

Somalia teeters on the brink of an Islamist takeover

A new force emerged in war-torn Somalia this year under an enigmatic title, the Taliban-like Islamic Court Union, also known as the Council of Islamic Courts.

Initially led by Sheikh Sharif Ahmed Muhammad, this loosely-organized body of 11 autonomous courts in the capital, Mogadishu, wants to implement Sunni Shari'a in the entire country. The ICU emerged in the early 1990s, after a criminal gang kidnapped one of Sheikh Sharif Ahmed Muhammad's students. Muhammad, a law graduate and a former high school geography teacher, decided to campaign for Islamic courts, to enforce stringent laws and punishments and to end the chaos and warlord rule that has existed in Somalia since the fall of Muhammad Siad Barre in 1992.

Another key figure in the ICU is Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, the leader of al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, an Islamist movement that has been around since the 1970s and has been pushing for the implementation of strict Shari'a across the Horn of Africa.

Aweys has admitted meeting with al-Qaida leaders and is wanted by the United States for involvement with al-Qaida and the killing of 18 US Army Rangers during the failed United Nations intervention in Somalia in 1992.

A typical Islamic court has three elements: a shura council composed of respected clan leaders; a chairman appointed by the shura; and a militia commander appointed by the chairman. The ICU courts are financed by a combination of "taxation" at militia checkpoints and private contributions, largely from Mogadishu businessmen who are tired of warlord rule.

With the Islamic Court

BACKGROUND

• By ISAAC KFIR

Union now controlling Mogadishu, the price of a kilo of rice has fallen from 9,500 Somali shillings (\$0.65) to 3,500 shillings, and camel meat has fallen from 30,000 shillings per kilo to 22,000. In the words of local businessman Abdikarin Abukar Fodare, "We no longer hire security militia for our commodities and we don't pay militia checkpoints - that is why the goods are back to their normal prices."

Once the ICU took control of Mogadishu, it turned its attention toward the south-central city of Baidoa, the seat of the country's internationally recognized government, the Transitional Federal Government. It is led by President Abdullahi Yusuf and Prime Minister Ali Muhammad Gedi, and Yusuf has long had a strong relationship with the Ethiopian government. Ethiopia, a nominally Christian country surrounded by Muslim states - Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti - has expressed grave reservations at the emergence of another Islamist state next door. They have kept a close watch on events in Somalia, and undermined peace negotiations there, for example, in 1997.

Somalia and Ethiopia share a long border - over 1,600 km. - and relations have always been turbulent. Somalia lost a bloody war over Ethiopia's Somali-populated Ogaden region in 1977-1978. The war was initiated by Barre in an attempt to create a Greater Somalia. The dream reappears every once in a while. In theory, Ogaden could become the Kashmir of the Horn of Africa.

In the mid-1990s, al-Ittihad forces attacked Ethiopian forces in Ogaden with the

aim of gaining control over the province, leading Ethiopian security to assassinate members of the Ogaden National Liberation Front. The front's members consequently left Ethiopia for Somalia, where they joined al-Ittihad.

It is also worth considering the role of Eritrea, which fought for independence from Ethiopia for decades, succeeding in the early '90s. Eritrea, a predominately Muslim country, has reportedly been supporting the Islamic Court Union because the Somali government relies on Ethiopia, and Eritrea would like to see Ethiopia mired in a bloody quagmire.

A large-scale war in Somalia involving Ethiopia would in all likelihood drag in Eritrea and Sudan - a haven for Islamic terrorism, and a former headquarter of al-Qaida - and probably Djibouti, one of the few Muslim countries participating in the US-led war on terror.

Prior to Ethiopia's intervention, the Islamic Court Union repeatedly stated that any foreign involvement, including by international or African peacekeepers, would lead to a jihad.

With the "coalition of the willing" already stretched thin in Iraq and Afghanistan, the international community cannot afford another country falling into the Islamist camp. It is therefore imperative that global actors, especially the African Union and the Inter-governmental Authority on Development, a seven-country regional development organization headquartered in Djibouti, became involved in mediating the crisis in Somalia.

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