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What are the implications of the recent developments for the Somali government?

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Executive Summary

Recently, there have been two major developments in Somalia. First, President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed visited the United States for the first time, where he addressed the UN General Assembly and met with several leaders from around the world. In Particular, President Sharif met with senior officials in the US government, including Deputy Secretary of State John Burns, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson, and Senior Director for Africa at the National Security Council Michelle Gavin. He also met with influential members of the US Congress, including Senator Russ Feingold, Senator John Kerry, Senator Carl Levin, and the two senators from Minnesota, Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, a state with heavy concentration of Somali Americans.

Second, while the President was in the US, the two main groups in Somalia that oppose Sheikh Sharif's government - Al-Shabab Movement and Hizbul-Islam - have clashed and fought each others heavily over the control of the port city of Kismayo. For the first time, these two groups fought openly, killing more than fifty from each side. Eventually, Al-Shabab chased Hizbul Islam out of Kismayo. The two groups also clashed several times in the Jubba region. In a bid to control the conflict, the leaders of the two groups met in Mogadishu and signed a peace agreement in which they agreed to stop the fighting and begin a dialogue on outstanding issues.

This paper analyzes the implications of these two developments for the Somali government. It argues that the positive reception that President Sharif received while in the United States suggests that his government is seen differently from its predecessors. Moreover, the fighting between the major opposition factions may lead to strengthening the government's position while weakening these two groups, particularly Hizbul-Islam, which will have significant difficulties in order to recover from these political setbacks. Overall, these developments seem to present the government with an opportunity to survive and begin to move forward in its political agenda.

Introduction

Recently, two major developments have unfolded in Somalia. First, President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed visited the United States for the first time in order to attend the meetings of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Second, Al-Shabab and Hizbul-Islam, the two main opposition groups in Somalia, have clashed in southern Somalia in a bitter power struggle.

This position paper is to analyze what these two developments mean for the Somali government. The paper argues that the positive reception that the president's delegation received from the international community and the Somali Diaspora in the United States has revealed that the current regime is different from its predecessors. Moreover, it contends that the current fighting between the opposition factions will strengthen the government's position while weakening these two groups, particularly Hizbul-Islam, which will have significant challenges in order to recover from these political setbacks.

Background: President Sharif's Visit to the United States

On September 25, 2009, President Sharif delivered his speech to the sixty-fourth session of the UN General Assembly in New York. According to sources close to the Somali delegation, President Sharif met with leaders, diplomats, and other dignitaries, including Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamid bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Prime Minister of Turkey Rajeb Ordogan, President of Rwanda Paul Kagame, President of Turkish Cyprus Demetris Christofias, and other leaders. He also met with many foreign ministers including those of Germany, Russia, France and Great Britain. With respect to the Inter-Governmental Organizations, President Sharif met with the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, the European Union's top diplomat Javier Solana, Secretary General of the Arab League Amir Musa, and the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Akmaluddin Ihsan Oglu.

After the General Assembly visit, the Somali president met with officials of the United States government, including Deputy Secretary of State John Burns, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson, and Senior Director for Africa at the National Security Council Michelle Gavin. Although President Sharif himself was not in attendance, his delegation attended a dinner hosted by President Obama for the leaders of the African Sub-Saharan countries. President Sharif also met with some of the most powerful elected officials of Congress, including Senator Russ Feingold, Senator John Kerry, Senator Carl Levin, and the two senators from Minnesota, Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, a state with heavy concentration of Somali Americans. With respect to the House of Representatives, President Sharif met with some key congressmen, who either lead or sit in important committees, such as Congressman Howard Berman, Congressman Donald Payne and Congressman Keith Allison. As sources close to the president told me, President Sheikh Sharif also met with several agencies that work on the development sectors while he was in the United States. For instance, he delivered the statesman lecture at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in Washington DC and gave a speech at DePaul University, in Chicago, as well Ohio State University and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Most importantly, during his visit, President Sharif also met with Somali communities in Washington, Minneapolis, Ohio, and Chicago. As reported by the Somali Services of the BBC and VOA, and many other Somali media outlets, President Sharif met with about 800 Somalis in Washington, 7500 in Minneapolis, 1200 in Ohio, and few hundreds in Chicago.

