SOMALIA AND AL-QAEDA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WAR ON TERRORISM

JAMES PHILLIPS

The United States has made considerable progress in its war against international terrorism. It has uprooted Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist group—and the radical Islamic Taliban regime that protected it—from Afghanistan. Yet, despite his military setback in Afghanistan and the arrest of over 1,300 al-Qaeda suspects in over 70 countries, bin Laden's terrorist network remains "the most immediate and serious threat" to American security, according to CIA Director George Tenet. Largely expelled from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda may seek to regroup in another country where it could count on some degree of local support.

Somalia is such a place. It is a failed state whose lawless anarchy would permit terrorists to operate relatively freely. Al-Qaeda has operated there in the past and has worked with a radical Somali group, *al-Ittihad al-Islamiya* (AIAI or "Islamic Unity"), since the early 1990s. Somalia also has a long seacoast with numerous unpatrolled ports that could provide easy entry for al-Qaeda terrorists fleeing from Afghanistan via Pakistan or Iran by sea.

If it were to intervene in Somalia, the United States would discover that Somalia's anarchy, which makes it fertile ground for Islamic extremists, also makes it an extremely unpredictable arena for military operations. It may be easier in military and geostrategic terms to conduct counterterrorist operations in Somalia than in Afghanistan, but Somalia's tumultuous internal politics make any sustained military operation a risky proposition.

The Clinton Administration discovered this when it expanded a 1992 humanitarian food relief operation in Somalia into a failed nation-building experiment. U.S. peacekeeping troops became a lightning rod for attacks by bin Laden's terrorists and his Somali allies. On October 3, 1993, 18 American special forces troops were killed in a battle with Somalis trained by bin Laden's supporters. The subsequent withdrawal of the U.S. peacekeeping forces from Somalia in 1994 was perceived as a triumph for bin Laden and probably encouraged him to launch increasingly devastating terrorist attacks against the United States to drive American forces out of Saudi Arabia, bin Laden's home country.

Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy. To prepare itself for the likelihood that bin Laden and his lieutenants will move their operations to Somalia, the United States should:

- **Place a top priority on intercepting al-Qaeda's principal leaders before they can establish a base of operations in Somalia.** Al-Qaeda's center of gravity, which must be destroyed if it is to be defeated, is not its physical infrastructure in Afghanistan or elsewhere, but its leadership structure. Capturing or killing these leaders is more an intelligence problem than a purely military one.

- **Bolster U.S. intelligence-gathering inside Somalia.** The CIA needs to recruit and deploy, as soon as possible, a network of Somali agents drawn from every clan and faction to gain a better understanding of Somalia's kaleidoscopic clan-based politics, al-Qaeda's presence there, and the strength of the groups that might aid it. Poor intelligence was a contributing factor in the failed 1993 raid that led to the deaths of 18 Americans.

- **Keep the focus on fighting al-Qaeda and avoid mission creep.** Washington must remain tightly focused on battling al-Qaeda. U.S. military forces, already spread thin, must prepare for other contingencies, including possible war against Iraq. The United States cannot afford to commit substantial military forces to action in Somalia unless there is solid evidence that al-Qaeda has moved its leadership or major portions of its operations there. Washington cannot repeat the mistake of getting involved in nation-building in Somalia.

- **Cooperate with Ethiopia and Kenya to curb Islamic radicalism in Somalia.** Neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya both have suffered from terrorist attacks launched by Islamic radicals supported by backers in Somalia. Ethiopia could be an important U.S. ally, with considerable influence inside Somalia exercised through its proxies in the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council. Addis Ababa also could provide access to Ethiopian air bases to use as staging areas for possible commando raids or air strikes.

- **Cultivate Somali allies to combat al-Qaeda.** The U.S. should recruit Somalis to help uproot al-Qaeda from Somalia, but Washington should refrain from picking sides among the factions and should keep its lines open to all factions with the exception of the radical AIAI.

- **Use covert CIA operations, special operations commandos, and precision air strikes as necessary to target al-Qaeda cells.** In Somalia, al-Qaeda would seek to blend in with native Somalis and use civilians as shields. Conventional military operations, and even large special forces operations as in Mogadishu in 1993, could result in heavy civilian casualties. Rather than take this approach, which would radicalize Somalis and win bin Laden greater support, the United States should attack isolated targets with small units operating stealthily at night. Lightning "snatch and grab" commando operations should be launched from bases outside of Somalia to limit the presence of foreign troops on the ground.

Conclusion. After being evicted from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda may regroup in Somalia, where it has longstanding links to the radical group *al-Ittihad al-Islamiya*. Washington's first priority should be to deny bin Laden a base in Somalia by intercepting al-Qaeda forces before they reach that failed state. Meanwhile the United States should increase its intelligence-gathering activities in Somalia to assess the strength of the threat that al-Qaeda poses there.

Absent a growing al-Qaeda threat or the move of its leaders to Somalia, the United States should avoid making a sustained military commitment there, which would divert scarce military forces from more urgent missions in Iraq or Afghanistan. The scale of any U.S. military and political commitment should be calibrated to match the threat posed by the al-Qaeda presence in Somalia. If this presence is found to pose little threat to American interests, U.S. military forces should not be deployed there. The United States instead should cooperate with Somalis to root out al-Qaeda. In any event, the Bush Administration should avoid being drawn into another costly and risky nation-building experiment in Somalia, this time under the guise of fighting terrorism.

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The United States has made considerable progress in its war against international terrorism, but it still faces contingencies that could complicate its goal of eradicating the scourge of global terrorism. The United States has uprooted Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda ("the Base") terrorist group—and the radical Islamic Taliban regime that protected it—from Afghanistan. Although al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants seek to regroup and challenge the authority of the U.S.-backed Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, bin Laden has lost his foremost safe haven and state sponsor.

Yet, despite his military setback in Afghanistan and the arrest of over 1,300 al-Qaeda suspects in over 70 countries, bin Laden's terrorist network remains "the most immediate and serious threat" to American security, according to Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet.[1] Largely expelled from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda may seek to regroup in another country where it could count on some degree of local support.

