

## **Sheikh Sherif's TFG: Thirteen Months On. Medhane Tadesse**

### **Overview**

The Transitional Federal Government /TFG/ of Somalia led by Sheikh Sherif Ahmed was intended to be the ultimate National Unity Government tasked with administering political reconciliation and establishing peace and security. This does not appear imminent. Yet, the expectations got fueled. Meanwhile, the insurgency remains intransigent and increasingly combative. Sheikh Sherif's TFG lost more areas to the insurgents than the previous Somali government.<sup>1</sup> Despite the continued reconfiguration of political and clan forces, evidence suggests that the overall conflict situation is unlikely to change dramatically in the short-term.

The conflict in Somalia is multi layered: between the TFG and radical Islamist insurgents; between them and moderate religious/clan forces; among the Islamists themselves; among different clan forces, and last but not least is traditional pastoral conflicts at the local level. The dominant form of conflict is however between the government and the *Shabaab* characterized by frequent attacks from insurgent groups on the TFG and AMISOM, particularly in and around Mogadishu. Southern Somalia is plagued with roaming insurgent militias. Twelve months have passed since the Djibouti agreement of August 2008 which set out to establish a national unity government and a strong security force in Somalia. It is time to reflect on the one year record of the TFG and reflect on the situation in Somalia.

### **The Somali Saga: Same Politics, Changing Alliances.**

The survival and consolidation of the TFG, including attempts to resurrect the Somali state, is dependent on four sets of players. On the Somali side the Somali people (several clan groups), the TFG and allied militias and the radical insurgents. Externally, the broader international community on the one hand and some group of countries (such as Eritrea) working to frustrate global efforts in Somalia on the other. The mainstream international community itself could be grouped into many sub-groups: The UN which has been led by the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Somalia; the African Union and its Mission to Somalia, AMISOM; Neighboring countries(including Uganda) and Western nations(Europe and the US). While the AU and the Americans are the most important external players, the most intrusive foreign official in Somalia is Ould Abdalla, the UN Special Representative to Somalia whose more-than passionate meddling borders the role of a non-Somali warlord. A more recent participant in Somalia is NATO, and a colloquium of naval forces who, since August 2008, has led maritime security activities against piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Central to all of this is the Djibouti Agreement and the TFG, against which-however remotely or closely- all the players have positioned themselves.

In June 2008, a UN brokered Peace Accord was reached between the TFG and the ARS led by Sheikh Sherif Ahmed in Djibouti. The agreement, complemented by enthusiastic support from major global players and the UN, was seen as a deal having a reasonable chance of success. Indeed, *the TFG is an amazing accomplishment; but it is also the strangest.* The end-set for the TFG was to promote national reconciliation, establish security, create governance institutions, and facilitate humanitarian aid. In

almost all counts the TFG's performance is less than what was widely expected. First and foremost, the government led by Sheikh Sherif Ahmed was tasked with facilitating national reconciliation and creating a robust security forces to achieve that. And it is in this front that TFG dismally failed. True, many *Hawiye* clan forces were neutralized, but Sheikh Sherif failed to bring all its major opponents on board. No doubt, one major challenge to Sheikh Sherif has been arbitrating the clan interests and political formula surrounding the structure of the TFG. Understandably, the *Darod* clan family, to which the previous President of the TFG belongs, currently feels alienated due to the Islamist insurgency and the Djibouti Agreement, since both processes are to some degree dominated by politicians from the *Hawiye* clan family.

One consequence of this is that the 'unity government' was forced by circumstances to focus on very few clans in and around Mogadishu. Thus, apart from serious confrontation with the *Shabaab* the main challenge for the new government remains to be balancing the different clan interests. By selecting a prominent member of the Northern *Darod* clan family as his Prime Minister, Sheikh Sherif might have won the qualified support of the Puntland state. Despite or probably due to this dissatisfactions are being voiced by the Southern *Darod*, mainly the *Merihan* who has little leading role in the reconstituted TFG and have lost Kismayo and Gedo to the *Shabaab*. No wonder, some of their clan forces have recently made temporary alliances with *Hisbu Islam* in the recent military clashes with *Al-Shabaab militias*, particularly in lower Juba areas. Extraordinary but underreported phenomenon.

