The African Union in Somalia:
African Solutions to African Problems?

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With an estimated one quarter of its 7.5 million population internally displaced or living outside the country as refugees, Somalia is widely considered to be a failed state. One tragedy has followed another: the latest, last year's severe drought in the Horn of Africa, resulted in new waves of Somalis fleeing their homes, at risk of starvation and death. As such, the recent successes of AMISOM (the African Union Mission in Somalia), both in the military and political fields, are quite surprising. Indeed, the latest developments bring a rare sense of hope for the stabilization of the Somali state. In September, AMISOM forces were able to capture Merka, a port south of Mogadishu, from the insurgent radical Islamist al-Shabab movement; a month later, together with the Kenya Defense Forces and Somali troops, AMISOM took over all the key areas in Kismaayo, a southern Somali port city considered al-Shabab's last stronghold. Although many had feared great bloodshed, al-Shabab fighters withdrew before African Union (AU) forces entered the city.

There are also signs of improvement in Mogadishu's security situation, and even evidence of a decrease in Somali pirates' activities along Somalia's shores and beyond. The improved security situation has affected the political sphere as well, with civil-rights campaigner Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's win in the September 2012 elections. Mohamud was elected by a newly established 275-member parliament, not by universal franchise. Nonetheless, the elections mark a favorable turning-point in the political history of the country, which has lacked a stable political center since

1991. The active role played by the AU through its AMISOM mission in stabilizing the stormy realities of Somalia raises the question: is the AU consolidating its role as an effective mediator and even peacekeeper? Is the call for "African solutions to African problems" actually starting to be realized by the AU's peacekeeping missions?

The remaking of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the AU in 2002 signified the member states' desire to establish a more effective framework for inter-African cooperation. The AU's Constitutive Act established the fundamental structure for achieving goals such as peace, security, and stability in Africa. On the issue of intervention in intrastate conflicts, Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act defined "the right of the Union to intervene in a member state pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity." Another mechanism established to prevent, control, and resolve conflicts within the continent was the Peace and Security Council (PSC). Comprised of 15 rotating members, the PSC was established to coordinate all responses to events involving grave human rights violations. At the same time, "African Solutions to African Problems" became a rallying cry in response to the international community's failure to address the growing numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, control widespread hunger and disease, and halt the endemic violence in many African conflicts, including Somalia's.

The roots of African intervention in present-day Somalia can be traced back to February 2005, when the country's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was proclaimed in Kenya, after two years of IGAD-sponsored peace talks between various Somali clans and factions.[1] A year later, IGAD's Peace Support Mission in Somalia (IGASOM) was established, yet it failed to lead a process of national reconciliation. Control of Mogadishu was seized by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU)—a coalition of local *shari`a* courts and Islamists—in June 2006. Although the Islamists' short period in power was considered relatively stable, bringing Mogadishu under one rule for the first time since 1991, the ICU's victory triggered apprehension both within and outside of Somalia. The ICU-led coalition contained

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[1] IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), established in 1996, is the East African regional organization that deals mainly with issues of conflict prevention, infrastructure development (transport and communications), food security and environmental protection.

both moderate and extremist factions, but al-Shabab, the best-trained, best-equipped, and most dedicated faction in the coalition, attracted the most concern. Ideologically, al-Shabab follows the *tafkiri* doctrine, which allows its members to declare other Muslims unbelievers (*kafir*), resist foreign presence on Somali territory (including peacekeepers, a fact that had major importance for the future AU peacekeeping force), and commit suicide to kill their enemy. Al-Shabab was also suspected of ties with al-Qa`ida (an alignment that was confirmed in February 2010). Neighboring Ethiopia and Western governments became increasingly alarmed in the face of the growing dominance of radical Islam in Somalia. In December 2006, in response to the call of Somalia's TFG, Ethiopian troops, backed by the US, intervened.

