Meeting Summary

Somalia: A New Approach

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Bronwyn Bruton:

Thank you all for coming today. Somalia has been an important matter for most of us but it has become an even more urgent matter since the events of last week. In 2006, Bush declared Somalia as a new front against terrorism. At the end of 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and the presence of Ethiopian troops helped Al-Shabaab to gain power. Since then, there have been numerous missed opportunities for discussions.

Today, the situation in Somalia is much worse than in 2006. The country is trapped in poverty and a dreadful military stalemate. As a rule of thumb, for a country of 9 million people, a stabilization force of around 100,000 is needed to bring order and stability. This would be a force, which is not only limited to military support. However, the number of peacekeeping troops in Somalia is very small. Thus it can only provide security for members of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) rather than for the Somali people. The African Union (AU) troops are facing a tremendous challenge in Somalia. Al-Shabaab fighters are hiding between houses and amongst civilians and the AU troops often fire back indiscriminately on civilian homes. Shells and mortars cannot be used with any accuracy in Mogadishu. 85% of civilian casualties are caused by AU peacekeepers. Stocking up the AU troops would put more people on the ground but would also cause more suffering for Somali people and in the end support Al-Shabaab’s aims.

The Ethiopian invasion, the insurgency and a persistent drought have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Somalia. The delivery of humanitarian relief is threatened not only by piracy but also by the escalating violence on land. Humanitarian relief has ended in Somalia because of US and UK fears that it would indirectly provide support to Al-Shabaab. However, for the people in Somalia, the presence of humanitarian organisations has been the only visible sign that the West is interested in their situation and this impression is now gone.

The solution for the current situation in Somalia is complex for several of reasons:

- Lack of military resources: No country is willing to put a significant number of troops on the ground and the recent bombs in Kampala have made the backing for military activity even worse.

- There are no good partners to work with.

- Hostility towards UN, AU and other African partners.
• A Military strategy won’t work. There is a strong likelihood that additional troops will stoke the conflict rather than solve it.

• What is needed is a diplomatic front and not only a military option.

As the US learnt in Afghanistan, state building strategies are extremely expensive and very complex. Without a physical presence and good intelligence it is most unlikely to succeed. In Somalia, there is a significant lack of troops on the ground and no budget to spend.

What should the US do now?

1. The situation in Somalia is very similar to the situation as it was in Iraq. Both countries were of concern previous to an intervention and the situation got worse when US entered the countries. The US turned a policy corner when they realised that the radicals in Sadr city were not enemies of the US. One needs to recognise that in some cases it is good to limit your enemy. Al-Shabaab is hated by many Somalis and is infiltrated by people who do not come from Somalia, and it is not monolithic. As an off-shoot from the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) it also includes people who represent their clans and these have to be included in a dialogue. It is a distasteful idea to undertake direct dialogue with some members of Al-Shabaab, but it might bring a solution.

2. The US is working hard to present a united front with AU and UN and to look like an unbiased actor. But the US needs to stop hiding behind a regional mask. The interests of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda are not the same as US interests and there is no value in conflating them. The US is – maybe with the exemption of Somalia’s direct neighbours – the most hated country in Somalia.

3. The US has a simple interest in Somalia: that is counterterrorism. Most Somalis share that concern and do not want their war to be internationalised. But there are people who are exploiting the conflict. The US should see the Somali people as the primary allies of America, not its enemies. This requires abandoning the state-building strategy as this needs a commitment for the next 20 years and not only for the next 3 years. The US and also the UK need to accept that attempts to build a government in Somalia ahead of bringing peace through reconciliation cannot succeed. The US needs to respect Somali people as partners and stop interfering in internal policies. It also needs to exclude people who just mess around.
Abdirisak Aden:

The first question coming to my mind is: has the US ever been engaged comprehensively or is it examining the best option to engage fully with the Somali conflict? The US has taken wrong decisions in the past and they have empowered radical elements in Somalia. For instance in 2006, the US, particularly the CIA, supported the coalition of warlords who have been the main architects of the Somali conflict since the collapse of the government. Other questions are: Is the US – and the international community – ready to see a viable Somali state or are they only in Somalia as part of their counterterrorism strategy? Are the people in Somalia ready to leave behind their differences and create a state? Who created Al-Shabaab and who has the moral right to dismantle it?

