

Challenges to US Diplomacy: Dealing with Terrorism and Instability in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

For the purpose of this presentation, I define the Horn of Africa as Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia/Somaliland. These countries have constituted one of the most conflicted corners of the world since the end of World War II. Other parts of the world have faced more death, destruction and deprivation for briefer periods of time. For example, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s; the nexus of countries engaged in the Israel-Palestine conflict; wars in South Asia and the Middle East involving Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Iran; and the longstanding conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa. The Horn of Africa, however, probably holds the record for the sheer number of conflicts during the past 60 plus years. Some of them have resulted in many deaths and displacement of millions of people.

Reasons for Conflict

The region is on a Muslim/Christian fault line. Most of the countries were once Cold War pawns and they are still dealing with that legacy. The area is generally poor and the countries have high levels of economic inequality and political marginalization. -There is frequent competition for scarce resources including arable land, water, and good grazing areas. The high population growth rate in most countries in the region adds to competition for access to land and scarce resources. Numerous pastoral people are constantly on the move seeking water, food, fuel and better grazing. The climate is often fickle and harsh, resulting in frequent food shortages and even famine; climate change will likely aggravate this situation.

Like much of the rest of Africa, colonial rulers carved up the region with arbitrary borders that divide ethnic groups. Countries in the region do not have a good record on governance; authoritarian governments are the rule rather than the exception. Corruption is high. The region is awash in small weapons and national borders are unusually porous. The Horn is also experiencing problems related to terrorism and religious fundamentalism emanating in the nearby Middle East and South Asia.

The Horn Ranks Poorly on Issues Related to Governance

A number of recent global and Africa-wide surveys demonstrate how poorly the Horn ranks globally on governance issues. The 2015 Index of African Governance by the

Mo Ibrahim Foundation ranked 54 African countries with number one as best governed and number 54 as worst governed. Somalia ranked 54, South Sudan 53, Sudan 51, Eritrea 50, Djibouti 36, and Ethiopia 31. Of the six countries in the Horn, four ranked in the bottom five.

The 2014 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranked 174 countries from least corrupt to most corrupt. Somalia tied for 174, Sudan was 173, South Sudan was 171, Eritrea was 166, Ethiopia was 110, and Djibouti was 107. Not a single country in the Horn even came close to reaching the mid-point of least corrupt countries.

In 2014, Freedom House identified all six countries in the Horn as “not free.” Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia ranked among the ten most repressive countries worldwide for both political rights and civil liberties. Freedom House ranked only self-declared independent Somaliland as “partly free.”

The Fund for Peace Fragile States Index for 2015 ranked 178 countries. South Sudan was number 1 or the most fragile state in the world. Somalia was number 2. Sudan was number 4. Ethiopia was number 20. Eritrea was number 24. Djibouti was number 40.

The 2015 Heritage Foundation ranking of economic freedom evaluated 178 countries. Eritrea ranked near the bottom at 174, Ethiopia ranked 149, and Djibouti ranked 112. South Sudan, Sudan, and Somalia were not ranked.

The 2015 World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters without Borders ranked 180 countries. Eritrea ranked last at 180, Sudan 174, Somalia 172, Djibouti 170, Ethiopia 142, and South Sudan 125.

The six countries in the Horn of Africa consistently rank at or near the bottom of these Africa-wide and global indexes.

Overview of Major Conflicts in the Horn

--Sudan:

The Anyanya I and II insurgency against Khartoum began in the mid-1950s in southern Sudan. There was a North-South civil war from 1983 until cease fire in 2003. Sudan has an ongoing territorial dispute with Egypt over the Halaib Triangle. There is periodic ethnic conflict in eastern Sudan. The conflict in Darfur began in 2003 and remains unresolved. There is sporadic conflict along border with Chad. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) operated out of southern Sudan when it was part of Sudan. Khartoum supported various terrorist groups from 1970s through 1990s and provided refuge for Osama bin Laden from 1991-1996. There has been sporadic conflict along the South Sudan border, especially in the Nuba Mountains, Abyei, and Southern Kordofan following the referendum that led to independence of South Sudan on 9 July 2011.

--South Sudan:

Since independence, South Sudan has experienced periodic conflict involving ethnic-based militias. An alleged coup attempt in 2013 followed by the removal of 1st vice president Riek Machar resulted in virtual civil war between the Dinka and Nuer, the two largest tribes in South Sudan.

--Ethiopia:

A left-wing military junta overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and other groups worked to topple the Mengistu Haile Mariam government, which fell in 1991.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Oromo Liberation Front sought autonomy and then beginning in the mid-1990s to topple the Ethiopian government. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Ogadeni National Liberation Front sought autonomy and then beginning in the mid-1990s to topple the Ethiopian government. There has been a number of less important ethnic-based liberation groups organized in Gambela, Afar, Beni Shangul and Sidama regions.

Ethiopia has been subject to growing Wahhabi influence from the Gulf States among its 36 percent Muslim population. Ethiopia has experienced periodic low level terrorist attacks by undetermined groups in urban areas. At the request of the Somali Transitional Federal Government, Ethiopia invaded Somalia late in 2006 to eliminate the administration operated by the Islamic Courts, which Ethiopia concluded was a direct threat.