Somalia is such a place. It is a failed state whose lawless anarchy would permit terrorists to operate relatively freely. The al-Qaeda network has operated there in the past and has longstanding ties to a small minority of Somali Islamists, with which it has worked since the early 1990s.

Somalia also has a long seacoast with numerous unpatrolled ports that could provide easy entry for al-Qaeda terrorists fleeing from Afghanistan via Pakistan or Iran by sea. The U.S. Navy intercepted at least one ship that reportedly transported fugitive al-Qaeda operatives who escaped from a Pakistani port inside a shipping container.[2] U.S. intelligence officials believe that bin Laden owns a number of ships, one of which is suspected of transporting

1. George Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat—Converging Dangers in a Post 9/11 World," testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess., March 19, 2002, p. 2.

2. A U.S. Navy boarding party found materials and equipment linked to al-Qaeda, but not the terrorists, who already had escaped. Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough, "Inside the Ring," *The Washington Times*, January 11, 2002.

some of the explosives used in the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.[3] Shortly after September 11, U.S. intelligence officials received reports that bin Laden himself planned to move from Afghanistan to Somalia or had already done so.[4]

To prevent al-Qaeda elements fleeing Afghanistan from relocating in Somalia, the United States has assembled a multinational naval flotilla off Somalia's coast and in the Arabian Sea to intercept fugitive terrorists. Washington also has stepped up aerial reconnaissance missions and intelligence-gathering activities inside Somalia to scout possible al-Qaeda strongholds. General Tommy Franks, commander in chief of the U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for conducting the war against terrorism in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and the Horn of Africa, has warned that he has evidence that al-Qaeda terrorist cells are present in Somalia—a "serious concern."[5]

There has been considerable speculation that Somalia may become the next front in the global war against international terrorism. If and when it were to intervene in Somalia, the United States would discover that Somalia's anarchy, which makes the country a fertile ground for Islamic extremists, also makes it an extremely unpredictable arena for military operations. It may be easier in military and geostrategic terms to conduct counterterrorist operations in Somalia than in Afghanistan, but Somalia's tumultuous internal politics make any sustained military operation a risky proposition, as the Clinton Administration discovered in 1993 when it expanded a humanitarian aid mission into a failed nation-building experiment.

To prevent al-Qaeda from moving its base of operations to Somalia, the United States should place a top priority on intercepting its leaders in transit, before they can establish themselves there. Washington also needs to bolster U.S. intelligence-gathering inside Somalia to determine the extent of al-Qaeda's presence. The United States then should calibrate its military and political commitment in

Somalia to match the threat posed by al-Qaeda forces. It should cooperate with Somalia's neighbors and cultivate Somali allies to combat al-Qaeda. If necessary, Washington should use covert operations, commando raids, and precision-guided air strikes to attack terrorist cells.

But the struggle against al-Qaeda is more an intelligence problem than a strictly military problem. The United States should seek to minimize its military presence inside Somalia and operate from ships off the coast and bases elsewhere to avoid giving bin Laden new targets to attack or giving Somalis new incentives to join his war against the United States.

WHY SOMALIA IS A LIKELY REFUGE FOR AL-QAEDA

Somalia, a country slightly smaller than the state of Texas, long has been one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. Its 7.5 million people have suffered through a long drought that has depleted their livestock herds and slashed agricultural production, the mainstays of the economy.

Much of their misery, however, has been man-made. General Mohammed Siad Barre, who seized power in a 1969 military coup, aligned Somalia with the Soviet bloc and adopted socialist policies that crippled economic growth. His aggressive foreign policy, backed by Soviet-supplied arms, led Somalia to invade Ethiopia in 1977 to seize the disputed Ogaden region, inhabited predominantly by ethnic Somalis. After Somalia was defeated by Ethiopia in a bloody and costly war, Barre's regime became increasingly harsh, repressive, and corrupt. In the late 1980s, various clan-based militias sprang up in opposition to the discredited ruling regime, and when General Barre was overthrown in 1991 by two rebel movements, Somalia was plunged into chaos.

The failure of the Somali government contributed to the fracturing of the Somali nation. Rival clan leaders mobilized armed followers to carve out competing fiefdoms. More than a dozen factions

