

Bush Doctrine's Defeat in Somalia

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A disastrous war in Somalia draws to a close. It killed thousands, displaced over 700,000 from Mogadishu alone, and created a pitiful humanitarian crisis. It is one more nail in the coffin of the Bush Doctrine, notes Patrick Seale.

The announcement from Addis Ababa that Ethiopian troops are withdrawing from Somalia by the end of this month means that the U.S. has suffered a defeat in the Horn of Africa — to add to the long list of U.S. foreign policy failures in the Arab and Muslim world.

With American backing, small numbers of Ethiopian troops entered Somalia two and half years ago in July 2006, growing into a force of some 30,000 men over the following months. Their aim was to drive from power the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) — a coalition of Islamist insurgents — which had taken control of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, the previous month.

The Islamists had managed to put to flight corrupt and extortionate warlords and, after years of anarchy in Somalia, had set about restoring some form of law and order.

But for President George W Bush, Islamic rule in Somalia could not be allowed to stand. However beneficial it might be for the local population, it did not square with Bush's 'Global War on Terror', launched after 9/11. The CIA then sought to overthrow the Islamists by means of Ethiopian forces, and of Abdullahi Yusuf's 'Transitional Government of Somalia' (TGS), a pro-Western and pro-Ethiopian phantom administration, based in Baidao.

Fierce fighting between Ethiopian troops and the Union of Islamic Courts escalated throughout December 2006, causing some 4,000 dead and wounded. By the end of the month, Ethiopian troops, backed by U.S. airstrikes, captured Mogadishu, hours after Islamist fighters fled the city. By 1 January 2007, the southern port of Kismayo — the last UIC stronghold — fell to the Ethiopians, while the U.S. Navy patrolled the Somali coastline to prevent Islamists escaping by sea.

The Islamists were routed, but they were not beaten. Almost at once, they started guerrilla operations against Ethiopian troops, trapping them in ambushes and inflicting casualties on them by means of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the lethal weapon which the United States had come to dread in Iraq.

As was predictable, the conflict attracted to Somalia a motley group of Islamist fighters from the Muslim world, intent on waging jihad against Ethiopia's occupying army and its American backers.

To the alarm of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, his country's intervention in Somalia also served to breathe fresh life into two insurgent groups in Ethiopia itself — namely the Oromo Liberation Front, which has been fighting for autonomy in southern Ethiopia, and the Ogaden National Liberation Front, largely made up of ethnic Somalis, which demands self-determination in eastern Ethiopia.

American help for Ethiopian forces — in the form of training, weapons supply, clandestine missions, air strikes, and the capture and interrogation of 'terrorist' suspects — seems to have been of little avail. On the contrary, it has united rival Somali groups against their common enemies — Ethiopia and the United States.

After gaining ground in recent months, the Islamist insurgents now control much of the south of Somalia — including the ports of Kismayo, Merka and Brava. Casting a noose around Mogadishu itself, they are evidently preparing for a final push, once the Ethiopians go home.

As the tide of war turned against him, the Ethiopian leader Meles Zinawi clearly had enough. On 28 November, he sent a message to the United Nations and to the African Union to say that Ethiopian troops would leave Somalia before the end of the year.

This brings to a close a disastrous war that has ravaged the country, killed thousands, displaced over 700,000 from Mogadishu alone, and created a pitiful humanitarian crisis. It is one more nail in the coffin of the Bush Doctrine.

What next? A 'moderate' Islamist leader, Shaikh Sharif Ahmed, who broke away from the Union of Islamic Courts, has announced that he would welcome an international force to replace the Ethiopians. His appeal looks like an attempt to promote his own prospects. As he already has some support in Eritrea, Djibouti and Yemen, an international force, he no doubt believes, could put him in power.

But Shaikh Ahmed faces stiff competition from another Islamist leader, Shaikh Dahir Aweys, and indeed from the Shebab, a still more militant Islamist group. The war caused splits within the Islamic movement, which seem likely to result in a new struggle for power.

Preoccupied by the rise of maritime piracy off the Somali coast, Western states are putting together a naval force to combat the pirates. But, after the Ethiopian experience, no country seems prepared to send ground troops into the Somali snake pit.

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