though the intervention itself was a failure, the large UN operation poured an enormous amount of money, employment and contract opportunities into the country, which helped to stimulate and strengthen legitimate business, shifting business activities away from a war economy toward construction, telecommunications, trade and services. In the process, it helped to reshape local interests in security and rule of law, and eventually local power relations as well. It also helped give rise to a business community in Mogadishu which by 1999 broke free of local warlords and bought militiamen out from beneath them. The result is that today the businessmen’s private security forces are the largest and best-armed militias in the city, and warlords, though still potential spoilers, are not nearly as powerful as before.

The evolving interest in rule of law and predictability is not only an agenda increasingly embraced by businessmen. It is also actively promoted by neighborhood groups, who have formed local security watch groups to patrol their streets. These groups consist of professionals, especially in education and health sectors, who are at the forefront of Somalia’s nascent “civil society;” clan elders, who are seeking to recoup their traditional role as peacemakers; and even many militiamen, who over time prefer the stability of a paid job in a private security force to the dangers of banditry. In many instances these changes constitute potential opportunities for reconciliation and state-building.

It is important to recognize, though, that some Somali constituencies which have a growing appreciation for improved public security are not necessarily strong advocates of a return to centralized government. A revived central state poses a potential threat—to impose taxes, restrict or regulate certain types of economic activities, and potentially turn into an instrument of predation and dominance that empowered clans and groups will wield at the expense of their rivals. The collective Somali experience of the central state has not been a positive one and tends to produce “zero-sum” thinking about a revived state. This tends to multiply the number of spoilers when peace talks reach discussions of power-sharing.

The rise of non-state actors as essential components of informal governance and security systems in Somalia has posed a challenge to external organizations accustomed to dealing only with state counterparts. Over the past fifteen years, most development agencies have learned to adapt to this unusual operating environment by creating Memoranda of Understanding with whatever local authorities they encounter on the

ground. These MOUs range from agreements or provision of security to international aid workers to procedures for hiring and allocation of contracts. The UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) oversees MOUs with local authorities and militias on security matters; and neighboring states Ethiopia and Kenya routinely conduct diplomacy with clan leaders in border areas to manage cross-border security issues. These relationships are fragile and if mishandled can compromise local counterparts. The ability of external actors to partner with local non-state actors remains a challenge and a work in progress.

Both progressive and hard-line Islamic movements have benefited from the prolonged collapse of the central state in Somalia. The complete collapse of government social services, for instance, has provided Islamic charities the opportunity to become the primary provider of education and health care services. The absence of a formal judiciary has enabled local *sharia* courts to step into the vacuum at the neighborhood level. For the most part, these social service providers and local *sharia* courts were and are not radical. Most *sharia* courts are controlled by clan elders and businessmen and operated by traditional Sufi clerics, while most of the Islamic social services are associated with more progressive Islamists.

However, hardline Islamists have also exploited the prolonged collapse of the state in Somalia. As discussed below, hardline Somali Islamists were able to capture control of the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) in 2006 and drive that umbrella movement into increasingly radical and ultimately self-destructive policies. These Islamists also forged links to foreign al-Qa'ida affiliates in the 1990s and later provided several terror suspects safe haven in Somalia. Hardline Islamists in Somalia were very successful at exploiting two commodities which Somali communities desperately craved after fifteen years of civil war and state collapse—a sense of public security and a sense of unity. By providing impressive levels of public order and policing in Mogadishu, and by appealing to a common identity as Somali Muslims rather than clans, the CIC attracted a considerable amount of public support from Somalis at home and abroad. They solidified this public support still further by tapping into strong anti-Ethiopian sentiments. By declaring jihad on Ethiopia, they successfully conflated Somali nationalism, anti-Ethiopianism and Islamism, mobilizing support from a broad range of Somali society, even those who were uncomfortable with some aspects of their Islamist agenda.

The balance of power between “moderates” and “hardliners” among Somali Islamists has been in a constant state of flux and is shaped principally by a combination of access to resources, coercive capacity to intimidate and the broader political context. Generally, situations marked by heightened external threats play to the interests of hardliners, while conditions favoring negotiations, compromise and normalization play into the hands of moderates. Not surprisingly, Islamist hardliners have sought to manufacture conditions of jihad with Ethiopia as a means of consolidating power and marginalizing moderate rivals.