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3. Steve Kroft, "Unsafe Ports?" *60 Minutes*, CBS News, March 24, 2002.
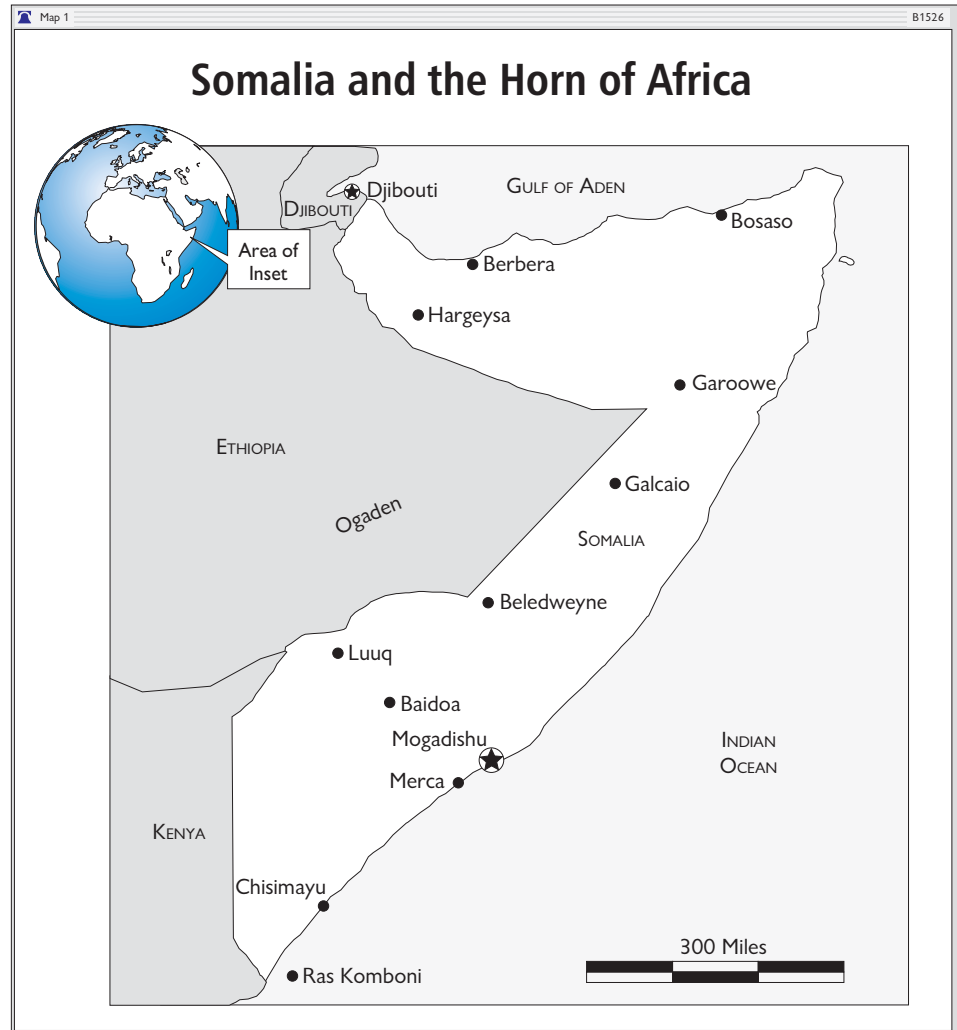
4. These intelligence reports, initially found to be credible, were later discounted. Thomas Ricks, "Allies Step Up Somalia Watch," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2002, p. A20.

5. General Tommy Franks, exclusive interview with the BBC, "U.S. Watches Somali al-Qaeda links," BBC News Online, March 17, 2002, at *http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/english/world/africa/newsid_1877000/1877878.stm*.

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jousted for dominance in a Hobbesian free-for-all. Northern clans gained autonomy and relative political stability in the breakaway territories of Somaliland in the northwest and Puntland in the northeast, but southern Somalia descended into a brutal civil war as warlords struggled for power and territory, particularly in the war-torn capital of Mogadishu. There, the warlord most responsible for ousting the Barre regime, General Mohammed Farah Aideed, gained a precarious dominance over rival warlords Muse Sude Yalahow and Ali Mahdi Mohammed.

By 1992, chronic factional fighting had exacerbated the growing humanitarian crisis. Farmers hampered by intermittent drought, economic chaos, and political violence increasingly were unable to plant and harvest food crops. An estimated 300,000 Somalis died of starvation during the early 1990s.[6] The United Nations Security Council launched an emergency food relief operation in August 1992 but was unable to assure the distribution of food supplies because of the deteriorating security situation, particularly in the south. Somali warlords ruthlessly plundered relief supplies to feed and subsidize their own militias.

Foreign Intervention and the Failure of Nation-Building. To rescue the floundering U.N. food relief operation, President George H. Bush ordered the Pentagon on December 9, 1992, to undertake Operation Restore Hope. This humanitarian mission, which eventually involved 25,000 U.S. servicemen, provided security and logistical support for the U.N. effort.

Somalia and the Horn of Africa

Map 1   B1526

DJIBOUTI • Djibouti   GULF OF ADEN   • Bosaso

• Berbera

• Hargeysa

ETHIOPIA   • Garoowe

Ogaden   • Galcaio

SOMALIA

• Beledweyne

• Luuq

• Baidoa

Mogadishu ★   INDIAN OCEAN

Merca •

KENYA

Chisimayu •

• Ras Komboni

300 Miles

Operation Restore Hope succeeded in alleviating famine conditions, but the incoming Clinton Administration, infused with the spirit of "assertive multilateralism," expanded the short-term humanitarian aid mission into a long-term nation-building operation under the auspices of the United Nations. This well-intentioned but naïve conception of foreign policy as social work triggered tragic unintended consequences in Somalia.

Somalia's fractious warlords increasingly bridled at what they saw as foreign interference. General Aideed initially had welcomed the United Nations intervention, which he sought to exploit to strengthen his domination over southern Somalia, but grew hostile after U.N. peacekeeping troops sought to disarm his militia and increasingly were

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6. Ted Dagne, "The Horn of Africa: War and Humanitarian Crisis," Congressional Research Service, *CRS Issue Brief* No. 10056, updated September 19, 2000, p. 8.

SOMALIA AT A GLANCE

SIZE: 627,337 square miles (slightly smaller than Texas)

POPULATION: 7.5 million (2001 estimate)

ETHNIC GROUPS: Somali (85%), Bantu, Arabs

RELIGION: Sunni Muslim

GOVERNMENT: An interim Transitional National Government was formed in October 2000, but controls little territory outside the capital of Mogadishu. Northern autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland have formed independent governments. Unstable southern Somalia is roiled by chronic civil war between numerous warlords and clan-based factions.

ECONOMY: One of the world's poorest and least developed countries, Somalia has few resources. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, with livestock accounting for approximately 40% of GDP and 65% of export earnings. Drought, famine, and constant civil strife have hamstrung economic growth.

GDP: $4.3 billion (2000 estimate, purchasing power parity)

GDP PER CAPITA: $600 (2000 estimate, purchasing power parity)

EXPORTS: Estimated $186 million in 1999, primarily livestock, bananas, hides, fish

IMPORTS: Estimated $314 million in 1999, primarily manufactures, petroleum products, foodstuffs, and construction materials.

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2001*

perceived as favoring his arch-rival, Ali Mahdi Mohammed.

