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Suits Before Boots: Diplomacy Over Militarism in Somalia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American foreign policy in Somalia has failed. For years the United States has been entrenched in a counterterrorism campaign against al-Shabaab, Somalia's most prominent militant group. Today, the U.S. war in Somalia offers a clear example of what happens when Washington leads with its military despite mounting costs, with little to show in curbing insurgency or achieving greater U.S. national security. The root causes of conflict in Somalia require a new approach.

The United States must reassess its mission in Somalia and recognize that its current strategy sustains the cycle of conflict and hinders stability. This will require Congress to take hard steps toward increasing transparency and oversight. Washington must reprioritize its foreign policy, opting for diplomatic solutions to Somalia's political and governance problems with the objective to end military commitments and encourage self-sufficiency.

The United States' presence does not inherently guarantee a functioning Somali government or an autonomous security force, but it is clear that sticking with the same military-led strategy will not deliver those results. If the U.S. reorients its policy toward a diplomatic approach that engages Somali leaders and civilians on reconciliation and reform, it has the potential to resolve key issues driving al-Shabaab's insurgency.

American Foreign Policy in Somalia Has Failed

Despite decades of U.S. military operations in Somalia, al-Shabaab, a dangerous Al Qaeda affiliate, is at its strongest in years.[1] Not only is current U.S. strategy unable to prevent al-Shabaab's increasing violence, but the United States also bears responsibility for its initial rise in the 2000s after years of foreign policy errors. Today, U.S. counterterrorism activities in Somalia also are failing. Placing Somalia within a post-9/11 paradigm has left decision-makers assuming that militarized foreign policy is the only viable solution. In reality, far less costly methods of engagement with Somalia would better address root causes of this insurgency, particularly those based in diplomatic tradecraft.

The United States Is at War in Somalia

At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 21st, President Joe Biden claimed that "for the first time in 20 years, the United States is not at war."[2] However, the U.S. already had launched unconventional military operations in the weeks leading up to UNGA, including a "surgical" airstrike targeting al-Shabaab.[3] Despite President Biden's assertion, the United States remains at war, operating in forty percent of the world's nations and prioritizing a military-led foreign policy over other methods to address national security challenges.[4]

The U.S. counterterrorism mission in Somalia is a prime example of America's nonchalant relationship with war. Following 9/11, the United States never officially declared war in Somalia, nor did Congress formally approve military action.[5] Washington's current goals in Somalia center on attacking and dismantling al-Shabaab with covert military operations. This "shadow war" strategy, used in other post-9/11 conflict zones like Yemen and Syria, entails a lighter footprint than conventional warfare and relies on deployment of Special Operations Forces (SOF), "train and assist" programs, private security contracts, military proxies, and drone strikes.

The U.S.'s main partners in this conflict are the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Somali National Security Forces (SNF), and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Also significant is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) base in Mogadishu.[6] The base is used for secret interrogations and training, but there is no public record of CIA activities in Somalia so the extent to which the CIA plays a role in this conflict is unknown.[7]

U.S. military operations in Somalia have a decisive role in prolonging the shadow war. Central to Somalia's rising militancy are civilian frustrations with its political and governance problems. However, rather than prioritizing political and governance solutions, the United States supplies and assists its security partners despite their repeated abuses, dysfunction, and weakness. [8] This enables rampant corruption and perpetuates the cycle of conflict. For years, Transparency International has ranked the Somali government the most corrupt in the world, in large part because of collaboration with al-Shabaab and misuse of foreign aid.[9] Nevertheless, the United States continues to turn a blind eye to its partners' misdeeds.

Every year, the human, economic, and political costs of the war in Somalia mount with little to show in achieving greater U.S. national security. What is evident, however, is that since the Cold War, a faulty grasp of cultural dynamics and misdiagnosed threats has plagued U.S. engagement in Somalia and hindered peace and reconciliation.

