ASSOCIATION OF CONCERNED AFRICA SCHOLARS

BULLETIN

Fall 1997

No. 48/49

Perspectives on Intervention and Conflict Resolution in Africa

ISSN 1051-08442

Hardly Innocent: Armed Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia

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At worst, "armed humanitarian intervention" is a complete oxymoron. At best, it traps those it involves in a series of unpleasant conundrums.

This is certainly the case with Somalia, while Somalia remains our "most complete" mistake in armed humanitarian intervention. I write "most complete" because the presumption is that Operation Restore Hope is already well behind us. But is it, when lessons learned in Mogadishu are being applied in Bosnia, Haiti, northern Iraq, central Africa, and in training scenarios for future Military Operations Other Than War?

As for referring to Operation Restore Hope as a mistake, policy makers not only mistook material devastation for social disintegration, but never quite understood the significance of Somalis' indigenous political order or the extent to which this was invigorated, and not weakened, by civil war.

Indeed, from the outset, Operation Restore Hope was misrepresented. It never was and never could have been a "purely humanitarian" mission. **Purely** humanitarian missions can only take place after singular disasters, when soldiers deliver blankets and conduct cleanup alongside the Red Cross. By definition, patrolling roads and living behind razor wire to feed people is not just humanitarian. Somalia's civil war was not finished when U.S. military personnel intervened. Worse, once the first U.S. official landed on Somali soil, the U.S. was embroiled in Somali politics. This, alone, meant the U.S. was engaged in state-building, no matter how stridently officials later denied it.

How else were American soldiers likely to secure airstrips, roads, or feeding centers without imposing American order? Or, to come at this from another direction: why did Americans have to feed **or** protect starving Somalis, **why** were Americans in Somalia at all? Because, experts kept declaring, Somalia lacked order, anarchy reigned. But as a premise for intervention this analysis was also faulty.

Anarchy is an intellectual construct but a societal impossibility. People always establish a pecking order, no matter how small the group or how briefly individuals interact. Human sociability itself is predicated on there being an established order. Men mate with women, women give birth to children, children are nurtured by adults . . . Likewise, sociability's antithesis--killing--reflects order. Having enemies to kill automatically implies a system of classification (us/them) and hierarchy (us being better than them).

In fact, the bloodshed in Somalia quite clearly revealed how Somalis were sorting one another out. But seeing no central government, intervention advocates presumed Somalis to be without a governing rationale of any kind. Ergo they described Somalia as ungoverned, or anarchic.

What such labels ignored is that underlying the defunct Somali state was a far more diffuse social organization which requires no formal government to work, and is activated by nothing less than the loss of security and the threat of violence. Everywhere, kin relations encode obligations and expectations, between, for instance, parents and their children, brothers and sisters, and husbands and wives. The twist, though, in Somalia is that many Somalis can trace their descent for as many as 20 generations or more, which extends obligation and expectation way beyond the immediate family.

Such genealogical reckoning makes for large social welfare safety nets. But it also creates a catch. While some Somalis are related to some other Somalis, not all Somalis are related to one another. Instead, at least six separable networks exist in what we still refer to as Somalia, and these networks, at the most

elemental level, actively consider themselves and one another to be mutually exclusive.

Replace genealogy with religion or shared history and we could be describing the basis for ethnic conflict anywhere in the world. When groups of people who consider themselves separable are stuck together, competing over the same limited goods or access to lucrative resources, conflict is bound to (eventually) erupt. Similarly, there is the potential for conflict occurring whenever one group is thought to have an unfair advantage over others, or when top-down control is exerted without bottom-up consent. Actually, the logic for fissure leading to fission could not be simpler. The difficulty is to identify where the societal breaking points lie, and what people will use to tag one another: shared language, religion, history, etc. Different ties can pull people in different directions at different times. But at bottom, primordial loyalties still exist. People trust those with whom they share a common morality, and identify those they can't trust as bearing different (bad, wrong, or tainted) blood.[1]

Trust and Mistrust

Ultimately people place their trust in the system they already know will secure them the best possible future. Humans everywhere strive to ensure that they and their offspring will remain safe -- and healthy, fed, sheltered, and assisted should disaster strike. In numerous states government has been able to assure this for most citizens. Where this is the case nationalism then acts as the state's moral glue, binding people together via a shared identity and purpose, which the state leads people to believe should (and must) override all other allegiances.