On the other hand the *Shabaab* managed to foot soldier a different collection of clans. The group seems to be at a relative ease to use disenfranchised tribes in its bid to thwart the challenge it faces from major clan alliances. A continuation of old practice with new agendas. This is not the end of it. Dissatisfied with the new government for not getting any strategic position in the new cabinet, there is always a danger the southern *Darod* could be used by the *Shabaab* and other hard line Islamists, as the *Hawiye* did for the last three years. As stated consistently and for over 15 years (refer to the piece *contested spaces and competing narratives in Somalia*) as much as the problem is radicalization of Islam, the conflict in Somalia is rooted in access to and the control of resources. A major prize is the fertile agricultural lands in southern Somalia formerly inhabited by a historically disenfranchised minority groups.<sup>2</sup> The tragedy of Somalia is that all kinds of resources, including the potential assets of the future state, are at stake. And here in lies the most intriguing, if not depressing, dynamics between religion, politics and economics in the Somali conflict.<sup>3</sup> The importance of clan lies in the fact that clan identity is the locus for physical security and military mobilization. There is no reason why political Islam can not play a similar role. Short of this, any policy prescription on the current crisis in Somalia will be at great pains to provide sound analysis on Somali Islamists; cannot make accurate predictions and cannot distinguish between what is, and what is not, significant. A major point of weakness of the TFG has been the inability to reach out to other clans and regions to actively engage in the 'new' political reconstruction and security imperatives. This would have improved the TFG's legitimacy and base of support and its ability to control potential spoilers and cultivate allies.

As much as many a *Darod* are disgruntled,<sup>4</sup> the *Hawiye* are not united behind Sheikh Sherif's TFG. Understanding power relations within the TFG, and the tension within the Islamists alike, requires more than casual familiarity with current ideological and business interests. Some *Hawiye* sub-clans<sup>5</sup>, recently jumped into the bandwagon of the *Shabaab* for narrowly focused clan consideration, as some of the sub-clans of the *Habegedir* have done to establish the Ahlu Suna Wal Jama'ia/ASWJ/ and declare war against the *Shabaab* in Central Somalia.<sup>6</sup> As much as it appears to be a moderate religious movement projecting power and resource against the *Shabaab*, the ASWJ is also a sub-clan, mainly

*Habirgedir* (or *Sa'ad*) construct. If its rise to a military organization was a surprise, its entry to the political intricacies was even much faster. The group is yet to curtail its political ambitions, at times increasing the ceiling of its negotiating position whenever it succeeds to mobilize resources and boost its confidence.

Apart from serving a bulwark against the *Shabaab*, increasingly definitively in Central Somalia, the ASWJ has been quick to harbor much broader political ambitions, at times becoming a source of irritation than an asset to Sheikh Sherif's TFG. A series of negotiations between the group and the TFG has never been easy; nor were they conclusive enough to show a clear direction.<sup>7</sup> And clan considerations are clearly at play. This might show a much deeper problem and reveals the dilemmas within the *Hawiye* leadership and the complicated relations of its sub-clans with the major warring sides in the country. One thing is however clear. Increased awareness and recognition by majority members of former Islamic Courts and *Hawiye* clan leadership- that continued use of the *Shabaab* agenda will not further their long term interests- seems to have changed the nature of alliances. For many *Hawiye* sub-clans aligning with the *Shabaab* have become like a gambling. Some of them have lost twice. Instead, having lost the support of the major clans and for political expediency, the *Shabaab* continues to use minority clans. Indeed, many sub-clans of the *Hawiye* are increasingly distancing themselves from *Al-Shabaab*; yet they are not coming closer to Sheikh Sharif's TFG. The difference being the insurgency in Somalia is not currently fully supported by one major clan, as was the case before.

There is no major clan strongly opposing the government and so fighting is largely limited to the south of the country, while the other major clan groups in the Central, North and North East are vehemently anti-*Shabaab*. Moreover, more than a few *Hawiyes* and some of their traditional leaders support the Sheikh Sherif government. In fact, TFG forces are now being aided and abetted by big militia groups (such as ASWJ, *Rahenween Resistance Army* and *Juba Valley Alliance*) from all the major clan families in Somalia. The insurgency is using other cruel methods to survive and thrive.<sup>8</sup> They may not be popular but the insurgents, mainly the *Shabaab* generate fear and terror from Kismayo in the south coast to Dusamereb in Central Somalia and further to the north in Galka'ayo on the vicinity of Puntland.

It is a stretch to claim that the insurgency has no support whatsoever from the clans. It only means that it has created its own niche in Somalia's political economy, perpetuating its own life by other means. It is now an organization led by less compromising but also less clannish leadership who had fought in Afghanistan in the last decade –effectively harness close ranks with international Jihadists that include foreign combatants and in some ways to Al-Qaeda-but had now become richer, more radicalized, and more heavily armed in the process of playing military politics in Somalia. Since early 2005 when the *Shabaab* first began to regroup, they have gradually matured and developed with the help of foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda, which has reorganized and retrained them to use more sophisticated tactics in their military operations. The *Shabaab* are at a disadvantage though. They seek to impose a crude ideology that has gone bankrupt in other countries of the Horn and beyond and is foreign to Somali thinking, an ideology that most Somalis consider abusive, evil, and decadent.