***State collapse and terrorist safe havens.*** It is often claimed that zones of complete state collapse are ideal safe havens for al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups. The case of Somalia suggests a more complex relationship between “ungoverned space” and terrorist activity. Recent research reviewing empirical evidence of Islamic terrorist activity in the

Horn of Africa demonstrates that al-Qa'ida and its affiliates in the Horn have found Kenya a much more conducive country from which to operate than state-less Somalia. Somalia, it is argued, plays a niche role for terrorists—mainly as a transshipment point for men, money and materiel into east Africa, and in a small number of cases as a safe haven for al-Qa'ida operatives fleeing from the law in Kenya. But Somalia's condition of lawlessness and complete state collapse produces constraints and dangers for terrorist cells just as it creates what aid agencies refer to obliquely as a “non-permissive environment.” Foreign terror suspects operating in Somalia are prone to extortion and betrayal; can get caught up in clan conflicts; are easily visible in a context of few foreign visitors; and face difficulties of communication, transportation, disease and access to clean water. The Harmony documents provide an excellent opportunity to test these claims in the existing literature.

### **III. Islamic Radicalism and al-Qa'ida Activity in Somalia since 1990**

Political Islam in Somalia – that is, any movement expressing overt political objectives organized around the identity and principals of Islam – has been through two full cycles of ascendance and collapse since 1990. This section provides a brief overview of the main trends driving the rise and fall of radical Somali Islamic movements and related al-Qa'ida activities. More detailed studies of Somali Islamists and foreign al-Qa'ida activities are available in published studies such as the excellent series of reports put out by the International Crisis Group.

Two points must be made at the outset. First, most manifestations of Islamist revival in Somalia cannot be considered radical. The al-Islah Salafi movement, for instance, is generally considered to be a progressive and relatively moderate movement, despite efforts by critics to tar it with the same brush as al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAI). Others, such as Tabliq, are missionary movements promoting rigid and strict adherence to Salafi interpretations of Islam but are focused on social, not political transformation. Graduates from Tabliq madrassas are nonetheless much more inclined to embrace radical and even jihadi agendas, making the distinction between “non-political” and “political” Islam difficult; equally problematic is drawing a meaningful distinction between “moderates,” “radicals,” and “jihadis.”

Second, the dozens of Somali Islamist movements which sprang up in the late 1980s and early 1990s emerged independent of al-Qa'ida support. Al-Qa'ida began expanding cooperation with AIAI only after the group had already been engaged in several losing battles in the Somali civil war and after one branch of AIAI established control over the district of Lu'uq near the Ethiopian border. Most of the top leadership of AIAI had served as heads of precursor Islamist organizations as far back as the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> AIAI was, in sum, a relatively established, independent organization and one with a leadership complex that was set in place. Non-Somali al-Qa'ida operatives were not therefore in a position to dictate terms to AIAI, and had only marginal influence over the national leadership. There were multiple tensions within AIAI—vertical tensions involving disputes between top leaders and field commanders, and horizontal fissures that

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<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group, *Somalia's Islamists*, Africa Report No. 100 (Nairobi/Brussels: December, 2005), 3. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3830&l=1>.

tended to manifest themselves along clan fault lines. The vertical tensions produced a context in which the problem of “agency” existed on multiple tiers. While al-Qa’ida sought to shape and direct AIAI activities in Somalia, it confronted internal AIAI problems of agency pitting Islamist leadership against local jihadi commanders.

*The first wave: 1990-1992*

The dozens of small Islamist movements which arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s coalesced into the AIAI movement. The Islamist movement briefly enjoyed rapid growth and strong support from cadres across clan lines in 1991, at one point boasting over a thousand men under arms and control of key seaports at Merka and Kismayo. The movement nearly took control of the northern seaport of Bosaso as well, but a combination of poor command and control, inexperience and clan divisions helped to produce serious setbacks which convinced most of the members that Somalia was not ready for an Islamic state and that da’wa, or preaching and proselytizing, was needed rather than jihad.

In the period from April 1991 to mid-1992, AIAI suffered two major setbacks. First, in April 1991, mainly Darood clan AIAI fighters fought a losing battle north of Kismayo against the forces of General Mohamed Farah Aideed. The Islamist fighters were convinced to protect the city by their clan elders, who duplicitously promised to set up an Islamic emirate in Kismayo in return for AIAI’s protection. At the time, senior AIAI leaders urged the fighters to fall back from the Jubba Valley to avoid a calamity, but the AIAI youth were intent on fighting and refused the more cautious council of the leadership.<sup>2</sup> This was the first of what would become a series of differences in opinion between the more cautious national leadership of AIAI and militant commanders in the field. In the aftermath, AIAI restructured decision-making in an attempt to concentrate power in the hands of senior figures.