The following steps toward improving foreign policy in Somalia are crucial. The U.S. must reorient its priorities toward diplomacy with the long-term goal of ending military commitments and encouraging self-sufficiency. Solutions must address the underlying grievances that drive the violence. Counterterrorism tactics that risk civilian lives and further destabilization, such as drone strikes, should be reformed with new restrictions and oversight that seek greater civilian protection. Congressional leaders must repeal the 2001 Authorization of Use for Military Use (AUMF) and require increased transparency from the Pentagon, particularly with regard to budgetary spending and security partnerships. Finally, Washington needs to take accountability for its role in civilian casualties in Somalia and compensate the victims and their families accordingly.

Setting a Low ‘Barre’: A History of Intervention Missteps

The United States’ presence in Somalia is not a post-9/11 novelty and neither are the blunders that characterize today’s counterterrorism efforts. American intervention in Somalia helped lay the groundwork for ongoing conflict that dates back to the Cold War and Somalia’s dictatorship under Mohamed Siad Barre. To maintain a partner in the Cold War, the U.S. poured economic and military support into Barre’s regime in 1977, ensuring the creation of the most prominent African army on the continent.[10] When Barre turned his army against its citizens, the U.S. eventually opted to withdraw funding. Just one month later, the dictatorship fell apart, an indication of the power the United States has in determining the survival of a military dictatorship.[11]

In the power vacuum left by Barre’s collapse, fighting broke out between various clans and warlords. The ensuing civil war was devastating. Between 1991 and 1993, one million civilians fled Somalia, two million were internally displaced, and 350,000 died.[12] Agricultural production all but ceased, and famine set in. The United Nations (UN) responded with its largest-ever humanitarian mission aimed at ending Somali suffering. Despite its best intentions, the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) quickly fell apart. Of the large amounts of food aid pouring into Somalia, combatants stole 80 percent, selling it in exchange for arms.[13] In 1992, the UN approved Operation Restore Hope, a U.S.-led mission staffed by 25,000 American troops to ensure that humanitarian aid reached Somalis.

In a series of grave missteps, the UN and U.S. missions turned toward militarized nation-building to “lift Somalia from the category of a failed state into that of an emerging democracy.”[14] This was a strategic play viewed by President Bill Clinton’s administration as an opportunity to demonstrate the United Nations’ capabilities.[15] In October of 1993 Operation Restore Hope set its sights on taking down Somali warlord Mohammed Aidid after he killed UN soldiers and “tarnished the humanitarian nature of the UN mission,” as President Clinton explains in his memoir.[16] This decision resulted in the catastrophic incident infamously titled Black Hawk Down. Eighteen U.S. service members lost their lives in a battle with Aidid’s supporters, their bodies dragged through Mogadishu by angry militants.

Following the humiliating failures of UNOSOM and Black Hawn Down, Somalia remained a failed state and the West withdrew. As BBC Africa Editor Mary Harper writes, the U.S. and UN missions were the first in which the term “mission creep” was used to “describe how a foreign intervention can end up trying to achieve something entirely different and more complicated than what it first set out to do.”[17] Similar patterns have since characterized the United States’ failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and persist within post-9/11 strategies in Somalia.

The United States’ Failing Shadow War

Today, the failures of the U.S. war against al-Shabaab stem from military-led solutions that ultimately mischaracterize the threat and cannot address the underlying issues driving instability.[18] Despite al-Shabaab’s wealth and its hindrance to regional stability, it hardly poses a threat to the U.S. homeland or its citizens beyond the American troops and contractors fighting militants in East Africa.[19] Pursuing the same strategy will fail to eradicate al-Shabaab, and it will not bring peace or stability to Somalia.

Somalia Within the Post-9/11 War Paradigm

In mid-August of 2021, the world watched with alarm as the Taliban quickly regained power in Afghanistan following the U.S. troop drawdown, concluding two decades of attempted nation-building and the war against terrorism. In President Biden’s speech defending his withdrawal of U.S. troops, he said that “no amount of military force would ever deliver a stable and secure Afghanistan.”[20]

The flawed policy in Somalia draws similarities with the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Both conflicts are characterized by intractable insurgencies and a U.S. relationship with weak and corrupt local governments. Moreover, American-led military operations in both countries, especially “over-the-horizon” drone strikes, have killed innocent civilians and caused severe public harm.[21]