## Is there a Life in the TFG?

As carefully as Sheikh Sherif prepared for it, the presidency has held insurmountable challenges and even some surprises for him—some foreseeable, some not, and some of his own making. It is hard to imagine that he can persuade the *Shabaab* voluntarily to give up fighting. The reason is simple. Such groups don't negotiate. They are designed to fight and kill. Hence, he found himself in an unavoidable paradox. Somalis and the international community at large want to see some kind of progress towards reconciliation. Yet the fanaticism that motivates Islamist guerrilla-not to speak of the *Shabaab*-does not allow for negotiations or compromises unless they face defeat or exhaustion, which is not apparent in the present Somali context. Nonetheless, the TFG continues to reach out to other armed elements and those who have accepted to join have been awarded cabinet posts.<sup>9</sup> Notably, *Al-Shabaab* and certain elements of *Hizbu al Islam*, the two main extremist groups that include foreign combatants and in some ways to Al-Qaeda, continue to remain outside the peace process. The most important problem that Sheikh Sherif and his aides weren't prepared for was the degree to which the Islamists, his former comrades-in-arms, would continue to oppose him. Knowing them for what they were should have signaled to the Villa Somalia's beleaguered president what was to come.

Many of his colleagues in the Islamic Courts Union/ICU/ now in the insurgency do not want Sheikh Sherif to be a successful president, perhaps dooming his group to minority status for quite a while in the broader Islamist political infrastructure in Somalia. Despite the prominent role he played in the rise of the Courts Union he still had to face a significant level of enmity and armed opposition from members and influential leaders of the defunct ICU. Evidently, a major weakness of the TFG president is the lack of coherent ideology and political constituency, apparently a major deficit in all the countries of the sub-region. Many in his camp, and very much in the disaggregated ICU, are unsure about their positions and harbor deep-seated sympathy and empathy towards their fellow Somalis in the insurgency. On the other hand the TFG has been slow to build trust and confidence with so-called moderate religious movements and armed groups such as ASWJ that were practically fighting the same enemies. Although many of them would want the nucleus of the TFG gain some strength and drive back the *Shabaab*, enthusiasm is less while the army lacks both a counterinsurgency strategy and the kind of weapons that would be needed to carry it out.

Compounding the problem is thus the lack of clearly articulated strategy and resolve vis-à-vis the radical insurgents. For many in Sheikh Sherif's camp, containing the radicals Islamists, particularly *Hisbul Islam* has been a tactical rather than a strategic matter. They can even be mistaken for each other. So there have been bouts of fighting with the militants and also unconventional deals with them; and these have been interspersed with policies of keeping some communication on some security matters—all part of a complex and duplicitous game.<sup>10</sup> Hence, as much as the challenge posed by the opposition is real, Sheikh Sherif's problems are internal, probably his own making. His style of leadership perpetuated his own isolation and increasingly making him out of touch from the public and different actors of the Somali society. Even traditional leaders and Islamic Scholars Council, with which Sheikh Sherif had close relations, have been quickly sidelined. Clearly he is not by any stretch a micromanager. But his selection of close aids and heavy reliance and trust of them borders to lose control and even anarchy. Alas, "the boys are running Villa Somalia".<sup>11</sup> Other influential forces inside the TFG are also bent on creating rival sources of political power. Sheikh Sherif's isolation has allowed that, which only added to his growing unpopularity, his indecisiveness, and the public feeling that he is out of touch.

Another major problem of the TFG is internal rivalry and disagreements, and not totally unrelated to this is lack of coordination and consistency.<sup>12</sup> Unlike previous disagreements which were between the main axis of conflict has slightly changed (previously it was between the office of the President and the office of Prime Minister). New locus of power around the deputy prime minister -who is also finance minister- have emerged further aggravating the problem of coherence and consistency.<sup>13</sup> Probably the fourth most serious problem is widespread embezzlement and corruption. The TFG, pretty much like its precursor, could be described as a "corrupt and ineffective administration without resources". The government received too little money and support to make its ministries capable of delivering services to the people. In this vacuum, warlords and cabinet ministers would easily reestablish relations with members of the illicit trade and crime syndicates as well as pirates; they sought out business and security deals for themselves. Many in the TFG would be quickly won over by bribes. This has negatively affected the much needed institutional development of the TFG. This is more evident in the establishment of security structures and beefing up war making capacity of the Somali government.

