

The Status of Conflict in the Southern and Central Regions of Somalia

By Michael A. Weinstein

SINCE APRIL 2009, the southern and central regions of Somalia have been drawn into a more generalized civil conflict between the country's internationally-recognized Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its loosely affiliated allies, and a coalition of armed opposition groups composed primarily of the transnational Islamic revolutionary group al-Shabab¹ and the Islamist-nationalist Hisbul Islamiyya (HI).² The broadening of the conflict to the regions from its epicenter in Somalia's capital Mogadishu has disrupted relatively fixed power configurations that had crystallized beginning in late 2007. This has created a highly fluid situation in which projections about the nature of a more stable balance of forces can only be tentative.

Overall, the armed opposition to the TFG currently has the upper hand. The opposition's Islamic administrations in the south are secure. In the center, the Hiraaan region is no longer a stronghold of TFG President Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad's allies in the Islamic Courts. The Galgaduud region is dominated by the traditional Sufi Islamist organization Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama (ASWJ), which is only a TFG ally of convenience. The Middle Shabelle region, which is Shaykh Sharif's base, moved into the column of



Figure 1. Map of central and southern Somalia.

the opposition on May 19, 2009. Moreover, the armed opposition has encircled Mogadishu by gaining dominance to the north in Middle Shabelle and to the south in Lower Shabelle.

This article will examine the recent turn of events in Somalia's regions before identifying the current balance of power in the country.

Recent Turn of Events

Within the context of post-independence³ Somalia, the southern and central regions belong to the territories under the nominal authority of the TFG. The TFG is presently confined on the ground to precincts of Mogadishu that are protected by a 4,300-strong African Union Peacekeeping Mission (AMISOM). Although the TFG's juridical authority theoretically extends through the whole of post-independence Somalia, the northwestern and northeastern regions are respectively under the de facto control of the self-declared and unrecognized Republic of Somaliland and the provisionally autonomous state of Puntland, both of which have insulated themselves with relative success from the conflict to the south.

The southern⁴ and central⁵ regions lack both the presence of the TFG and

functioning regimes of their own. As a result, these regions consist of a patchwork of local authorities composed of factions allied to the TFG with varying degrees of affiliation, and factions of the armed opposition that engage in tactical cooperation. These "local authorities" function in cities, towns and villages within the regions to maintain security (such as the removal of extortionate roadblocks) and implement forms of Shari`a law that vary according to the ideological proclivities of the factions in control who consult with clan elders and local clerics. There are also regional authorities with varying degrees of effectiveness.

At the micro-level, political conditions are exceedingly complex, with overlapping and cross-cutting relations among clans, clerics, and political groups. The many and varied actors evince greater and lesser degrees of coordination and contention with one another, depending on whether one faction or coalition dominates an area, or whether the balance of power is more equal. Through the spring of 2009, the southern and central regions have become increasingly contested, making any assessment of the balance of power in each one provisional and problematic.

The political picture in the southern and central regions, which resembles the fragmented conditions of the period between the fall of the Siad Barre dictatorship in 1991 and the Islamic Courts revolution in 2006, is most directly a result of the Ethiopian occupation of southern and central Somalia that occurred at the end of 2006 and ousted the Courts from control of most of the regions. Almost immediately, factions in the Courts began regrouping and launched an insurgency against the occupation that was centered in Mogadishu and achieved limited success and an effective stalemate. The resistance movement altered its strategy decisively in autumn 2007, shifting its focus to the regions, where Ethiopian forces were either absent or stretched thin. The opposition's aim was to take territory, establish administrations in cities, towns and localities, and eventually encircle Mogadishu, where the insurgency continued.

Through 2008, the insurgency increasingly made advances and gained

1 During the period of the Courts movement's dominance in 2006, al-Shabab was the movement's military spearhead and championed an irredentist program of incorporating ethnic Somali populations in Ethiopia into an Islamic emirate encompassing all ethnic Somali populations and governed by a Salafist interpretation of Shari`a law.

2 Hisbul Islamiyya is an Islamic party founded in January 2009. It is composed of four factions opposed to Shaykh Sharif's new government: the hard-line Asmara wing of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia led by Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys; Harakat Ras Kamboni, a southern Somali Islamist group affiliated with Shaykh Hassan "Turki," who has had ties with al-Shabab; the Islamic Front of Jabhatul Islamiyya, an insurgent group formed in 2007 to oppose Ethiopian troops in Somalia; and a little-known, Harti clan group called Anole and based in Kismayo. It has largely allied itself to al-Shabab, although it is a distinct organization.

3 Somalia gained independence in 1960.

4 The southern regions consist of Bay, Bakool, Gedo, Middle and Lower Jubba, and Lower Shabelle.

5 The central regions consist of Hiraaan, Galgaduud, Middle Shabelle and Mudug, the latter of which has an autonomous administration that has not yet been drawn into the wider conflict.

momentum. This was especially true in the south, to the point that when Ethiopia terminated its occupation at the end of that year, the insurgency was dominant in the southern regions. In the south, al-Shabab, which had separated itself from the Courts movement, was strongest. In two of the central regions—Hiraan and Middle Shabelle—factions of the Islamic Courts held sway. In all regions, other factions were present, disputing or collaborating with the major players.