The second setback for AIAI occurred in Bosaso, Puntland, in 1992. There, the AIAI (including many fighters returning from Kismayo) settled and created what one analysis describes as a state within a state in Northeast Somalia, taking over control of seaport revenues.<sup>3</sup> AIAI briefly took control of all main towns in the region and declared an Islamic administration, but the dominant Mijerteen clan in the Northeast assembled a militia which routed the Islamists. An estimated 600 died and the rest fled into the remote coastal settlement of Los Qorey in Somaliland. Thereafter the main unit of AIAI gradually dispersed back into their own communities. With the exception of two branches of AIAI – the mainly Marehan clan unit that controlled the town of Lu’uq, and the mainly Ogaden clan movement based in Ethiopia – the rest of AIAI dissolved itself, becoming what some analysts refer to as an “alumni network.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6.

Ebb tide: 1992-2000.

Following the dissolution of AIAI in Los Qorey, the movement continued to operate as a discrete organization in two areas—Lu’uq, a stronghold dominated by Islamists mainly from the Marehan clan in the Somali region, and Ethiopia, where mainly Ogaden clan members of AIAI operated. Terrorist attacks against government and civilian targets by the Ethiopian branch of the AIAI in 1995 produced an Ethiopian crackdown on Islamists in the Somali region and also resulted in Ethiopian military attacks on Lu’uq, which was believed by the Ethiopians to have provided logistical support for the Ethiopian-based AIAI. Islamists fled Lu’uq and dispersed back to their own communities. AIAI was described at this point as a “spent force” in Somalia.

Though this appeared to be a low water mark for Islamism in Somalia, it was actually an important period of rebuilding and regrouping. Ex-AIAI members established themselves in business networks, in education, the media and the judiciary, building a base which would later prove critical to the new Islamist movement. An impressive network of Islamic schools, hospitals and charities sprang up, especially in Mogadishu. Locally, communities began to establish neighborhood, clan-based *sharia* courts to provide for themselves a modicum of rule of law. These *sharia* courts were not radical – they were funded by businesses, overseen by clan elders, and operated by traditional clerics. But they would later be used as a base for more politically minded Islamists. By 2000, political Islamism in Mogadishu was clearly an ascendant force. But the particular manifestation of political Islam that would emerge—progressive, moderate Islamism or radical jihadi Islam—was not a foregone conclusion.

The second wave: 2000-2006.

Since 2000, Islamist leaders with clear national ambitions – including Hassan Dahir Aweys – have resurfaced and used a succession of Islamic court umbrella movements as a platform to advance their national political aspirations. This period of recent Islamic ascendance is well-known and extensively documented and need not be repeated here.<sup>4</sup> What is important to stress is that the umbrella movement of *sharia* courts (which eventually became known as the Council of Islamic Courts, or CIC) developed its own financial support from local businesses and contributions from abroad; developed the most powerful, committed and well-trained militia in the country; attracted support from across a range of different clans; and at a fairly early stage struggled with an internal split between moderates and hard-liners, including a jihadi militia unit known as the *shabaab* which conducted a dirty war of political assassinations in Mogadishu from 2004 to 2006. The jihadis within the movement were also responsible for providing safe haven to a small number of foreign al-Qa’ida figures wanted for the 1998 terrorist attacks on U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

It was the CIC which decisively defeated the U.S.-backed Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism in June 2006, expanding its control over all of Mogadishu and most of south-central Somalia. Over the second half of 2006, the CIC veered increasingly into more radical social and foreign policies, including declarations

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<sup>4</sup> See the series of International Crisis Group reports since 2002.

of jihad on neighboring Ethiopia. By fall of 2006, war between Ethiopia and the Courts was viewed as likely if not inevitable. The fear was that war was exactly what the jihadis wanted, and that they would use a protracted urban guerilla war against Ethiopia to generate backing from throughout the Islamic world.

*Ebb tide or tsunami? 2007 and beyond.*

The war did take place, but not as most expected. Ethiopia's decisive rout of the CIC forces in initial battles, and the subsequent decision to dissolve the CIC and return militia and weapons back to clan elders in Mogadishu, precipitated a dramatic and sudden collapse of what had appeared to be a robust and politically ascendant Islamist movement. For the third time in fifteen years (1991-92 in Kismayo and Bosaso, in 1996 in Lu'uq, and in 2006 in Mogadishu) an Islamist movement in Somalia appeared to make fatally poor tactical choices, producing military defeats that exposed the thinness of their public support. If past trends are to hold, we can expect the Islamists to disperse, focus again on da'wa and building business and social networks within their communities, and wait before attempting another political or jihadi initiative. But at least some indicators suggest that this time the loss at the hands of the Ethiopians could produce a quick resurgence of radicalized jihadi violence in Somalia.