Another, more critical, end state of the Djibouti agreement was the creation of more robust security forces in Somalia. The Djibouti Agreement stipulated the establishment of Joint Security Committees but progress has been slow. As late as last month the Prime Minister called upon the UN to facilitate a meeting and initiate a process to see the progress (and the lack thereof). Whatever the reality behind recent, more encouraging developments, in which the TFG is aggressively working hard to mobilize new fighters, train and integrate new recruits to its forces, the process of consolidating its authority particularly with respect to the security sector has been extremely slow. However the military situation is not totally hopeless. In fact, a remarkable development is that the government supported by clan militias but largely with the support of AMISOM seemed to have resisted the sustained attack and slowed the advance of the hard-line Islamists. Despite the combined and sustained insurgent attacks the TFG stayed put and survived the onslaught. Things seem to be changing so fast, the TFG may be preparing to take the war to the insurgent areas of influence.

Recent military movements by *Al-Shabaab* in Benadir and Central Somalia are aimed at forestalling an eminent government military offensive. Other clan cum religious forces continues to successfully shield their areas against the insurgency, particularly *Shabaab*. Far from exhausted, the insurgency is not in the offensive for sometime to come. Effective coordination between the TFG and the disparate clan forces as well as regional and international resources would make a lot of difference in the war that is sure to come. Recent military maneuvers and the preparations for war will definitely help bolster its security institutions.

As much as it was a political agreement, the Djibouti Accord was very much a security arrangement.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the security arrangement was critical in underpinning and reinforcing the other pillars of the process as well, including political cooperation, reconciliation and justice, and reconstruction and development. Significantly, there also appears to be little or no effective linkage between the JSC and the High Level Committee (HLC) which was established to provide overall policy guidance. Cognizant of its own failures, the international community was not in a position to hold the TFG accountable for its failures, including this one. However, due to the internal weakness of the TFG (discussed above) and the lack of sustained and well organized support from the international community the two institutions achieved very little. So is the TFG.

## The International Community

The international community is slow, may be unwilling, to seriously take up its role in Somalia. The reasons are many. To put it briefly; Somalia has never been the priority. There is no major domestic constituency in Europe or the US in support of proactive role, let alone intervention, in Somalia. What has gone wrong has been the primacy of security threats, however mocked those threats, and the sense and degree of urgency it represents. One major consequence: the international community's refusal to take state-building and peace-building in Somalia seriously and instead waging a part-time and fruitless war. The donor powers are caught between persisting in supporting the T.F.G., devising new operational tactics; or pulling back.

We have seen the same pattern in other conflict and post conflict countries, but more visibly in Somalia. The international community makes promises that remain unfulfilled, only to remake them a few months or years later, freshly packaged. For Somalia the results have been too erratic Western military engagement, too little money, and a lack of coherent strategy and sustained policy initiatives on the part of Western and Somali leaders. One consequence has been a revived *Shabaab* movement that has made a third of the country ungovernable. Together with *Hisbul Islam* and foreign Jihad organizations, *Shabaab* leaders are trying to carve out new bases on the Somali-Kenya border.

The Somali government has shown a fatal incapacity to boost its profile and deliver security to its people and the West has failed to sustain support and deal with interfering neighbors, such as Eritrea and Iran. Somalia desperately needs international aid, but its leaders must first define a strategy that demonstrates to their own people and other nations that they are willing to stand up to the radical insurgents and show the country a way forward.

## Policy Options

- Until the international community is ready to assume a proactive role in Somalia and ready to support the TFG in a sustained and coordinated manner, it needs to take its hands off from Somalia. Short of a serious and sustained commitment, the involvement of global players' only plays into the hands of the insurgents, making the Western nations major allies to the Islamists. This seems a paradox, but it is true. Flip flopping by the international community only hurts the TFG, and helps the Islamists. And when and if the international community is ready to play a serious and proactive role it should be in a coordinated and sustained manner. To this effect, as in former Yugoslavia or Afghanistan, the West needs a lead nation to play such a role.
- Given the weakness of the TFG, playing into the differences within the insurgency should form a major component of the policy of the international community, particularly the US. Unless the inclusion of Somali Islamists in the US terror list is not smartly updated and used against their readiness to peace on a regular basis, it is less likely that the radical groups, particularly *Hizbul Islam* (if at all it exists as a cohesive group) will begin to entertain the idea of negotiations as a political strategy.

