

Just a glimmer of hope

After 18 years of strife, there is a small chance that a new Somali president and a new American one could make a fresh start.



Getty Images

The most smashed-up country in the world has reached a crossroads. The recent election of a moderate Islamist, Sharif Ahmed (pictured above), as Somalia's new president may offer the best chance of peace in the country for more than a decade. As head of the Islamic Courts Union that held sway over a chunk of Somalia in 2006, he was later driven into exile by invading Ethiopian troops backed by America. So it was quite a turnaround when, on his first day in office a few weeks ago, this courteous former geography teacher went to Ethiopia and got a standing ovation from heads of state in its capital, Addis Ababa, at an African Union (AU) jamboree.

This week he and his ministers went back to Mogadishu, Somalia's wrecked seaside capital. In his campaign he pledged to crush or co-opt Somalia's jihadists, who have taken over chunks of the country, and to rebuild national unity. Somalia has had no effective government since 1991, when a military dictator, Siad Barre, was toppled as the cold war ended. Could that change?

Mr Ahmed has a mammoth task. For a start, he has nothing resembling a proper government. His ministers are cobbled together from Islamists, secular nationalists, grizzled warlords and white-collar émigrés. They have no budget. He was elected by a parliament that can no longer meet in its own country. Its members operate at foreign donors' expense, staying in a plush hotel in the nearby country of Djibouti. A few weeks ago, Somali jihadists overran the dusty Somali town of Baidoa, parliament's official seat (see map below).

While the world has focused on a wave of piracy off Somalia's coast, which has threatened even the biggest ships heading for the Suez Canal or the Mozambique Channel, space has opened up onshore for jihadists that has not been seen since the Taliban gave Osama bin Laden his Afghan haven. Most of these fighters are loosely gathered around a group called the Shabab (Youth), which began as the armed wing of Mr Ahmed's Islamic Courts.

The original Shabab was shredded by Ethiopian artillery and American air strikes two years ago. The revitalised Shabab is sustained by a martyrdom complex. But its success is also due partly to money: it pays young Somalis to fight for it. It has also benefited from the decision of President George Bush's administration to isolate moderate Islamists such as Mr Ahmed and to embrace secular warlords with a history of terrorising civilians.

In the past few years, Shabab numbers have risen from a few hundred fighters to several thousand. The group controls the port towns of Kismayo and Marka, a number of places in the interior and parts of Mogadishu. It gets rake-offs from factories, warehouses, ports and airports, plus cash from Arab donors who see Somalia as a vital front in global jihad.

Local and foreign fighters, belonging to the Shabab or linked to them, are trained in camps beside Somalia's coastal mangrove swamps and in the scorching bush inland. They want to create a pure Islamist state, with hopes of acquiring the Somali-populated bits of eastern Ethiopia and north-east Kenya. The caliphate that emerged would be governed under a rigid Wahhabist interpretation of Islam, very different from the easy-going, mystical Sufism practised by most Somalis. The Shabab is ready to deploy suicide-bombers at home and abroad to further its cause.

Where it has control, it conveys its message with ruthless effect. When its people executed Abdirahman Ahmed by firing squad in the southern port of Kismayo in January, the event featured on al-Qaeda websites. What excited the viewers was the sight of an Islamist court, run by the Shabab and operating freely, publicly sentencing a 55-year-old politician to death. He had been found guilty of "showing sympathy for Christianity". His corpse was thrown into the infidels' cemetery to show he had worked with the occupying Ethiopian troops, whom the jihadists view as "crusaders", though many are Muslim.

Will the Shabab take over completely?

In the next few months, governments of countries with historical, humanitarian, commercial or strategic ties to Somalia, including its African neighbours, the United States, Italy, Britain, Sweden, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, must decide whether to spend time and money to give Mr Ahmed a chance to rescue his benighted country. If they do not, he will very probably fail—and the country with him.

The battleground is Somalia's centre and south, which has water and food. Everywhere the complex mix of clans and sub-clans is combustible. By contrast, the arid north, peopled largely by nomadic camel-herders, is fairly peaceful. Puntland, in the north-east, is semi-autonomous, but most of its people want to be part of a federal Somalia. It hosts some of the pirates, as well as people-traffickers, kidnappers and a fair number of jihadists. But its government has disarmed freewheeling militias and more or less keeps order.

The recently ousted previous Somali president, Abdullahi Yusuf, a Puntland warlord, has taken several hundred gunmen back north from Mogadishu and now seems more interested in his businesses, mainly in the town of Bossaso. Somaliland, a former British territory, has been fairly stable since it declared independence in 1991. If coming elections there go well, with voters using biometric identity cards, it may slowly start to win recognition from some African countries and others farther afield. It is not clear what Mr Ahmed thinks about independence for Somaliland. But nationalists and jihadists are violently against it, as is Puntland, which disputes a border zone with it.

What is clear is that no one controls the country, neither the government, nor the Shabab. But, certainly until Mr Ahmed's arrival, the Shabab have been in the ascendant. Its system of 20 to 30 men per cell, each one locking into larger command structures when they take a

town, is hard to crack. Hardened by battle, hunger and disease (often malaria), the Shabab fighters are difficult for foreign security services to track. They pass easily between Somalia and Kenya and from there into Somali communities in Europe and America. Foreign intelligence services think a Shabab terror attack sooner or later in Nairobi is likely. Some airlines may soon stop flying to Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport because of threats.

London and other Western cities could well become targets too. The FBI apparently put the Shabab high on its list of outfits that might have tried to launch an attack during Barack Obama's inauguration. A suicide-bomber, Shirwa Ahmed, who blew himself up in a Shabab operation in northern Somalia in October, was an American citizen, one of 100,000-odd ethnic Somalis resident in Minnesota.