The parallels do not end there. The U.S. sanctioned the wars in Somalia and Afghanistan under the 2001 AUMF. The 2001 AUMF granted the President authority to "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons" who played a role in the attacks on September 11th.[22] Both missions initially focused on hunting Al Qaeda operatives but expanded to address a wider net of issues.[23]

One significant difference between Somalia and Afghanistan lies in the severity of the terrorist threats. There has been a longstanding threat of violence toward the U.S. in East Africa, as demonstrated by the 1998 bombings of its embassies in Tanzania and Kenya.[24] However, after fourteen years Al-Shabaab has not demonstrated the capability or desire to attack the U.S. homeland. Conversely in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda posed a direct threat to the United States homeland as evidenced by the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, Islamist violence in East Africa provided policymakers with a lens through which they could point to Somalia's status as a 'fragile' or 'collapsed' state and therefore a hotbed for terrorism.[25]

Supporting Ethiopia's Invasion

Two months after the attacks on 9/11, President George W Bush ordered the closure of al-Barakat, a Somali money transfer company, accusing the owner of collaborating with and managing the finances of Osama bin Laden.[26] President Bush argued that this move sent "a clear message to global financial institutions; you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. And if you're with the terrorists, you will face the consequences."[27] As it turned out, the consequences dealt to al-Barakat were administered with little or no evidence of its ties to Al Qaeda. The U.S. removed al-Barakat from its terrorist list months later, but not before cutting off income for thousands of Somalis, whose livelihoods were dependent on al-Barakat's services.[28] Not only did this error alienate many Somalis, but it also paved the way for the U.S. to implement military-led strategies in Somalia.

From 2001-2006, the U.S. worked with local Somali warlords to capture suspected al-Qaeda operatives, eventually leading to targeted airstrikes as its strategy.[29] Meanwhile, a "loose alliance of highly localized sharia courts" known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) rose to power for a brief six months, bringing "a degree of stability and order to people's lives."[30] The United States and the international community should have used this period to engage with the ICU. Instead, they reverted to their familiar strategy of foreign imposition.

Within the United States' post-9/11 lens, the ICU could not be viewed as anything other than an al-Qaeda-linked threat. Though there were moderate elements to the ICU as well as more extreme ones, intervening on the basis of preventing potential terrorism emboldened the rise in anti-foreign intervention sentiments.[31] President Bush's 2006 National Security Strategy identified Africa as a "high priority" requiring partnerships "with Africans to strengthen fragile and failing states and to bring ungoverned areas under the control of effective democracies."[32] The American government had hoped to find its Somali partner in the war on terror among the warlords who had identified potential Qaeda operatives. Ethiopia, which also was concerned about the implications of an Islamic neighbor, appeared a natural partner for the United States. What came next was a rallying cry for what soon became the Shabab militia. In December 2006, the U.S. threw its weight behind a full-scale Ethiopian invasion to overthrow the ICU. Ethiopia's 14,000-troop invasion succeeded in its mission but at high costs. Two-thirds of Mogadishu's population fled, seeking refuge in other parts of Somalia and neighboring countries. The anti-foreigner resistance found in al-Shabaab retreated to the south of Somalia emboldened and radicalized.[33]

Between 2006 and 2008, al-Shabaab grew in size and control over central-southern Somalia and organized retaliatory attacks against Ethiopian forces. The State Department officially designated al-Shabaab as a foreign terrorist organization in February of 2008. The group began criticizing the U.S. and what it saw as "crimes against Muslims worldwide," as well as praising al-Qaeda, eventually declaring its allegiance to the terrorist network in 2012. Severe famine and insecurity followed.[34] In 2013, the FGS was established, funded by the U.S. and other foreign powers and supported by AMISOM.