#### **IV. Assessment of Harmony Documents on Somalia**

Somalia is a prominent topic in the translated documents, comprising several hundred pages of transcripts, released for this report. All but one of these documents is sourced to al-Qa'ida operatives.<sup>5</sup> All but two documents are dated, or appear to have been written, between 1991 through 1995. This was a period of enormous upheaval in Somalia, and included the following events:

- a prolonged crisis of state collapse, civil war, and famine (January 1991-December 1992);
- the U.S.-led UNITAF humanitarian intervention (December 1992-May 1993);
- the handover to the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) and the protracted armed clashes pitting the UN and U.S. forces against the militia of General Mohamed Farah Aideed in Mogadishu, culminating in the "Black Hawk Down" battle of October 3-4, 1993 (June-October 1993).
- the subsequent period of failed UNOSOM efforts to broker a deal to revive a Somali state, ending with the UNOSOM withdrawal (October 1993-March 1995).

This was also a period when al-Qa'ida was first attempting to forge cooperative relations with Somali Islamists, establish training camps in Somalia and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia (known today as the "Somali region"), develop cells and a regional base of operations in Kenya and, upon the announcement of a U.S.-led humanitarian

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<sup>5</sup> The exception is a secret letter from the Intelligence Service of the Iraqi Embassy in Djibouti to the Director-office of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, regarding radical Islamist activities in Djibouti and Somaliland, October 2001. Harmony, ISGQ-2005-00024493.

intervention in Somalia in late November 1992, target U.S. and UN forces in Somalia. Most of the Somalia documents in the Harmony project thus reflect the concerns and preoccupations of al-Qa'ida at a very particular moment in the group's recent history in Somalia, a period defined by preliminary assessments, initial forays and, not surprisingly given the operational challenges that Somalia posed to all outsiders, initial mistakes.

An important backdrop to the Somalia Harmony documents of 1991-1994 is the relocation of Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan to Sudan in 1992, and the rise of Sudan as a major terrorist safe haven throughout the early to mid 1990s. Al-Qa'ida's increased penetration of East Africa, and its preoccupation with derailing the U.S. and UN intervention in Somalia, is in part a function of al-Qa'ida's physical presence in Sudan at the time.

Appropriate caution must be used in reaching unqualified conclusions about al-Qa'ida and Somali Islamists on the basis of this collection. First, the documents themselves are often fragmentary, due to damage or illegible handwriting. Second, they constitute only a small portion of the correspondence al-Qa'ida operatives certainly produced during this period. Third, some of the reports appear to make questionable claims of responsibility for events that al-Qa'ida may not have had a hand in the potential for self-promotion and inflated claims in these communications must be considered.<sup>6</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, at least some of the al-Qa'ida figures who produced these reports were new to the region, resulting in reports that are often simply mistaken about everything from basic Somali geography and clans to explanations of Somali politics.

That said, much can be gleaned from these documents, which are a treasure trove of invaluable evidence of al-Qa'ida's involvement in and perceptions of Somalia. They are equally valuable as glimpses into the internal debates and power struggles of the Somali Islamists themselves. Much of the documentation from this collection serves to reinforce widely held views about the nature of Islamic radicalism in Somalia; in some cases the documents challenge conventional wisdom.

In this section, observations about what the Somali Harmony documents tell us are broken down by topic.

### *Objectives of al-Qa'ida in Somalia.*

The initial objective of al-Qa'ida, as it made preliminary contacts with Somali Islamists, was to explore an alternative base of operations to Afghanistan. Presumably the arrangement struck with the government of Sudan in 1992 reduced the urgency of this objective. Thereafter, the primary mission appears to be to promote recruitment and establish training bases in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and inside Somalia in support of the Somali "mujahideen." Expeditions and training exercises are conducted in the Somali region of Ethiopia; exploratory missions are sent to Ras Kamboni along the southernmost

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<sup>6</sup> Such claims present leaders with a real problem. They cannot observe whether their operatives in Somalia are working hard to make alliances with problematic clan leaders or not. This may be one reason al-Qaida leaders required extensive reporting despite the obvious security risks this entailed.

Somali coast; and frequent flights to Lu'uq, the town held by AIAI from 1991 to 1996, are made for meetings with AIAI leadership.<sup>7</sup>

That the period of 1991-93 constituted an early, exploratory phase for al-Qa'ida in Somalia is clear from documents discussing the initial establishment of an operational base in Kenya and from the very rudimentary, often glaringly inaccurate knowledge that the al-Qa'ida operatives have of Somalia (discussed below).