The Transitional Federal Government's call for outside military intervention turned out to be very unpopular with many segments of Somali society, and ignited a new wave of violence throughout the country. As a result, the AU Peace and Security Council created AMISOM in January 2007, with an initial six-month mandate. The following month, UN Security Council Resolution 1744 approved the mission's mandate, which included support for efforts to stabilize the country; promotion of dialogue and reconciliation; facilitation of humanitarian assistance; and the creation of favorable conditions for long-term stabilization, reconstruction, and development. Today, roughly 6,000 peacekeepers, mainly from Uganda and Burundi, are deployed out of a total authorized strength of 8,000.[2]

Until recently, it seemed that most of AMISOM's above-mentioned targets were unattainable. Besides a weak political center, the almost unlimited on-the-ground control of local warlords, and the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, Somalia has not constituted a unified political entity for many years. Mogadishu and its surroundings are being run separately from Somaliland, a separatist state in the northwest, and Puntland, a non-secessionist, autonomous state in the arid northeast corner of the country. In addition, AMISOM troops had to deal with the fact that resistance to their efforts was grounded in an ideological-religious doctrine.

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[2] Nigeria, Ghana, and Malawi have pledged additional troops. The Djibouti Peace Agreement expressly prohibits countries neighboring Somalia from contributing troops. AMISOM website, accessed 25 October 2012, http://amisom-au.org/about/frequently-asked-questions/

Indeed, AMISOM personnel were themselves targets of escalating violence. In May 2007, four Ugandan peacekeepers were killed. The Burundian contingent was attacked soon after its arrival in October 2008. In January 2010, the AU PSC reiterated its strong condemnation of the continued attacks and other acts of terror being perpetrated against the TFG, the Somali people, and AMISOM by armed opposition groups determined to undermine the peace and reconciliation process. The Council further admonished al-Shabab for denying the needy population access to humanitarian aid and services.

Until recently, most observers tended to be rather pessimistic about the AU's ability to handle the situation in Somalia. The American analyst Paul Williams argued, "Nominally a peace support operation, AMISOM's main role has become protecting Somalia's Transitional Federal Government. This has left it in an odd position: it is delivering humanitarian assistance to some residents of Mogadishu while simultaneously trying to counter an insurgency led by al-Shabab that is fond of employing terrorist tactics."[3] Two years ago, several scholars claimed that "the AMISOM operation, coupled with US, regional, UN and other international support, appears increasingly to serve as a magnet to 'internationalise' the conflict, attracting foreign elements to the side of al-Shabab and other insurgents and, more pertinently, radicalizing such armed groups – and the local population."[4]

Such a pronouncement was perhaps overly critical, as AMISOM was objectively ill-equipped and lacked sufficient financial means and manpower to alleviate the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation. Conversely, following AMISOM's recent military and political achievements, some observers now tend to be overly optimistic, claiming even that the peacekeeping mission in Somalia demonstrates that the AU is "more efficient" than NATO in Afghanistan,[5] and portraying the organization as capable of tendering effective solutions to African problems.

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[3] Paul D. Williams, "The African Union Mission in Somalia: Decision Time," *SIPRI* 10 (December 2010).
[4] Jakkie Cilliers, Henri Boshoff, and Festus B. Aboagye, "Troop Surge in Somalia Won't Solve Anything," *The African.org* (Oct.–Nov. 2010).
[5] BBC Monitoring Africa (London), 8 October 2012.

What makes Somalia's case unique is that the AU has had to try to solve the conflict by itself. In contrast to another well-known case of conflict in Africa—that of Darfur, where a hybrid AU-UN force has been posted since 2008—the international community has been unwilling to send troops to Somalia (partly owing to the traumatic failure of the US-led "Operation to Restore Hope" in the early 1990s). This forced the AU to handle on its own the multiple complexities of a country that had been torn apart. At this point, it seems that the AU is demonstrating an increased ability to effectively handle conflicts by itself (notwithstanding substantial financial and logistical aid from external sources). Recent news from Somalia, therefore, should indeed evoke a cautious sense of hope regarding the AU's emerging ability to offer solutions to African problems, although there is still a long way ahead.

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