

Rediscovering Somalia

By Julie Hollar

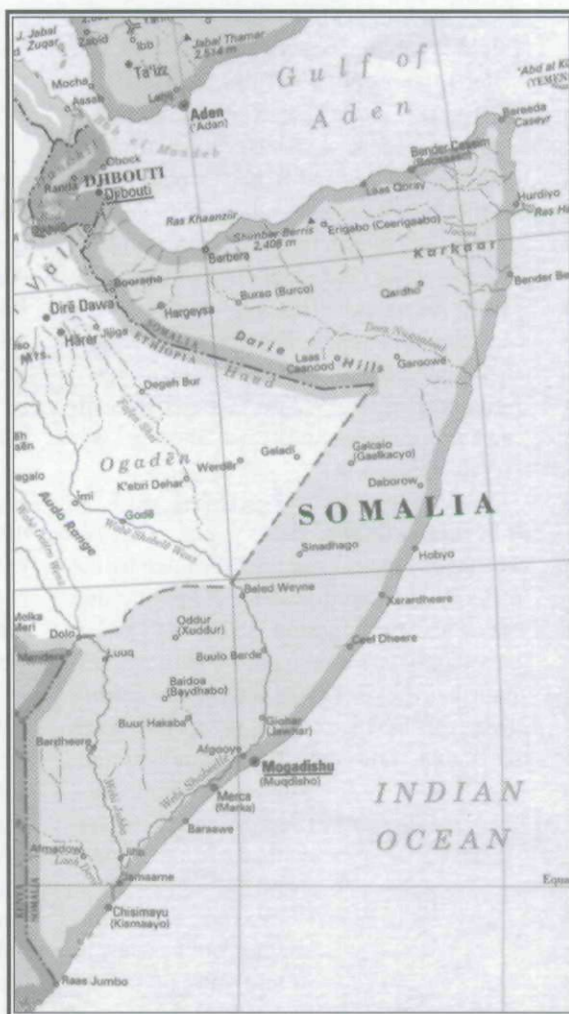
After years of paying scant attention to Somalia, U.S. media suddenly rediscovered the war-torn African nation in 2006 when a coalition of Islamic courts and their affiliated militias imposed peace on feuding warlords and began enforcing religious law. A U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion soon loomed, and the Bush administration made the preferred story line clear. “The Council of Islamic Courts is now controlled by Al-Qaeda cell individuals, East Africa Al-Qaeda cell individuals,” announced Jendayi Frazer, U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs (*Voice of America News*, 12/14/06). “The top layer of the courts are extremist to the core. They are terrorists and they are in control. They are creating this logic of war, and that’s a problem.”

Al-Qaeda, Islam, terrorists, extremists: Frazer’s short declaration was packed with Bush “war on terror” buzz words that by now ought to set off alarm bells in journalists’ heads. And yet recent media coverage of Somalia, while occasionally critical, has too often failed to challenge the official version of the story or probe deeper into the U.S. role in the distant conflict.

The Al-Qaeda menace

“Keeping an Eye on Evil, U.S. Tracks a Growing Al-Qaeda Menace in Africa,” announced a New York *Daily News* headline (12/24/06) the day Ethiopia declared pre-emptive war on the new power across the border. The paper reported that “Al-Qaeda’s role this time [in Somalia] is well known,” seeking neither dissent nor evidence to evaluate anonymous U.S. officials’ ominous Al-Qaeda allegations and Taliban analogies.

A week earlier, as tensions were rising, fellow New York tabloid *Newsday* (12/18/06) explained that “Al-Qaeda has



embedded key commanders with the Somali militants and is looking toward Somalia’s collapse as an opportunity to establish a terror base there.” The *New York Times* seemed content to simply report over and over some variation on the theme, “American officials have accused the Islamists of sheltering terrorists connected to Al-Qaeda” (12/14/06), never trying to ferret out the truth.

The *Washington Post*’s front-page piece (12/18/06) was headlined: “U.S. Sees Growing Threats in Somalia; Al-Qaeda’s Influence, Possible War With Ethiopia Are Concerns.” The article was scarcely better, devoting some 10 para-

graphs to alleged Al-Qaeda links and only one to dissent—from within the administration. That the dissenter was someone as highly placed as national intelligence director John Negroponte apparently didn’t manage to raise many eyebrows at the *Post*, nor did the fact that it wasn’t the first time “a senior U.S. intelligence official” had told the paper that Somalia was “not an Al-Qaeda safe haven” (5/17/06).

Television was often the least skeptical of all. “Somalia has been a safe haven for Al-Qaeda ever since the U.S. military pulled out of the country following the infamous Black Hawk Down firefight,” reported CBS’s David Martin (1/10/07). CNN Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr made the stakes clear, reporting ominously (1/6/07), “Today, here in East Africa, the concern remains that unless Somalia is shut down as a terrorist safe haven, the threat of another attack remains very real.”

