AFRICA

Somalia Faces Disaster: A Lesson for the West?

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The recent decision by the UN Security Council to extend the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) for another six months runs the risk of being a band-aid fix for a deeply festering wound. The problems and weaknesses of Somalia's security structures are too deep and difficult to address within merely a few months. Dealing with these challenges will require a consistent, sustained approach over an extended time, alongside a broadened perspective of the intervention.

On 15 November 2023, the UN Security Council approved a decision to postpone the withdrawal of the multinational force deployed in Somalia to counter the al-Shabaab terrorist organization. Following an official request from the Somali government, the resolution came after the withdrawal in September of 3,000 of the 17,000 soldiers stationed on Somali soil. Moreover, in recent months, African countries contributing to the ATMIS mission have expressed doubts about Somalia's ability to provide for its internal security. The UN Security Council move guarantees that more than 14,000 troops will remain throughout the country until June 2024, when the phased withdrawal, to be completed by December 2024, will begin.

Several factors have influenced the UN Security Council's decision to delay the removal of ATMIS troops. Unquestionably, the international context plays a crucial role. The outbreak of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has further diverted international attention from the fate of Somalia. Over the past two years, numerous crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a series of coups in West Africa, the war in Tigray, and the internal conflict in Sudan, have collectively reduced the prominence of this state in the Horn of Africa on the international agenda. While Somalia may have lost priority in the eyes of international actors, the overall perception of the country has nevertheless not changed.

Beyond the cyclical statements from Mogadishu expressing confidence in its ability to manage internal affairs, there is a widespread awareness that the country remains on the brink of catastrophe, even though, emboldened by his election victory, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (HSM) announced that his government would be able to restore Mogadishu's authority throughout the country within a year. Subsequent developments soon belied this false optimism. The declaration of intent by the new HSM government was followed by an outbreak of insurgencies in several al-Shabaab-controlled areas. Leading the violent uprising against the al-Qaeda-linked organization were clan militias known collectively as Ma'awisley.

Contrary to some initial interpretations, the actions of the communities in the central regions of the country were not attempts to restore the legitimacy of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). The Somali people deeply distrust the FGS and the political elite. Rather, the Ma'awisley action was a bottom-up rebellion against the harsh conditions of al-Shabaab rule. However, the clan uprising triggered a virtuous cycle that led the Somali National Army (SNA) to launch Operation Black Lion (OBL), a broader offensive against the terrorist organization. This military operation involved joint action by the SNA, clan militias, and extra-regional actors such as the United States and Turkey. Over the course of a year (August 2022-23), OBL achieved some significant results, such as the liberation of strategic areas in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states.

In recent months, however, the SNA's actions have gradually weakened. The balance of power on the ground has suddenly reversed, enabling al-Shabaab militias to retake areas liberated only a few months ago. This development once again highlights the Somali authorities' lack of capacity to exert territorial control. In the face of al-Shabaab's counteroffensive, the fear of an Afghanistan-like scenario has spread rapidly among international actors. Consequently, despite opposition from some European countries—the EU remains the main financial partner of ATMIS—the renewal of the African Union multinational force mission appeared to be the only option to avert disaster.

In effect, the UN Security Council decision has accomplished little, apart from buying time and postponing the question of Somalia's future. Nevertheless, international actors can and should learn lessons from this situation. The first and most crucial of these pertains to the inability to

control areas liberated from al-Shabaab, a shortcoming that underscores the fragility of Somalia's socio-political system even more than its lack of security. Indeed, while there are undoubtedly weaknesses and shortcomings in the Somali security forces, it is reductive to limit the issue to hard security capabilities. Somalia's inability to maintain control over territory liberated from al-Shabaab must be traced to the political dimension. Somalis' discomfort with the FGS is growing and widespread, even though international stakeholders still believe that the way to ensure a stable future for the country is to support the development of its security sector.

However, not only is the Somali government still unable to provide security for its citizens, but also it is far from able to deliver essential services. The general lack of governance encourages the emergence of alternative authorities to the national one, such as al-Shabaab, Federal Member States (FMS), and local communities (e.g. Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a). These dynamics have contributed to further complicating the mosaic of clans and relationship networks throughout the country. The fragmentation of authority, allegiance, identity, and loyalty in Somalia today is greater than ever. This is the result of a state-building process that has stalled alongside the country's institutional development. Meanwhile, discouraging signs not exclusively related to the threat posed by al-Shabaab are emerging. Across the country, animosities and rivalries among communities are growing under the radar. The fragile inter-clan balance on which the Somali state-building project was built appears to be increasingly disintegrating. In some areas, more than others, such as Jubaland, South West State (SWS), and Galmudug, signs of the resurgence of decades-old hatreds and grievances are on the rise.

In these volatile contexts, the withdrawal of multinational contingents could lead to new cycles of violence at the local level, with inevitable risks of contagion spreading beyond Somali borders. Indeed, intercommunal and clan disputes also involve the FMS. As a result, there is a high probability that the end of ATMIS and the failure of the FGS to provide stability will pave the way for new struggles for political power among clan militias and FMS armies. This danger could be exacerbated if the arms embargo on Somalia is lifted, as the Mogadishu government has requested.

Regardless of the future of ATMIS, the regional variable could determine the outcome. The outbreak of a new conflict in Ethiopia and the escalation of hostilities in Las Anod have the potential to trigger a domino effect with devastating consequences for Somalia. The risk of the country's fragmentation will increase due to these developments and could have a catastrophic impact on the already dire humanitarian situation of the Somali people. In addition, the collapse of Somalia's fragile state structures would create further instability in a highly vulnerable region.

Correspondingly, Western players need to rethink their approach to the Somali context. The opening of a new crisis front would suit Russia's agenda. Indeed, Moscow currently views the outbreak of multiple crises as a valuable means of diverting resources from the United States and European countries committed to supporting Ukraine. Moreover, the collapse of the Somali stabilization project would allow Russia to feed the narrative of the failure of the liberal model. Consequently, hard security interventions and the development of Somali security institutions must necessarily be accompanied by comprehensive engagement in multiple areas: political, cultural, social, economic, environmental, and human. This approach will require the joint involvement of Somali and non-Somali state and non-state actors. Somalia, indeed, could become a testing ground for a new intervention model by creating an ad hoc coalition of different actors, distinct from each other but united by a shared agenda. This ad hoc coalition should include domestic actors, such as civil society and diaspora groups, and extra-regional actors with leverage in the country, such as the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. Involving regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC), which Somalia recently joined, is also crucial. Western countries, including the US and the EU, must be called upon to coordinate efforts to implement a common agenda for all stakeholders, including Somali shareholders. Too often in recent years, international stakeholders have promoted different agendas by sending inconsistent messages to Somali actors.

The United States should lead this ad hoc coalition and promote an agenda based on a comprehensive review of the country's political and institutional architecture. The current federal system lacks effective integration, and the roles and mutual responsibilities of the

federal state and the FMS are neither clear nor defined. These blurred roles have weakened the state-building process and the fight against al-Shabaab, hindering progress in overcoming clan logic in recent years. Significant reform must furthermore be applied to the economy, over which the FGS and the FMS are currently in competition.

The Somali government relies heavily on foreign aid and taxes on international trade and lacks the resources to improve basic services. As a result, it is unable to govern effectively and has no legitimacy. The present situation could, therefore, provide an opportunity to revive the liberal approach and prevent Somalia from slipping back into the abyss.