--Eritrea:

Armed groups agitating for independence from Ethiopia began operations in the early 1960s. Eritrea achieved de facto independence in 1991 and de jure independence in 1993. Eritrea periodically has had conflicts along its border with Sudan. In 1995, it experienced a major dispute with Yemen over the Hanish Islands in the Red Sea. Eritrean troops entered Ethiopia in 1998, leading to a bloody conventional war that lasted until 2000. This conflict remains unresolved. Eritrea once supported extremist Somali groups that opposed both Ethiopia and the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia. Eritrea sent troops to Djibouti's border in 2008. The situation has been defused but not resolved.

--Djibouti:

There is a long history of conflict between the Afar and Somali peoples that led to the creation of the Afar Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy. It still conducts occasional attacks in the country.

--Somalia:

Following independence in 1960 and throughout the 1960s, there was regular conflict with neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya as Somalia agitated to incorporate the Somali populations that live and have citizenship in those two countries. There was a major conventional war with Ethiopia in 1977-78 when Somalia briefly captured most of southeast Ethiopia. Civil war broke out in the late 1980s between Somaliland and

Somalia. After the fall of Somali President Siad Barre in 1991, Somaliland declared independence from Somalia. At the same time, Somalia became a failed state.

Beginning in the early 1990s, al-Ittihad al-Islami rose as an Islamic extremist organization. This was followed by a period of warlord rule in much of Somalia and the international intervention led initially by the United States from 1992 to 1995. The Islamic Courts took power in 2006. Ethiopian troops entered Somalia and removed the Islamic Courts from power in 2007. This resulted in the rise of al-Shabaab, which has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.

In 2008, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was established to counter al-Shabaab. Troops from neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia entered Somalia at the request of the Somali government to fight al-Shabaab; they eventually became part of AMISOM. While al-Shabaab has lost considerable territory, it regularly carries out terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in Somalia and neighboring Kenya.

Proxy Wars

Most countries in the region have a long history of supporting proxy wars against their neighbors. For years, Ethiopia and Eritrea supported the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army and the northern-focused Sudan National Democratic Alliance Forces that were trying to topple the government in Khartoum. Ethiopia once supported several opposition groups against Somalia and now provides refuge for an Eritrean exile group that opposes Eritrea.

Eritrea once supported the eastern Sudanese Beja National Congress against Sudan. Today Eritrea supports the Ogadeni National Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, and other Ethiopian dissidents who oppose the government in Addis Ababa.

Khartoum previously supported the Oromo Liberation Front, Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and Benishangul People's Liberation Front against Ethiopia; the Eritrean Islamic Jihad against Eritrea; the Lord's Resistance Army and the West Nile Bank Front against Uganda; and Chadian rebel groups against the government in Ndjamen. There is some evidence that Khartoum is now supporting rebel movements in South Sudan while South Sudan supports an opposition group operating in Sudan.

Somalia previously supported a variety of Somali armed groups against Ethiopia. This tit-for-tat support of armed groups in neighboring countries has been one of the principal causes of conflict in the region.

Characteristics of Military Organizations

Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea have professional and well equipped armies that have been tested in battle. Sudan's military was established from the beginning along professional lines. There is also a large Sudanese militia that is much less professional.

Sudan traditionally relied heavily on soldiers from Darfur, which posed a major dilemma when the conflict broke out in 2003 in Darfur. Khartoum questioned the loyalty of the Darfur soldiers. That helps explain why Khartoum relied so heavily on the murderous Janjaweed militia to confront the Darfur rebel groups.

Under the imperial government, Ethiopia had a long history of a professional and well trained military that even sent several battalions to fight with the United Nations forces in Korea in the early 1950s. The current Ethiopian and Eritrean armies began as guerrilla organizations and only transformed themselves into professional armies after taking control of their respective governments. They still retain, however, some of the tactics and thinking of guerrilla leadership.

Sudan is now the third largest manufacturer in Africa of military equipment after South Africa and Egypt. Sudan's Military Industrial Corporation produces a variety of ammunition, small arms, mortars, rocket launchers, APCs, self-propelled artillery, and tanks. Ethiopia has a modest arms industry that produces assault rifles, RPGs, small arms, and has an assembly plant to manufacture tanks.

Ethiopia relies on a volunteer army; Eritrea has imposed conscription. Leadership of the Ethiopian military is heavily Tigrayan, which gives rise to resentment because the Tigrayans constitute only 6 percent of the population. The Sudan People's Liberation Army in South Sudan tried without much success to transition from a guerrilla force to a professional army. Internal conflict in South Sudan has derailed this effort.

Somalia does not have a meaningful national army but is trying to build one; unfortunately, clan, ethnic, and regional loyalties still prevail. Al-Shabaab has a disciplined militia that uses extreme tactics such as suicide bombings and has questionable morale. The quality of other Somali militias, some that support the Somali Federal Government and others aligned with al-Shabaab, varies enormously and routinely switches loyalty. Security forces in Somaliland are totally independent of the Somali government in Mogadishu and those in Puntland operate largely independently of Mogadishu.