Aideed launched a guerrilla war to drive out U.N. peacekeeping forces, and his gunmen killed 25 Pakistani peacekeepers in an ambush in June 1993. The Clinton Administration dispatched U.S. special forces to arrest General Aideed in Mogadishu, but the mission backfired on October 3, 1993, when Aideed's gunmen shot down two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters and killed 18 Army rangers—the heaviest casualties U.S. forces had suffered in a single battle since Vietnam—in a fierce firefight that also claimed the lives of over 1,000 Somalis.

This ill-fated operation, chronicled in the book (and now movie) *Black Hawk Down*, became the tragic turning point in America's intervention in Somalia. After stunned Americans watched television coverage of Somalis dragging the body of a dead American soldier through the streets of Mogadishu, the Clinton Administration quickly reversed course. Unable to justify to appalled Americans the sacrifice of U.S. troops originally dispatched to feed starving Somalis, it abandoned its overly ambitious nation-building experiment in Somalia. Washington withdrew the U.S. forces from Somalia by the end of March 1994, and the U.N. peacekeeping mission was terminated in 1995 after failing to restore law and order.

Unintended Consequences: The Rise of Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is a transnational umbrella group that has evolved from a loose association of Islamic militants who had flocked to Afghanistan during the 1980s to join the *jihad* (holy war) against the Soviet occupation.[7] Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, many of these estimated 25,000 "Arab Afghans" returned home, where they fostered radical Islamic movements in many Muslim countries, including Somalia. According to U.S. intelligence reports, bin Laden sent Islamic extremists to Somalia in 1991–1992 to help the Somali Islamic radical group *al-Ittihad al-Islamiya* (Islamic Unity, or AIAI) to organize an armed militia, establish schools and clinics, and prepare to seize power.

One of the most grievous unintended consequences of the U.S. intervention in Somalia was that U.S. peacekeeping forces became a lightning

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7. See James Phillips, "Defusing Terrorism at Ground Zero: Why a New U.S. Policy Is Needed for Afghanistan," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1383, July 12, 2000.

rod for terrorist attacks from bin Laden's terrorists and their Somali allies. Al-Qaeda's first known terrorist attack against Americans was the December 1992 bombing of a hotel in Aden, Yemen, used by American soldiers en route to Somalia to participate in the relief operations.[8]

Bin Laden, who lived in nearby Sudan from 1991–1996 under the protection of the radical Islamic regime in Khartoum, regarded the American humanitarian intervention in Somalia as a colonial occupation and a threat to Islam. This mirrored his hostile view of the deployment of U.S. troops to defend Saudi Arabia in 1990 after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He deemed the U.S. intervention to be an intolerable occupation of his Saudi homeland and a crusade against Islam.

In 1993, bin Laden issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) calling for Somalis to attack U.S. forces and drive them out of the country.[9] He dispatched several lieutenants, including Mohammed Atef, who is believed to have helped plan the September 11 attacks, to help train Somalis in military and terrorist tactics.

According to U.S. officials, bin Laden spent $3 million to recruit and airlift elite veterans of the Afghan *jihad* to Somalia via third countries, such as Yemen and Ethiopia.[10] Several hundred foreign veterans of the Afghan *jihad,* expelled from Pakistan in 1993, also joined the Somali *jihad* after passing

through Sudan.[11] Tariq Nasr Fadhli, a radical Islamic leader from Yemen who fought under bin Laden against the Soviets in Afghanistan, helped bring Yemeni mercenaries to fight in Somalia.[12]

Bin Laden later claimed responsibility for the deaths of the 18 U.S. soldiers in Mogadishu.[13] In a 1997 interview with CNN, he gloated that al-Qaeda had trained and organized the Somali fighters who did the actual fighting.[14] Al-Qaeda members are suspected of teaching General Aideed's militia how to shoot down U.S. helicopters by altering the fuses of rocket-propelled grenades so that they exploded in mid-air.[15]This tactic, developed by the Afghan *mujahideen* (holy warriors) in their war against the Soviets, was the same one al-Qaeda forces used to bring down two U.S. helicopters near Gardez, Afghanistan, during Operation Anaconda in early March 2002.

Triumph Against U.S. in 1993 Stokes Bin Laden's Ambitions. The ignominious collapse of the U.S. peacekeeping mission in Somalia after October 1993 undoubtedly led bin Laden to conclude that "you go kill a few Americans and they go away," as one expert described it.[16] This also reinforced his contempt for American staying power and fueled his ambitions to use terrorism to drive American influence out of the Muslim world: If the deaths of 18 soldiers could cause the withdrawal of 25,000 U.S. troops from Somalia, bin Laden had

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8. The soldiers left before the bomb exploded, killing two tourists. Vernon Loeb, "A Global Pan-Islamic Network," *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1998, p. A24.

9. Bin Laden argued that "We have to cut off the head of the snake." Mark Fineman and Stephen Braun, "Life Inside al Qaeda: A Destructive Devotion," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2001.

10. Richard Sale, "Yemen: Rocky Road to Terror Cooperation," United Press International, December 11, 2001.

11. Maulana Masood Azhar, a Pakistani terrorist leader with ties to al-Qaeda, traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, in 1993 to assist Somali Islamic radicals who requested money and recruits. After being arrested in Kashmir in 1994, Azhar admitted to Indian police that al-Qaeda provided extensive aid to *al-Ittihad al-Islamiya*, which organized attacks on U.S. troops in Somalia. Paul Watson and Sidhartha Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to Al-Qaeda," *The Los Angeles Times,* February 25, 2002, at *http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-022502hawk.story.*

12. Fadhli also is suspected of involvement in two December 1992 bombings in Yemen that targeted U.S. servicemen headed for Somalia. Watson and Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to Al-Qaeda."

13. J. T. Caruso, Acting Assistant Director, Counter Terrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Al-Qaeda International," statement for the record before the Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 107th Cong,, 1st Sess., December 18, 2001, p. 2.

