

Introduction

The US has had a particularly troublesome relationship with Somalia since the downfall of dictator Siad Barre in 1991. Critics maintain that Washington's difficulties have stemmed from major miscalculations that reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of Somali society and history.

America's first Somalia problem emerged after then US President George Bush's announcement on 4 December 1992 that he had ordered the deployment of some 30,000 troops to Somalia. He said they would be doing "God's work" by delivering food aid to starving Somalis and by preparing the way for a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operation to keep the assistance moving. However, many Somalis perceived the US-UN intervention as an opportunity to acquire political legitimacy or economic benefits. Others believed the presence of foreign troops violated their country's sovereignty.

Washington's crusade ended in disaster. On 3 October 1993, some 115 US troops launched a mission to capture Somali leaders who supported warlord General Mohammed Farah Aideed. The operation went terribly wrong as US commanders had underestimated the capabilities of Somali forces. Somali gunmen killed 18 US soldiers, wounded 78 others, and shot down two Blackhawk helicopters. American forces retaliated by killing more than 1,000 Somali men, women, and children during a battle that is now known as Africa's My Lai. In other actions, Canadian, Belgian, and Italian troops committed an array of human rights violations. Washington refused to investigate the incident or to punish the perpetrators but Canada, Belgium, and Italy underwent the painful process of holding official inquiries into the excesses of their troops in Somalia and taking steps to prevent their troops from carrying out future abuses.

After the withdrawal of US forces (March 1994) and of UN peacekeeping troops (March 1995), the international community largely ignored Somalia, which had gained the reputation of a failed state. However, the country continued to receive some humanitarian aid and support for an array of Somali peace talks, none of which produced any lasting results and reinforced Western perceptions that Somalia was one of Africa's most dangerous and unstable countries.

America's second Somalia problem surfaced in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 when Osama bin Laden claimed that he had helped train the Somalis who had participated in the 1993 Mogadishu fire-fight thus helping to ensure that Somalia would be high on the US target list. Military and security planners believed that *al-Qaeda* terrorists fleeing from Afghanistan planned to reestablish themselves in Somalia. As a result, Somalia became a major focus of Washington's Global War on Terrorism. On 12 December 2002, President George W. Bush readied the US military for battle with *al-Qaeda* terrorists by authorizing the establishment of

the Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA).

Frustratingly, there was no outpouring of terrorists from Afghanistan to Somalia. Nevertheless, the search for *al-Qaeda* continued for more than a year. Meanwhile, the US largely ignored the *al-Qaeda* operatives, who had been in other East African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania for many years. A 2003 UN Report of the Panel of Experts in Somalia showed that, while the US was busily looking for non-existent *al-Qaeda* terrorists from Afghanistan in Somalia, *al-Qaeda* operatives in Kenya had been planning an attack in that country since at least 2001. The report also indicated that the SA-7B missiles used in the 28 November 2002 attack on Mombasa's Paradise Hotel and the attempted shoot down of an Israeli airliner had been shipped through Somalia.

In the aftermath of the Mombasa attack – which claimed the lives of 12 Kenyans, three Israelis, and at least two suicide bombers – most American policymakers finally realized that East Africa's terrorist problem extended far beyond Somalia. Nevertheless, there still is a minority who continue to believe that Somalia is *al-Qaeda*'s East African nerve center.

The four Somali watchers who have contributed to this issue help to clarify the political and military intricacies of contemporary Somalia and the role of terrorism in East Africa. The authors also explain why Somalia never became a haven for *al-Qaeda*, the factors that contributed to the failure of numerous peace initiatives, and the role of Islam in Somalia.

Their findings suggest that Somalia remains a poor and divided country that poses little threat to the West or to its immediate neighbors. However, the country's role as a transit point for weapons and a safe haven for a limited number of Kenyan Somalis who are associated with *al-Qaeda* remains a piece of a much larger and very dangerous puzzle.

The Editors