Background: The Civil War between the Opposition Groups

On the ground, Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam, the two main rival groups that vehemently oppose President Sharif's Transitional Federal Government, have clashed and fought heavily over the control of the port city of Kismayo while he was still visiting the US. It has been an open secret for sometime now that the Al-Shabab Movement and Hizbul Islam do not see things eye to eye, but few have expected that they would engage in open war at this particular time. For the first time, the two groups fought openly, killing more than fifty fighters, and Al-Shabab chased Hizbul Islam out of Kismayo. The two groups also clashed several times in the Jubba region. In order to control the conflict, the leadership of the two groups, Sheikh Ahmed Abdi Godane of Al-Shabab Movement and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys of Hizbul-Islam, met in Mogadishu and signed a peace agreement on in which they decided to stop the fighting and to open a dialogue on outstanding issues, while using the Sharia as a base. Although the fighting has subsided, there have been at least two skirmishes after the agreement.

The United States response: What changed?

The United States has warmly welcomed President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and his delegation. Both the administration officials and the legislators who met with the president have reassured him that Washington is committed to support the Somali government. In fact, the House of Representatives introduced Resolution 859 few days after the Somali delegation left America in which it urges the Obama Administration to recognize and support the Somali government. Ironically, just three years ago in 2006, the United States government helped overthrow Sheikh Sharif's Union of the Islamic Courts from power. Former Assistant Secretary of the State for African Affairs Jendayi Fraser had openly condemned Sheikh Sharif calling him a radical when he refused to participate in the US-backed reconciliation conference in Mogadishu. The apparent question is what has changed?

There are several explanations for answering this question.

On the Somali side, there is a significant change. Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and many Islamists of the same persuasion have matured politically since then and realized that the change they aspire to can come only through incremental and peaceful means. I met with many of these leaders in Mogadishu in 2006, in Kenya in 2007, in Asmara in 2008, and in other different places in 2009. It is clear that the idealism that led them in 2006 and the arrogance some in their coalition showed toward others when they expelled the warlords from Mogadishu have disappeared. Now, they are sharing power with individuals who they do not like and when asked about their reasons they argue that there is an Islamic basis for their decision – that when you cannot get all of what you want, you don't have to leave them all either. Like other mainstream Islamic movements in world, the Islamist faction of the government is obviously of the opinion that democracy is combatable with Islam and they welcome it.

Similarly, on the United States side, a lot has changed too. For this paper, I will limit my discussion to two factors. First, for many years, as Fawaz Gerges, John Esposito, and others have argued, Washington adopted an accommodationist rhetoric and confrontationist policies toward Islamic movements. The main purpose was to deny Islamist political power at any cost. The Islamic movements in Algeria and Hamas in Palestine are the case in point here. The two exceptions are Iran (through revolution) and Sudan through military coup d'état. The anti-Islamist policy, which drove the war on terror in the years of George W. Bush, has been disaster for both the United States and the Muslim world. This policy failed miserably and, as a result, the United States revised it before the Bush administration left office. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has openly admitted that the exclusion of Islamists from power and the support of the authoritarian regimes did lead the world into neither peace nor democracy. Furthermore, the Obama Administration has continued on the path to reverse this destructive policy, and President Obama's Cairo speech of June 4, 2009, signaled that America is ready to deal with those who want peace.

Besides, the current US policy toward Somalia, even though not officially articulated yet, suggests that America's pragmatism is being tested in Mogadishu. Welcoming and dealing with known Islamist leaders and supporting an Islamist-dominated government in Somalia is a new chapter in the history of the relations between the United States and Somalia. In other words, the pragmatism of the moderate faction of Islamists has been met with the pragmatism of the super power. That said, caution is warranted here; it is still too early to say that Washington has officially endorsed the Somali government. Although all indicators show that this is where such a relationship is heading, it will take some time before things change at the official level.

