



Meeting Summary: Failed Muslim States: Somalia and Afghanistan

Chair:

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Speakers:

Prof. Said S Samatar

Michael Griffin

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25 April 2007

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The meeting looked at the route to and prospects for the current situations in both Somalia and Afghanistan. Prof. Said S Samatar is a well known Somali academic historian and commentator, the author of numerous books and articles on Somali history, politics and culture. Among them are his landmark history of Somalia's early 20th century Islamist rebel Somali Oral Poetry and Somalia Nationalism: the case of Sayyid Mahammed 'Abdille Hasan and Somalia: a Nation in Turmoil'. After the meeting he produced this paper setting out his views on the Islamic Courts and Ethiopia's intervention. Michael Griffin is author of Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan. He has been a freelance writer in Africa and the Middle East and worked in Afghanistan off and on as a consultant for the United Nations, beginning in 1994.

Gareth Price

Welcomed everyone to the meeting. Dr. Price wondered if there were things we could learn from Afghanistan in the early 90s for Somalia today. He reminded participants that the meeting was on the record.

Prof. Samatar

Prof Samatar said a lot has changed since he decided what he would talk about at the meeting. Now the Ethiopian flag is flying over Mogadishu and Meles seems determined to turn Somalia into a client state. The reckless rush of Ethiopia into Somalia shows a country aspiring to a status much higher than is warranted, although Ethiopia does of course have the strongest army in the region. He thought the famous saying "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to America" might usefully be adapted as "Poor Somalia, so far from Allah and so close to Ethiopia." The image of Ethiopia as an ancient adversary is deeply ingrained in Somali consciousness. Understanding this helps us to see why the TFG bringing in

Ethiopian troops to help them was so shocking. Initially it did look like the Ethiopian involvement would tip the balance of power to the TFG and peace. Now we consider the TFG as winners who are in control of the country. But Meles has also won because he has been able to divert attention away from his domestic problems, and he can say any criticism is tantamount to treason while the country is at war. The United States was also delighted to have the Islamists removed from power. Kenya, too, is thought of as a winner since a stable government in Somalia will alleviate the refugee problem they have. Finally Africa as a whole could have been the fifth winner with one neighbour helping another. The losers appeared to be Afewerki (the Eritrean President) and Egypt. It seems once again that Ethiopia has prevailed over Egypt. But Ethiopian involvement in Somalia may turn out to have been a huge mistake, if Ethiopia suffers a big defeat, as is likely then Somalis will turn against them. So although the Ethiopia lion has gone to lie with the Somali lamb it will not be getting much sleep.

In Iraq we see that it is impossible for the army to put down the insurgency by force alone, unless they use genocide. So what will happen in Somalia? Lewis has suggested that the EU may be implicated in war crimes in Somalia. A return of the Islamists is likely to make the bloodshed even worse and the longer Ethiopia stays the worse it will get.

The pattern of Somali social organisation precludes the growth of grassroots jihadist movement. In fact Prof. Samatar thinks Somalia will never be a breeding ground for Islamic extremism. Somali politics is based on lineage segmentation. Evans Pritchard and I M Lewis, the British anthropologists, saw Somalia as divided at all levels, including the religious, into warring groups. This ensures institutional instability. There is no mechanism for bringing a man to account for changing what he says or which side he is on. This segmentation is the root cause of why Somalis don't have a central government. Ethnic loyalty trumps loyalty to Islam every time. The ICU is a rickety amalgam of kinship factions, with each group representing a different ethnic identity. The ICU is neither truly Islamic, nor Courts based nor a Union but rather a fragile alliance of clans wrapped in an Islamic flag. Any group that rises to power in Somalia has problems because they always splinter. When the US invaded in the 90s they were a new power and the segments came together to oppose them. The same happened to the TNG and, if Ethiopia hadn't rescued him, the same would have happened to Abdulahi Yusuf.

Somaliland has kept away from the abyss. How? They fought a long time against Barre and so developed a high level of solidarity. This is also achieved by the desire to achieve international recognition; finally the traditional elder structures are still very strong in Somaliland.