When the U.S. started bombing alleged Al-Qaeda targets in the wake of the invasion (1/7/07), journalistic eagerness to find “war on terror” successes trumped caution. CBS *Morning News* (1/11/07) reported that one airstrike had targeted an operative behind the embassy bombings who “had evaded capture for eight years under the protection of Somalia’s Islamic government” (rather nonsensically, since the Islamic Courts Union had only controlled Somalia for a few months). The *New York Post*, infamous for its sensationalist headlines, announced (1/11/07), “Qaeda Clobbered: U.S. Somalia Raid Kills Embassy Fiend.”

Such proclamations, repeated across the media, quickly proved premature. Practically before the ink was dry on the *Post*’s headline, a U.S. official had admitted to the BBC that the Al-Qaeda operative in question had been neither captured nor

killed (**L.A. Times**, 1/12/07), and before long officials had confessed that neither of the two publicly acknowledged U.S. strikes had actually hit any of their alleged Al-Qaeda targets (**McClatchy**, 3/5/07)—a fact that got dramatically less coverage than the original cheers.

Unheard critics

As in the run-up to the Iraq War, dissenters from the official line were plentiful, but most journalists simply didn't bother to look for them. **McClatchy Newspapers**, whose reporters had been some of the few in the press corps to challenge Bush's Iraq claims in the run-up to that war (see **Extra!**, 3-4/06), was again an exception, reporting (12/22/06) after the State Department's Frazer linked the Islamic Courts to Al-Qaeda that "Western diplomats, some U.S. intelligence officials and independent analysts dispute those allegations as exaggerated."

Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus told **Foreign Policy** magazine (12/06) that the Islamic Courts were "absolutely not" controlled by Al-Qaeda: "There is a legitimate debate over whether a small number of leaders in the Islamic Courts have linkages with a small number of leaders from Al-Qaeda. That's not the same as saying that the two are in a deeply intrinsic partnership."

There was one more problem with officials' claims: They never produced a shred of evidence. "U.S. officials have not publicly revealed evidence that the government of Somalia knowingly allowed the terrorist network to stay," noted an online **PBS** report (1/26/07), "or that the Union of Islamic Courts militias that controlled large areas of the country from June to December 2006 are linked to Al-Qaeda." Andre Le Sage of the National Defense University told **PBS** that while there almost certainly were some Al-Qaeda individuals in Somalia—as, it should be pointed out, there also are in the U.S., Britain and any number of U.S.-allied countries—there were never significant Al-Qaeda training camps.

Clearly, U.S. and Ethiopian officials were inventing a bogeyman in Somalia that the media seemed all too happy to

believe in. For Ethiopia, which was feeding highly questionable intelligence to the U.S., playing up the Al-Qaeda threat was a convenient way to get U.S. backing and public sympathy. Strongman president Meles Zenawi faced domestic unrest against his brutal rule and found in Somalia a convenient external enemy that would help him shore up his power (**Washington Post**, 12/20/06); his primary concern with the Islamic Courts was not their cries of jihad but their coziness with Ethiopia's bitter enemy Eritrea, a secular state (**International Affairs**, 12/10/07).

The U.S. has a keen strategic interest in Somalia, whose long coastline fronting both the Red Sea and Indian Oceans puts it at the heart of key oil routes, and an unfriendly government could threaten U.S. interests. (See **Extra!**, 3/93.) Centcom also saw it as an excellent opportunity to get into Somalia under Ethiopian cover and strike at alleged Al-Qaeda and foreign fighters (**Esquire**, 7/27/07), thereby notching a few victories in Bush's faltering "war on terror."

U.S. role in Courts' rise

The government's rhetoric, repeated by the media, helped prime the U.S. public and the world for invasion, painting it as an inevitable response to Al-Qaeda aggression that the U.S. watched warily from a distance. In fact, none of it has been inevitable, and the Bush administration role in Somalia's tragedy goes much deeper than mere name-calling.

Indeed, it was another botched effort in that "war on terror" that led to the rise of the Islamic Courts in the first place. The Courts had existed in Mogadishu since 1994, their influence waxing and waning but never successfully challenging the greater power

of local warlords. A gradual resurgence that began in 2003 brought some degree of peace and security to Mogadishu residents, but soon led to increased CIA attention, particularly since Somalia had been considered for invasion post-September 11.

Islamist leaders became targets of assassinations and disappearances, popu-

larly attributed to the U.S. In early 2006, the CIA provided big payments to brutal and widely despised warlords who formed the "Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism," a group that clashed with the Courts and snatched up "terror suspects" to feed to the CIA, actions that managed to backfire and dramatically increase public support for the Islamic Courts; experts argue that without that U.S. involvement, the Courts wouldn't have been able to build up the public support they needed to bring Mogadishu under their control (**Agence France Presse**, 6/15/06; Chatham House, 4/07).