Of these military organizations, the Ethiopians are most capable of getting the job done. Ethiopia is also one of the largest troop contributing countries to UN peacekeeping operations. There are serious questions about morale in an otherwise highly competent Eritrean force.

Terrorism Overview

Sudan has gone from a terrorist host to a cooperative counterterrorism partner of the United States. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in 1998 on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the United States launched a cruise missile attack against a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum in the mistaken belief it was linked to Osama bin Laden. From time to time, Sudan is the location of terrorist attacks, usually by outside groups, aimed at Western interests.

Since 1992, Somalia has attracted al-Qaeda-linked foreign jihadis. Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks are often carried out in the name of al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab remains the most serious terrorist threat in the region.

Ethiopia is a strong counterterrorism partner of the United States. It has experienced numerous small terrorist attacks by regional enemies but has avoided catastrophic incidents.

Djibouti (95 percent Muslim) and Eritrea (50 percent Muslim) have been largely left alone by international terrorists. Djibouti cooperates closely with the United States on counterterrorism while Eritrea does not. It is not clear why Islamic terrorists have so far given Eritrea a pass. It might be due to its highly authoritarian form of government, strong ability to monitor dissidents, and the fact that it previously supported Islamic groups in Somalia. Until recently, Djibouti was largely free of terrorist attacks in spite of the fact that it hosts American, French, and Japanese military bases.

Somali Piracy

Somali piracy rose sharply in 2004-2005, putting Somalia on the international maritime security map for the first time. Actual and attempted attacks exploded in 2008 when there were 111 of them. In terms of successfully hijacked ships, Somalis accounted for 86 percent of the world's total in 2008. Piracy increased again in 2009 and set new records in 2010 with 445 attacks, up 10 percent over 2009, resulting in 49 hijacked vessels. Somalia accounted for 92 percent of ship seizures globally in 2010. At the end of 2010, Somali pirates held 28 vessels and 638 hostages.

A strong international naval presence and improved anti-piracy measures by individual ships' masters caused a sharp drop in attempted and successful hijackings in the Gulf of Aden. As a result, the Somalis extended their geographical reach to the Arabian Sea, the Seychelles, north of Madagascar, and off Oman. The Somalis are entrepreneurial and adaptive and their piracy techniques changed accordingly. Their primary goal is making money through the ransom of ships and the crew. They rarely tamper with the cargo on board. Increasingly, they fired automatic weapons and RPGs at the bridge of intended targets to encourage the ship's master to stop. The going ransom rate for large vessels and well heeled owners reached more than \$3 million per successful hijacking.

As the problem extended geographically, more ships began using on board security teams. In the last several years, the collective anti-piracy measures have reduced the problem to little more than a nuisance. In 2014, no merchant vessels were successfully pirated in the western Indian Ocean region. There were 18 pirate attacks in 2014 that resulted in the successful hijacking of only two dhows.

Most experts on Somali piracy dismiss any connection between the pirates and the al-Shabaab terrorist organization. While there is no ideological link, there are reasons why pirates would want to cooperate with al-Shabaab for reasons of convenience.

Challenges for US Diplomacy in the Horn

The challenges facing U.S. diplomacy in the Horn are considerable. Africa is not a priority for U.S. policy and competes poorly with many other regions of the world for high level executive branch attention and Congressional funding. Within Africa, however, the Horn of Africa does get more attention and better funding than most other regions.

The United States has good relations with Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia but strained relations with Sudan and Eritrea and increasingly complicated relations with South Sudan. In any event, the governments of Somalia and South Sudan do not control all of their own territory. These factors reduce American leverage in the region.

The United States has strongly supported the principal African organization for resolution of conflict in the Horn—Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD). But IGAD has not yet demonstrated the ability to resolve disputes among its member states.

While the United States is one of the most important international players in the region, it is not the only one. The European Union, United Nations agencies, and World Bank are the principal providers of development assistance. The United Nations shares control with the African Union for a peacekeeping operation in Sudan's Darfur region and has sole responsibility for another in South Sudan. The African Union operates a peace making operation in Somalia.

A number of countries have more important economic relations than the United States has with most of the countries in the Horn. For example, several European countries, China, India, and, in a few countries, even Saudi Arabia and Turkey have more significant economic relationships. Russia and China are the major arms suppliers to the region. Nearby countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, and Chad all have important political interests in one or more of the countries in the Horn.

While the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa military base in Djibouti is the largest one in the region, France and Japan also have a base there and China is in discussion with the Djiboutian government for some kind of naval support facility. The United States also has a drone operation in southwestern Ethiopia.

All of these international players complicate the coordination of policy towards the region. There are significant numbers of Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans now living in the United States, thus impacting the domestic decision-making calculus. Finally, there have been occasions when the United States made decisions concerning the

region based on inadequate or inaccurate information. Not only is this a conflicted corner of the world, it is a complicated one for U.S. diplomacy.