



Policy Forum Report
Terrorism in the Greater Horn of Africa

February 18, 2014

Introduction:

On February 18, 2014, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the challenge of terrorism in the Greater Horn of Africa. The following is a summary of the views expressed and the insights that emerged from the discussion.

Factors Driving Terrorism, Conflict, and Instability in the Horn:

The Greater Horn of Africa is one of the most conflicted regions in the world, and terrorism has been on the rise since the 1990s. Contributing factors include widespread poverty, rampant unemployment, an overabundance of weapons, and highly porous (in some places, undefined) borders. In addition, the collapse of governments and upheaval of other institutional structures—as in places like Somalia and South Sudan — enable terrorist groups to step in to fill the vacuum, as was the case with Al-Shabaab after the dissolution of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia.

The region also encompasses pronounced religious fault lines. Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda all to varying degrees have mixed populations of Muslims and Christians. The Sudans split between the predominantly Muslim North and the animist and Christian South. These religious tensions have been exacerbated by extremist interpretations of Salafist ideology propagated by Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. Yet militancy related to religion is not confined to a single faith tradition, as evidenced by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. Moreover, one finds similar difficulties in states like Somalia, where everyone is of the same faith but nationalism becomes the principal catalyst for the conflict. The phenomenon of Somali-American youth traveling to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab, however, is also a problem. Colonial legacies and a perennial sense of injustice continue to drive some youth to embrace terrorist groups.

The reintegration of ex-combatants and those who wish to leave terrorist groups also remains a challenge. As in the case of the anti-Soviet *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan, combatants without alternative job prospects or the means to integrate successfully into civil society are highly likely to find other outlets for their fighting skills.

Somalia has been the primary nexus for terrorist activities in the Horn, since the collapse of the ICU transformed that country into a state of warlords and Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab increased its reach. Instability and the lack of suitable employment also led to a rise in piracy, largely among unemployed Somali youth who have not yet developed traditionally-employable skills like farming, fishing, or herding. (By 2012, however, piracy declined significantly as the effectiveness of

international countermeasures increased.) Despite the tribal homogeneity in Somalia, clan-based rivalries continue to be a source of friction, and fighting continues between the eastern and western regions. Although the recently installed government was receiving some Western support at the outset, many now feel that the international community has lost interest in supporting a stable central government in Somalia.

Somaliland, which unilaterally declared its independence from Somalia in 1991, is illustrative of a region which, although it experienced less government-led development assistance than the rest of the country, became much more stable—politically, socially, and economically, owing to the role played by grassroots communities and traditional law.

Recommendations for the United States:

- *Support civil society, build local goodwill, and respond to local concerns.* Civil society is typically the first line of defense against terrorism. The commitment of local communities is largely driven by addressing the root causes of local conflict that are driving the conflict locally (most of the terrorist incidents in the Horn are domestic), rather than participating in specific counterterrorism initiatives. However, instead of building up civil society and addressing these local concerns, the United States has tended to channel its financial support to the country's elites, framed through a national security and intelligence lens. On-the-ground realities suggest this emphasis may be misplaced and that resources would be better employed at the grassroots.

In Ethiopia, for example, there has been a violent crackdown on members of the Muslim community who have been engaging in peaceful civil disobedience. While this community has resisted the call to violence in spite of obvious provocations, rather than acknowledging this, the US government (USG) continues to send weapons and other support to the Ethiopian government. Some participants felt that Ethiopia exaggerates a largely-absent domestic "Muslim terrorist threat" to continue receiving US security support, which is then used to destabilize Somalia. It was suggested that the United States follow the example of countries like Turkey, which has provided scholarships to Somali students, built schools and hospitals, and has an Embassy presence in the country. Such efforts help to build local goodwill and address the root causes of violence.

- *Support education and social programs.* Education is critical to creating stable social and economic development, the absence of which provides a fertile ground for terrorism. Education is especially critical in places like Somalia, where 44% of the population is under the age of 14. Current schools supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Somalia are said to be contributing to the radicalization of young people, yet these are often the only options for parents who are seeking a religious education for their children or who are unable to access education elsewhere.

Refusal by the USG to provide financial assistance to religious schools limits its ability to provide viable alternatives for these families. One suggestion posed during the discussion was that the USG fund secular classes within existing religious schools, if it is unable to fund the school itself. It was also suggested that the USG provide scholarships for Somalis to study in America or in regional schools such as the American University of Cairo or Beirut, if they are unable to access education in their own country. In addition, support for "Sports

for Peace” programs was suggested as a mechanism for promoting peace and constructive community involvement among young people.

- *Coordination with NGOs to Facilitate Private Aid.* OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) restrictions can also prevent private aid from reaching those areas in various countries that are most vulnerable to terrorism and instability. In Somalia, for example, NGOs are typically confined to operating in the capital and nearby areas, because the sanctions regime prevents them from serving in areas controlled by Al-Shabaab. The Treasury Department should cooperate more closely with NGOs to ensure that our aid reaches the most vulnerable regions.

Action should also be taken to assuage the concerns of Somali-Americans and American Muslims more generally that they could become targets of onerous US scrutiny if they were seen to be donating to Islamic charities. If people do not feel safe donating to reputable organizations, they may resort to donating to less-established organizations or individuals, which, in turn, could wittingly or unwittingly allow funds to end up in the wrong hands.

- *Better explain US policies abroad, and seek the advice of Americans with ties to countries of concern.* Extremist websites use international grievances toward the United States, such as America’s support for Israel, to incite anti-American hatred and violence. Better efforts are needed to explain US policies in places like Somalia, through the use of USG digital outreach teams; and Somali-Americans should be sought out to advise US policymakers on making policy in Somalia.
- *Learn from and emulate the successes of regional programs in counterterrorism and countering violent extremism.* For example, Djibouti’s strong efforts to provide positive activities for its youth—typically the most vulnerable to violent extremism—and its counterterrorism initiatives, in collaboration with the United States and neighboring countries, have contributed to the general stability there, helping it thus far to avoid the militant upsurges found elsewhere in the region.

The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.