

# **Counter-terrorism in Somalia: How external interference helped to produce militant Islamism**

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## **Introduction\***

Somalia has made international headlines for almost two decades, first as a place of civil war characterized by clan warfare and humanitarian catastrophe, then as a failed state, and finally as a potential safe haven for Islamist terrorists.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the assumption about ‘black holes’ and ungoverned spaces voiced by politicians and some academics, the Harmony Project has shown that the absence of a government in Somalia did not automatically provide fertile ground for *Al Qaeda* terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Things began to change, however, in 2006. In that year, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) unexpectedly took control of Mogadishu and much of southern and central Somalia. The UIC was overthrown a few months later by an Ethiopian military intervention supported by some internal players and the U.S. Since then, militant Islamism has gained further momentum in the country. Currently, ‘extremist’ groups, such as *Al Shabaab* and *Hizbul Islam*, are fighting a transitional government under the ‘moderate’ president Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who in 2006 had been a head of the UIC, which was then considered a ‘Taliban-like’ regime by much of the West.<sup>3</sup> This alone should suffice to caution us against ascribing any objective meanings to such terms as ‘extremists’ and ‘moderates’, even if empirically such a distinction may make sense in certain cases and at particular moments in time.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, local and regional actors, including Somali warlords and Ethiopia quickly appropriated the newly introduced ‘anti-terrorism’ rhetoric in order to attract resources and support.<sup>5</sup> Still, at the local level the civil war in Somalia continued to be primarily over the question of who controls which parts of the country (and the related resources, such as ports, junctions, and road-blocks) or even ‘the state’.

Only since 2006, as I argue here, has the warfare in Somalia gained an ‘ideological’ quality pitting radical Islamists and their global networks against forces of an increasingly militant West and its allies.

A brief digression on the term Islamist is necessary here. The term refers to actors that combine strict adherence to the written sources of Islam, including the Koran, Hadith, and authoritative commentaries, with ‘Islamic activism’, that is, ‘the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character’.<sup>6</sup> Islamism covers social reform movements as well as militant or ‘jihadi’ groups.<sup>7</sup> There are national Islamists as well as global jihadists.<sup>8</sup> Possibly the only common goal of all Islamists is to erect Islamic states – and in the long run, a new Caliphate – in which the divine law (*shari’a*) rules, but the strategies for achieving this aim differ tremendously.<sup>9</sup>

Among most Somalis, who traditionally adhere to Sufism, the branch of radical Islam preached by *Al Qaeda* was genuinely unpopular. Even among the small group of local Islamists, the reform movements were the majority, and militants failed to gain popular support until recently. This is in contrast to the dominant external perception of the situation in Somalia that has been brilliantly criticized by Marchal.<sup>10</sup> Between 2006 and 2009, however, external interference intensified. In reaction to the above-mentioned military intervention of Ethiopia and U.S. counter-terrorism, *Al Qaeda* launched its ‘e-jihad’ (electronic jihad) in Somalia by referring to the country in media addresses disseminated via television and the Internet and calling upon dedicated jihadists to aid the Somali *mujahedin*.<sup>11</sup> This virtual involvement has gained material substance with the rise of the Somali extremist group *Al Shabaab*. What initially, in 2005, was a handful of unpopular hardcore militants has by 2009 become the dominant military force in southern and central Somalia. In May 2008, *Al Shabaab*’s new leader openly pledged support for Osama Bin Laden. The strategies of the group resemble those of *Al Qaeda* cells in other parts of the world (suicide bombings and remote-controlled explosives, beheadings of opponents, and so forth), and foreign fighters and volunteers from the Somali diaspora have joined the ranks of the movement. Thus, the Manichean perspective of the (perennial) struggle of ‘good’ against ‘evil’, which is variously assigned to ‘Islam’ against ‘the West’ or the other way round, has manifested in Somalia.<sup>12</sup> Much like in

other settings where the U.S.-led war on terror reigns and *Al Qaeda* got involved, propaganda and violence are used to forge binaries that ‘distort rather than illuminate the political landscape’.<sup>13</sup>

This paper first provides some background on Islamism in Somalia. Subsequently it outlines in detail the events of 2006 and introduces the main factions and actors. In this way, the heterogeneity of the ‘Islamist camp’ in Somalia is revealed. The text then follows up on the impact of U.S. and *Al Qaeda* politics on Somalia until the fall of 2009 and shows how external interventions produced ‘new’ extremists and moderates. It finally proposes that the current (civil) war in Somalia has its roots in the global ideological confrontation between the U.S. and *Al Qaeda* and their respective local allies.

### **Background: Islamism in Somalia**

Political Islam in Somalia goes back to the 1970s. Islamism had been suppressed under the government of Mohamed Siyad Barre (1969–1991).<sup>14</sup> Only after the fall of his regime in January 1991 did Islamists in Somalia have a chance to become politically and also militarily active. The first, and for many years only, important militant Islamist group was *Al Itihad Al Islam* (AIAI). It was founded in the early 1980s as a loose umbrella organization for Somalia’s Islamists, who were at that time all in hiding. It entered the civil war by capturing the port town of Kismayo in early 1991. When the forces of the United Somali Congress (USC) under the warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed of the Hawiye/Habr Gedir clan advanced against the strategically important town a few months later, AIAI sought to forge an alliance with the local Darood militias against the USC. AIAI did not succeed and subsequently was crushingly defeated and had to vacate Kismayo. The event was significant in two regards: First, it initiated a series of military defeats of AIAI at the hands of warlord militias. Two important factors limiting the power of the Islamist forces were clan tensions within AIAI and the lack of popular support. Second, before the clash over Kismayo, Aideed had sent Colonel Hassan Dahir Aweys, also of the Hawiye/Habr Gedir clan (but a different sub-clan), as head of a delegation to the Islamists in order to negotiate a peaceful handover.<sup>15</sup> Colonel Aweys

changed sides on that occasion. He did not return to the USC and had to escape Kismayo together with AIAI.<sup>16</sup> As Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, he became and remains today one of Somalia's most influential Islamist leaders.

Throughout the 1990s, AIAI tried to gain a foothold in various parts of Somalia. It fought in the northeast against the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) under Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf over the control of the lucrative port of Boosaaso. After being routed by the SSDF, the remnants of the AIAI troops turned to the southwest, where they established control over the town of Luuq and some other places in the Geedo region, close to the Somali-Ethiopian border. Some also went to the far south and took over the area around Ras Kambooni, near the Kenyan border. Other members of the movement decided to leave the armed struggle and engage in civilian social projects, such as Islamic development aid, orphanages, and schools. In particular, the northern Somali *Al Itihad* under Sheikh Ali Warsame, a resident of Bura'o town (in what had become Somaliland after its unilateral secession in May 1991), turned to non-violent politics.

Within the southern Somali *Al Itihad*, a schism occurred. Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys had become the military leader of AIAI in the mid-1990s. Together with Hassan Abdullahi Turki he continued violent campaigns in western Somalia and the Somali region of Ethiopia, where they engaged Ethiopian troops. Sheikh Mohamed Ise headed a splinter group of AIAI that changed its name to *Al Itisam*.<sup>17</sup> *Al Itisam* was concentrated in Mogadishu, where it refrained from military activities, although it was ideologically more radical and consistent than *Al Itihad*, which comprised both Salafi and non-Salafi members.<sup>18</sup> All the leading Somali Islamists, however, continued to be in contact with one another, and most of them appeared again later in connection with the UIC.

Parallel to the activities of AIAI, but not always directly related to these, Islamic courts were established in Mogadishu and parts of southern Somalia. The first courts were set up in northern Mogadishu in 1994, which then was controlled by the warlord Ali Mahdi Mohamed (Hawiye/Abgal), under the chairmanship of Sheikh Ali Dheere (from the same clan). The courts functioned in accordance with the wishes of the warlord, who benefitted from the basic security (against petty criminals) provided by the courts in his area. When Sheikh Ali Dheere tried to establish the courts as financially independent and politically active institutions, Ali Mahdi forcibly disbanded them. *Shari'a* courts were

also established in Beledweyne town, in the Hiiran region, and some other locations, in cooperation with local faction leaders. Islamic courts emerged in southern Mogadishu only after Mohamed Farah Aideed, the dominant warlord who once had allied briefly with the AIAI but was generally closer to ‘traditional’ Sufi Islam, died in 1996.<sup>19</sup> From the beginning, the courts there were independent of faction leaders and enjoyed the strong backing of sub-clan elders and the local business community.<sup>20</sup> In this context, Islamists ‘began to perform some of the functions normally conducted by the government. The Islamic Courts became particularly important as they began to establish islands of security in Mogadishu.’<sup>21</sup>

The courts in Mogadishu and the surrounding areas were not necessarily extremist in their orientation. They were certainly all religiously conservative and issued sentences in accordance with the *shari’a*. Not all, however, took recourse to extreme punishment such as amputations. All courts had to respect the wishes of their respective clans and sub-clans, usually expressed by the clan and sub-clan elders, and to carefully avoid interfering in inter-clan politics that could easily escalate into feuds. Thus, a court militia could not apprehend criminals not belonging to the descent group of the court members.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, some courts came under the influence of militant Islamists. Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, the AIAI military leader, established himself as a leading figure in the Ifkahalane court in southern Mogadishu; he was related to this court through patrilineal descent.