- Besides, continued pressure is needed to encourage the TFG to advance the Djibouti Peace Process and implement key benchmarks jointly agreed by Somali political leaders and the international community.
- Beyond that, there are numerous opinions on what will most effectively—which is not the same as most quickly—stimulate the restoration of the Somali state. Somalia thought some of us one major lesson: don't lose the state; and if you do, it will be difficult to recreate it. Given the very brief and abusive nature and history of the Somali state, indeed this is the most difficult enterprise. Arguably, state and peace building in Somalia are often antagonistic and at times contradictory. Whenever, state building is in full swing peace building suffers the most. Worse, most of the approaches adopted by external actors to establish the central government, as a nucleus of the would-be-state, appear to be 'unSomali'. The appropriate and most realistic approach would be to encourage, support and reinforce peace building at the local level. The processes in Somaliland and Puntland are a clear testimony of the probable success of this approach.

There is an urgent need to spark decentralized political processes in Somalia. Focus on peace building at the local/regional level than state-building at the Center. I wrote articles and a book many years back to square my belief in a bottom-up approach. In the 10 years or so since, my advice hasn't much changed (or been taken). External players and the Somali political elite, including passionate academics has never really recognized that the problem of reestablishing the Somali state is deeply grounded in reality as well as in the external players' distortions and misperceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> As cynically argued by some even, the town of Jawhar which should be the stronghold of president Sharif's government both in geographic and clan terms, is today the Command Post of the Al-Shabaab leadership.

<sup>2</sup> One of the major developments in post-1991 Somalia has been the expansion of the *Ayr/Habirgedir* to many areas of southern Somalia. The United Somali Congress led by General Farah Aideed overran most of the riverine areas in 1991-2 presenting themselves as liberators. But, as it turned out to be, their aim was simply to replace the landowners and not to return the land to the original farmers. This is a very much related to the Mudug Factor in Somali politics.

<sup>3</sup> For further details go to [Al-Ittihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia. Religion, Money, Clan and the Struggle for Supremacy over Somalia](#). 2001. By the same author.

<sup>4</sup> This doesn't change the fact that many leaders of the *Shabaab* hail from Somaliland and Puntland mainly inhabited by *Darod* and *Isaq* clan families.

<sup>5</sup> such as the Murrursade,

<sup>6</sup> Infact more than any other difference, the most pervasive choke points within the group has to do with the clan variable and its equivalent geographic/regional dimension.

<sup>7</sup> Negotiations from Addis Ababa to who knows Dubai or Saudi Arabia have continued, and the results are less clear. I mean beyond joint press releases, MoUs and common resolutions. There is genuine concern that the ASWJ might develop into another warlord machinery.

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<sup>8</sup> What I call as the three F's: *fear, foreign money, and foreign fighters* have long become the main source of power and obedience to a very complex insurgency. This should not be confused with the other three 'F'-the *find, fix and finish* mantra of the US counter terrorist strategy

<sup>9</sup> The current TFG is a transformed one, made up of an opposition group which comes to an existing parliament with half members, had to win coming as a new voting block giving Sheikh Sheriff the upper hand. This has created ideological and clan imbalances within the TFG, which will become difficult to rectify in the short-term. A process dictated by the UN and the United States it was not balanced at all and the deal favored the Islamic Courts group. The dominant partner is the group led by Sheriff. As such the current TFG is practically an ARS government, with all the ideological confusion associated with it vis-à-vis its opponents.

<sup>10</sup> The issues surrounding the French security agents sold and resold several times among Somali groups, enemies and friends alike, signals how complex the relations are.

<sup>11</sup> Some consider these 'boys' as inexperienced and with, often, not the best of intentions. By which they mean the chief of staff and people from Diaspora.

<sup>12</sup> One must remember that the T.F.G. is also seriously split, as it has been from its beginning in 2004, by factions allied with its president, now Sh. Sharif Sh. Ahmad from the Hawiye, and its prime minister, now Omar Abdurrahman Ali Sharmarke from the Darod, who often find themselves contesting the composition of a new cabinet whenever Sharmarke is expected to name under pressure from donor powers.

<sup>13</sup> The conflict and major contention is now between the so-called 'two Sharif's'. And Sheikh Sherif Adan is not only a politician but also a businessman. His network of friends within and outside of the TFG and his total control on budgetary issues makes him a major, not necessarily useful, player.

<sup>14</sup> Participants at the August Djibouti Conference agreed that the Joint Security Committee (JSC) is the mechanism for both the coordination of the Security Sector within the TFG and the coordination of International Support to that sector. Two critical mechanisms were created to help implement the Framework Agreement: the Joint Security Committee/JSC/ and the High Level Committee/HLC/. While the former was mandated to lead the process of creating security institutions and coordinate security matters with international assistance programmes, the latter was established to provide overall policy guidance.