When the U.S. returned to Somalia after 9/11 it, once again, prioritized a military-first approach that has not only failed, but also exacerbated the problem it was trying to address. Some go so far as to argue that by

leading with militarized foreign policy and supporting the Ethiopian invasion, the United States helped create the very thing it aimed to destroy.[35]

Al-Shabaab's Power and Objectives

Of all the militant groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab is the wealthiest.[36] Last year, al-Shabaab netted at least $120 million from illegal trade as well as extortion fees from holding civilians, aid workers, and businesses ransom.[37] Reflecting the anti-foreign sentiments that led to its creation, al-Shabaab's primary goal is to drive all foreign entities out of Somalia. Since February 2021, the group maintains its hold across the central and southern regions of the country while it tries to control parts of northern Somalia.[38] It sometimes launches cross-border attacks on neighboring Kenya and Uganda to send a message "to every country who is willing to send troops to Somalia that they will face attacks on their territory," the group's spokesman has said.[39]

From 2010 to 2020, al-Shabaab killed an estimated 4,500 civilians. On October 14, 2017, the group launched the sixth most deadly terrorist attack in history with bombings in Mogadishu that killed nearly 600 Somalis and wounded over 300 others.[40] Somali civilians bear the brunt of the violence, but terror attacks in Uganda and Kenya, as well as refugee displacement in East Africa, impact those outside of Somalia as well. At first glance, violence and destabilization in Somalia might appear unrelated to U.S. action, especially when considered through the post-9/11-view of the world; however, the United States is not without fault for the situation in Somalia. Al-Shabaab likely would not exist today if it were not for the decades of U.S.-led destabilization that transformed the group "from a small, relatively unimportant part of a more moderate Islamic movement into the most powerful armed faction in the country."[41]

Costs of the Shadow War in Somalia

The United States' presence in Somalia has profound costs: the impact on human life, the collateral damage of U.S. operations, the financial burden on its citizens, and the destabilization of Somalia's politics and economy. The U.S. bears responsibility for a plethora of misdeeds that all point to the need for policy change.

The Impact on Human Life

U.S. foreign policy in Somalia tends to choose its partners poorly, granting them impunity even while they operate against regional security interests. This is how it worked with Siad Barre during the Cold War and with the Somali warlords of the early 2000s.

Today is no different. Both al-Shabaab and the Somali National Security Force recruit civilians by force, including women and children.[42] Further, the U.S. provides the African Union Mission in Somalia with millions of dollars each year, even when AMISOM troops faced repeated accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse against Somali women and girls.[43] Those who might argue that the U.S. should continue to lead with its military strategy might cite al-Shabaab's horrific crimes and lawlessness as a reason to stay. However, if the U.S. continues to fund partner organizations that commit human rights abuses and remain unsuccessful in decreasing conflict, there is little evidence to support further U.S. involvement. Despite Washington's claims that its "over-the-horizon" drone strategy comes at a low cost, civilian casualties remain a recurring consequence. In Somalia, the precise death toll from U.S. airstrikes is unknown.

This is almost entirely because the Pentagon is able to operate in Somalia with "maximum flexibility and minimal bureaucratic impediment."[44] According to Airwars, a transparency project assessing claims of air and artillery strikes across the globe, U.S. forces have confirmed only five civilian deaths and eleven injuries in Somalia. Meanwhile, Washington estimates that confirmed militant deaths land somewhere between 1,919 to 2,563. These deaths also are significant; a representative of Amnesty International argues that "it's just not plausible" that those deaths were actually all terrorist forces and that none were civilians.[45] The civilian death toll is higher than the United States admits. Airwars estimates civilian deaths to be anywhere between 70 and 143 since 2007; however locally reported deaths from U.S. Forces range from 193 to 331.[46] An internal assessment within the Pentagon indicates that it knew about the civilian casualties resulting from its attacks in Somalia despite claiming there were none.