In 2000, a number of courts in Mogadishu came together and created a joint council. The aim was to be able to conduct coordinated militia operations against (alleged) criminals. (The council also served as a vehicle for the political ambitions of some leaders, such as Aweys, who was its Secretary General.) As a result of this cooperation, the influence of the Islamic courts extended throughout Mogadishu and its surroundings. Still, the International Crisis Group observed: ‘Few people shared the courts’ puritanical religious views but they were popular for their ability to provide security.’<sup>23</sup> In the same year, 2000, at an internationally supported peace conference in Djibouti, the Transitional National Government (TNG) was installed as the new Somali government. Under President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan (Hawiye/Habr Gedir), the TNG was particularly sympathetic toward the non-violent Islamist groups in the country,

including the *shari'a* courts, parts of *Al Itihad*, and a group called *Al Islah*, which was politically and socially active but distanced itself from militancy.<sup>24</sup> The TNG began to integrate the existing courts, including the judges and the militias, into its justice system. In this way, it undermined the independence of the courts. Finally, the TNG demanded that all judges take exams in order to guarantee basic legal standards. Many of the existing court judges perceived this as a humiliation, and some also feared that they might fail. So many quit the government positions.<sup>25</sup>

In 2004, the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts, which in 2006 became known as the UIC, was founded as the new umbrella organization of the *shari'a* courts in Mogadishu. Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was elected chairman of the council.<sup>26</sup> He had previously been associated with the group *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* (ASWJ) and had worked in the judicial system and as an aide to the local faction leader Mohamed Dheere.<sup>27</sup> The courts pooled their military hardware and established a joint militia force of about 400 men. Meanwhile, the TNG had collapsed, and the new international attempt to establish the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as its successor at a peace and reconciliation conference in Eldoret and then Mbagathi (Kenya) had not yet come to fruition. Therefore, the courts' newly joint militias constituted the strongest force in Mogadishu, and the political weight of the umbrella organization grew. Nonetheless, the organization was internally quite diverse, and it brought together moderates, who were not interested in pursuing political aims violently, as well as extremists. Only a minority of the ten or eleven courts that joined forces in 2004 were extremist and militant.<sup>28</sup> The first indicator of a revolution within the movement was the appointment of Aadan Hashi Ayro, a young militant close to Sheikh Hassan Daahir Aweys, as commander of the militia of the Ifkahalane court in 2005, without protest from the other courts. Just months before, Ayro and his followers had made international headlines for desecrating a colonial-era Italian (Christian) cemetery in Mogadishu.<sup>29</sup> Ayro soon became the leader of the courts' 'youth organization', a group combining a small number of extremely radical and militant elements, known as *Al Shabaab*.<sup>30</sup>

The development of political and militant Islam did not take place in a vacuum. External actors had a strong influence on the course of events and the dynamics in Somalia. Contacts between international Islamists, *Al Qaeda* specialists, and Somali

radicals have existed since the early 1990s. On several occasions, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys has traveled to Sudan, where Hassan Al Turabi, the Sudanese Islamist leader, paved the way for the hosting (between 1992 and 1996) of Osama Bin Laden and his followers. Mohamed Atef, a high-ranking *Al Qaeda* official, visited Somalia in 1992, probably in order to forge an Islamist alliance in Somalia and throughout the Horn of Africa; this project failed.<sup>31</sup> Other *Al Qaeda* specialists were also deployed to Somalia in the early 1990s to establish an operational base for the group, but they did not succeed in turning ‘stateless’ Somalia into a safe haven and a training and operations ground for their network. Recent analyses suggest that *Al Qaeda* faced problems similar to those faced by the UN and U.S. humanitarian and military intervention in Somalia (1992–1995): they were partly distrusted as ‘foreigners’ who adhered to a version of Islam that was not popular in Somalia, they ran into problems with always changing clan and sub-clan alliances, they were limited by the weak infrastructure of the country, they lacked security, they were exposed to external interventions since no government could uphold Somalia’s sovereignty, and they were at risk of being ‘sold’ by petty criminals and others in Somalia to the enemy (the U.S.).<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, some terrorist attacks in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania (between 1996 and 2002) have been carried out by using Somalia as a ‘corridor’ into the region and for smuggling in weapons and personnel, and some terrorists hid in Somalia after their attacks. Clearly, a number of Somali extremists were trained in Somalia by foreign fighters, and some Somalis went to Afghanistan in the 1990s and early 2000s in order to receive training and gain combat experience at the Taliban’s side. Still, Somalia did not become a safe haven for *Al Qaeda*, and terrorist training facilities were extremely limited and quickly dismantled after the 9/11 attacks for fear of U.S. reprisals. UN missions to southern Somalia in the fall of 2001 concluded that no training camps or fundamentalist activities could be identified.<sup>33</sup> In sum, Somalia was never a major field of *Al Qaeda* activities in the 1990s.<sup>34</sup>

Ethiopia got involved in the Somali conflict early on. Throughout the 1990s it militarily intervened several times against AIAI, which Addis Ababa perceived as a threat. AIAI operated in the Somali region of eastern Ethiopia (the so-called Ogaden region), where it sought to bring Islamist and nationalist forces among the marginalized Ethiopian Somali population together against the oppressive state. When the conflict

between Eritrea and Ethiopia erupted in 1998, each government supported various guerilla groups against the other. In this context, AIAI profited from the support of Asmara. This resulted in a ‘simmering proxy war between Ethiopia and Eritrea for influence in and control of southern Somalia.’<sup>35</sup> Following the 9/11 attacks, after Washington had decided to refrain from direct military involvement in Somalia, Ethiopia and the U.S. engaged in a ‘dirty war’ in Mogadishu by hiring warlords and their troops in order to snatch or assassinate Somali and foreign terrorist suspects hiding in the city. This interference in particular changed the nature of the low-intensity civil war that had been smoldering in Mogadishu for a decade. A ‘series of assassinations and kidnappings of religious figures between 2002 and 2005 that were thought to have been ordered by the Americans and Ethiopians and carried out by the factions’ increased the popularity of the Islamists and of anti-American sentiments.<sup>36</sup> Extremist Islamic groups also engaged in assassinations of ‘unbelievers’ (in Somaliland, but also in southern Somalia, foreign aid workers and journalists were targeted) and Somali opponents.<sup>37</sup>

The late 2004 installation in Kenya of the TFG triggered hostile reactions in Mogadishu and elsewhere in the country. First, the newly elected president of Somalia, Abdullahi Yusuf, a former warlord and president of Puntland (1998–2004), called for the deployment of foreign troops in (southern) Somalia immediately after his inauguration. This clearly sent the message ‘home’ that he did not believe in peaceful negotiations. Second, the TFG cabinet was filled with warlords who did not have a reputation of caring much for the people. Third, for some Hawiye in Mogadishu, Abdullahi Yusuf, as a member of the Darood/Majeerteen clan, represented a ‘clan enemy’. Fourth, Abdullahi Yusuf had the reputation of being a staunch ‘anti-Islamist’. His troops had defeated AIAI in northeastern Somalia in 1992, killing hundreds of Islamists. Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys and other senior Somali Islamists were therefore connected to Yusuf through old enmity.<sup>38</sup>

To sum up, militant Islamism in Somalia developed in the context of state collapse and civil war beginning in 1991. Up until 2005, the ‘Islamist camp’ was characterized by the heterogeneity of its actors and their orientations. Within groups such as AIAI and the courts, influential individuals held different views, for instance regarding the appropriateness of the use of violence. This led to schisms and uneasy alliances of



convenience. Furthermore, all Islamist groups had to consider the genealogical factor involved in the Somali civil war. Despite their aim to transcend ‘clan’ and establish an Islamic state, they had to cooperate with clan and sub-clan elders and warlords and their militias. Until 2005, militant Islamists did not enjoy popular support in Somalia. They also were not very well connected internationally. This increasingly changed with the external military intervention of Ethiopia and the U.S. and the establishment of the TFG under Abdullahi Yusuf, who gained international recognition while lacking legitimacy in most parts of Somalia (apart from Puntland, his ‘clan-homeland’ in northeastern Somalia). In particular, the joint Ethiopian and U.S. counter-terrorism strategy after 9/11 contributed to the radicalization of a small group of dedicated jihadists, which provided the nucleus for the later unfolding of extremist violence in Somalia.