14. "Bin Laden, Millionaire with a Dangerous Grudge," available at *http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/12/binladen.profile/index.html.*

15. Watson and Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to Al-Qaeda."

16. Professor Ken Menkhaus, quoted in Nicholas Kristof, "The Wrong Lessons of the Somalia Debacle," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2002, p. A29.

reason to believe that killing more Americans could lead to a similar pullout from Saudi Arabia.

Al-Qaeda terrorists are suspected of involvement in a series of increasingly ambitious terrorist bombings that killed five U.S. military advisers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1995; 19 U.S. military personnel at the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia in 1996; and 224 people, including 12 Americans, in the simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998. The embassy bombings took place on August 7, the anniversary of the first deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia in response to the August 2, 1990, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. According to U.S. intelligence, al-Qaeda used Somalia as a regional base of operations, including preparations for the 1998 embassy bombings.[17] Some of the members of the same Kenya-based al-Qaeda cell that helped train Somalis to kill U.S. soldiers in 1993 went on to carry out the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi.[18]

Bin Laden's victory in Somalia also helped radicalize Somali Islamists. Although Somalia's AIAI was formed in the late 1980s as a fundamentalist Islamic social–political movement, it evolved into a revolutionary Islamic force with (1) the return of a sprinkling of Somali veterans of the Afghan *jihad*, (2) bin Laden's radical influence, and (3) Sudanese support. It sought to build an Islamic state that would be governed by *Sharia* (Islamic law).

After the collapse of the Barre regime in 1991, AIAI vainly sought to seize control of the northern port of Bosaso and the southern cities of Merka and Kismayo but was repulsed by local Somali clans. Following the failure of the U.N. intervention, AIAI had greater success in consolidating control over the Gedo region near the Kenyan border. It built up a stronghold in the town of Luuq and cultivated support of ethnic Somalis living across the border in Ethiopia and Kenya, particularly in the Ogaden region and the teeming slums of Nairobi. The Ogaden clan, straddling the borders of eastern Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and southern Somalia, provided fertile ground for Islamic militants, in part because it experienced constant friction with Christian or secular regimes in Ethiopia and Kenya.[19]

Operating from its stronghold in the Gedo region from 1991–1997, AIAI sought to "liberate" the Ogaden region with Sudanese support and to recast Somali irredentism in the form of a radical Islamic revolution against the predominantly Christian Ethiopian government. At its peak, it could mobilize more than 3,000 fighters and staged terrorist attacks inside Ethiopia and Kenya,[20] but its strength has declined significantly as a result of three Ethiopian military interventions in the last six years, provoked by AIAI terrorist attacks.

In 1996, Ethiopian troops invaded Luuq, killed hundreds of AIAI militants, and found ready allies in clan militias that rejected the radical ideology of the AIAI. Many Somalis in Luuq turned against the AIAI because they resented the imposition of strict *Sharia*, the outlawing of *qaat* (a mild narcotic widely consumed by Somalis), and the swaggering presence of AIAI gunmen from outside clans.[21]

Following their defeat in Luuq, AIAI leaders concluded that Somalia was not yet ready for Islamic rule. They retreated from the highly militarized Afghan-style paradigm of Islamic revolution and focused instead on a more patient incremental strategy that involved the long-term infiltration of regional institutions, promotion of fundamentalist Islamic education institutions, and decentralized work within clans to avoid unnecessary clashes with traditional clan leaders.[22]

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17. David Ottaway and Thomas Ricks, "Somalia Draws Anti-Terrorist Focus," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2001, p. A22.

18. Ron Scherer and Alexandra Marks, "A Trial's Fallout for International Terrorists," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 10, 2001, p. 1.

19. Ken Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia," *Middle East Policy*, March 2002, p. 111.

20. J. Stephen Morrison, testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 107th Cong., 1st Sess., November 15, 2001, at *http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa76191.000/hfa76191_0.HTM*.

21. Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia," p. 113.

22. Ken Menkhaus, "Africa, Islam and Terrorism: Meeting Summary," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 27, 2001, at *http://www.ceip.org/files/events/AfricaTerror-summary.asp*.

TRACKING AL-QAEDA

In the aftermath of September 11, Somalia, which fell off the radar screen of U.S. foreign policy after the 1994 withdrawal of U.S. peacekeeping forces, has become an important front in the global struggle to eliminate Osama bin Laden's terrorist network. This effort requires a grueling shadow war on many diverse fronts, most of which will be non-military in nature. While the military front in Afghanistan was crucial because it deprived bin Laden of his primary sanctuary and state sponsor, over time al-Qaeda's leadership will adjust and regroup elsewhere where it can operate more freely.

Al-Qaeda's center of gravity, which must be destroyed if it is to be defeated, is not its physical infrastructure in Afghanistan or elsewhere, but its leadership structure. Capturing or killing these leaders is more an intelligence problem than a purely military one. Bin Laden and his top lieutenants operate as an umbrella group to recruit, train, finance, and logistically support a diverse network of Islamic extremists. While the foot soldiers are relatively easy to replace, the leadership, drawn from a tight circle of "Afghan Arabs," will be much harder to reconstitute because personal trust based on shared experience is so vital to its operations. Now that they have been forced out of their Afghan caves and shorn of most of their Taliban allies, they are increasingly vulnerable to betrayal. The more bodyguards they retain for personal security, the more risk they take of detection or treachery. Communications and movement undoubtedly have become more difficult.

Pakistan. Although bin Laden retains popular support in some pockets of Afghanistan and in Pakistan's frontier tribal areas, the proximity of American military power makes an indefinite stay there a risky proposition after the fall of the Taliban. Moreover, as long as Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who turned against the Taliban, is in power, bin Laden cannot rest easy in that region or in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

Iran, Iraq, Sudan. Although at least one high-ranking al-Qaeda leader has taken refuge in Iran,[23] travelling across Afghanistan to get there would be risky, even if bin Laden trusted Iran's divided government to protect him. Al-Qaeda also has ties to Iraq,[24] but that country is more distant and more difficult to enter without being detected by the United States. Sudan, which still harbors some al-Qaeda members, is a possible sanctuary; but Khartoum already has shown bin Laden the door in 1996—and has placed his former mentor, radical Sudanese Islamic ideologue Hassan Turabi, under house arrest.

