



UN and AU Peace Operations in Somalia

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The Somali peacekeeping experience, which spans over two decades, provides a good example of the evolving roles of the AU and the UN in responding to conflicts and crises in Africa.

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), now in its fourth year of operations, continues to face fundamental obstacles in achieving its mission of bringing peace to Somalia and restoring the country's institutions. While Al Shabaab remains active and in control of much of southern Somalia, international efforts to develop an agreed country-wide security structure have foundered on their continued inability to resolve the differences between competing Somali visions of the country's future.

The underlying unresolved issue is whether the Somali state shall continue to be run by a centralized structure led by the [Marehan](#) clans based in Mogadishu, which were dominant in Siad Barre's government from 1969 until the collapse of the state in 1991 or become a federal state under a new constitution with power shared among the major clans and groups throughout the country. As United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UN SRSG) Michael Keating and Sagal Abshir, a specialist on Somalia, have written in a recent [Center for Conflict Resolution article](#), "the articulation of a National Security Structure treads on the most sensitive fault line of Somali politics – the balance of power between the center and the peripheries."

In principle there is [agreement](#), endorsed at a May 2017 Conference in London, about a National Security Structure which would bring the police, army and intelligence services together on a federal basis. But in practice this has not happened.

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The Historical Context

To understand why this is the case, it is important to recall how the current situation came about. When Major General Siad Barre took control of the state in a bloodless coup in October 1969, he ushered in 21 years of military dictatorship. He inherited a more or less functioning state bringing together the southern and northern parts of the country which had voluntarily united at the moment of independence eight years earlier. They had been governed heretofore by Italian and British colonial administrations, and therefore were quite different in terms of economic development and political outlooks.

For the next twenty-one years, Siad Barre governed Somalia autocratically with the support of his Southern based Marehan clan. The north was largely disenfranchised and ignored. In 1988 as the forces of Mohammed Farah Aideed closed in on him from Ethiopia, and his political support narrowed in the wake of an insoluble civil war, he bombed his own countrymen in Hargeisa. Northerners were not only disenfranchised; they were the enemy. Barre fled the country in 1991, going first to Kenya and then to Nigeria where he died.

Peacekeeping and Peacemaking in Somalia: A Mixed Record

The ensuing civil war from 1991-1995 between rival clans created a humanitarian catastrophe as Somali families fled from the scorched earth in the south to camps in and around Mogadishu. From 1992-1995 international efforts, led by the United States, sought to bring the Somali warlords together at meetings in Addis Ababa to try to find an agreed basis for a new government.

UN efforts to reconcile the warlords and set up a functioning government quickly faltered, however, and collapsed after the murder of 42 UNITAF Pakistani peacekeepers in July 1993. The United States sent a separate

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Marine contingent to Mogadishu to try to capture Aideed. Seventeen Marines and many more Somalis died in a **night long firefight** on October 4, 1993 which became known as “Black Hawk Down” while Aideed remained at large. President Clinton gave in to congressional pressures to withdraw all US forces; by April 1995 the United States withdrew all its forces and all other states with troops on the ground followed.

In the words of former UN SRSG to Somalia Augustine Mahiga, to an audience at the International Peace Institute in **January 2012**, the international community – minus a few humanitarian agencies – essentially had abandoned the country. For the next 12 years Somalia remained in this semi-anarchic situation from which Somali leaders have been struggling to recover ever since. The Transitional Federal Government was based first in Kenya, then in Baidoa from 2004 until 2007 when African Union forces ousted al-Shabbab from the capital enabling the Federal Government of Somalia to be re-established there. See my Chapter “Peacemaking in Somalia: AU and UN Peace Operations” in The Palgrave Handbook of Peabebuilding in Africa, CCR 2018.