### **The rise of the UIC and *Al Shabaab* and the beginning of the current phase of global confrontation in Somalia**

The U.S. decided in early 2006 to employ an alliance of Mogadishu warlords to snatch several *Al Qaeda* operatives who had taken refuge in Somalia and, more generally, to keep the Islamists in check.<sup>39</sup> The warlords leading the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) wanted to take back control over lucrative ports and businesses in the city that had been successively taken over by Islamists and their sympathizers. In February 2006, fighting between the ARPCT and the courts erupted. The latter joined forces and became internationally known under the name Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), even if, locally, people continued to speak simply of ‘the courts’ (*makhkamadaha* in Somali).<sup>40</sup> Between February and June 2006, hundreds of civilians were killed in the crossfire and shelling, and thousands fled the city. By the end of June the courts had won. It was the first time in fifteen years that one force was in control of the whole of Mogadishu.

External observers were taken by surprise. Initially, at least in the academic community, positive evaluations of the peacefulness and political stability of Mogadishu under the new rulers dominated.<sup>41</sup> Also, many Somalis in Somalia and in the diaspora

were positively surprised. Menkhaus stated: ‘Tens of thousands of diaspora members flew back to Somalia, some just to visit, others to offer their services to the ICU [UIC]. For many, the impulse to support and join the ICU [UIC] was driven as much by a sense of renewed nationalist pride than by a commitment to political Islam of any sort’.<sup>42</sup> As leading figures, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys gained worldwide publicity. The first was presented as the ‘moderate’ face of the movement, while the second represented the ‘hard-liners’. Things were, however, a bit more complicated, as I will outline below.

The UIC quickly expanded its rule over much of southern and central Somalia and soon challenged the TFG, which was confined to the town of Baydhabo, about 250 kilometers northwest of Mogadishu.<sup>43</sup> The Ethiopians rushed to the aid of the TFG. Officially, only advisors and no Ethiopian troops were sent. In August, however, credible reports of massive Ethiopian troop movements in and around Baydhabo appeared. Eritrea helped the courts with advisors, arms, and allegedly also some troops. Under the auspices of the League of Arab States, peace talks between the TFG and the UIC were held in Khartoum between June and August 2006 but fell apart in October of that year.<sup>44</sup> This failure was related to the increasing influence of extremist elements in the UIC. In September 2006, *Al Shabaab*, under Ayro, and the Ras Kambooni Brigades, under Hassan Turki, cooperated in the capture of Kismayo. This was a significant event since it was the first military takeover of a place by troops under the UIC umbrella. Before that, the UIC had expanded peacefully upon ‘invitation’ of the local populations in southern and central Somalia, who appreciated the stability and (Islamic) justice provided by the courts. The Kismayo operation served the cause of UIC critics, who argued that the courts had a militant, expansionist, and even jihadist agenda.<sup>45</sup>

The situation was complicated further when in July 2006 Osama Bin Laden issued a message urging Somalis to build an Islamic state and back the courts in their fight against the TFG. Bin Laden threatened that *Al Qaeda* would fight foreign troops if they intervened in Somalia in support of the TFG. In September, Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Al Qaeda*’s number two, called on Somalis to oppose the TFG and expel the ‘Zionist-Crusader presence’ from the Horn of Africa.<sup>46</sup> These messages pointed to the instrumentalization of the situation in Somalia by *Al Qaeda* leaders in order to legitimate

their global struggle, threaten their enemies, and generate support.<sup>47</sup> Hogan observed with regard to Somalia and the Horn in 2006 that the *Al Qaeda* leadership ‘has clearly articulated an effort to incorporate a new and more distant geographical area.’<sup>48</sup> This verbal support did not yet indicate any significant involvement of *Al Qaeda* on the ground or a willingness to get militarily engaged on a greater scale.

The TFG leadership also was not interested in a compromise. (Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, the speaker of the parliament, was dismissed after he went to Mogadishu in November 2006 and negotiated with the UIC on his own initiative.) Ethiopia and the TFG accused the UIC of hosting international terrorists connected to *Al Qaeda*. Jendayi Frazer, then U.S. assistant secretary for African affairs, accepted these claims. On 14 December 2006, she announced that the UIC was controlled by *Al Qaeda*. This happened at a time when European Commissioner Louis Michel was in Somalia to mend relations between the opponents.<sup>49</sup> Thus, EC and U.S. perceptions of the situation differed; yet, this did not matter much since the U.S.- and Ethiopian-driven war machinery was already in place. Certainly, the UIC had contributed to this terrorist discourse with undiplomatic statements by some of its leaders about a ‘jihad’ and its refusal to allow any international observers to visit Mogadishu to verify or reject claims about *Al Qaeda* terrorists there.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the extremist elements could not be suppressed; to the contrary, their strategy to sabotage any compromise through violence worked out.

#### *The UIC as a heterogeneous body*<sup>51</sup>

The following factions played a role in the UIC in 2006:

- i) Various *shari’a* courts: In Mogadishu alone, *circa* fourteen *shari’a* courts existed in 2006. Most were responsible for a particular neighborhood and tied to a certain clan or sub-clan (mainly the Hawiye clan-family, but also Darood and some so-called minority groups). Only some of the courts in the UIC were actually aligned with extremism. The majority were not very interested in the jihadi political and military agenda and concentrated mainly on security in their own areas.

ii) *Al Shabaab: Harakat Al-Shabaab*, which translates ‘Youth Movement’, began as the ‘youth’ organization of the Islamic courts. Founded in 2004 or 2005, it served as the armed wing of the UIC. In early 2006, *Al-Shabaab* fielded about 400 men, a force considered to have increased to about 2,000 just prior to the Ethiopian invasion in December 2006.<sup>52</sup>

iii) *Al Itihad Al Islam* (Islamic Unity): As described above, AIAI was by far the largest armed Islamist organization in Somalia in the early 1990s. It is important to remember that AIAI was a quite heterogeneous movement, riddled with ideological and clan differences. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. designated AIAI a terrorist organization. Subsequently, most of its members preferred to keep a low profile and to melt back into the wider society. Many remained active in the social sphere and ran Islamic NGOs, orphanages, and schools. *Al Itihad* can be considered the ‘mother’ of contemporary Islamist organizations in Somalia.

iv) *Majuma Ulema*: A group of Somali religious leaders (*Ulema*) set up a small militia force immediately after the fall of Siyad Barre in January 1991 in order to provide security in certain neighborhoods of the capital and assist some embryonic *shari’a* courts. The declared purpose of *Majuma* was to protect the proper understanding and practice of Islam and establish a Somali government based on the *shari’a*. In the early 1990s, *Majuma* became involved in a variety of peace initiatives. Although *Majuma* has maintained a distance from politics, its Islamist orientation is manifest in its support of Mogadishu’s *shari’a* courts.

v) *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama’a* (ASWJ): ASWJ originated in 1991 as an offshoot of *Majuma*, in response to a request for cooperation from warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed. While some *Majuma* leaders refused to get involved in warlord politics, others felt a need to act in order to defend ‘traditional’ Somali Islamic practices from foreign, and especially Salafi/Wahabi, encroachment.<sup>53</sup> ASWJ eventually lost influence in warlord politics but has remained active as an umbrella group for

politically motivated sheikhs from the Sufi brotherhoods. This movement involves considerable opportunism and has been described as a ‘conservative force that presents itself as moderate’.<sup>54</sup>

The following were the key individual players in the UIC in 2006:

i) Haji Abukar Omar Adaani, a businessman from the Hawiye/Abgal/Warsangeeli sub-clan, over the years had become a financier of the *shari’a* courts. It was his long-standing business rivalry with Bashir Rage, another businessman from the same sub-clan, over the control of the El Ma’an port in Mogadishu that ignited the Islamic courts battle with the warlord alliance in Mogadishu in early 2006.<sup>55</sup> It has to be stressed that for many businessmen in Mogadishu, cooperation with the Islamic courts and Islamists was simply the best way to secure their businesses and pursue their economic interests. Not all businessmen supporting the courts were Islamists themselves.<sup>56</sup>

ii) As introduced earlier, Hassan Dahir Aweys (Hawiye/Habr Gedir/Ayr/Ayaanle) was a colonel in the Somali army who participated in the Ogaden war between Somalia and Ethiopia (1977–1978). Under Siyad Barre, he went to jail several times after 1979 for his Islamist views. He joined AIAI and became a military leader of the movement in the 1990s. He was also involved in the setting up of *shari’a* courts, finally emerging as leader of the UIC with Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. In mid-2006, he was named chairman of the *Shura* of the UIC. Aweys had been put on the U.S. list of terrorists in 2001 for being AIAI’s military leader. In a rare interview with Western media, Aweys defended himself and *Al Itihad* by arguing: ‘I don’t know anything that al Itihaad al Islamiya [sic] did to America.’ He maintained that AIAI’s focus was on Ethiopia. In the same interview, Aweys confirmed that one of his main aims was the integration of the Somalis in the Ogaden region (today, Region 5) of Ethiopia into Somalia.<sup>57</sup>