Yemen. Yemen is another possible destination. Bin Laden's father was born in the mountainous Hadramawt region in the north before migrating to Saudi Arabia. Al-Qaeda is known to have sympathizers in quasi-autonomous tribal areas and successfully carried out the October 12, 2000, terrorist attack on the USS *Cole* in the port of Aden, killing 17 Americans. But moving to Yemen would mean moving close to U.S. air and naval bases in neighboring Oman. Moreover, the Yemeni government has cracked down on Islamic radicals, deployed troops to chase Al-Qaeda fugitives, and reportedly improved its anti-terrorism cooperation with the United States since September 11.

Somalia. Somalia, which has had no functioning central government for more than a decade, has no effective police force, intelligence agencies, internal security forces, army, navy, or coast guard. Its 1,900-mile coast, the longest in Africa, is a smuggler's paradise. If they chose to leave the Afghan–Pakistani border area, bin Laden and his lieutenants could easily hide in a container transported by truck to a bustling port, then move by container ship to a rendezvous with a small boat in the Indian Ocean or Gulf of Aden. Al-Qaeda long has moved personnel and supplies in and out of Somalia by boat, particularly along the southern coast, where it has established a base of operations on Ras Komboni Island, near Somalia's southern border with Kenya.[25]

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23. Senior U.S. and Israeli officials maintain that Abu Musaab Zarqawi, a senior al-Qaeda commander who fled from western Afghanistan when the U.S. military campaign began, has turned up in Tehran under the protection of Iranian security forces. Douglas Frantz and James Risen, "U.S. and Israel Fear Tehran Harbors Al-Qaeda," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2002, p. 20.

24. See James Phillips, "Target Iraq's Terrorist Regime, Not Just Osama bin Laden, To Win the War on Terrorism," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 780, October 2, 2002.

Al-Qaeda has worked successfully with AIAI in the past, as well as with clan militias such as General Aideed's forces in Mogadishu. Bin Laden could use his great wealth to acquire more allies, as he did in Afghanistan, where he subsidized the Taliban's army. A little money goes a long way in Somalia, where jobs are scarce and militia members get paid as little as $4 per day. All of these factors make Somalia a likely destination if and when the top al-Qaeda leadership decides to move to a new base of operations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY

To prepare itself more effectively for the likelihood that bin Laden and his lieutenants will move their operations to Somalia, the United States should:

• **Place a top priority on intercepting al-Qaeda's top leaders before they can establish a base of operations in Somalia.** Al-Qaeda's chief assets are its principal leaders, who inspire, mobilize, train, equip, finance, and coordinate the disparate activities of a network of terrorist cells and affiliated groups in over 60 countries. Although bin Laden is the front man, he is more important as a symbol and financier than as the operational commander. One of his code names was "the contractor," which suggests how he sees his own role.

The chief organizer is believed to be Egyptian militant Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egypt's *Al Jihad* terrorist group, which was responsible for the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Egyptian militants, who acquired considerable terrorist experience in their long struggle with the secular regime in Cairo, provide much of the operational leadership for that terrorist group today.[26]

Capturing or killing the top leaders would not end the threat posed by al-Qaeda's network of quasi-independent cells, but it would diminish

the scale of the threat, hinder their ability to coordinate operations, restrict their financing, and set back the recruitment, training, and deployment of new terrorist operatives. Bin Laden's demise could demoralize his followers, depriving the organization of its charismatic recruiter, fund raiser, and financial backer. Without its top leaders, the network could fracture into independent franchises that would each pose less of a threat to the United States and its allies than bin Laden's collective group.

Al-Qaeda's leadership is most vulnerable when it is on the run, not hidden and hunkered down in remote strongholds protected by supportive local populations. If the al-Qaeda leaders are successfully transplanted to Somalia, it probably will be much more costly and dangerous to track them down, capture, or kill them.

The U.S. Navy, augmented by British, German, French, and Dutch naval forces, already is patrolling the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden to intercept and inspect naval vessels before they can reach Somalia. Since September 11, the Pentagon has stepped up aerial reconnaissance flights and satellite surveillance of the Horn of Africa and surrounding seas. This naval screen and surveillance should be continued indefinitely to deter and detect al-Qaeda's movements.

The United States also should provide technical assistance to Somalia's neighbors to help them monitor their borders and coasts more closely. Some of the most radical AIAI groups, which would be among the most willing to help bin Laden, operate in Ethiopia's Ogaden region and in northern Kenya.

• **Bolster U.S. intelligence-gathering inside Somalia.** Somalia has been described as Africa's "proverbial black hole."[27] Since the onset of its chronic civil war and the withdrawal of the

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25. Ottaway and Ricks, "Somalia Draws Anti-Terrorist Focus," p. A23.

26. See Ed Blanche, "The Egyptians Around Bin Laden," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1, 2001.

27. Susan Rice, testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 107th Cong., 1st Sess., November 15, 2001, at *http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa76191.000/hfa76191_0.HTM*.

U.N. presence, few Westerners and fewer Americans have had the opportunity to follow the tortuous twists and turns of Somalia's factional bloodletting. Little is known about the strength of the AIAI, which has dispersed and melted into its constituent clans since its military defeat by Ethiopia in 1997. Even less is known about the strength and disposition of al-Qaeda forces or the precise nature of their links to AIAI or other Somali groups.

While the United States has mobilized its technological intelligence-gathering capabilities, such as satellite surveillance and aerial reconnaissance assets, human intelligence is crucial to the success of counterterrorist operations. The lack of good human intelligence was an important factor in the failure of repeated U.S. efforts to capture General Aideed in 1993: Despite the fact that he was living close to U.S. forces inside Mogadishu, and despite 25,000 U.S. troops on the ground and a network of Somali informants, Aideed eluded capture.