One can safely argue that Washington recognizes that all the other possible alternatives are far worse than the alliance of the moderate faction of Islamists, members of the civil society, and nationalist groups on one side and former members of the transitional government and some warlords on the other. It is clear that Washington will not deal with the Al-Shabab movement, a group which it has included in its list of terrorist organization.

Previously, many Somalis rejected the United States' claim that Al-Shabab was proxy for Al-Qaeda. I myself had seriously questioned Washington's assertions in the past. But, Al-Shabab's leaders have now incriminated themselves; they have repeatedly declared their support to Al-Qaeda's ideologies and methods. At times, they say that they are not officially part of Al-Qaeda but share with them goals and objectives, ideology and enemy. In fact, many media outlets including Al-Jazeera reported that Al-Shabab has released a tape showing their pledged of allegiance to Bin-Laden.

On the other hand, for Washington, Hizbul-Islam cannot also be an alternative to the government for three obvious reasons. First, Hizbul Islam's leaders, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys and Sheikh Hassan Turki, are both included on the UN and United States' terrorist lists. Certain governments and Somali groups have repeatedly tried to convince Washington to remove Sheik Hassan Dahir from its list. The US response has always been that this was not a political decision and that only a court of law can remove their names from the list. A well-placed source told me that pursuing him might be a political decision, but if Aweys is to be removed from the list, the judicial branch is the only agency that has the prerogative to make such a decision. The fact that Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys is their leader prevents this group from having influence and legitimately exercising such influence on the world stage and within the community of nations, at least for now and for the foreseeable future.

More important, Hizbul-Islam's policies are confused, as they do not project a different line of argument from that of Al-Shabab. In attempts to appease Al-Shabab, Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys has publicly blessed Al-Shabab's tactics such as the use of the civilians as a human shield while launching rockets at the positions of the UN-authorized African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the government forces. Moreover, he has recently endorsed suicide bombings as a legitimate and Islamically permissible means of waging war against the AMISOM forces in Somalia - previously, while Sheikh Hassan Dahir was in Asmara, he has not endorsed these tactics publicly. He has apparently done this in order to avert clashes because Hizbul-Islam is militarily weaker. Hizbul-Islam's position on how to achieve power is also troubling. The organization cannot be distinguished from Al-Shabaab in its positions of affecting political change through the force of arms.

In addition, the kidnapping of French officials in Mogadishu on July 14, 2009, and Al-Shabab's insatiable demands in regard to the matter have put light into the difficult position that Sheikh Hassan Dahir is in. Presently, if one looks at the actors that are driving the agenda, it is Al-Shabab on one side and the government on the other – Hizbul-Islam is nowhere to be seen. Al-Shabab rarely informs Hizbul-Islam about their military operations. Often, Al-Shabab deliberately creates situations where the leadership of Hizbul Islam has to either be silent or support Al-Shabab's extreme positions. One of the spokesmen of Hizbul-Islam, stated this difficult position clearly. Ismail Haji Adow, said Al-Shabab demanded that "we [Hizbul-Islam] have three choices: Join Shabab, join Sharif's government or become civilians. They demanded that we had to disarm and we cannot accept that."

Apart from Hizbul-Islam, a new group called Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jama'a emerged against Al-Shabab when Al-Shabab desecrated the graves of Sheikhs revered by Sufis. Surprisingly, this group has scored some military victories against Al-Shabab in some regions, particularly in central Somalia. Some of the leaders of this group have visited the American Embassy in Nairobi and have presented themselves as the alternative option. Two factors, however, haunt this organization. First, it is considered as the Trojan horse for Ethiopia. Second, it is still limited to specific areas such as Central regions, and few Somali politicians who are allied to Ethiopia are believed to be using the organization.

Outside the Islamist groups, there are no secular movements or credible leaders that can challenge Sheikh Sharif's government. Both Somaliland and Puntland have not put forward an alternative national political program, at least for now. Moreover, clan entrepreneurs and warlords in Somalia have neither the force nor the political credibility. As a result, Washington needs a credible local partner in Somalia and the current Somali government does not have competition for that spot at all.