iii) Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (Hawiye/Abgal) had been a secondary school teacher and had spent some time in Sudan or Libya. As discussed previously, in the early 1990s, he joined *Majuma* and/or *ASWJ*. He was involved with several *shari'a* courts in the early 2000s and was close to the businessman Abukar Omar Adaani. In 2004, he was elected chairman of the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts, which in 2006 became known as the UIC. As UIC chairman, Sheikh Sharif made contradictory statements in 2006. On the one hand, he presented himself as moderate and committed the Islamic courts to democratic process and good relations with the international community. On the other hand, he at times called the U.S. an enemy of Islam and vowed to fight until the entire country was under the courts' authority.<sup>58</sup> In October 2006, it was Sheikh Sharif who appeared in combat fatigues brandishing an AK47 while declaring jihad against Ethiopia and any foreign troops on Somali soil.<sup>59</sup>

iv) Hassan Abdullahi Turki belongs to the Darood/Ogadeen clan. He was an early member of AIAI. Around 1993, an AIAI splinter group and a *shari'a* court were established under Turki's leadership in the coastal village of Ras Kambooni in southern Somalia. Turki commanded a force of about 200 militiamen, mainly from his own sub-clan, which controlled the Ras Kambooni area. Turki is a militant and was reportedly responsible for assassinations of political opponents and at least one foreigner in southern Somalia.

v) Adan Hashi Ayro belonged to the Hawiye/Habr Gedir/Ayr sub-clan. He fought with AIAI in northeastern Somalia in the 1990s and continued fighting in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and also in Mogadishu. He then went to Afghanistan for military training. In Afghanistan he allegedly had contact with *Al Qaeda* and Taliban officials. Beginning in about 2003 he gained attention as the leader of a still nameless, very ruthless independent Somali jihadi network that has been linked to the murders of four foreign aid workers (in Somaliland) and over a dozen Somalis believed to be part of counter-terrorism operations. In 2005, he

became the leader of *Al Shabaab* and held that position until he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in May 2008.

vi) Ahmed Abdi Godane (Isaaq/Arab) is a native of northwestern Somalia/Somaliland. He reportedly worked for the remittance company Barakaat in the town of Bura'oo in the 1990s. Godane had received military training in Afghanistan and joined the ranks of international jihadists. He was allegedly involved with Adan Hashi Ayro in the killings of a number of foreign nationals in Somaliland in 2003 and 2004. In mid-2006, he became secretary general of the Executive Council of the UIC.

vii) Ibrahim Al Afghani (Isaaq/Sa'ad Muuse), from Somaliland by clan, is reported to have fought in Kashmir and Afghanistan before becoming an AIAI commander. He later joined *Al Shabaab* and became a leader in that group for members of the Isaaq and Harti clans. Al Afghani was accused (with Ayro and Godane) of involvement in the murders of foreigners in Somaliland.

viii) Yusuf Mohamed Indhoadde, a Hawiye/Habr Gedir/Ayr warlord, ruled in the early 2000s in Merka town in the Lower Shabelle region, where he had managed a system of *shari'a* courts. In 2006, he turned to the UIC and became the courts' overall chief of security. In December 2006, he invited international Islamist combatants to come to Somalia to take part in a jihad against the enemy.<sup>60</sup>

ix) Mukhtar Robow is a militant Islamist who by descent belongs to the Rahanweyn/Leysan clan residing predominantly in central-southern Somalia (Bakool region). He allegedly engaged in the training of Somali militants in the 1990s. He traveled to Afghanistan in 2001, where he fought with Taliban/*Al Qaeda* forces. Robow returned to Somalia in 2003 and became the deputy minister of defense for the UIC in 2006 before taking the position of spokesman and deputy commander of *Al Shabaab*.<sup>61</sup>

x) Sheikh Ali Warsame (Isaaq/Habr Je'lo) was educated in Sudan and had been a conservative religious scholar. He got involved with AIAI in the early 1980s and was its military leader from 1993 until around 1995. After a series of defeats, he turned to a non-violent strategy, quit the AIAI leadership, and went back to Bura'o (Somaliland), where his patrilineal relatives reside. In 2006, he and some other clerics in Somaliland were suspected by local authorities of being connected to the UIC in Mogadishu.

The relationships between the various groups and individuals connected to the UIC were complex and not free of tensions. The UIC in 2006 clearly was a heterogeneous body combining seasoned Islamists who pursued a mainly national agenda and dedicated (and sometimes quite young) 'global' jihadists who were close to the Taliban and/or *Al Qaeda*. Some of the UIC leaders had a history of militant Islamism, while others had previously followed a non-violent path. Some were ideologically oriented toward Salafism or Wahabism, while others adhered to conservative but, in comparison, rather 'traditional' Somali interpretations of Islam. Possibly their only common aim in early 2006 was to get rid of the warlords and their militias and establish an Islamic state in Somalia. By then, this was actually in accordance with the positions of many people in southern Somalia who wished for peace and order and saw Islam as the last refuge against crime, social dissolution, opportunistic warlords, the indifferent position of much of the world, and the destructive interference of Ethiopia and the U.S. It is worth noting that the UIC came to power at a moment when the factional system championed by the warlords and their external allies (Ethiopia, Eritrea, the U.S., and others) had been exhausted. In a way, Islamism seemed to be the 'natural' path to take.<sup>62</sup> Of course, which direction within political Islam would guide the way was yet unclear in early 2006.

#### *Inner-UIC dynamics in 2006*

Sheikh Sharif led the Executive Committee of the UIC, which in June 2006 comprised some twenty members. Some were certainly radical jihadists, such as Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was then the secretary general of the committee. The 'encroachment' of the



extremists may have been related to the influence of Hassan Dahir Aweys, who was the head of the advisory committee the *Shura*, which had more than ninety members. Nonetheless, Marchal maintains that it was unclear which of the two bodies had the final say, what the decision-making procedures were, and who had the mandate to do what.<sup>63</sup> The political structure of the UIC in mid-2006 was rife with ambiguities. Decisions were often made by field commanders, who had varying respect for Sheikh Sharif and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys. ‘Simply accepting *fait accompli* rather than debating decisions became a common occurrence [within the UIC].’<sup>64</sup>

The capture of Kismayo in September 2006 and the failure of the negotiations between UIC and TFG sponsored by the Arab League one month later were decisive victories for the extremists within the courts movement. These were mainly ‘successes’ for *Al Shabaab*, which in the second half of 2006 emerged as the only faction with a clear profile. Its members had jihadi credentials, some of its leaders had been trained and fought in Afghanistan, and there existed relationships between individual *Al Shabaab* figures, such as Adan Hashi Ayro, Mukhtar Robow, and Ahmed Abdi Godane, and *Al Qaeda*. Otherwise, in the rest of the UIC, disagreements between leading figures were the norm, not the exception.<sup>65</sup>

Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys had been a mentor certainly to Ayro and possibly to other extremists. He also had wider Islamist connections. However, it is doubtful that he was very closely connected to *Al Qaeda* or even wished to be. Aweys clearly followed a Somali nationalist agenda, and his main interests were focused on fighting Ethiopia and other foreign troops interfering in Somalia and establishing a strong and united Somalia under Islamic rule. He pursued this aim throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s with consistent militancy but at the same time also engaged in the establishment of basic local security and justice through *shari’a* courts. In the second half of 2006, it seemed that Aweys increasingly lost control over Ayro and *Al Shabaab*. There is not a general consensus about the relationship between these two key Islamists.

