

STATE COLLAPSE, INSURGENCY, AND COUNTERINSURGENCY: LESSONS FROM SOMALIA

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For more than 2 decades, Somalia has been the prime example of a collapsed state, thus far resisting no fewer than 15 attempts to reconstitute a central government, while the 16th such undertaking, the current internationally-backed but struggling regime of the “Federal Republic of Somalia,” just barely maintains a token presence in the capital and along the southeastern littoral—and that due only to the presence of a more than 17,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force. In fact, for much of the period, insurgents spearheaded by the *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Movement of Warrior Youth, al-Shabaab), a militant Islamist movement with al-Qaeda links, dominated wide swathes of Somali territory and operated more or less freely in other areas not under their de facto control. Despite the desultory record, the apparent speedy collapse of the insurgency since late-2011 has made it fashionable within some political and military circles to cite the “Somalia model” as a prescription for other conflicts in Africa, including the fight in Mali against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies.

In contrast, this monograph argues that the failure for so long of any of Somalia’s successive governmental entities to prevail over their opponents and bring an end to conflict has little to do with the lack of outside assistance, especially of the military variety, often cited by way of explanation and more to do with other factors on which external actors can have little positive ef-

fect. Specifically, if the regime fighting an insurgency is unable or unwilling to take the steps to achieve internal political legitimacy, no outside intervention will be able to help it to “victory.” In examining how such has been the case in Somalia, the nature of political legitimacy in Somali society is closely examined, deriving pointers not only from the success of al-Shabaab and its allies, but also those of relatively stable new polities that have emerged in various parts of the former Somali state in mobilizing clan loyalties and local community sensibilities. Both the implications of engaging these alternative centers of legitimacy—an approach the international community only reluctantly and hesitantly came around to embracing—and the potential to exploit the opportunity presented by the weakness of and divisions among the extremists to not only clear a space for humanitarian action, but also to ensure a modicum of stability and security in the geopolitically sensitive Horn of Africa, are then discussed.

Among the lessons thus drawn, which are applicable to other insurgency and conflict situations in Africa, is that the repeated failure of internationally-backed attempts to reestablish a national government in Somalia underscores the limitations of top-down, state-centric processes that are structurally engineered with a bias in favor of centralization, rather than bottom-up, community-based approaches better adapted to the local sensibilities.

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