Implications of recent developments for the Somali government

President Sharif's visit to the United States came at a time when the Somali government was trying to convince its international community partners that it has the support of the Somali people, the winning plan, and the leadership capacity to establish durable peace and create a functioning state in the country. Listening to the speeches of the president, one can surmise that his government claims that it is pursuing two-pronged strategy: Reconciliation whenever possible and military force when unavoidable. Based on its rhetoric, the government has argued that, since the Djibouti agreement, it has been calling for reconciliation with the opposition groups and has said that it convinced some of the opposition members to join the government.

In his speeches, President Sharif reiterated his government's commitment to the reconciliation process. However, he also called on the international community to support the government in building its defensive capacity by training the security forces and lifting the arms embargo. He appealed for increasing the AMISOM forces and beefing up its mandate, providing financial assistance to the government, and delivering timely relief to the displaced people.

It appears that the government does not have much hope in reconciling with Al-Shabab. Al-Shabab leaders give outright rejection to reconciling or making peace with the government and they consider the members of the government institutions apostates from Islam and legitimate targets for assassination.

Hizbul-Islam leaders send mixed messages. The leadership does not pronounce specific individuals as apostates. Nonetheless, they consider national institutions collectively as an enemy of Islam and, to them, only war is the legitimate means of unseating the government. Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys often says that the government is not a relevant actor. Ironically, he demanded that AMISOM forces should leave the country; Sharif had to resign; and a fully-fledged peace process had to be initiated. A credible source close to the opposition groups told me that the leadership of Hizbul-Islam cannot present an alternative policy that Al-Shabab disagrees. "It has been consistently proven that one has to either agree with Al-Shabab's line of thinking or get ready for fighting" he said. In other words, even if Hizbul-Islam wants to negotiate with the government, it cannot say it publicly for now.

In contrast, as can be understood from the speeches and actions of government leaders it appears that the government has now come to the realization that reconciling with these groups peacefully might be difficult. This realization seems to have led the government to signal a policy change on three areas: First, the government wants to increase the number of AMISOM soldiers in Somalia. This is a controversial move because the withdrawal of AMISOM is one of the key demands of the opposition groups. For the government, this is a short-term solution to the security problems that exist. As the *New York Times* reported on September 17, 2009, the African forces may be deployed to some of the regions outside Mogadishu, such as Kismayo.

Second, in his speech at the UN General Assembly, President Sharif called on the UN to lift the arms embargo from the government so it can purchase weapons in order to secure its “monopoly over legitimate violence.” This is an interesting development because it shows that the government, in the final analysis, believes that empowering state institutions is the only way forward in ending lawlessness in Somalia. Although the international community has not yet acted on this request, the United States has already provided military assistance to the government – and this is a new development.

Finally, in his speech to the General Assembly President Sharif asked the UN to help in the training the Somali Security Forces. This shows that the government wants the UN to become one of its main partners in peace-making. This is also consistent with government’s claim that it has secured three main interests (or objectives) through the Djibouti conference: The withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces, the adoption of the Sharia as basis of legislation, and removal of the Somalia file from the hands of the Ethiopian-controlled Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to the UN.

The implication here seems to be that the Somali government has realized the weakness of regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU), Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab League (AL), and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). If the UN accepts this proposal, it would mean that, like Liberia and Congo, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations will become involved in the training of the Somali forces.

With respect to his speech to the CSIS, President Sharif underlined that the Somalia case would become much easier if the government gets the assistance it needs. This time, it appears that Sharif was sending a message to the United States to assure that his government can be a credible local partner. Clearly, he was trying to present the good side of his administration and what it has achieved so far.

I believe that one of the main reasons that President Sharif visited the United States was to show both his supporters and his rivals that, unlike previous Somali governments, his government had the support and the good will of the Somali people. He capitalized on the fact that he is new to Somali politics and thus, the president, the prime minister, and some of the cabinet ministers do not bring negative political baggage with them.