Sheikh Sharif’s position in 2006 did not become fully clear. As outlined above, his statements as UIC chairman were contradictory. In mid-2006, the ICG confirmed that the UIC leadership, including Sheikh Sharif, ‘has been casually dismissive about credible allegations of jihadi violence and the presence of foreign al-Qaeda [sic] operatives in

Mogadishu safe houses reportedly operated by some of its top figures. Sheikh Sharif has repeatedly portrayed these concerns as “propaganda” and claimed the U.S. has been misled by warlords exploiting the war on terror.’<sup>66</sup> In comparison with other UIC leaders, however, Sheikh Sharif was mainly perceived as moderate, and certainly he was interested in finding a solution to the political crisis in the second half of 2006 through negotiations rather than violence. He was also the only Islamist leader who, after the defeat of the UIC by Ethiopian and TFG troops in late 2006 and after his surrender to Kenyan authorities in early 2007, publicly apologized for the mistakes of the UIC administration.<sup>67</sup>

To sum up, it is clear that from mid-2006 onward, *Al Shabaab* and related extremists acted increasingly independent from the leadership of the UIC. Their operations alienated Western and other observers and created divisions within the UIC as well as resistance among the Somali people, who ‘began to protest the drastic rise in taxes in October 2006, the ban on qaat [*qaad*] that punished the thousands of people who earned their living in its trade, and the normative coercion that had young militia members with limited religious knowledge humiliating anyone in the street who did not seem sufficiently pious.’<sup>68</sup> For moderates in the courts the dilemma became that the jihadi tactic of assassination, which helped eliminate potential opposition to the courts in Mogadishu in 2005, could be used against them. This put the UIC leadership in a difficult situation in mid-2006, when faced with international demands to ‘marginalize the radicals’.<sup>69</sup> The immediateness of the danger for the two UIC heads, Sheikh Sharif and Aweys, was stressed by Marchal, who argued that ‘[r]elationships between *al-Shabaab* [sic] and the other trends within the ICU [UIC] had gone from bad to worse in the weeks before the Ethiopian military intervention. Although denied by the two leaders, close relatives or friends mentioned that there had been several assassination attempts against Sheikh Shariif and Hasan Daahir orchestrated by *Al Shabaab* members at that time.’<sup>70</sup> Finally, a certain degree of opportunism among the leading figures of the UIC has to be taken into account. Former warlords, such as Yusuf Mohamed Indhoadde, their militias, and influential businessmen joined when it seemed that the UIC was ‘the movement to be with’. Nonetheless, behind the Islamist facade they followed their own economic and political interests related to clan and other connections. Sheikh Sharif himself had

maneuvered quite a bit in 2006 before he clearly distanced himself from militancy and extremism in early 2007. Aweys possibly tried to hold the courts movement together and therefore granted influence to the jihadists, even if he as a nationalist did not share their global vision.

*The U.S. position on the UIC in 2006*

During a joint hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations in June 2006, John Prendergast, a longtime Africa specialist, who at one point was an advisor to the U.S. government, confirmed that Washington paid the warlords about US\$100,000–150,000 a month in 2005 and in the first half of 2006, ‘and we encouraged them to come together in the larger terrorism alliance.’<sup>71</sup> The latter strategy proved disastrous: ‘U.S. counter-terrorism efforts meant to contain foreign al-Qaeda [sic] operatives have accelerated the expansion of jihadi Islamist forces and produced the largest potential safe haven for al-Qaeda in Africa.’<sup>72</sup> In the same hearing, Jendayi Frazer stressed that the U.S. was concerned about the emergence of a jihadist Islamist state in Somalia.<sup>73</sup> John Prendergast maintained that the U.S. should ‘engage with all elements of the Islamic Courts, but particularly the Courts Executive Committee which is headed by Sheikh Sharif.’<sup>74</sup> He asserted that Sheikh Sharif and his associates were moderates and a channel of communication for the U.S.<sup>75</sup> Ted Dagne, an African affairs specialist at the Congressional Research Service, admitted that the Bush administration knew little about the UIC.<sup>76</sup>

While there was a lack of clarity about the nature of the UIC, Ethiopia and the TFG under Abdullahi Yusuf decided that the Somali Islamists were ‘terrorists’ and a threat to regional and potentially international security. The Bush administration accepted this position, which was, in the eyes of many Somalis and most external observers, based less on facts and more on the parochial self-interest of Ethiopia and the TFG.<sup>77</sup> Preparations for a full-scale military intervention were underway by late November 2006, and UN Resolution 1725 (6 December 2006), authorizing a military mission to Somalia (of the states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union) to protect the TFG (among other tasks), paved the way.

Menkhaus points out that ‘the Ethiopian offensive was not, as has sometimes been falsely portrayed, an instance of the U.S. subcontracting the war of terror to a regional ally.’ He emphasizes that ‘Ethiopia pursued its own interests and would have acted with or without U.S. approval.’<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, ‘the U.S. did provide diplomatic, intelligence, and possibly other support to the Ethiopian government in this operation.’<sup>79</sup>

In sum, U.S. policy on Somalia in 2006 suffered from insufficient knowledge about the UIC (apart from sketchy impressions of some of the most ‘nasty’ Somali Islamists, such as Aweys, Ayro, and Turki).<sup>80</sup> The U.S. also did not have a comprehensive plan for Somalia. The TFG leaders and Ethiopia took advantage of this lack of knowledge and planning to connect their Somali adversaries with *Al Qaeda* and thus appropriate the international discourse on Islamic terrorism for their own ends.

This paper has made clear that 2006 was a decisive year regarding the dynamics of Islamism and violence in Somalia. A decade or so of ‘low intensity war’ (involving primarily local but also some regional actors) had ended, and a new phase of global confrontation had begun.<sup>81</sup> The latter was indicated by the engagement of the U.S. and Ethiopia (a regional ‘empire’) with regard to the payment of warlords in Mogadishu to act against local Islamists. The means provided to these figures went directly into the war between the warlord alliance and the courts, which triggered the coming to power of the UIC. Things came to a head when Ethiopian troops with U.S. backing (and the consent of the ‘rest of the world’) intervened militarily in Somalia. In response, *Al Qaeda*’s e-jihad unfolded, UIC leaders called for jihad, and some foreign fighters rushed to support their ‘brothers’ in Somalia. This decisively internationalized the fighting in Somalia and turned it into a confrontation in which global ideological differences between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ were played out.

### **Military counter-terrorism and the forging of new ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’**

In December 2006, about 14,000 Ethiopian troops with tanks and air support ousted the UIC from all its positions in southern Somalia. This invasion installed the TFG in Mogadishu. Soon, the new rulers were confronted by a complex insurgency of Islamist

and Hawiye militias in southern Somalia. The U.S. politically supported the Ethiopian and TFG war inside Somalia. In January 2007, U.S. forces conducted two air strikes against alleged terrorists in the country. An African Union 'peacekeeping' mission called AMISOM was deployed in early 2007. This, however, did not change the overall violence of the situation. To the contrary, the AMISOM troops, which were all from Uganda and Burundi, were soon perceived as foreigners biased in favor of the TFG and came under attack by the insurgents.<sup>82</sup> Between January 2007 and December 2008, this war left more than 10,000 people dead and many more wounded, and more than a million residents temporarily fled Mogadishu. Gross human rights violations were committed by all parties to the conflict.<sup>83</sup>

Things began to change slowly at the diplomatic level in the first half of 2008. Nuur Hassan Hussein had been elected the new prime minister of the TFG. He was interested in dialogue with the Islamists. Already in September 2007, the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) had been founded in Asmara, Eritrea. It comprised former UIC members and others opposed to the TFG under Abdullahi Yusuf. Its chairman became Sheikh Sharif, who in the course of 2008 entered into dialogue with Nuur Hassan Hussein. This process was facilitated by Special Representative of the UN Secretary General Ahmedou Ould Abdallah. Simultaneously, the U.S. continued selective operations against alleged terrorists on Somali soil. In March 2008, *Al Shabaab* was designated a terrorist group by the Bush administration. One month later Adan Hashi Farah Ayro, the group's leader, was killed together with dozens of other (mostly unrelated) people in a U.S. air strike against a village in central Somalia.<sup>84</sup> Following Ayro's death, Ahmed Abdi Godane took over the leadership of *Al Shabaab* and signaled the movement's shift into the ranks of the global jihadists by opening with greetings to Osama bin Laden in a 4 June 2008 communiqué.

Diplomatic efforts at the UN level and the continued counter-terrorism activities of the U.S. served to split the Asmara-based opposition. Washington was clearly not prepared to talk to Somali extremists or people or groups perceived as such. This indirectly led also to the isolation of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who sat in Asmara and was a prominent figure in the ARS but was rather skeptical about the negotiation process led by Sheikh Sharif and Nuur Hassan Hussein under the auspices of the UN. Aweys

allegedly was in close contact with Adan Hashi Ayro, who operated on the ground in Somalia. However, it is unclear if Aweys was really supporting *Al Shabaab* or just felt marginalized and tried to enhance his political weight by countering Sheikh Sharif's efforts, which militant Islamists must have perceived as the final surrender of the UIC to the UN and the TFG. Negotiations between the TFG and the ARS took place in Djibouti (since Eritrea positioned itself against this initiative), and an agreement was reached there on 9 June 2008. The central provisions of this Djibouti Communiqué were the cessation of hostilities between the government and the opposition, the joint request to the UN Security Council to deploy an international stabilization force, the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops from Somalia, the dissolution of the ARS, the provision of humanitarian access, and the establishment of a Joint Security Committee.<sup>85</sup> This agreement strongly reflected the positions of the TFG, whereas the ARS representatives in Djibouti had demanded as a first step the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops. The remaining ARS leaders in Asmara, particularly Aweys, plus the militant groups in Somalia condemned the agreement. The ARS effectively split over the agreement into Asmara and Djibouti factions. The U.S. supported the agreement.<sup>86</sup> The agreement led to the decision of the Transitional Federal Parliament (TFP) in November 2008 to double the number of parliamentary seats to 550 in order to establish a government of national unity and integrate members of the (moderate) Islamist factions.