The wildcard that transforms al-Qa'ida objectives in Somalia is, of course, the sudden announcement of the U.S.-led humanitarian intervention into Somalia in December 1992. Thereafter, the abiding preoccupation expressed in the documents is the need to attack and derail the U.S./UN mission. On this count the Harmony documents confirm existing evidence from the *USA vs. Usama bin Laden et al.* trial, in which al-Qa'ida views the intervention in Somalia as a first step by the U.S. toward Sudan. In this sense, Somalia is a subsidiary priority for al-Qa'ida—the main objective is to thwart a dangerous precedent of American armed intervention in the Horn which could endanger al-Qa'ida's base in Sudan. Ironically, Somalia was a subsidiary priority for the United States as well, which intervened in Somalia, according to then Acting Secretary of State Larry Eagleburger, “because it wasn't Bosnia”—in other words, to set a precedent for robust UN peace enforcement in a place where it appeared doable.

The fact that al-Qa'ida had established working relations with Somali Islamists in 1991 and 1992, and earned at least a modest working knowledge of the country during that time, is recognized by al-Qa'ida operatives as a major advantage once the U.S. “Operation Restore Hope” forces arrived. “Your early arrival on Somali soil ahead of the enemy America gave you an excellent opportunity to gain knowledge of the battleground ... and understand ... the social and political situation,” notes the author of “The Third Letter to the African Corps.”<sup>8</sup>

The longer-term objectives of al-Qa'ida in Somalia appear to get lost once the American and UN presence is established there, at which point the sole preoccupation of the movement becomes striking at the enemy. The longer-term dispensation of Somalia is not given much attention, to the chagrin of one al-Qa'ida observer writing in 1995:

The West was defeated and fled Somalia.... [But] the original problem that you went to address still exists. What happened to the Somali Salafia and where is it now...? Did you suddenly go to Somalia and suddenly withdraw, as happened in Afghanistan, without accomplishing any clear objective or follow up the victory and benefit from it to accomplish additional victories?<sup>9</sup>

#### Agency Problems.

One of the most fascinating findings emerging from review of the Harmony Somalia documents is the tensions within the triangular relationships involving the foreign al-Qa'ida operatives, the national-level AIAI leadership and the local Islamist commanders.

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<sup>7</sup> Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104; Harmony, AFGP-2002-800597; Harmony, AFGP-2002-600113.

<sup>8</sup> Harmony, AFGP-2002-600053, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The tensions in these relations, which occasionally express themselves in incentives in some of the documents, arise from problems of agency.

The first sign of a power struggle between AIAI leadership and militant field commanders occurred in 1991 outside of Kismayo where, as was noted above, AIAI senior officials argued in vain for a withdrawal. Following the crushing defeat of AIAI in Bosaso in 1992, national leadership of AIAI no longer sought to hold territory and no longer saw jihad as an appropriate tactic. AIAI's top leaders believed instead that Somalia was unprepared for an Islamic state and required da'wa, or preaching, first. This position reflected the fact that AIAI leadership itself had concluded that the contextual factors noted in the first section of this chapter were indeed real constraints on political Islam and required a generational project of resocializing and preparing Somali society. This long-term and more incremental vision clashed with the desires of the more militant field commanders, especially those in the Somali region of Ethiopia. The Harmony documents capture this tension repeatedly.

In one of the best-developed examples, an al-Qa'ida operative, Saif al-Islam, is providing training to a unit of Ethiopian Somali Islamists in a remote camp in Somali region in July 1993. After first dealing with his own problems of "agency" (his al-Qa'ida superior repeatedly postpones committing to assistance to the Somali Ethiopian cell, and drags his feet on bestowing upon Saif the right to represent al-Qa'ida in discussions with AIAI), Saif must manage an emerging split between the more militant Ethiopian wing and their AIAI leaders in Somalia proper. The Ethiopian AIAI wing issues a decree which commits them to continued jihad against the government of Ethiopia, and which decides to separate from the General Islamic Union in Somalia (AIAI) due to its decision "to abandon jihad for the pursuit of peaceful solutions." The Ethiopia wing also confided to Saif that AIAI leadership "was angry with us when we contacted you in Sudan."<sup>10</sup>

What emerges from the collection of Harmony project documents is a tense triangular relationship in which the foreign al-Qa'ida operatives and the militant field commanders tend to share a common set of interests and perspectives in opposition to the AIAI leadership, which is perceived as too cautious and political. The position of the AIAI leadership accurately reflects the Somali penchant for pragmatism and risk aversion described earlier in this chapter.