Michael Griffin

There are similarities between the ICU and the Taliban but also important differences. The Taliban emerged in an age of innocence before 9/11. Mr Griffin felt he wasn't in a position to make a full comparison but there were some interesting points. There is a difference between Taliban I and Neo-Taliban (II) that emerged in the run up to the 2004 election. Taliban I emerged as an Afghan solution to an Afghan problem, with a highly literal imposition of Sharia law. Taliban II remains poorly understood but it taps into a rich tradition of resistance and is importing tactics from Iraq.

Taliban I were supported by Pakistan who had an interest in moulding the future of Afghanistan. They used money from the US to back the people they liked. At this

time Pakistan was building up their nuclear capability in preparation for a third war against India and they wanted Afghanistan as an insurance policy. Taliban I was supported by the ISI with arms provisions, help in finding technical military experts and the provision of hard currency in order to bring Afghan factions on side.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were the main backers of the Taliban. The Taliban adopted three main policies. First, introducing popular justice, including the summary execution of rapists. Secondly, they used the idea of a holy war and recruited students from the Madrassas and had no negotiation with secularism. Thirdly, they ensured military superiority using, among other methods, Hilux trucks in a similar way to the Somali technicals.

The Taliban are willing to suffer heavy casualties, but these generally fall on pious volunteers rather than experienced military professionals. The Taliban also benefited from the mystique surrounding Mullah Omar. His refusal to talk to foreigners, his donning of the Prophet's cloak, his refusal to leave Kandahar and his refusal to be photographed all contributed to this mystique. The leading Taliban members tended to have learnt their military tactics in the traditional militias and the conservative leadership tended to be illiterate and unaware of secular ideas. The leadership structure was consultative rather than hierarchical.

On the question of whether there was ever a moderate branch of the Taliban: of the two leaders who were always spoken about, one died in 2001 and the other joined Taliban II. The link with Al Qaeda is poorly understood but it definitely grew stronger from 1996 onwards.

Q.

If the Somali clan system is inherently instable why was the country able to be temporarily stable under the ICU?

Prof. Samatar

The ICU provided a certain degree of stability, after 14 years of instability under the warlords this was the first time peace broke out. But as time passed the ICU managed to make themselves unpopular with the imposition of a medieval Sharia law. Even when the ICU was in power the segmentary nature of Somalia was asserting itself.

Q.

What is your prediction for the security situation in Somaliland?

Prof. Samatar

Since Somaliland has good relations with Ethiopia I don't think that much will change.

Q.

It is assumed that Somalia will become a breeding ground for terrorism. How did the Afghan environment allow terrorism to breed?

Michael Griffin

Bin Laden had long-term relations with Afghanistan; he was welcome as a *jihadi* anti-Soviet warrior. In a way, the Taliban inherited him. His wealth was a very important factor. His relationship with Omar became closer after Bin Laden moved closer to Kandahar. Following the US embassy attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Bin Laden began to overshadow the Taliban movement. Indeed some people say that Al Qaeda effectively organised a coup inside the Taliban.

Prof. Samatar

I'm not sure how strong the relationship is between Al Qaeda and Somalia. He was interested in the country when the Americans were being driven out, but I'm not aware that they have any resources or training facilities in Somalia at the moment. Bin Laden knows that he would be betrayed if he went to Somalia.

Q.

Somalia always loses out to Ethiopia because the Ethiopians have all the trappings of a state including a good army and an excellent diplomatic service. What can a country that is totally broken do to become a state? Should the UN trusteeship council idea be revived to incubate failed states?

Q.

Does the situation in Mogadishu amount to Genocide?

Prof. Samatar

Ethiopia and Somalia are very different. However underdeveloped Ethiopia may be, they have an elite who have operated in a state system for seventeen centuries. There was a bill in Congress to tie Ethiopian aid to democracy, but it was killed after lobbying by Ethiopia. Somalia does not have a tradition of a central state. It is made up of segments that splinter as soon as they come together. The shelling of civilians is certainly a war crime but I'm not sure if it amounts to Genocide.

Michael Griffin

Since the Bonn conference Afghanistan has built a constitution, held presidential and parliamentary elections launched a new currency and central bank and recruited a police and army. But 50% of the economy is still based on opium. The former military commanders are now MPs and businessmen. The growth of mobile phones has allowed people to talk and have provided many opportunities for business. Yet despite all this the Taliban are running a very successful insurgency.

Gareth Price

Thanked the speakers.

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