The New Taliban

By J. Peter Pham

On June 5, an armed Islamist group, the Union of Islamic Courts, took control of Mogadishu, Somalia's largest city, after heavy fighting against “warlords” representing an ad hoc alliance apparently recently underwritten by the CIA and the Department of Defense. Since then, the Islamist forces have also seized the strategically important town of Jowhar, which controls the route to Baidoa, where Somalia's internationally recognized but utterly ineffectual “Transitional Federal Government” camps out.

Like the Taliban before them, the Union of Islamic Courts portrays itself as a popular indigenous law-and-order group emerging to provide governance and social services in the absence of any functioning state institutions since the dictator Siad Barre fled in 1990. And like their Afghan counterparts who sent the man who is now Yale's most famous student on tour, the Somali Islamists put forward a moderate face in the person of a former high school teacher, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who assures us that many of the international media as make it in Mogadishu that he is a “moderate” and that his group poses no threat to the outside world.

Alas, the truth is that the Union is made up of at least four major jihadi groups: al-Itihad al-Islami (“Islamic Union”), a group which used to appear on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations (the folks at Foggy Bottom apparently bought at face value the group's previously self-proclaimed dissolution); al-Tawhidi al-Muqaddam (“Excommunication and Exodous”), a group so extreme that it considered Osama bin Laden too moderate and tried to kill him in Sudan in 1996; al-Islah (“Reconciliation”), an Islamist group pushing for the establishment of an Islamic state in Somalia; and al-Talibah (“Making Known”), an Islamist “missionary” group with links to the same madrassas in Pakistan which gave us the Taliban.

The forces of the Union, like those of the Taliban, are reinforced with foreign jihadi including, according to my sources in Somalia, Arabs, Afghans, Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Palestinians and Syrians. And, again like the Taliban, the Union is generously supplied by nominal U.S. allies on the Arabian peninsula—in this case Saudi Arabia and Yemen, via daily flights from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

The Taliban proved the lethality of allowing a militantly Islamist group to seize control of any country. But in contrast to isolated Afghanistan, Somalia sits astride shipping lanes vital to the global economy for the flow of oil and cargo.

We ignore Somalia's radical Islamists at our own peril.

After they make short shift of Somalia's symbolic government—withstanding the last ditch attempt at the U.N. this week to shore it up with the appointment of a new International Contact Group—the Union will turn its attention to destabilizing Somaliland, whose democratically elected, secular government has already been declared anathema by the Union's chief ideologist, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, the al Qaeda-linked head of al-Itihad. (This month alone, the Somaliland government has intercepted two major arms shipments destined for Union-aligned jihadis from well-wishers in Arabia.) Then the Union will turn on Ethiopia and Kenya, both countries with large ethnic Somali populations with significant pockets of jihadi infiltration. If all this sounds a bit far-fetched, recall that the Taliban's Mullah Omar thought of himself as the emir of a nascent Central Asian caliphate.

There has been a lot of ink—some would even say blood—spilled over what the Clinton and Bush administrations should have known could have done to prevent the attacks of Sept. 11. One thing, however, is certain: As the 9/11 Commission report, among others sources, makes painfully clear, throughout the late 1990s the Taliban regime was not exactly subtle about what it and the numerous foreign groups it hosted were up to in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan. Yet it was only after the twin towers came down that the U.S. took action—and, by then, our best potential ally, the long-neglected Hamid Shah Masud, leader of the Northern Alliance, lay dead at the hands of al Qaeda assassins, killed two days before 9/11.

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Today, it is an open secret that the same dynamic is at work in Somalia as was at work in Afghanistan a decade ago. Ironically, while senior U.S. officials have had even less reaction to the fall of Mogadishu to the Union of Islamic Courts than their predecessors had to the fall of Kabul to Taliban, even the U.N. has acknowledged the existence of terrorist training camps in Somalia. One report prepared for the Security Council last year listed 17 of them by name. Yet not only are the U.S. military personnel of the Combined Joint Task Force, Horn of Africa, based in nearby Djibouti (and not allowed to take direct action against the camps), but official U.S. policy does not even make provision for sharing up Somaliland as a bulwark against the rising tide of radical Islamism in the horn.

Unfortunately for Somalia, its neighbors, and ultimately the U.S., it seems we're well on our way to proving once again the truth of Santayana's warning that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

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