The Revival of Somaliland

While fighting continued in the south, leaders in the north announced the establishment of Somaliland as an independent country setting up its own governing structure in Hargeisa. For the next two decades, while instability and fighting have continued in the South, Somaliland has become a fundamentally viable peaceful state; when I attended a conference there in 2000, there were few police around, money changers functioned openly in the streets (unimaginable in Mogadishu). While neither the African Union nor the United Nations would grant it recognition Somaliland today is a functioning country. The official arguments that recognition would set a precedent for more

separations and foreclose reunification strike the author as unpersuasive for a number of reasons. Those include the relative autonomy that both Somaliland and Puntland currently maintain, as well as the levels of peace and security that each semi-autonomous regions has managed to build, at odds with the insecurity that continues to plague the south of Somalia. On precedent Eritrea and Djibouti are already separated from Ethiopia.

AMISOM: Achievements and Obstacles

Over these past four years African Union forces under AMISOM political and military control have had a mixed record. They have managed to eject Al Shabaab fighters from the capital, to establish a modicum of order and security and to protect officials in the government and the parliament. However, it has been a very difficult undertaking; recurrent attacks on hotels, restaurants and cafes frequented by international diplomats underscore the city's continued vulnerability to terrorist attacks, including the massive October 2017 [attack](#), likely carried out by Al Shabaab, though the group has yet to claim responsibility. Staff of the SRSF and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia are confined to the compound adjacent to the international airport, and are allowed to travel around the city only if they are accompanied by armed guard.

Recently major AMISOM force contributors, especially Ethiopia and Uganda, have wanted to set a time limit to their continued engagement, though there is a [debate](#) regarding how quickly the force should drawdown. They have come to recognize that unless they set deadlines their troops are likely to be asked to remain indefinitely. Training of Somali security forces to replace AMISOM forces has proven very difficult. Indeed the Somali National Army is actually a series of regionally based forces with limited training and minimal national integration

and unity. Although Al Shabaab continues to lose ground in the face of continued AMISOM military pressure, their **defeat** is in no way a certainty. It remains to be seen whether the Somali National Army can hold ground against a resurgent Al Shabaab, leaving AMISOM force contributors no choice but to keep their troops in Somalia.

Another shortcoming, as highlighted in a recent Global Observatory article, is public skepticism as to whether AMISOM can or will protect the population from Al Shabaab attacks. In the absence of an effective protection of civilians (POC) program AMISOM is not widely perceived as protecting the average Somali from attack. AMISOM's official responsibility is to protect the institutions of the nascent Somali state, and not the people. Even if AMISOM's mandate were changed to take into account POC, it will nonetheless take some time to change these perceptions.

Where Do We Go From Here?

AMISOM and the United Nations are in a complex situation. They are committed to assisting the people and government of Somalia to strengthen their political and security institutions. They are obliged to respect the country's sovereignty and are therefore circumspect in any critique of its performance. While any projection is difficult, it is likely that international forces, funding and political support will be required for many years to come.

Image credit: AU-UN 1st photo – Tobin Jones /Flickr.

About the Author

John L. Hirsch is currently a Senior Adviser to IPI President Terje Rød-Larsen after having held various positions at IPI, including Vice President and Acting Head of the Africa Program. He is also Adjunct Professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and served as Director of the Occidental College United Nations Program from 2002-2011. Before joining IPI, Ambassador Hirsch served as United States Ambassador to the Republic of Sierra Leone from 1995-1998. His extensive African experience includes assignments as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Somalia from 1984-1986, and subsequent roles as Political Adviser to the Commander of UNITAF, General Robert Johnston, and as Deputy to President Bush's Special Envoy, Ambassador Robert Oakley from 1992-1993. His publications include *Sierra Leone: Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy* (Lynne Rienner, 2001) and *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope: Reflections on Peacemaking and Peacekeeping*, co-authored with Ambassador Robert B. Oakley (US Institute of Peace, March 1995). His chapter "Peace and Justice: Mozambique and Sierra Leone Compared" appeared in *Peace versus Justice? The Dilemmas of Transitional Justice in Africa*, edited by Chandra Lekha Sriram and Suren Pillay (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009).

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