But where the state does not meet people's need for future security, loyalties shift. People fall back on social welfare nets they know will work. The problem is, the state itself gets used as a social welfare net. This is because all states are peopled. Ministers, civil servants, government employees of all kinds will take advantage of their positions to secure their own futures if they believe the state won't. Because they do they state can't. This creates a vicious catch-22: The state can't be solvent under such conditions, while because the state is insolvent people have no choice but to preferentially look out for themselves. National morality is punctured. Instead, a patchwork of competing moralities fills the vacuum.

In Somalia the blueprint for competing moralities was long extant. Genealogies are all-important among nomadic pastoralists the world over because blood ties are one possession people don't have to physically carry yet always bear.[2] Nor do kin relations change, which is something even more critical in an unpredictable environment, such as Somalia's. Put most succinctly, genealogies record links which are kept only if kin prove worth remaining tied to: if they are reliable, helpful, and don't cause strife within the group. What genealogies really represent, then, are charts of trustworthiness, according to which connected individuals can presume that, based on past relations among their forbears, they **should** get along. Gaps, meanwhile, (which can be small between lineages or gulf-like among clan-families) reflect people not having gotten along, which then offers a historical precedent for not having to get along now or in the future.

Given such genea-logic, mistrust becomes prophetically self-fulfilling. Also, it is virtually impossible to convince people that their mistrust is wrong so long as they can point to specific events which prove their thinking right. And unfortunately, the slightest history of being wronged is often proof enough. For instance, every time someone from Clan X deceives, robs, kills, or threatens a member of Clan Y, the genealogical system for reckoning trust is revalidated. The system is also reconfirmed whenever a member of Clan X favors a fellow clan member, which is exactly what members of all clans expect. Nor does it matter how many counter-examples might be available to dilute the proof. Just one instance, like one drop of the wrong blood, is sufficient.

Now consider what happens when humanitarian assistance is injected into such a situation. Old expectations are immediately fulfilled anew. Certainly during Operation Restore Hope, who resources flowed through

(e.g. those Somalis outsiders hired) determined who resources flowed to (namely, their relatives). The cycle which collapsed political and economic power together in only some hands was never broken. Though new sets of people may have benefitted, they gained advantage in the same old ways.

Solutions?

If we think about this logically, and not emotionally, there are only two ways to break such vicious cycles: either one side rids itself of opponents (via genocide), or a beneficent outside force imposes a more equitable order.[3] The problem with this latter approach, though, is that in places where trust is already circumscribed the political order is local, and resides in the most elemental of communities: in families, church congregations, religious brotherhoods, neighborhoods. To break these open is necessarily bloody and time-consuming work. Worse, it is unclear whether the U.S. has ever successfully managed to save a people by purposely setting out to undermine the fiber of their life, which is what re-ordering trust at ground level requires.

Also, there is the issue of local recalcitrance. Somalis, for instance, have long displayed consistent, active disinterest in westernization. This should be apparent to anyone who has visited Mogadishu. Proportionately probably more Somalis than Kenyans have traveled abroad, but this was never visibly trumpeted. As late as 1989 the national capital, still intact, had fewer than a dozen restaurants which served anything but Somali cuisine, traditional Somali dress was the preferred garb after working hours, and Somali music was far more popular than western music. Numerous indicators pointed to the depth of Somalis' cultural attachments.

For centuries Somalis have had contact with other sophisticated cultures without having been Islamicized, orientalized, or westernized. This should have registered.

Certainly urban Somalis enjoyed various aspects of western **material** culture, and to a person may well have desired more televisions, refrigerators, cassette players, and VCRs. But few of these same Somalis sought a western makeover. In fact, it may already be a truism to point out that just because many people around the world want what Americans have -- in terms of comfort and security -- this does not mean that they want to do what Americans have had to do to attain these, or that they are willing to follow American advice.[4]

The Commitment Conundrum

Ironically, the only converts secular humanitarians do tend to make are from among the weak and unprovided for, the losers and victims.[5] And without adequate safety nets, these are the people who, by default, most need humanitarian intercession in order to have some sort of future.