Policy changes are instrumental in impacting the frequency of drone attacks. Last year declared U.S.

drone strikes and alleged civilian deaths reached an all-time high, largely as the result of U.S. policy decisions. Within months of President Donald Trump taking office, he designated parts of Somalia an active combat zone, thus reducing restrictions on battlefield rules, including the "safeguards against civilian bystander deaths" that "often gave adult men less protection than women and children."[47] Furthermore, he gave the military "total authorization" to run its drone program without White House approval.[48] As a result, alleged and declared strikes in Somalia skyrocketed to an all-time high during Trump's presidency.[49]

When President Biden assumed his role in 2021, he made an early decision to limit drone strikes by reinstating the centralized approval process. While reported U.S. drone strikes have decreased, this does not at all indicate that Washington is stepping away from its drone warfare tactics. In fact, Biden is likely to release his drone playbook within the coming months, and according to White House officials, it will stick with the status quo. Within Somalia, Biden will most likely provide U.S. commanders "greater latitude to decide on their own to carry out particular strikes."[50]

Even if the U.S. operates in Somalia with more restrictions on battlefield rules, a militarized posture will always have fatal implications because the system itself is centered around killing people. The U.S. Department of Defense's Law of War Manual "never mentions the duty to verify targets, and explicitly rejects the presumption that people are civilians."[51] If the Pentagon cannot assume people are people first, before they are enemies, it should not expect to bring peace or stability to Somalia.

Further, research by Amnesty International's Crisis Team and reporting from journalist Amanda Sperber demonstrate that U.S. drone strikes have many "collateral" impacts on civilians. Strikes damage farms, homes, and livestock and even fuel al-Shabaab, whose soldiers will accuse civilians of "being U.S. spies or forcing them to choose between fighting for al-Shabaab and fleeing home."[52] As such, drone strikes are used as a recruitment tool. U.S. forces that assess the human cost of their operations in Somalia typically neglect the "collateral" damage of drone strikes.[53] For example, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) Civilian Casualty Assessment Quarterly Report released in November 2021 made no mention of the non-civilian death toll or the damage from its strikes on Somalia and across the continent.[54]

The Financial Costs of War

The U.S. mission in Somalia is primarily funded through the Pentagon as part of the U.S. war on terror. The latest data from The Costs of War Project reports that the U.S. has spent and obligated $8 trillion total on its post-9/11 wars from Fiscal Year (F.Y.) 2001 to FY2022.[55] Those funds come almost entirely from government borrowing, which has raised the budget deficit, national debt, and consumer interest rates. In addition to the explicit costs of borrowing, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, the Sahel, and beyond have critical opportunity costs by divesting funds from domestic renewal.[56] Additionally, Somalia demonstrates that the United States spends an exorbitant amount of money on preventing terrorism even when insurgency does not threaten the U.S. homeland or its core interests.[57]

The covert nature of the shadow war in Somalia prevents the public from grasping the total financial burden of the war in Somalia. As a result, the funding total for US operations in Somalia is unknown. Beyond secret troop operations, drone strikes, CIA expenditures, and other undisclosed spending, the U.S. has spent $720 million in funding to AMISOM between 2007 and 2019.[58]

Some experts argue that since the overall costs of war in Somalia are lower in comparison to Iraq and Afghanistan, it is worth maintaining the U.S. presence there; however, the comparatively "low" cost of waging war in Somalia does not at all justify the human costs, nor does it recognize the economic and political implications for the Somalis.[59]

Somalia's Security Economy and Costs to Political Stability

Yet another consequence of the shadow war involves American funds pouring into Somalia to sustain an economic system that relies on the constant cycle of violence. Private security contractors, the FGS, SNF, AMISOM, the business class, and dominant clans all count on and benefit from the security economy, as does al-Shabaab.[60] Beyond colluding with the federal

government and its forces through the flow of illegal imports and exports, including weapons, al-Shabaab wages political violence and demands payment from Somalis "for its protection against that very violence."[61] The FGS also markets local crises in order to receive financial aid from the international community, then pockets sizable amounts of that aid for itself. Further, the SNF and Danab, the Somali government's elite U.S.-trained force, have on occasion provided the American military with false intelligence about al-Shabaab's location to minimize the impact of drone strikes on the militants– and yet, the U.S. appears to trust that its strategy will succeed.