As such, most of the meetings he had with the Somali communities have been widely covered by the BBC and VOA Somali Services, as well as many Somali websites and local radios throughout the world. This was an effective publicity campaign for the efforts and intentions of President Sharif and his government. While in the United States, the president met with thousands of Somalis from all corners of the United States and Canada. He projected an image that he had an open-door policy, as he met with groups, Imams, clan

elders, students, business groups, and individuals, including some of the lead Somali academics. While talking to these Somalis he understood that they longed for having a functioning state in their home country, and he tailored his message to their aspirations. Although I follow and comment on Somali issues on a regular basis, I have to admit that the Somali response to Sharif surprised me, as I assumed that there would be some who would demonstrate against him – The support was near unanimous. No demonstrations, physical or verbal, were reported

Clashes between the opposition groups

The implication for the inter-conflict between Al-Shabab and Hizbul-Islam gives good opportunity for the government. This will drive the losing side, most probably Hizbul-Islam, to the government side. In fact, several government ministers held a press conference with a group that abandoned Hizbul-Islam this week (third week of October 2009), in which the militia leader attacked the policy of opposition groups.

This might moderate Hizbul-Islam's original demands that President Sharif should resign, AMISOM troops should leave Somalia, and a new reconciliation conference be initiated, and might compel Hizbul-Islam to revise or completely abandon this position. In other words, Al-Shabab's hard-line stand, 'you are either with us or with the enemy', will surely drive some of the leaders of Hizbul-Islam to the government camp, as happened before in the case of the former warlord Yusuf Indha Ade. In other words, for Sharif's weak government, this is the best present that the opposition could give to him – a blessing in the sky as the cliché goes.

What does all this mean?

The events that have unfolded in the past month mean that the Somali government has a golden opportunity to effect change. However, neither Washington's rhetoric that it is committed to supporting the Somali government, nor the weakened opposition are in themselves sufficient for this opportunity to materialize.

Somalia's challenges are many. The most important one that has haunted the many past governments is lack of resources. Since its inception in February 2009, the government failed to provide basic salary of \$100 and equipment to 20,000 soldiers. The government wanted to engage the Diaspora professionals, and it approached the United Nations to help reverse some of the brain-drain. Bringing professionals back, about 300, requires millions of dollars as these people would take a leave of absence from their jobs for several years in order to develop Somali institutions. This has not materialized yet either. The main reason for this is that the country is poor and as such the few sources of revenue that could generate some cash are not functioning. Moreover, the international community has not delivered the financial pledges it has made to the government. Unless timely and generous financial support is given, the government will not succeed even if the opposition does not challenge it militarily. In other words, the international community, particularly, the United States must provide tangible assistance if the TFG is to affect a meaningful change in Somalia.

Second, important regional actors are still free-lancing and at times undermining the government. Ethiopia, particularly, its recent incursions to the country and the open support it provides for its proxy groups, regions and clans is a source of concern. Ethiopia's previous hostile policies perpetuated the conflict and the statelessness in Somalia. Expecting Ethiopia to support genuine state-building is not realistic, but at least if it does not undermine the current effort, that would help. The current trend indicates that Ethiopia may undermine the current Sheikh Sharif regime even after withdrawing its troops from Mogadishu and

professing support for the government. Ethiopia has a number of internal challenges that guide its policies towards Somalia and its interested are not served by a strong Somali Government.

Third, for the last twenty years, Somalis have not had governmental institutions that function. Most of the people never lived under government protection and they need time to adjust to and accept law and order in their daily life. Changing the attitudes of millions of Somalis needs a massive and costly educational campaign; that may take sometime before the government can fund or focus on.

Finally, President Sharif and Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid need to make firm but practical decisions and project a sense of urgency in their actions; they must be committed to significant changes that impact people's daily life. So far, one can argue that they adopted a risk-averse approach in which they did not introduce major strategic changes. Moreover, the government, if it is to survive, has to attract professionals in the Diaspora into the government, since Somalia has not had the educational institutions that could produce the expertise needed for almost two decades. This requires a political will and financial commitment from the government.

Conclusion

This position paper has analyzed two major developments: President Sharif's visit to the United States and Inter-Islamist conflict in Somalia. The paper has also examined the United States' policy shift and the implications this might have for the Somali government. It has argued that the combination of these two events enhances the Somali government's chances for survival and development.

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