Today, the level of U.S. human intelligence on the ground is much lower, especially in southern Somalia where the threat of terrorism and support for Islamic extremism is greatest.[28] Army special forces units assigned to the Central Command have practiced training missions against mock-ups of terrorist compounds, but according to a senior official, "There is not enough intelligence on Somalia right now on which to base an attack."[29]

To remedy this situation and avoid another failed military operation, the Central Intelligence Agency needs to recruit and deploy, as soon as possible, a network of Somali agents, drawn from every clan and faction, to gain a better understanding of Somalia's kaleidoscopic clan-based politics, al-Qaeda's presence there, and the strength of the AIAI and other groups that might aid it. The United States should also consult the intelligence agencies of Britain, Egypt, France, Italy, Israel, and Saudi Arabia,

which may have access to better intelligence. Officials of the CIA, the State Department, and the Pentagon also should consult with their counterparts in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti to get up to speed on Somalia.

- **Keep the focus on fighting al-Qaeda and avoid mission creep.** Washington must remain tightly focused on battling al-Qaeda, whose far-flung network already has required U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Georgia. U.S. military forces, already spread thin, must prepare for the contingency that al-Qaeda forces seek sanctuary in Iraq or are not expelled from Iran in a timely manner. The United States cannot afford to commit substantial military forces to action in Somalia unless there is solid evidence that al-Qaeda has moved its leadership or major portions of its operations there.

Faced with the prospect of a looming confrontation with Iraq over weapons of mass destruction—the ultimate terrorist weapon—the Defense Department cannot risk getting bogged down in operations against AIAI absent a growing al-Qaeda threat in Somalia. The United States should try to contain and defeat AIAI by giving diplomatic, economic, and intelligence support to Somali factions that oppose it and to Ethiopia and Kenya, which it also threatens. But the United States should reserve the use of military force for cases in which vital national interests are at stake. Those interests are not at stake in Somalia unless al-Qaeda greatly increases its lethal activities there.

Washington cannot repeat the mistake of getting involved in nation-building in Somalia, this time under the guise of fighting terrorism. America's experience in Lebanon, Somalia, and the Balkans demonstrates that nation-building efforts often draw U.S. forces into internal power struggles that actually create incentives and targets for terrorism.[30] U.S. soldiers should

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28. Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia: Next Up in the War on Terrorism?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Africa Notes* No. 6, January 2002, p. 2.

29. Rowan Scarborough, "Special Forces Train for Somalia Duty," *The Washington Times*, February 19, 2002.

be employed to capture or kill terrorists, not to function as social workers.

- **Cooperate with Ethiopia and Kenya to curb Islamic radicalism in Somalia.** Neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya have strong reasons to cooperate in containing and defeating Islamic radicalism in Somalia. Both have large ethnic Somali minorities and share long, porous borders with Somalia. Both have suffered from terrorist attacks launched by Islamic radicals supported by backers in Somalia. Both want to live next to a stable Somalia that does not export terrorism or starving refugees. And both will become frontline states if al-Qaeda turns Somalia into another Afghanistan.

Ethiopia, which has fought three wars with Somalia, is well-positioned to assist American efforts to combat al-Qaeda or its local Somali allies. Addis Ababa has taken firm action to roll back AIAI influence on its borders. It expelled the AIAI from its stronghold in Luuq in 1997 and cobbled together a coalition of Somali factions to form the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council (SRRC), which keeps the AIAI from returning in strength.

The SRRC also opposes the Transitional National Government (TNG) in Somalia, which Ethiopia claims is a Trojan horse for the AIAI. An interim coalition government formed in October 2000 at a conference in Djibouti, the TNG has a mandate to hold elections in three years to select a permanent government. In practice, it is an impotent shell that does not even control all of Mogadishu. Although it is recognized by the United Nations and backed by the Arab League, only a handful of states recognize it as Somalia's legitimate government. The TNG is not recognized by the United States, nor should it be unless it purges AIAI members from its ranks. In September 2001, AIAI was named by the Bush Administration as one of the 27 entities supporting al-Qaeda.

Ethiopia could be an important U.S. ally, with considerable influence inside Somalia exercised through its proxies in the SRRC. It also exercises power directly by deploying troops who repeatedly have crossed the border to drive away the AIAI, which Ethiopia regards as its chief external threat. Addis Ababa also could provide the U.S. military with access to Ethiopian air bases to use as staging areas for possible commando raids or air strikes. General Franks visited Ethiopia and Kenya in mid-March 2002 and asked both countries to dispatch military liaisons to the Central Command's headquarters in Tampa, Florida, a sign of growing military cooperation.

There also is a downside to close U.S. cooperation with Ethiopia. Ethiopia has its own agenda in Somalia, which has more to do with maintaining control over the Ogaden and assuring its hegemony over western Somalia than with defeating al-Qaeda. It also has an interest in exaggerating the radical Islamic threat emanating from Somalia to extract maximum foreign aid from Washington. Washington therefore should carefully screen information gleaned from Ethiopian sources for self-serving items.

Washington also should refrain from giving Ethiopia control over any U.S. aid shipped over the border to Somali factions. The Carter Administration ceded control of the arms pipeline to the Afghan *mujahideen* to Pakistan in early 1980, and the Pakistanis used that control to build up the influence of radical anti-Western Islamic groups that it could exploit to undermine India's control over the disputed Kashmir province. These groups later coalesced into the Taliban and became Osama bin Laden's allies.

In addition, Washington should undertake intelligence-sharing and security cooperation with Ethiopia and Kenya. If al-Qaeda's influence continues to grow, the United States should provide intelligence, logistical support, and training for Ethiopian and Kenyan special forces

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30. See Gary Dempsey, "Old Folly in a New Disguise: Nation Building to Combat Terrorism," Cato Institute *Policy Analysis* No. 429, March 21, 2002.

to enable them to raid al-Qaeda and AIAI personnel inside their own borders and in Somalia.