By enabling corruption, the U.S. communicates that its partners in Somalia are free to act with impunity so long as they seem to oppose terrorism. Moreover, it leaves little incentive for Somali politicians to address the grievances of their constituents, such as economic marginalization and regional insecurity, factors that drive recruitment by al-Shabaab.[62]

The presence of private security contractors is another crucial factor upholding Somalia's security economy. The Department of Defense contracts private security firms that pay foreign soldiers to assist in the fight against al-Shabaab. Since the U.S. introduced security contractors to the conflict in Somalia, they have gained a monopoly on the security economy.[63] Firms designate boundaries for expatriates and foreign diplomats so that they are barely able to leave the Mogadishu International Airport Compound.

When foreign diplomats are allowed to leave, security contractors charge thousands of dollars per person to for their protection.[64] As such, private security firms benefit from heightened violence because it brings them more business.[65] One private security firm, Bancroft, built the American embassy in Somalia and leases it for a steep price, making it one of the most expensive U.S. embassies to operate.[66] Further, U.S. partnerships with private contractors are notoriously difficult to track as its funds usually pass through foreign governments, leaving Congressional officials unable to determine how the money was spent.[67]

Future Costs: The Risk of Repackaging Counterterrorism

For decades, U.S. militarism has justified its presence abroad with the same repackaged "logics" of intervention that point to a perceived threat (such as communism or extremism) and argue that it poses an imminent risk to U.S. interests and security. This approach has been repeatedly applied in Somalia and is reflected in U.S. decisions to support Barre's dictatorship, launch Operation Restore Hope, sponsor the Ethiopian invasion, and wage a shadow war. Although the global war on terror is widely recognized for its overwhelming failures, hawkish pundits and warmongering policy experts pivot to great-power competition as the latest case for prolonged military involvement abroad. This emerging position argues that China's growing influence across Africa "will imperil U.S. interests on the continent– and possibly U.S. security at home."[68] For some, the solution lies in maintaining or increasing U.S. military presence in Africa: "Anything short of that will cede the advantage to the United States' adversaries."[69]

Policy change in Somalia is needed now more than ever. If Washington fails to reform its military-first approach, it risks letting the "forever war" evolve into a mission to contain Chinese competition. Poorly made policy decisions fuel arguments for great power competition. For example, while the U.S. spends trillions on its post-9/11 wars, China wins friends across the continent of Africa through economic partnerships with a development bank that surpasses the U.S. tenfold, thus fueling Sino-American competition.[70] If the United States is truly interested in promoting its own interests in partnership with Somalia, it should pursue economic and political stability through demilitarization and diplomacy.

The United States Must Realign Its Priorities in Somalia With a Diplomatic Approach

The war paradigm approach taken by the U.S. in Somalia limits diplomatic capability and prolongs the conflict. Despite the demonstrated failures of American intervention in Somalia, sustainable investment in the country's future remains a low priority. When the U.S. leads with force, efforts to engage with Somalis

on peacebuilding, reconciliation, law, governance, and local economy, all take a back seat to military operations. The U.S. should make policy changes today to demilitarize its presence in Somalia and shift to a more diplomatic approach.

Increasing Transparency and Oversight

America's shadow wars are notoriously opaque, making it difficult to fully grasp the magnitude of the problem. The decision to maintain or alter U.S. foreign policy in Somalia will have real impact for Somalis.[71] As such, it is imperative that reform happens in the appropriate context, which requires increased government transparency and oversight. The United States' Congress is heavily responsible for demanding this change.

U.S. operations in Somalia escape the level of oversight that Congress requires from more explicitly authorized missions, which dramatically limits government transparency and accountability.[72] For example, weeks before he left office, President Trump supposedly withdrew all U.S. troops from Somalia, but it was later reported that some U.S. forces remained.[73] Under the current Biden administration, more Special Operations Forces reportedly have returned. Not only are these decisions made with zero Congressional approval, but the White House also has divulged little information about these changes, sometimes outright lying by claiming that the U.S. has no presence on the ground in Somalia.[74]

In order to improve government transparency and oversight, Congressional leaders must pressure the Department of Defense and the CIA to release more information regarding budgets, funding, private security contracts, and partnerships with key players in the war. The impunity of U.S. military projects survives with public inattention toward operations in Somalia. Congress and the public must push the U.S. military to take accountability for its role in civilian casualties and utilize compensation policies for those who have been negatively impacted by its military operations, including non-casualties and damage to livelihoods.