At the end of 2008, the most powerful Courts factions in the central regions allied themselves with the movement's former executive chairman, Shaykh Sharif, who became president of the internationally-supported TFG in December 2008 through a power-sharing agreement with the old TFG in which his faction was incorporated into the transitional government. The faction of the Courts movement led by its former *shura* chairman, Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys, which later entered the HI coalition, rejected any deal with the TFG and turned to armed opposition, forming tactical alliances with al-Shabab. With the factions of the original Courts movement divided between those who accepted and those who rejected power-sharing, the stage was set for conflict between the two coalitions.

During the first half of 2009, the conflict in the southern and central regions mutated from resistance to the Ethiopian occupation and growing control of territory by factions of the Courts movement, to confrontation between those factions willing to participate in the new TFG, if only expediently, and those that abjure participation. The situation took a drastic turn in May 2009 when the armed opposition to the TFG launched a major offensive in Mogadishu that succeeded in taking most of the city. The offensive was halted only by the wall of heavy weapons deployed by AMISOM forces protecting key infrastructure and government installations.

The timing of the opposition's May offensive in Mogadishu was based on its judgment that the TFG might receive military support from external powers and international organizations that would shift the balance of power. Resistance to the offensive by pro-Sharif factions of the Courts movement and TFG

forces proved to be weak. In response to the opposition's gains, the TFG has attempted to mobilize any groups opposed to a takeover by the opposition, including former warlords, religious groups fronting for clan militias, figures in former TFG administrations in the regions and their clan militias, and frontline states Ethiopia and Kenya. The mobilization of elements allied by convenience to the TFG has triggered a counter-mobilization by the armed opposition, resulting in the current fluid and volatile political conditions.

The Current Balance of Power in the Regions

Shifting week by week, the current balance of power in the regions is determined by the status of forces of pro-TFG factions and the factions of the armed opposition. In each region, the elements composing the contending coalitions and their relative strength vary.

Most generally, there is a marked difference between the central and southern regions. The former—including Hiraan on the west, Galgadud in the center, and Middle Shabelle to the east—were, before the armed

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opposition's May 2009 offensive, mainly in the hands of Islamic Courts forces affiliated with Shaykh Sharif, or clan militias contested by al-Shabab in the case of Galgadud. In contrast, the latter, comprising the southwestern Bay, Bakool, and Gedo regions—and the southeastern Middle and Lower Jubba, and Lower Shabelle regions—were dominated by the armed opposition.

Through the spring and into the summer of 2009, the grip of the pro-TFG forces in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle has been broken by the armed opposition,

and Galgadud has continued to be contested. The southern regions remain dominated by the armed opposition, but they are being challenged by forces of former TFG administrations that have massed on the border with Ethiopia in Gedo and Bakool, and issue continuous threats to attack the current Islamist administrations. Ethiopia is widely reported to have set up bases in Hiraan and Galgadud to monitor and contain the armed opposition, and to have crossed into Bakool.⁶ Ethiopia has also harbored former warlords from the regions, such as Barre Hirale Shire from Gedo and Yusuf Dabaged from Hiraan, and has trained their forces and forces loyal to the pro-Sharif Islamic Courts.⁷ In the deep south, Kenya has moved soldiers to the borders of the Gedo and Lower Jubba regions, triggering threats and counter-threats.

The strategic Hiraan region is currently the most unstable, with its capital Beledweyne divided between the Islamic Courts and HI, and many of its towns under the control of al-Shabab. In an attempt to reverse the momentum of the armed opposition, the TFG's minister of internal security and close ally of Shaykh Sharif, Colonel Omar Hashi Adan, returned to his home region to mobilize forces on the border with Ethiopia at the end of May. Having crossed into Hiraan, Hashi's forces were unable to make headway, and he was killed in a suicide bombing on June 18.⁸ Since then, al-Shabab has taken the town of Jalalaqsi, and ongoing mediation efforts mounted by Hashi's replacement, Mohamed Daqane Elmi, have failed.⁹ On July 2, the security chief of the Islamic Courts in Hiraan, Shaykh Ibrahim Yusuf, defected to HI, stating that he could no longer “work with the government” after it appealed to foreign troops for help.¹⁰

6 “Ethiopian Forces Conduct Operations in Central Somalia,” Radio Simba, June 25, 2009; “Ethiopian Troops Allowed in by Somali Government – Official,” Radio Shabelle, June 23, 2009.

7 “Ethiopia Training Fighters Loyal to Moderate Somali Islamist Group,” Midnimo.com, July 1, 2009.