The Djibouti agreement had outmaneuvered not only Aweys and some Islamist hard-liners but also President Abdullahi Yusuf of the TFG, who had always preferred a military victory over a settlement through negotiations. His calculations were based on continued Ethiopian engagement on the ground. But the Djibouti agreement foresaw the end of the Ethiopian intervention. Addis Ababa was willing to pull its troops out of Somalia after two years of bloody campaigns, many losses, and growing international criticism. In December 2008, Abdullahi Yusuf resigned his position. In January 2009, the Ethiopian withdrawal was complete. *Al Shabaab*, which by then had grown into the dominant military force in southern Somalia and under its new leader, Abdi Ahmed Godane, had officially associated itself with *Al Qaeda*, took over most of the positions vacated by the Ethiopians. In January 2009, the Somali parliament convened in Djibouti. In a rather non-transparent process, new MPs were chosen to fill the 275 additional seats

previously established by the parliament. On 31 January 2009, this enlarged parliament elected Sheikh Sharif the new president of Somalia. His election was endorsed by the U.S. and the UN.

The new TFG, however, faced enormous challenges inside southern Somalia. Islamic extremists belonging to militant groups, such as *Al Shabaab* and a newly founded organization called *Hizbul Islam*, refused to acknowledge Sharif's government, which they perceived as corrupted by the international community.<sup>87</sup> The military and financial resources of the new TFG were extremely limited. Much of southern and central Somalia was controlled by enemy militant Islamists and clan militias. In February 2009, the TFG moved to Mogadishu. Yet, instead of using the momentum and capitalizing on popular support inside Somalia, Sheikh Sharif spent much of February and March 2009 outside of the country, attending various political meetings and holding talks with friendly governments. Also, the international community was reluctant to release financial and other support for the new TFG.

In April 2009, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys returned from Asmara to Mogadishu and began to organize the militant resistance against Sheikh Sharif's administration. Aweys took leadership of *Hizbul Islam*, which also integrated (under a loose umbrella) the Ras Kambooni brigades of Hassan Abdullahi Turki. Renewed heavy fighting broke out in the capital city around 7 May 2009. In the course of one week, more than 100 people (mostly civilians) died and several hundred were injured due to the indiscriminate use of small arms and heavy weapons. Since then, the fighting between TFG troops supported by AMISOM forces, on the one hand, and *Al Shabaab* and *Hizbul Islam* fighters, on the other, has continued.<sup>88</sup>

In June 2009, the U.S. arranged for a shipment of forty tons of arms and ammunition to the TFG in Mogadishu. (The deal was brokered through the AMISOM troops on the ground in Mogadishu; Washington asked the Ugandan and Burundi troops to hand over some of their arms to the TFG and then paid several million U.S. dollars so that the AU forces could refill their stocks.)<sup>89</sup> In August 2009, Hillary Clinton, the U.S. secretary of state, met with President Sharif in Nairobi and pledged U.S. support for his government. Clinton's assistant secretary of state for Africa, Johnnie Carson, announced ahead of the meeting: 'We think that the support for Sheikh Sharif and his government

offers an opportunity to be able to restore some stability, fight against the Somali Islamic extremists of *Al Shabaab* and *Hizbul Islam*, the two groups that are working against them.’<sup>90</sup> At the meeting, Clinton stated: ‘There is also no doubt that *Al Shabaab* wants to obtain control of Somalia to use it as a base from which to influence and even infiltrate surrounding countries and launch attacks against countries far and near.’ She added: ‘Certainly if *Al Shabaab* were to obtain a haven in Somalia, which could then attract *Al Qaeda* and other terrorist actions, it would be a threat to the United States.’<sup>91</sup>

To sum up, throughout 2007 and until mid-2008, the U.S. pursued its counter-terrorism strategy in accordance with the Ethiopian military occupation of Somalia (which, nonetheless, followed its own rules and directives from Addis Ababa) and launched several missile strikes against alleged terror suspects in Somalia. While Washington was not prepared to reach out to the ‘evil’ extremists, it, together with the UN, Somali Prime Minister Nuur Hassan Hussein, and Sheikh Sharif’s faction of the ARS, ‘created’ the ‘good’ moderates with whom one could talk.

Sheikh Sharif has ‘learned his lesson’. In early 2009, a statement allegedly issued by Osama Bin Laden was published calling for international jihadi support of the Islamist fighters in Somalia. Sheikh Sharif responded by saying: ‘*Al Qaeda* has never helped Somalis reach a peaceful solution and has never wanted Somalis to have a government. *Al Qaeda* did not teach us the Islamic religion and has not given us any support so I urge them to leave us alone.’<sup>92</sup> When President Sharif met with Clinton in Nairobi he confirmed that the U.S. support was very important for his administration. Comparing this with his positions in 2006 shows that not only the U.S. policies but also the positions of some of Somalia’s leading Islamists have changed.

Very dramatic changes have also happened with regard to *Al Shabaab*. It has become what many Somalis and most external observers had always feared, and even worse. It ‘hardened’ over the years of fighting against the TFG and Ethiopian troops. Currently, *Al Shabaab* fields several thousand trained fighters. Its tactics have changed, from hit-and-run ambushes to sophisticated suicide missions and remote-controlled bombs that have taken scores of lives (of armed enemies and of civilians). In contrast to the period from 2006 to 2007, *Al Shabaab* now also controls and administers territories and communities. The harsh response to Islamist attacks by the TFG and Ethiopian troops



(who simply shelled whole neighborhoods in Mogadishu from where the attacks had been conducted, killing thousands of civilians and creating hundreds of thousands of refugees) plus the U.S. missile attacks that killed dozens of innocents added legitimacy to the Islamist insurgency and even a degree of popularity to *Al Shabaab* among destitute youths in Somalia and some diaspora Somalis.<sup>93</sup>

Arguably, the comparison of the UIC to the Taliban that was popular in 2006 was not well founded. At that time, there were major discrepancies between the two movements, such as the absence of much combat experience on the part of the UIC and the lack of a consistent ideology among the Somali Islamists. Yet, in 2008/09, after two to three years of insurgency, the militant Somali Islamists, particularly *Al Shabaab*, in fact resemble the battle-hardened and ideologically uncompromising Taliban of 1996, ready to rule a country. In this sense, the anti-Islamist propaganda of 2006 has fulfilled itself.

## **Conclusion**

This paper traced the most recent dynamics of violence in Somalia back to the year 2006, which is understood to be the beginning of a new phase of global confrontation in Somalia that is concentrated on gaining a local victory in the global battle between militant Islamists and their enemies (the U.S. and allied powers). Thus far, neither side has won the war, in Somalia or elsewhere.

The events in Somalia in 2006 and afterward were embedded in a brief history of Islamism in Somalia after state collapse that clearly shows the decisive break in 2005/06. The ascent to power of the UIC marked the first time in fifteen years that Mogadishu and much of southern Somalia had been under one rule and mostly peaceful, if only for a few months. Certainly, the U.S. ‘failed to judge the Union [UIC] for its deeds: the stabilization and pacification of one of the world’s most lawless areas.’<sup>94</sup> The question is, however, if Washington ever was interested in accurately judging the UIC. It obviously made some efforts to understand who the Islamist leaders were, yet the decision to engage in military counter-terrorism and support Ethiopia’s intervention was made before

any ‘research’ into the matter had been concluded (or even conducted). Thus, it seems that Washington’s confidence in its strategy – the war on terrorism – and the perceived legitimacy of that strategy ruled out real alternatives. The same can be said of the hard-core Somali jihadists and their idols and supporters among *Al Qaeda*.