So what's the cure?

Nearly all Ethiopia's occupying troops have now withdrawn from Somalia. Since then, the Shabab has begun to use suicide-bombers and roadside bombs in an effort to drive out the 3,400-odd remaining AU peacekeepers, who guard a few streets around the port, airport and presidential palace. Last week 11 Burundian peacekeepers were killed by Shabab suicide-bombers. Earlier in February a remote-controlled landmine wounded several of them. In a panicky response, the AU soldiers opened fire, killing at least 20 civilians—just what the Shabab wanted.

Whether or not foreigners have been involved, peacemaking has failed for the past 18 years. Since Mr Barre fell, no fewer than 16 concerted efforts to make peace have foundered. Mr Ahmed may fail too. Many people profit from the long war and want to keep it going. Some siphon off aid money, others move heroin through Mogadishu or traffick people by sea to Yemen. Somali pirates are often sponsored by Somali businessmen abroad.

Many Somalia-watchers think Somalis should work out their own political settlement—and that foreigners should keep out. Somehow the Shabab has to be crushed, perhaps bringing some of its more amenable members into Mr Ahmed's apparently moderate Islamist fold. The Shabab may not be as cohesive as it claims to be. The recent departure of the hated Ethiopians and the Shabab's own record of bullying the impious and smashing the gravestones of Sufi saints have lost it some support. Its two top commanders, Muqtar Robow and Hassan Turki, may become isolated if Mr Ahmed's government holds up, especially as many of the Shabab fighters come from the new president's own Hawiye clan. Thanks to some back-channel talks, some Shabab, including an influential commander in the town of Jowhar, have already changed sides.

Crush them or co-opt them

Plainly the Shabab will be hard to deal with, whether by force, negotiation or trickery. With its training camps, arms caches and money, it is more than just an Islamist outgrowth of Somalia's intricate clan politics, which has generally determined the balance of power in the country. Aden Hashi Ayro, a Shabab commander killed by an American missile last year, still has a following, even in death. If foreigners keep out and the AU withdraws the remnants of its peacekeepers, the Shabab may simply fill the vacuum, tighten its grip on the south and exert more power nationwide by controlling the supply of food to a hungry people. Civil strife could turn into sectarian war, with secular warlords presenting themselves as Sufi sheikhs in the fight against the Shabab.



The boys in black who want the new man to fail

Alternatively, if Mr Ahmed is too indulgent as he seeks to buy off the Shabab, Somalia may get a caliphate by stealth. If, however, he keeps on good terms with Ethiopia and America and refuses to institute sharia law, as he promises, he may lose support in Mogadishu, where an influential group of clerics has called for sharia's imposition, including public executions.

Some suggest, as a first step, that Mr Ahmed should persuade the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague to indict Somalia's worst offenders. Human-rights campaigners wonder why thugs are being brought to justice in Liberia, Sierra Leone and even, most recently, in Congo, but have never been indicted for crimes in Somalia. They fear that the latest peace effort may strengthen a culture of impunity by letting warlords off scot-free as a reward for coming on board. Proponents of using the ICC say that Mr Yusuf, the last president, was forced to step down partly because of threats that he would face an international travel ban and an assets freeze if he clung to office.

Another proposal is to set up an international "green zone" in Mogadishu. But in present circumstances, there is no chance of Western armies establishing themselves in the lawless capital. Nor are United Nations peacekeepers likely to hunker down there. Some suggest extending the mandate of the AU's present embattled force of Ugandans and Burundians for another year. The AU troops could perhaps be bolstered by private security firms to let UN offices and foreign embassies be re-established in Somalia, helping Mr Ahmed get a grip on Mogadishu. At the least, the airport should be secured. The UN's special envoy, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, a former foreign minister of Mauritania, says he is determined to move his office from Nairobi. "Why [is there a green zone] in Baghdad and Kabul but not in Mogadishu?", he asks plaintively. But previous efforts to bring in effective peacekeepers, whether African or UN, have all failed.

In any event, Mr Ahmed's government needs cash—to pay for basic services and to reinforce his own fledgling security force. For instance, the UN has trained 3,000 Somali police, but they have not been paid for a year. Somali businessmen say outsiders—Saudis are most often mentioned—could bankroll the new government and do more to spur free enterprise by buying livestock and investing in fishing.

If the UN and Western governments remain loth to get involved, Mr Ahmed will hope for more energetic regional diplomacy. Ethiopia and Eritrea, bitter rivals, have used Somalia as a battlefield for a proxy war. Ethiopia has kept its promise to Somalia's more moderate Islamists that it would remove its troops and has publicly backed Mr Ahmed. His fragile government would be helped if Eritrea's was persuaded to cut its links with the radical Somali Islamists it has been backing merely to hurt Ethiopia. But according to some reports, Eritrea has recently

flown several planeloads of arms into Kismayo to bolster the Shabab. It may also help Iranian and Arab sympathisers to send arms and explosives.

Though unlikely to get deeply involved, Barack Obama's administration may have a chance to help too. It is likely to continue to foster cosy relations with Ethiopia, despite that country's poor human-rights record, and may want to be tougher with Eritrea. Backing Mr Ahmed, at least with cash and diplomatic support, would meet part of Mr Obama's inaugural promise to put out the hand of friendship to those who unclench their fist. But it seems likely, at any rate at first, that Mr Ahmed will be on his own, while al-Qaeda and its friends continue to view ungoverned Somalia as a promising territory for infiltration.

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