In 2006, I went to Somalia to organise a seminar on how to strengthen the fragile peace in South and Central Somalia and foster a dialogue between representatives of civil societies, leaders of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and members of the transitional federal parliament. During my visit, I met with leaders of UIC as well as Shabaab leaders such Fuad Khalaf. At that time Godane was general secretary of UIC while Fuad was Education Minister. At that time, Shabaab had roughly 400 members and was not as powerful as they are now. They were very dependent on UIC leaders politically and financially. The invasion by Ethiopia endorsed by the US created an empowerment of Al-Shabaab. It now has an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 followers and controls large parts of Southern Somalia. The opportunity to create peace and stability has been missed and the situation is now worse than before. The issue then is, do the US and the international community have a moral responsibility to correct the past mistakes by assisting people of Somalia to deal with Al-Shabaab? It is time to take responsibility for the vicious consequences of our prior actions.

The strategy of constructive disengagement is misleading and far from the political and security situation on the ground for several reasons:

1. There are several groups within Shabaab with different agendas. But Shabaab does not have a political agenda. It not only rejects the idea of Somali state but also other Islamist groups in Somalia.

2. The actions taken by Al-Shabaab over the last months such as the declaration of war against Yemen and the recent bombings in Uganda indicate the weakness of national and local groups of Shabaab. It also shows that Al-Shabaab does not recognise the international system and Somali
borders and will use Mogadishu as their base for their global Jihad against all nations.

3. Al-Shabaab tries to destabilize the whole region including Somaliland and Puntland.

The suggested strategy will cause more chaos. Yesterday’s positions of warlords will be filled by today’s Shabaab warlords hungry for power and destroying what is left of the country. What we will witness will probably be a humanitarian crisis worse than today’s, constant war and conflict with neighbouring countries and also a perfect safe haven for Al-Qaeda fugitives.

There is an opportunity for the US under President Obama to take a new approach and to engage with different Somali stakeholders to achieve peace and to support the rebuilding of the state. If the US can spend hundreds of million US$ to rebuild and democratise other countries, why can’t it spend it on Somalia?

The Djibouti Agreement was a key step towards creating peace. The TFG’s task was to create security and to create institutions but so far it has failed to achieve it. It rather created a top-down governing approach and a political elite. The TFG currently has 550 MPs and more than 40 ministers and it lacks a clear vision. Since the Djibouti agreement the role of the international community has been characterized with a lot of meetings and talks as well as half hearted engagement on the Somali issue. The US policy is mainly focused on public diplomacy and substantial support to AMISOM as well as salary and equipment to the country’s security forces.

What should the Obama Administration do? The key principle and goal for US support should be the establishment of a Somalia State that is able to solve its problems in the long term. In actuality, all the problems in Somalia stem from lack of functioning state institutions in the country. The policy of containing Shabaab should be secondary. The US and international community needs to provide policies based on the political, security, social and economic issues in different parts of the country. Establishing functioning central government must be the first priority.

The Ethiopian invasion and US endorsement has created a strong anti – America attitude in Somalia. In this regard, the US should deploy more soft power rather than military means so as to counter the increase of radicalization in Somalia.

The majority of the youth, those fighting for and supporting Shabaab, have no other economic means to support their family. What the US should do is to
support the regional and local administrations and the business sector to create job opportunities, as well as education and vocational training centres.

**Q&A SESSION**

**Q:** Thank you very much to both speakers. I have read your report and I have to say it is one of the few Western analyses, which actually makes some sense. You suggest a strategy of ‘constructive disengagement’, but is this not only a re-phrasing for what in reality is a strategy of containment? The US will not establish a government in Somalia: that is our job as Somalis.

**A (BB):** I do agree that constructive disengagement can sound like containment and that this might not be the best option of Somalia. But if the US cannot support TFG with the resources they need, American engagement will only make the situation worse. I did not want to say that we should not help them but that we should be aware that we – governments and also analysts and experts – have the power to do harm. If this is the only thing we can do then we should better not do it.

**Q:** Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed has promised to bring all the Islamic groups in Somalia together on one table, but has not been successful. Do you think that he will try again?

**A (AA):** There is always a possibility for Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed to try but the situation is very difficult at the moment because of the existing structure of the parliament and the lack of political institutions. There has been no real engagement by the international community. Somalia’s problems are Somalia’s problems and we need to find a Somali solution. Home-grown solutions of the kind found in Somaliland are the best chance for success. But there is need for engagement both from Somalia and from the international community.