The mutually reinforcing ‘arrogance’ and unwillingness to compromise of the two extreme poles – the warriors against terrorism and their opponents – led to an increasingly binary logic of fighting in Somalia after 2006, which, in the form of *Al Shabaab* as it developed between 2007 and 2008, in fact produced the clear-cut ‘evil’ enemy the U.S. and its regional and local allies were evoking in 2006. This paper shows that in 2006 and before, however, the Somali Islamist camp had been so diverse and heterogeneous that one could hardly identify one group with a consistent ideological and political agenda. Individuals and groups disagreed more regularly than not, and every Islamist movement since 1991 had to struggle with the challenges of ‘clanism’ (considering patrilineal descent in politics) and a lack of popular support. This only changed when global powers got involved, frequently upon the ‘invitation’ of local actors, even if up until today most Somalis and even some leading Islamists certainly would have preferred to find their own solutions to their problems. Yet, in an age of global confrontation, dynamics of violence rarely remain isolated, at least in the hot spots of resource competition and ideological struggle. In this sense, an exclusive focus on terrorism and civil war, as proposed by Boulden, is insufficient.<sup>95</sup> International counter-terrorism and other policies have to be taken into account. Schlee recently concluded that ‘the rise of political Islam [in Somalia] is a response to the “war on terror” and therefore cannot be an element of its justification.’<sup>96</sup> This applies not only to Somalia but also to the wider Horn.<sup>97</sup> But Somalia since 2006 is possibly the clearest example of the failure of U.S. (and Ethiopian) counter-terrorism policy, which actually has produced what it was supposed to counter. Sociologically speaking, these developments demonstrate the entrapment of unintended consequences, even for the globally most powerful actors.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is concerned with southern Somalia. The situation in northern Somalia is very different. Somaliland, in the northwest, declared its independence in 1991. The civil war can be considered ended

there, and some basic government structures are in place, although Somaliland is not recognized as an independent state. Puntland, in the northeast, was established in 1998 as an autonomous regional state. Both of these northern political entities are geographically distant from but politically involved (to various degrees) in southern Somalia. Aspects of this involvement will be outlined where necessary but are not the main subject of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Korteweg listed seven elements of ‘black holes’ that in his opinion would support terrorist engagement (Korteweg, Rem, 2008: ‘Black holes: On terrorist sanctuaries and government weakness’, *Civil Wars* 10(1): 60–71). Yet he completely blocked out the fact that the absence of government and the availability of weapons within a community provide a veritable security risk also to external terrorists. Moreover, ungoverned spaces and ‘black holes’ can be invaded by the enemies of terrorists as well, with impunity. These and other factors were clearly presented and analyzed by the Harmony Project/Centre for Combating Terrorism at West Point, 2007: ‘Al-Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa’ (<http://ctc.usama.edu/aqIIasp>).

<sup>3</sup> Thomson, Alex, 2006: ‘Somalia’s Taliban?’ (*Channel 4*, 6 June, <http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/world/somalias+taliban/165555>); Kfir, Isaac, 2008: ‘Islamic radicalism in East Africa: Is there a cause for concern?’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31(9): 829–55, 842.

<sup>4</sup> Moslems who try to go ‘back to the roots’ of Islam and focus on the fundamental sources of their religion, the Koran and the uncontested traditions of the Prophet Mohamed (Hadith), are fundamentalists in my view. This does not mean, however, that they would necessarily wish to become politically active or use violence (Euben, Roxanne L. and Zaman, Qasim, 2009: ‘Introduction’, in: R. L. Euben and Q. Zaman (eds), *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1–46, 40–46). In this paper, I use ‘extremists’ for those Islamists who are willing to use violence in order to achieve political aims.

<sup>5</sup> Elliot, Ashley and Holzer, Georg-Sebastian, 2009: ‘The invention of “terrorism” in Somalia: Paradigms and policy in US foreign relations’, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 16(2): 215–44, 216.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), 2005: ‘Somalia’s Islamists’ (Africa Report Nr 100, 12 December), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> The adjective ‘jihadi’ is related to ‘jihadism’, which is ‘a neologism derived from the Arabic *jihad* (to struggle, to strive) that is frequently used in the press to denote the most violent strands of Islamism’ (Euben and Zaman, ‘Introduction’, p. 3).

<sup>8</sup> Kfir, ‘Islamic radicalism in East Africa’, pp. 830–31.

<sup>9</sup> Euben and Zaman, ‘Introduction’, pp. 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> Marchal, Roland, 2007: ‘Warlordism and terrorism: How to obscure an already confusing crisis? The case of Somalia’, *International Affairs* 83(6): 1091–1106.

<sup>11</sup> Rogan, Hanna, 2007: ‘Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad: Virtual battlefields from Iraq to the Horn of Africa’, *Culture and Society* (Summer/Fall): 89–96, 93.

<sup>12</sup> This certainly does not mean that I would follow Huntington’s infamous ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis. To the contrary, my point here is that the main actors themselves applied such a binary and ‘clashing’ logic, which serves their mobilization of war allies against each other. This practice is opportunistic and does not prove any structural global developments allegedly inherent in any overarching ‘cultural’ or ‘religious’ theories.

<sup>13</sup> Euben and Zaman, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Marchal, Roland, 2004: ‘Islamic political dynamics in the Somali civil war,’ in: A. de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa*, London: Hurst & Company, pp. 114–45.

<sup>15</sup> Aweys was genealogically close to Aideed, yet he was also already an Islamist, with ties to AIAI. Aideed used him as a ‘doubly-related’ middleman, which is a classic Somali tactic in conflict situations (Roland Marchal, personal communication, 11 November 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Le Sage, Andre, 2004: ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism: Political Islamic movements and US counter terrorism efforts’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Jesus College, Cambridge University), chap. 4; ICG, ‘Somalia’s Islamists’, pp. 3–5.

<sup>17</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, pp. 107–08; Marchal, personal communication.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Salafism’ refers to ‘contemporary Muslims who generally eschew the interpretive methods and norms of the medieval Islamic schools and take as a guide for proper behavior only the word of God, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and the example set by the pious forbears’ (Euben and Zaman, ‘Introduction’, p.

3). The term ‘salafi’ derives from ‘*al salaf al salih* (the pious forbears), usually understood as the Muslims of the first generations of Islam’ (Ibid., p. 19).

<sup>19</sup> This is a good example of the opportunism involved in the Somali civil war on the sides of warlords and Islamists: in early 1991, Aideed fought and defeated *Al Itihad*; in the fall of 1993 he briefly allied with the movement (at least with some Hawiye/Habr Gedir elements within it) against the U.S. forces in Mogadishu.

<sup>20</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, pp. 141–42.

<sup>21</sup> Shinn, David H., 2007: ‘*Al Qaeda* in East Africa and the Horn’ ([http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/JCS/Summer07/shinn\\_al\\_qaeda.pdf](http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/JCS/Summer07/shinn_al_qaeda.pdf)), paragraph 37.

<sup>22</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, pp. 135, 141–42.

<sup>23</sup> ICG, ‘Somalia’s Islamists’, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, pp. 144–45, 151–73.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 144–45; ICG, ‘Somalia’s Islamists’, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Marchal emphasized that Sheikh Sharif’s chairmanship had been pushed by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who, as a member of the Habr Gedir clan, wished to have a member of the Abgal clan as partner in order to avoid any fissures within the Hawiye clan-family (Marchal, personal communication).

<sup>27</sup> ICG, ‘Somalia’s Islamists’, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Weber, Anette, 2008: ‘State building in Somalia – Challenges in a zone of crisis’, in: E. M. Bruchhaus and M. Sommer (eds), *Hot Spot Horn of Africa Revisited*, Hamburg: Lit Verlag, pp. 14–27, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Marchal, Roland, 2009: ‘A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3(3): 381–404, 388.

<sup>31</sup> Harmony Project/Center for Combating Terrorism, ‘Al-Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures’, pp. 44, 79. For a slightly different account, see: Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> Menkhaus, Ken, 2004: ‘Somalia: State collapse and the threat of terrorism’ (Adelphi Paper 364, Oxford), pp. 71–75; Harmony Project/Center for Combating Terrorism, ‘Al Qaida’s (Mis-)Adventures’.

<sup>33</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, p. 111–12.

<sup>34</sup> Menkhaus, ‘Somalia: State collapse and the threat of terrorism’, pp. 66–71; Harmony Project/Center for Combating Terrorism, ‘Al Qaida’s (Mis-)Adventures’, p. 2; Shinn, ‘*Al Qaeda* in East Africa and the Horn’, paragraphs 5 and 6.

<sup>35</sup> Le Sage, ‘Somalia and the war on terrorism’, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup> Marchal, Roland, 2007: ‘Somalia: A new front against terrorism’ (<http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/marchal/printable.html>), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> ICG, 2006: ‘Can the Somali crisis be contained?’ (Africa Report Nr 116, 10 August), pp. 10, 17, 19; Red Team Report, 2007: ‘Somalia: Islamic extremism, clan politics and insurgency’ (March), p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Marchal, personal communication; Hassan, Harun and Barnes, Cedric, 2007: ‘A return to clan-politics (or worse) in southern Somalia?’ ([http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Hassan\\_Barnes/printable.html](http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Hassan_Barnes/printable.html)); Red Team Report, ‘Somalia: Islamic extremism, clan politics and insurgency’, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> The main targets were two or three foreign jihadists who had allegedly been involved in the U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-el-salaam in 1998 and who were suspected to be hiding in Mogadishu.

<sup>40</sup> In the media and the academic literature, various names and abbreviations were used, such as United Islamic Courts (UIC), Islamic Courts Union (ICU), and Council of Islamic Courts (CIC).