Probing deeper, this issue of who is considered a victim is **the** central, unspoken contradiction in armed humanitarian intervention. This is because only outsiders view victims as innocent non-combatants worth protecting. Among locals, victims wouldn't be victims if they weren't viewed as enemies at worst and of no value at best. Arguably, this is why Somalis in the southwestern triangle were allowed to starve; they weren't worth saving. In other words, they **were** a "they" to everyone else.

Meanwhile, when the U.S./UN stepped in to protect those we labeled innocent, we only half committed ourselves. Unless we went after the people who were making victims of those we wanted to save we weren't likely to solve our clients' chief problem, which was to get rid of **their** tormentors, once and for all. And, in the Somali case, this meant targeting more than just General Mohamed Farah Aideed; it would have meant targeting whole clans.

Another way to think about this is to try to think more concentrically. Clearly interventionists have not. To put this in the starkest possible terms, if intervention advocates did feel morally bound to the people they were trying to save they would know they had already chosen sides. Locals certainly recognize this. Often, too, locals act and react accordingly, just as Somalis did, since in Somalia there is a historic presumption that

outsiders should be co-opted or killed, taken advantage of or driven away. And Operation Restore Hope, UNOSOM I and II simply reaffirmed why outsiders interfere.

Conclusion

Operation Restore Hope **should** be instructive. Even had U.S. forces possessed sufficient armor and brilliant military leadership in Mogadishu, nothing we were likely to do there could have rescued Somalia. Flooding the local economy with goods, intervening with aid, promising years' worth of assistance would have reversed little. After all, this is part of what created so much trouble in the first place.

Nothing short of guaranteeing all parties the future they desired, or wreaking utter devastation on everyone alike would have shattered the locally valid and locally-known moral universe. Maybe. The problem with guaranteeing the future would have been that no outsider can, without exerting colonial-like control, while the problem with shattering a political order which already had people living in so many mutually wary camps is, how do you know when the order has been splintered enough? Also, how do you measure devastation among people who have already proven unwilling to trade our kind of material well-being for their intangible: sociocultural autonomy?

This is just one of the sticky moral questions Operation Restore Hope **should** have raised. But I'm not sure it has. Instead, those who advocate armed humanitarian intervention now seem completely fixated on the mechanics of intervention. By concentrating on the specifics of operations, they must think they can **make** Military Operations Other Than War work. And perhaps they can. So far Operation Restore Hope hasn't been repeated. Given recent lessons learned soldiers are not being deployed to make the same operational mistakes. Yet, no matter how cleverly the rules of engagement or command have been reshaped, we still don't seem to know what to do once we're "there." We wisely reject the role of conqueror. But without reordering society from the ground up, can there be a "there" there? Can we really make a difference?

Unfortunately, the Somali case suggests just how we do. In Somalia, where the local political and moral orders remained intact and uncentralizable, our doing good for some Somalis only ensured that we wouldn't and couldn't do good for all.

NOTES

[1] This is true even where the political order is national. Not long ago American whites did not view negroes as political and moral equals, and one drop of negro blood used to be enough to classify someone as a negro. Likewise, for Hitler, one drop of Jewish blood was enough to condemn someone to the gas chambers. In fact, national citizenship in some countries (such as Germany) is predicated on being of German descent or, in other words, bearing German blood.

[2] Not all Somalis are pastoral nomads, though the majority are descended from pastoral nomads. Even so, the dominant ideology in Somalia is borne of pastoral nomadic roots and has affected everyone: agriculturalists, townsmen and women, even Somalis abroad. Overriding identity for all Somali remains genealogical.

[3] Ironically, thanks to so many disparate labor, education, and other diasporas, it may well be impossible today to completely rid one's group of all opponents.

[4] This is a variant of the point Samuel Huntington makes when he distinguishes between westernization and modernization.

[5] The parallels between these people I refer to as "secular humanitarians" and Christian missionaries are striking in a number of ways beyond just who secular humanitarians and missionaries work with. For instance, both sets of do-gooders appeal "home" for money, as well as tally the numbers of people they "save."