**Q:** I am very concerned about Al-Shabaab, especially with view to what happened now in Uganda. People say it is important to engage with them because they are imbedded in communities. But they have links to Al-Qaeda and we do not know how far these links go.

**Q:** I was struck by a point you just made. You said that you want to engage with some leaders of Al-Shabaab but would target only those who are Somalis. Is this targeting not extremely difficult and does it not bear the potential of getting involved in a local disputes?
A (BB): Yes, I agree that it is difficult to target the right people, if you want to fight them or if you want to talk to them. But if we look at the key strike in 2009, an Al-Qaeda operative was taken out without other civilians being involved. Just to be clear, the last thing I suggest is for the US to become involved in local or national politics.

Q: If I understood correctly your recommendations are based on assumptions that might not be true. Firstly, that Al-Shabaab is ready to talk. Secondly, that this is acceptable for the US and Somalia. And thirdly, that Al-Shabaab if taken on board will let go of its broader agenda. But if these assumptions are not true, what is your plan B?

A (BB): My analysis is that they would be willing to talk. Their motives are pragmatic and some, like Roboh, are against Al Qaeda. I am not talking about bringing Al-Shabaab into the government. In my view there is no place for a government at all in Somalia at present and creating one won’t solve anything. On the international agenda, some would be willing to drop it and others wouldn’t. Some of Al-Shabaab can be considered as suitable targets for international counter terrorist measures.

A (AA): The position of Al-Shabaab changes according to the political situation. But it is Somalis who should determine their own future, not Al Qaeda. The foreign elements in the organization have become more dominant in the last 6 months.

Q: I have lived in Somalia for many years and I think it is important for the US to let go and to allow other actors to become engaged. There is immense hatred and fury in Somalia against the US, which has been transported from years to years. And is Somaliland not part of the solution? It is working extremely hard and is doing terrible well, so should we not recognise it?

A (BB): I am a great fan of Somaliland and can see that it might gain its independence one day. The lesson it shows is that political success is achieved through a balance of power. The weakness of the institutions helps to make the government very responsive to the public. From a counter terrorism perspective, though, we might find that in the long run Somaliland and Puntland, which are weakly governed, provide a better haven for Al Qaeda than Somalia’s war zones.

A (AA): Somaliland enables us to be proud of our diversity. But we have a saying: if you have a problem with your leg, don’t cut it off. It is a good example and shows that Somali people are able to negotiate political solutions together.
Comment (HE the Ambassador of Ethiopia): Ethiopia is not the arch enemy of Somalia as you suggest. Before talking about disengagement it should be noted that engagement by the international community has never existed. The TFG lacks the support it needs. Talking of constructive disengagement is irresponsible and contrary to the interests of the region, as we have seen in Kampala so recently.

A (BB): I hope for good relations between the two countries but there was anger against Ethiopia during the military intervention. I agree that the US has not been engaged in Somalia with sufficient resources. It does not have the interest to find the necessary resources.

A (AA): Somali entities need to be empowered to defeat the extremists. Providing troops does not provide a solution. Somalis themselves must own the decision making process.

Q: Godane and the main Al-Shabaab leaders come from Afghanistan and are members of Al Qaeda. Roboh, Aweys and such like have no leadership role in Al-Shabaab. So if there is a negotiation it would have to be with Al Qaeda.

A (BB): That is not possible. My argument is that the US does not have the power to deal with Somali politics or to anoint people as leaders. It can’t do it and shouldn’t try to since these efforts just stoke conflict.

Q: Why should the international community support the TFG if there is leadership failure?

A (AA): Support is needed for the Transitional Federal institutions rather than the TFG. These institutions are beset with structural problems – for example the number of ministries is far too large. The TFG needs to articulate a vision and needs to build broader support, not just in Mogadishu. International assistance should be provided on the basis of performance and what the TFG can deliver on the ground. Help is needed to disengage the youth from militia activities.

Q: What role has the diaspora played?

A (AA): A huge contribution, in business and in political dialogue. The diaspora has an important part to play in the dialogue.

Q: What steps are being taken to intercept logistic supplies to Al-Shabaab?

A (BB): The US is the main source of weapons for Al-Shabaab; up to 80% of the TFG forces have defected with their weapons. So stopping military support is the best way to stop arms for Al-Shabaab.
A (AA): Most of the US supplies go to AMISOM rather than the TFG. TFG forces received very little. The way forward is not through a military solution but should be based on values, identifying the real stakeholders in peacemaking, state building and de-radicalisation.