Most importantly, Congress should repeal the 2001 AUMF, which has provided limitless power to wage war against militant groups with no role in the 9/11 attacks. Al-Shabaab did not even exist on September 11th.[75] Past presidential administrations have claimed the 2001 AUMF as authorizing U.S. military operations in Somalia because of al-Shabaab's 2012 pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda; however, there is no designation within the AUMF for associated forces of al-Qaeda.[76] That being the case, the 2001 AUMF must be repealed. If terrorism in Somalia someday does pose a threat to the U.S. homeland, the executive branch can pursue formal authorization for war that clearly designates the parameters for force and requires transparency.

Implementing a Demilitarization Strategy

To address its role in perpetuating violence and corruption, Washington, with the State Department at the lead, must implement a gradual demilitarization strategy and negotiate its partnerships with the FGS, SNF, and AMISOM. The U.S. military mission in Somalia assumes that its forces are able to contain rising militancy. However, a militarized approach does not acknowledge the underlying grievances that drive extremism, and guns are inefficient tools to address instability and governance failures.

For years, the U.S. has treated the security situation as much more important than it is. While Somalia's instability does pose risks to the United States, those risks are not drastic enough to justify an indefinite commitment to provide military support in Somalia. Moreover, the U.S. and AFRICOM have had no real impact on building up Somalia's security.[77] As such, it is time for Washington to demilitarize its foreign policy and focus on its diplomats' ability to implement political and governance solutions. This can be made more effective by leveraging U.S. military support. Furthermore, lethal drone strikes should require a centralized approval process and target verification to ensure that civilians are not mistaken for operatives, and that strikes are only orchestrated in direct self-defense. President Biden has allowed the Department of Defense to launch drone strikes against al-Shabaab in the "collective self-defense," of American security partners.[78] An updated strategy in Somalia should make sure that military leaders cannot sidestep procedures by invoking the need to attack even when Americans are not at risk.

The timeline for demilitarization should be drawn with an appreciation for the delicate security situa-

tion and should not result in a hasty withdrawal. The U.S. exit from Afghanistan demonstrates that rushing demilitarization can create chaos. Moreover, an irresponsible withdrawal runs the risk of leaving Somalia even worse off. It is important that the United States does not create more harm by departing. Leaving Somalia should take no more than three years, which is the ideal period to allow for a "responsible withdrawal and corresponding security improvements."[79]

The key to a responsible exit is giving the Somali government the opportunity to prepare. If the U.S. were to withdraw its military aid and operations from Somalia in one fell swoop, al-Shabaab has the potential to inflict significant damage on the sitting government.[80] It is important to note that a U.S. presence does not inherently guarantee a functioning Somali government or a self-sufficient security system, but sticking with the same military-led strategy will not deliver those results.[81] Given the U.S.'s role in creating the security conflict in Somalia, Washington still should take the risk of withdrawing over a longer period instead of immediately.

Further, U.S. foreign service officers will require security and protection from service members, but without the severe risk aversion that hinders diplomatic work in Mogadishu today.[82] As such, the Pentagon should maintain support capabilities through close collaboration with and approval from the White House to ensure that force is used only when absolutely necessary to protect Americans on the ground. The U.S. should be responsible for giving Somalia the fighting chance to stand up on its own, but Washington should not be charged with forcing the government to make changes. Instead, the United States can and should use its strongest leverage point of military assistance to create benchmarks and incentives that will motivate the FGS to work toward self-sufficiency so that it can survive once the U.S. leaves. With indefinite support from the United States, the FGS has little urgency to enact reform, but a drawdown with a limited time period provides the incentive to improve.[83] If, however, the FGS repeatedly fails to meet benchmarks for reform and shows no inclination to do so, the U.S. is justified in withdrawing before the three-year mark, so long as its diplomats receive the security and protection required to do their jobs.