- **Cultivate Somali allies to combat al-Qaeda.** Because Somalia has no central government, al-Qaeda will have no state protection if it moves there in force. This will make it potentially vulnerable to the sudden shifts of alliances that mark Somalia's tumultuous factional politics.

  At present, there is no obvious candidate that can play a role similar to that of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan by cooperating with U.S. military forces to root out al-Qaeda cells. Ethiopia is lobbying for U.S. support for their allies in the SRRC, but that coalition of warlords contains several militias that fought the United States in 1993, including one led by General Aideed's son, Hussein Mohammed Aideed. Moreover, Somali politics are so fluid and opportunistic that the makeup of the SRRC is bound to shift over time. In fact, if al-Qaeda does build up in Somalia, it could well spread around enough money to cause Aideed's militia and several others to defect from their Ethiopian patron.

  The northern breakaway regions of Somaliland and Puntland are relatively hostile to Islamic radicalism, but both are far from the main hotbed of potential support for bin Laden in southern Somalia. Puntland also has been riven by a factional split that pits its Ethiopian-backed former President Abdullahi Yusuf against his successor, an ally of the TNG whom he accuses of being an Islamic militant. In late November 2002, Yusuf stormed into Puntland with some 1,000 Ethiopian troops. While AIAI is suspected of infiltrating Puntland's judicial branch,[31] and the Puntland port of Bosaso reportedly was used to send Somali volunteers to Afghanistan to help bolster al-Qaeda,[32] increasing numbers of Puntlanders are said to resent Ethiopia's domination of their political system.

Given the confusing nature of Somalia's violent political culture, Washington should refrain from picking sides among the factions and should instead keep its lines open to all factions, with the exception of the AIAI, until it determines whether a growing al-Qaeda presence makes it necessary to dive again into the snake pit of Somali factional warfare. If U.S. intelligence determines that al-Qaeda remains a shadowy presence and Somali warlords are painting their opponents as Islamic radicals in order to attract American or Ethiopian support, as some suspect,[33] Washington should keep all the factions at arms length and avoid being drawn into their political blood sport.

- **Use covert CIA operations, special operations commandos, and precision air strikes as necessary to target al-Qaeda cells.** For the U.S. military, Somalia is a more convenient battlefield than Afghanistan in geostrategic terms. It has a long seacoast that makes it more accessible to carrier-based warplanes, marine landings, and special forces operations. U.S. air power is more effective in finding and hitting targets in Somalia's relatively flat desert terrain, compared to the rugged mountains of Afghanistan. And the military probably has better advanced knowledge of the terrain, based on its deployment in 1992–1994, than it did going into Afghanistan last fall.

  Politically, however, Somalia is much more difficult than Afghanistan. Many Afghans hated the Taliban and were willing to join the fight against it once it became clear that the U.S. air campaign was lethally effective. Somalis will feel threatened, not liberated, by the presence of foreign troops. The Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was a battle-hardened force that had fiercely fought the Taliban for seven years without cracking. But the SRRC and other Somali coalitions can dissolve overnight and re-form in different configurations. Fortunately,

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31. Ottaway and Ricks, "Somalia Draws Anti-Terrorist Focus," p. A23.

32. Morrison testimony, November 15, 2001.

33. See Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia."

this also will be a problem for bin Laden if he chooses to flee to Somalia.

A war against al-Qaeda in Somalia is likely to look much different from the war in Afghanistan. In Somalia, Al-Qaeda would need to function in a dispersed and hidden manner to avoid deadly air strikes with precision-guided munitions. It would seek to blend in with native Somalis and use civilians as shields. Conventional military operations, and even large special forces operations as in Mogadishu in 1993, could result in heavy civilian casualties.

Rather than take a sledgehammer approach, which would radicalize Somalis and win bin Laden greater support, the United States should attack isolated targets with small units operating stealthily at night. Lightning "snatch and grab" commando operations should be launched from bases outside of Somalia to limit the presence of foreign troops on the ground. Wherever possible, the United States should use Somali surrogates trained by the CIA and minimize the involvement of Americans on the ground. Moving large numbers of U.S. troops into Somalia would be a lightning rod that would provoke attacks and give al-Qaeda more targets without appreciably increasing the effectiveness of the anti-terrorism campaign.

Detecting and neutralizing dispersed al-Qaeda cells is more an intelligence problem than a military problem. The CIA should take the lead, supported by Somali paramilitary forces and U.S. special forces. The air war would be much more specialized, involving precision-guided munitions almost exclusively to limit civilian casualties and avoid provoking a backlash from the clans of unintended victims. Most U.S. military forces would be better deployed to deal with more pressing threats from Iraq or elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

After being evicted from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda may regroup in Somalia where it has longstanding links to the radical group *al-Ittihad al-Islamiya*. Washington's first priority should be to deny Osama bin Laden a base in Somalia by intercepting al-Qaeda forces before they reach that failed state. Meanwhile, the United States should increase its intelligence-gathering activities in Somalia to assess the strength of the threat al-Qaeda poses there.

Absent a growing al-Qaeda threat or the move of its leaders to Somalia, the United States should avoid making a sustained military commitment there, which would divert scarce military forces from more urgent missions in Iraq or Afghanistan. The scale of any U.S. military and political commitment should be calibrated to match the threat posed by the al-Qaeda presence in Somalia. If this presence is found to pose little threat to American interests, U.S. military forces should not be deployed there. Instead, the United States should cultivate local Somali allies to root out al-Qaeda.

The United States also should try to contain and defeat AIAI by giving diplomatic, economic, and intelligence support to Somali factions opposed to it, as well as to Ethiopia and Kenya, which are threatened by it. But Washington cannot afford to bog down its overburdened military forces in naïve nation-building efforts that are inherently risky, expensive, and doubtful. It should have learned from the collapse of the Clinton Administration's Somalia intervention in 1993 that no good deed goes unpunished. Nation-building exercises draw peacekeeping forces into the lethal politics of failed states and create new incentives for terrorism and new targets for terrorists to attack.

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