#### *Problems of Preference Divergence.*

Al-Qa'ida operatives clearly desire jihadi attacks against the "enemy" (the U.S./UN in Somalia, Ethiopian forces in Ethiopia). Those high-risk preferences based on a global agenda diverge from the agenda of the AIAI leadership, which seeks power nationally and is less inclined to take on the risks of attacking the U.S. military. In one report, al-Qa'ida operatives meet with AIAI leader "Sheikh Hassan Tahir" (Hassan Dahir Aweys)<sup>11</sup> in 1993 and promise to fund "all operations" of AIAI if it engages in military operations against the U.S.; otherwise, al-Qa'ida will continue to aid the secular resistance forces

<sup>10</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600104, 15.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix B-III for a more in-depth discussion of Aweys. Also, see Harmony, AFGP-2002-800611 for a Kenya Visa Application with the name of Hassan Aweys. Ironically, this document was seized by U.S. Forces in Afghanistan during the 2002 timeframe.

(factional militias). Sheikh Hassan's response is that "the time is not right to start conducting jihad" and that "they must work against the Americans through political means."<sup>12</sup> In a separate communication, this preference on the part of the top AIAI leadership to avoid or postpone jihad is treated with contempt by an al-Qa'ida official, who concludes that "only a coward or scoundrel would say such a thing." He continues: "I have no doubt that even Saddam Hussein, Aided, Arafat, Sayyaf, Hikmatyar, and Burhan have more manhood than they have. Like the latter, they are useless. Beware of them."<sup>13</sup>

### Clannism.

The Somali Islamist movement in 1991-96 was divided to some degree by clan, and at any rate was forced to operate in a context in which clannism was a highly mobilized and politically exploited identity. This confronted al-Qa'ida with horizontal as well as vertical cleavages in its local ally. Most of the al-Qa'ida operatives who write in these documents were new to Somalia and were poorly equipped to understand the complexities of Somali clannism. Their reports are littered with crude, inaccurate descriptions of Somali lineages and express the same level of bewilderment over clannism that one frequently hears from international aid workers and diplomats. Clannism is said by the al-Qa'ida reporters to infuse the Islamic movement itself. "Each member of the movement is fanatically attached to his tribe," complains one entry.<sup>14</sup> Another entry, from the Somali region in Ethiopia, reveals the extent to which the Islamists were unwelcome by local clans.

In several instances, documents reveal that al-Qa'ida encounters difficulties because its local Islamist allies are predominantly from one clan and are resisted by rival clans. Here al-Qa'ida runs into the same difficulty that so many international NGOs have faced in the field—the prospect of being "captured" by one clan and earning the enmity of others in the process.

### Leadership and Organization.

A major complaint of the foreign al-Qa'ida figures writing in the Harmony documents is the poor leadership and organization of the Somali Islamic movement. At the time most of these documents were produced, AIAI had more or less dissolved itself as a formal organization, operating more like a loose network. Hence it is not surprising that al-Qa'ida discovers a lack of organization. It specifically complains about corruption and financial mismanagement,<sup>15</sup> and lack of chain of command. "How is it," one entry chides, "that military force is employed by order of civilians and the military commander doesn't even know about it?"<sup>16</sup> The disastrous early military losses by AIAI in Kismayo and Bosaso are also assessed as the result of faulty leadership. Interestingly, Hassan Dahir Aweys, the CIC leader who was a principal architect of the disastrous Islamist war with Ethiopia in December 2006, was a commander in both of those early losses.

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<sup>12</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600110, 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600053, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-800640, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002 600104, 19;

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

### Islamic Charities.

Following the 9/11 attacks, a number of Islamic charities operating in Somalia and Kenya were shut down on the grounds that they were being used as fronts for al-Qa'ida. The Harmony documents do not provide any specific evidence to back up charges against particular Islamic NGOs, but several passages allude to al-Qa'ida's use of charities. In one instance, an al-Qa'ida operative reminds his Somali counterparts that "jihad brings a lot of money from charities."<sup>17</sup> In another entry, an al-Qa'ida operative assesses the level of corruption and competence of relief agencies they have penetrated along the Somali-Kenya border, noting that "the situation of the relief agency in Lipouy [Liboi] is not yet corrupted, unlike that of Mandeera which is a hopeless case."<sup>18</sup>

### Sufi Opposition.

In some cases foreign al-Qa'ida operatives appear stunned at the depth of resistance they face from Sufi clerics. In the Somali region of Ethiopia the al-Qa'ida operative describes with shock the "level of cunning and hatred" toward the Islamic Union; when one local cleric preached at mosque the local people kick the Islamic Union out of their village.<sup>19</sup>

### Lack of Mass Support.

One of the more revealing and insightful criticisms of the Somali AIAI is the charge leveled by an al-Qa'ida official that the movement is too elitist and cut off from the masses. "A movement that is isolated from its masses," he argues, "that is suspicious of its people, and whose people are suspicious of it, can achieve nothing but destroy itself."<sup>20</sup> This was in fact precisely one of AIAI's biggest problems – it was a movement of educated, well-traveled elites, who did not speak the same political language of the average Somali. Ironically, however, the AIAI leadership's decision to focus on da'wa, to socialize Somali society and prepare it for Islamic rule, was an implicit recognition of the gap that existed between the AIAI leaders and the people.