American funds incentivize key players in the conflict to hold Somalia hostage in a perpetual state of violence and corruption, all to the benefit of al-Shabaab and at the expense of Somali civilians. Withdrawing military commitments is essential to, at the very least, cut off American culpability in propping up a broken system. U.S. military aid and assistance for its partners should be held contingent upon their progress in eliminating human rights abuses, collusion, and corruption. Encouraging positive behavior from Somali leadership and AMISOM will limit the U.S. role in upholding the corrupt security economy and could strengthen its partnerships in Somalia.[84]

Engaging with Somalis

To build a new approach in Somalia, Washington should entrust the State Department with exploring political solutions. The U.S. should develop these solutions with a broad net of Somalis from different backgrounds, industries, and clans that represent all political constituencies. For more than forty years, the U.S. has misread cultural and political dynamics and failed to implement effective solutions. For that reason, political solutions for Somalia should come from Somalis themselves: civil society groups, grassroots peace-building organizations, politicians working against corruption, and business leaders.[85]

Somalis are known to be self-sufficient, especially after decades of conflict have forced them to create alternative economic and political systems.[86] It is time for the U.S. work with that self-sufficiency. The same goes for development and aid. The U.S. Agency for International Development should focus its efforts on engaging with a diverse group of Somalis and funding locally based organizations to address humanitarian needs, including peace and reconciliation efforts.

To pursue greater access to a broad base of Somali citizens for collaboration, Americans must be allowed to leave the Mogadishu Airport Compound. U.S. diplomats are the only foreign officials restricted from doing so, and those boundaries have become a "counterproductive level of risk aversion."[87] The Pentagon originally relied on the State Department to help recruit soldiers for Danab from "all over the country," so foreign service officers should be able to access Somalis for significantly less dangerous projects.[88]

Some of the driving factors regarding security concerns outside of the Mogadishu Airport Compound include the fear of Shabab attacks; however, letting the risk of terror attacks limit U.S. efforts to administer aid also prevents Somalis from seeing evidence of U.S. assistance. Despite the U.S. being the largest foreign donor to Somalia, other donors like Turkey are "hugely popular in Somalia" because they work on high-profile projects, such as building infrastructure.[89] If Washington were to allow its diplomatic leaders to work across Somalia, not only would that provide the access needed to engage directly with civilians, but it would also improve public opinion of the U.S. and could dissuade terrorist sympathizers.[90]

Finally, engaging with Somalis also means engaging with the business community. Unlike the Pentagon, the Department of State can address financial disparity by building economic partnerships within nonmilitary industries. Somalia was once a top agricultural exporter and opening Somali businesses and exports U.S. markets to would help the U.S. find mutually beneficial ways to engage with Somalia.[91]

Diplomacy in Somalia Is Challenging but Important

While diplomacy is a nonviolent alternative to militarized foreign policy, it runs the risk of making political mistakes not unlike those of the U.S. military, and it poses new challenges when addressing the threat of al-Shabaab. For years, U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Somalia legitimized the sitting government and its partners, thereby validating division, corruption, and under-the-table dealings with fundamentalist groups. The challenge of addressing insecurity and violence in Somalia with a less militarized approach will have to avoid enabling and encouraging a corrupt governmental system.

Furthermore, addressing the root causes of violent extremism with diplomacy will likely require negotiation with al-Shabaab, especially to end the war. On the one hand, al-Shabaab is known to have less extreme combatants who are not as committed to sowing terror as others. Unlike military conflict, diplomatic negotiation provides the opportunity to reach those soldiers.[92] On the other hand, it may be challenging to convince policymakers to negotiate with al-Shabaab if they refuse. Disengagement is an option, but the United States should take seriously its history of contributing to Somalia's instability and pursue reconciliation through diplomatic means, even if it means negotiating with al-Shabaab.

Conclusion

It is time the United States allows Somalis to pursue reconciliation on their own terms. Four decades of U.S. intervention have sustained political disorder, destabilization, and violence. The U.S. role in Somalia fuels al-Shabaab as a current threat, yet policymakers cite the group's presence as a reason to stay. America's policy failures in Somalia are unquestionable, but its role in the future is yet to be determined. Washington has a choice to make: transform its foreign policy in Somalia, or fail. If the United States can adapt, it can end its shadow war in Somalia and work toward sustainable peace and stability for Somalis.

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