8 The identity of the suicide bomber is still disputed.

9 “Somalia: MPs Say They Have Talks With Islamist Organizations in Hiran Region,” Shabelle Media Network, June 24, 2009.

10 “Senior Somali Islamist Figure Quits Pro-Government Group,” Radio Simba, July 2, 2009.

In the more isolated Galgadud region, clan militias under the umbrella of the ASWJ, which has allied itself loosely with the TFG, have succeeded in marginalizing al-Shabab, but have not been able to eliminate it as a fighting force. ASWJ, which represents traditional Somali Islam, is suspicious of Shaykh Sharif, who has not committed to its interpretation of the religion. In May, ASWJ political spokesman Kaliph Mahamud Abdi said that his group was prepared to support the TFG on the condition that Shaykh Sharif promised to stop cooperating with foreign Islamic ideologies, especially Salafism.¹¹

The TFG has suffered its greatest loss in the Middle Shabelle region. Middle Shabelle borders the Banadir region, which encompasses Mogadishu. Moreover, it is Shaykh Sharif's home region and has provided his major base of support. On May 19, al-Shabab forces, commanded by Shaykh Abdirahman Hasan Husayn, captured the capital of Middle Shabelle, Jowhar, and have since gained control of most of the region's districts. Fighting has continued as pro-Sharif Islamic Courts forces attempt to oust al-Shabab administrations, but the Courts have not yet been successful.¹²

In contrast to the central regions that are actively contested, the Islamist administrations in the south, which are controlled by various factions of the armed opposition or alliances among them, have not yet faced military attack. Nevertheless, they are threatened by forces on the border with Ethiopia that are led by former warlord Barre Hirale, whose home region is Gedo, and the former TFG administrations of Bakool and Bay, led by former Bay commissioner Hasan Mohammed Bikole, who has said that their forces would include "foreign troops."¹³ The power figure behind Bikole is former warlord Mohammed Ibrahim Habsade, the current minister of ports and sea transport of the TFG. In response to the heightened threat level,

the Islamist administrations in the southwest have strengthened security by establishing checkpoints. Shaykh Mukhtar Robow, a leader of al-Shabab in Bay and Bakool, said on June 23: "We have issued an order to kill [Muhammad Ibrahim] Habsade."¹⁴ The new al-Shabab commander leading the Bay and Bakool administrations, Shaykh Mahad Umar Abdikarim, said on June 30 that his forces would continue to fight the TFG.¹⁵

More insulated, the southeastern regions, which include Lower and Middle Jubba and Lower Shabelle, have more secure Islamist administrations. A coalition of opposition groups composed of al-Shabab, Harakat Ras Kamboni (led by Shaykh Hassan Turki) and the Anole militia are in control of southern and central Somalia's second largest city and capital of Lower Jubba, the strategic port of Kismayo. Tensions on the border with Kenya, which are heightened by Nairobi's support for the TFG and hints that it will intervene, have triggered threats by the Kismayo administration to attack targets in Kenya.¹⁶ To the north, the Lower Shabelle region is controlled by al-Shabab, which holds the port of Merka, and HI, which is dominant in Afgoe, abutting the Banadir region.

Conclusion

A review of the status of the general conflict in southern and central Somalia specified by region reveals a fluid situation marked by precarious balances of power, factionalization, loose coalitions and, at present, tentative intervention by external powers. Each region has its own particular power configuration that favors the TFG or the armed opposition.

The armed opposition consummated its strategy adopted in late 2007 of encircling Mogadishu by gaining dominance to the north in Middle Shabelle and to the south in Lower Shabelle. In addition, both Middle and Lower Shabelle do not border external powers and, as a result, are relatively insulated from external intervention.

This has left the TFG struggling to retain control of the capital, while the opposition—al-Shabab, HI and its supporters—continue to consolidate and contest control over the central and southern regions. Uncertainty prevails and changes will depend on myriad factors. Most importantly, changes to the current balance of power will depend on the willingness of external governments to intervene militarily on behalf of the TFG. Changes also depend on the relative ability of broad coalitions, each composed of factions pursuing their own agendas and often at cross-purposes with one another, to hold together and coordinate efforts.

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11 Scott Baldauf, "After Five Days of Assault by Better-Armed Al Shabab Militiamen, Pro-Government Fighters Have Apparently Begun to Retreat," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 12, 2009.

12 "Islamic Courts, Al-Shabab Battle in Southern Somalia Town," Shabelle Media Network, June 25, 2009.

13 "Somali Government to Use Foreign Troops in Ousting Al-Shabab from Regions," Allpuntland.com, June 29, 2009.

14 "Somali Islamist Group Threatens to Kill Cabinet Minister Over Remarks," Garowe Online, June 23, 2009.

15 "Somalia: Hardline Islamist Official Vows to Continue Fighting Government," Shabelle Media Network, June 30, 2009.

16 "Militia to Target Kenya and Ethiopia," *The Nation*, June 30, 2009.