<sup>41</sup> Inter Africa Group, 2006: ‘Human security in Somalia’s new order’ (briefing paper, October).

<sup>42</sup> Menkhaus, Ken, 2009: ‘Violent Islamic extremism: Al-Shabaab recruitment in America’ (hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 11 March), pp. 2–3. I personally heard several stories of ordinary Somali families in the diaspora, for example in the U.K., who packed their things and returned to Mogadishu in the expectation of a functioning Islamic government and a finally peaceful home.

<sup>43</sup> Inter Africa Group, ‘Human security in Somalia’s new order’; ICG, ‘Can the Somali crisis be contained?’; Menkhaus, Ken, 2006/07: ‘Governance without government in Somalia: Spoilers, state building, and the politics of coping’, *International Security* 31(3): 74–106.

<sup>44</sup> ICG, ‘Can the Somali crisis be contained?’ p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Marchal, ‘A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab’, p. 391.

<sup>46</sup> Shinn, ‘*Al Qaeda* in East Africa and the Horn’, paragraph 42.

<sup>47</sup> Rogan, 'Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad', p. 90.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> Marchal, 'A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab', p. 392.

<sup>50</sup> Marchal, 'Somalia: A new front against terrorism'; Shinn, 'Al Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn', paragraph 44.

<sup>51</sup> The following paragraphs are based on Le Sage, 'Somalia and the war on terrorism'; Marchal, 'Somalia: A new front against terrorism'; Marchal, 'A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab'; McGregor, Andrew, 2009: *Who's Who in the Somali Insurgency: A Reference Guide*, Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation; Red Team Report, 'Somalia: Islamic extremism, clan politics and insurgency'; ICG, 'Somalia's Islamists'; ICG, 'Can the Somali crisis be contained?'; and a number of other sources indicated in the text. It has to be noted that some of the details about the factions and individuals involved are contested. Information about Somalia's Islamists is hard to verify. The security situation in southern Somalia prevents researchers from doing extensive field research. External (non-Moslem and non-Somali) researchers/observers generally manage to visit only for a few days, if at all, under heavy protection. Even then, they usually do not reach key Islamist actors. Possibly the only exceptions in this regard are Roland Marchal and the experts of the ICG, who have good connections on the ground in southern Somalia. Even they are sometimes accused of being biased.

<sup>52</sup> Since 2006 this group has developed further and in 2008/09 became the dominant militant organization in Somalia. However, in my opinion, *Al Shabaab* in 2006 and *Al Shabaab* in 2008/09 must be seen as distinctly different regarding fighting power, political influence in Somalia, and global jihadi connections.

<sup>53</sup> Wahabism goes back to the teachings of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahab. Wahabis 'prefer to think of themselves simply as good Muslims or, at best, as Salafis – often adhere to the legal norms of the Hanbali school of law, though it is the teachings of the foundational texts, irrespective of this or any other school doctrine, that they profess to follow' (Euben and Zaman, 'Introduction', p. 21).

<sup>54</sup> Schlee, Günther, 2008: *How Enemies are Made: Towards a Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*, New York: Berghahn, p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> Red Team Report, 'Somalia: Islamic extremism, clan politics and insurgency', p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Marchal, personal communication.

<sup>57</sup> Norland, Rod, 2006: 'Heroes, terrorists and Osama' (interview with Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys), *Newsweek*, 22 July.

<sup>58</sup> ICG, 'Can the Somali crisis be contained?' p.16.

<sup>59</sup> *Economist*, 2006: 'A holy war in the Horn?' 6 October.

<sup>60</sup> Later on, he changed sides several times and currently (October 2009) is minister of defense of the new TFG under Sheikh Sharif.

<sup>61</sup> Robow was replaced as spokesman of the movement in early 2009, after he had shown preferential treatment for enemies belonging to his own Rahanweyn clan-family when his forces took over the town of Baydhabo.

<sup>62</sup> Marchal, personal communication.

<sup>63</sup> Marchal, 'Somalia: A new front against terrorism', p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Marchal, 'A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab', p. 390.

<sup>66</sup> ICG, 'Can the Somali crisis be contained?' pp. 15–16.

<sup>67</sup> Red Team Report, 'Somalia: Islamic extremism, clan politics and insurgency', p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> Marchal, 'Somalia: A new front against terrorism', pp. 8–9.

<sup>69</sup> ICG, 'Can the Somali crisis be contained?' p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Marchal, 'A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab', p. 396.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations, 2006: 'Somalia: Expanding crisis in the Horn of Africa' (joint hearing, 29 June), p. 61.

<sup>72</sup> ICG, 'Can the Somali crisis be contained?' p. i.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, 'Somalia, Expanding crisis in the Horn of Africa', p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>77</sup> Marchal, 'Somalia: A new front against terrorism', p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> The main Ethiopian interest was certainly to crush any irredentist threat *in statu nascendi*. Also, the strategic alliance between Asmara and the UIC was a reason to not let things continue in southern Somalia.

<sup>79</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic extremism', p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> See Dr. Pham's deliberations in U.S. House of Representatives, 'Somalia: Expanding crisis in the Horn of Africa', p. 65.

<sup>81</sup> A previous phase of global 'humanitarian' confrontation took place between 1992 and 1995, when about 30,000 troops under UN and U.S. command intervened in Somalia.

<sup>82</sup> Menkhaus, Ken, 2008: 'Somalia: A country in peril, a policy nightmare' (ENOUGH Strategy Paper, September); Hoehne, Somalia Update (2006-2008), pp. 6-7.

<sup>83</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2007: 'Shell-shocked: Civilians under siege in Mogadishu' (<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/somalia0807webwcover.pdf>); Gettleman, Jeffrey, 2007: 'Somali battles bring charges of war crimes', *New York Times*, 6 April; Menkhaus, Ken, 2007: 'The crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in five acts', *African Affairs*, 106(204): 357-90; Amnesty International, 2008: 'Routinely targeted: Attacks on civilians in Somalia'; Human Rights Watch, 2008: 'So much to fear: War crimes and the devastation of Somalia' (<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/somalia1208web.pdf>).

<sup>84</sup> In total, between January 2007 and mid-2008, at least six air strikes and one missile strike from a ship were conducted by U.S. forces against targets in Somalia. Most of the strikes killed scores of people but not the designated targets, that is, terror suspects.

<sup>85</sup> UN Secretary General, 2008: 'Report on the situation in Somalia', 16 July.

<sup>86</sup> U.S. Special Envoy to Somalia, 2008: 'U.S. Special Envoy Discusses Current Events in Region' (Ask America web-chat transcript, 31 July.

<http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-English/2008/August/20080801130602eaifas0.1554224.html>).

<sup>87</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 2009: 'The Sheik Sharif show', *Africa Confidential* 50(4): 10-12; Menkhaus, Ken, Prendergast, John, and Thomas-Jensen, Colin, 2009: 'Beyond piracy: Next steps to stabilize Somalia' (Enough Project, May).

<sup>88</sup> In mid-2009, conflict within the militant Islamist opposition escalated over control of the port town of Kismayo, resulting in several rounds of fighting in and around the town. This conflict reflects clan tensions between the sub-units of the two movements; additionally it involves a power struggle between the opposition leaders, Ahmed Abdi Godane and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys. In late October 2009, *Al Shabaab* seems to have gained the upper hand and certainly remains the most powerful and extremist faction in Somalia.

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2009: *Background Briefing on U.S. Assistance to the Somalia Transitional Federal Government* (<http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=3162&lang=1>).

<sup>90</sup> Pflanz, Mike, 2009: 'Hillary Clinton to pledge US support for Somalia again [sic] al-Shabaab terrorists', *Telegraph*, 4 August (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>).

<sup>91</sup> *Skynews*, 2009: 'Clinton pledges US boost for Somali govt', *Skynews*, 6 August (<http://news.sky.com/skynews/>).

<sup>92</sup> Associated Press, 2009, 28 March.

<sup>93</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic extremism', p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Rosen, Jonathan, 2008: 'Mistaken identity: The Union of Islamic Courts and the failure of the US war on terror in the Horn of Africa', *Geopolitics in the Middle East* 1(1): 7-22, 18.

<sup>95</sup> Boulden, Jane, 2009: 'Terrorism and civil wars', *Civil Wars* 11(1): 5-21.

<sup>96</sup> Schlee, *How Enemies are Made*, p. 168.

<sup>97</sup> Smidt, Wolbert, 2008: 'Terrorism and discourses on terror in Ethiopia', in: Eva-Maria Bruchhaus and Monika M. Sommer (eds), *Hot Spot Horn of Africa Revisited: Approaches to Make Sense of Conflict*, Münster: Lit., pp. 132-45.