### Al-Qa'ida Pragmatism/Instrumentalism.

This same al-Qa'ida official argues that al-Qa'ida has erred in seeking out appropriate allies in Somalia. "Al-Qa'ida's Salafia tendencies have led it to search for a political ally in Somalia with an identical intellectual focus," he opines. "This is the greatest calamity."<sup>21</sup> In his view, Somalis are merely temporary allies of expedience, tools to use in the battle against the "Knights of the Cross." To that end, he argues for greater partnership with secular Somali factions (presumably General Aideed and the SNA) which may be more effective in battling American and UN forces. In a remarkably candid and pragmatic passage, he notes that "nearly everywhere your situation and ours has no place for the ideal; just for that which is the least bad.... You must find men you can deal with, even if they are not from our venerable forefathers.... I do not mind

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<sup>17</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-6000104, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600113, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600104, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600053, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

cooperating with Aideed if you have made sure that what he is doing with the Americans is not staged....”<sup>22</sup>

### *Al-Qa’ida Confronting Somali Culture.*

Some of the culture clashes captured in the documents are predictable and sound remarkably similar to after-hours complaints by new aid workers about “ungrateful locals.” “The strange people who received us were lukewarm and wary towards us,” complains one al-Qa’ida entry. “They are stingy and greedy.”<sup>23</sup> But setting aside the numerous disparaging remarks about Somalis that appear in these entries, the more significant complaint was over Somali decision-making. The Somali practice of inclusive, consensus-oriented decision-making (traditionally, the male elders gathering in a “shir” or assembly) collided with the need for rapid, streamlined command, and resulted in complaints about the lack of secrecy in Somalia.<sup>24</sup> This last point is particularly important because it points to the fact that local decision-making norms influence the value of areas as terrorist safe havens.

### *AIAI Terrorism.*

AIAI was designated as a terrorist organization in late 2001, on charges that it was behind a series of lethal bombings and assassination attempts in Ethiopia in 1995. For years, Somali members of AIAI have argued that by 1995 AIAI was a very decentralized organization and that the Ethiopian Somali AIAI conducted those attacks on their own, against the wishes and advice of the AIAI groups inside Somalia. It was unfair, these ex-AIAI members claimed, to brand the whole organization as terrorists when they disagreed with the acts committed. The Harmony papers help to document the growing split between the Ethiopian and Somali-based AIAI in the early 1990s, and the clear militancy of the Ethiopian Islamists compared to their colleagues in Somalia. That heightened militarism on the part of the Ethiopian wing of the AIAI was no doubt linked to the fact that the AIAI in Ethiopia was fighting for very different objectives than the AIAI wing inside Somalia. The Ethiopian wing of AIAI was part of a long-standing irredentist armed insurgency by Somali Ethiopians. The movement’s aim of imposing an Islamist state over all of Somali-inhabited East Africa required armed violence against one of Africa’s largest and most seasoned militaries. By contrast, the AIAI wings inside Somalia were preoccupied with expanding their control in a country where they faced no government at all.<sup>25</sup>

### *Logistical Obstacles and Constraints Faced in Somalia and the Ogaden.*

The Harmony documents present compelling evidence to support the thesis that foreign terrorists find remote zones of state collapse and armed conflict relatively inhospitable and challenging operating environments, not “safe havens.” Field reports are replete with complaints about poor food, unsafe water, uncomfortable shelter, heat, disease, biting insects, defective vehicles and poor tires. The physical constraints are vividly presented

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<sup>22</sup> Harmony, AFGP-2002-600053, 2

<sup>23</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-6000104, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-800640, 17, 19.

<sup>25</sup> For more on AIAI, see Appendix A-I.

in an entry describing the condition in the remote, swampy, forested coastal area of Badadhe, near the Kenyan border.

Hassan Dahir Aweys.

The U.S. government placed Hassan Dahir Aweys on a designated list of terror suspects for his alleged links to al-Qa'ida and for his sheltering of several foreign al-Qa'ida operatives in Mogadishu. Aweys has repeatedly denied that he has ties to al-Qa'ida or has provided safe haven to terrorists, and his supporters have argued that there is no evidence to back up these charges. Some well-placed analysts have argued that Aweys is actually a moderate voice within the current Islamist discourse in Somalia, and that he is fighting a rear guard battle against young, radical jihadists in the *shabaab* militia.

Intriguingly, the Harmony documents provide evidence to back both of those claims. If repeated references to Sheikh Hassan and Sheikh Hassan Tahir refer in fact to Aweys and not someone else – and the contextual evidence in the documents points to Aweys<sup>26</sup> – then it provides a clear picture of regular, routinized contact between al-Qa'ida operatives and Aweys on matters of mutual cooperation. This includes early references to him traveling to Sudan,<sup>27</sup> and being present in Ras Kamboni while al-Qa'ida was establishing a training camp there in 1993.<sup>28</sup> He can, perhaps, deny that these contacts were consequential, but not that they occurred.

At the same time, Aweys comes across in these documents as an Islamist leader who has tactically rejected the use of jihad during the period 1993-95. His al-Qa'ida contacts quote him as saying that the time is not yet right for jihad. He and other leaders of AIAI are the target of withering criticism by militant Somali commanders in the field, and by some al-Qa'ida operatives as well, for being a “coward.” This portrait of a hardliner who is nonetheless viewed as a constraining force on younger, less patient jihadis is remarkably similar to the portrait some observers have painted of Aweys in recent times.

Use of Contractors.

One concern about al-Qa'ida's use of Somalia as a transshipment point for short-term operations into East Africa—for movement of money, men, and materiel—is the fact that terrorists need not locate fellow believers to conduct these operations, but that most any Somali businessman is willing to conduct a transaction for a fee with no questions asked. This fear is confirmed in one of the Harmony documents describing al-Qa'ida's rental of a boat and its Bajuni captain to ship them from Lamu to Ras Kamboni. The al-Qa'ida operative writing this report describes his Bajuni sea captain as one of those with “low morals and big egos. Cigarette smoking, chewing qat, chasing women and lying, etc., are common among them.” While acknowledging that “we don't trust him,” the operative

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<sup>26</sup> Harmony, AFGP-2002-800611.

<sup>27</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-800600.

<sup>28</sup> Harmony, AFGP 2002-600113, 6.

concludes that, “as far as his skills are concerned he is excellent. I traveled with him previously; he knows the best ways to approach shores.”<sup>29</sup>

#### *Use of Kenya as a Base of Operations.*

The Harmony documents reinforce the observation that while Somalia was a target of al-Qa’ida efforts to establish training bases and project influence, Kenya proved to be a far more conducive setting to base al-Qa’ida operations. Multiple al-Qa’ida cells operated unimpeded throughout the country (mainly in Nairobi and Mombasa). Harmony documents paint a remarkable portrait of al-Qa’ida cells freely operating in Kenya, with few expressed concerns about being monitored or detained by Kenyan police or security forces. The ease with which they chartered small planes to fly in and out of Lu’uq, Somalia, in 1993, during a period when that town was controlled by AIAI, with no hint of authorities checking on their activities, is especially revealing, as is their transaction to hire and purchase boats on the coast for travel into coastal Somalia. Indeed, the only anxiety expressed in Harmony document communications is a complaint in 1993, during the worst moments of political crisis in Kenya, that “Kenya is not a good place.... [T]he cost of living is high, plus corruption is dangerously prevalent – there is theft, house break-ins, no political stability, and it is possible there will be an explosion in the country.”<sup>30</sup> We explore al-Qa’ida’s fascination with Kenya in greater detail in chapter 4 of this report.

#### *Somalia today.*

Current events in Somalia are hard to interpret. In December 2006 it appeared that business leaders and clan elders in Mogadishu essentially told the CIC not to return to the city to wage a protracted guerilla struggle. This interpretation of events is hard to reconcile with recent fighting in Mogadishu. One interpretation is that the violence is driven by rivalries between clan leaders, some of whom are deeply dissatisfied with the Transitional Federal Government’s efforts to assert control over economic activity and so are giving free reign to their fighters.<sup>31</sup> So far there is simply insufficient evidence to fully understand the dynamics of this rapidly evolving situation. However, it does highlight the fact that, a desire among Somali business and clan interests to end civil conflict does not mean they will support or tolerate a strong central state that could impinge on their prerogatives.

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<sup>29</sup> Harmony, AFPG 2002-600114.

<sup>30</sup> Harmony, AFPG 2002-800597.

<sup>31</sup> Journalists have suggested the violence is being driven by Hawiye clan leaders unhappy with increased import duties imposed by the new government. See “A failed state that threatens the region,” *The Economist*, 7 April 2007, 43. Others suggest the violence is driven by rivalries between the Hawiye clan and the Darood clan of interim President Abdullahi Yusuf. See Jesse Nunes, “Fighting between Ethiopians and Somali insurgents escalates in Mogadishu,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 March 2007; and Abdurrahman Warsameh, “Somali chaos: Clans, Islamists, foreigners,” *ISN Security Watch*, 29 March 2007, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=17430>.