The CIA operation was hardly a secret in Somalia or the rest of the world, and several journalists did report this U.S. involvement and its backlash (e.g., **Associated Press**, 4/9/06; **Washington Post**, 5/17/06; **McClatchy**, 6/5/06). But by the time of the Ethiopian invasion just six months later, many media outlets had neatly swept it under the rug, portraying Washington as a detached bystander.

Just before the invasion began, Long Island **Newsday**'s editors wrote (12/18/06) that "Washington has paid scant attention to Somalia and the Horn of Africa" since it pulled out of Mogadishu in 1994, and was merely "keeping tabs on this crisis from its base in neighboring Djibouti."

CNN Africa correspondent Jeff Koinange concurred: After 1994, "The world pretty much forgot about Somalia until now," he reported (12/27/06). Today, "Somalia is back in the headlines fighting what can only be described as a confusing war," one that was ultimately "not about land but about religion"—conclusions only believable if one has swallowed heavy doses of official propaganda.

Even the **New York Times**, which had previously published a front-page piece detailing the CIA role (6/8/06), began to feign amnesia; the **Times**' Jeffrey Gettleman wrote (11/20/07) that, after the U.S. pulled out of Somalia in 1994, "the United States—and much of the rest of the world—basically turned its back on Somalia," and not until "the summer of 2006" did they "start paying attention again after a grass-roots Islamist movement emerged from the clan chaos and seized control of much of the country."

The invasion's silent backer

That sort of media amnesia runs rampant in coverage of the current crisis as well.



Andre Le Sage of the National Defense University on **PBS**

Shortly after the Courts took power, Ethiopia began quietly sending troops across the border (AP, 7/20/06); by December 2006, they numbered in the thousands, and were beginning to advance on Islamic Courts-held territory. Some in the Courts declared holy war against the invaders, and skirmishes began breaking out.

The Bush administration, fearful of public backlash, wanted no media attention on its impending war in Somalia: "Central Command was extremely wary of being portrayed in the media as Ethiopia's puppet master. In fact, its senior leaders wanted to keep America's participation entirely secret," revealed *Esquire* (7/27/07). The State Department wanted all eyes on supposed U.S. efforts at a diplomatic

settlement: "The press must not be allowed to make this about Ethiopia, or Ethiopia violating the territorial integrity of Somalia," instructed a leaked internal memo (*New York Times*, 12/27/06).

At first, they were successful. Though a few journalists immediately noted U.S. fingerprints on the imminent invasion (e.g., *McClatchy*, 12/22/06), most obediently passed on the propaganda. The *New York Times*' Gettleman credulously painted the U.S. as scurrying to prevent a war (12/20/06), pointing to "11th-hour diplomatic efforts" that "may be another factor" in staving off a conflict. That "diplomatic effort"—pushing through a U.N. resolution that authorized peacekeepers but excluded a demand that the Ethiopians withdraw—was in fact the polar opposite, a provocation that gave Ethiopia the green light and undermined diplomatic negotiations (*McClatchy*, 12/22/06; *Boston Globe*, 11/29/06).

And indeed, just a few days later, Ethiopia unleashed its full U.S.-trained and -funded military fury, bombing the Mogadishu airport and marching towards the city. "Could the U.S. be drawn into a growing conflict between Islamic rebels in Somalia, and Christian invaders in Ethiopia?" asked CNN (12/26/06). Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr regurgitated the official spin:

What has really happened here is in the last several months, this Islamic militia has taken over much of Somalia. They are calling for a new jihad. They have ties to Al-Qaeda. That has made Ethiopia, which has a large Christian population, very upset, and very concerned about having the jihadist movement on their border.

The U.S. military personnel at the base camp in Djibouti "very much plan to stay out of the fight," reported Starr, whose recent stint embedding at that base proved to be, as usual, of more value to the military than to viewers.

Under attack, the Courts put up little resistance and melted away within days. Many in the media cheered and deleted from history the months of unprecedented peace under the Courts. "In a country with such a troubled recent history, including

famine, anarchy, isolation and war, a potentially viable government has suddenly emerged," wrote the *New York Times* (12/29/06). The AP reported (1/2/07) that "Somalia now has the best chance in 15 years to end anarchy and establish an effective government."

As the Ethiopian troops were trouncing the Islamists, the U.S. launched an airstrike in Somalia, and the cat was soon completely out of the bag. The London *Guardian* reported shortly afterwards (1/13/07) that an early December visit to Ethiopia by Centcom commander John Abizaid was the "final handshake" authorizing the invasion; "CIA paramilitary officers, Special Operations forces, Marine units and helicopter gunships" were engaged from the beginning (*Weekly Standard*, 1/29/07). The *New York Times* reported (2/23/07) that the Bush administration had decided in 2006 that "an incur-



Barbara Starr, CNN Pentagon correspondent, tells you "what has really happened here" (12/26/06)—or at least what her official sources really told her.

sion was the best option to dislodge the Islamists from power"; the article named names, revealing that both Abizaid and Negroponte directed crucial U.S. intelligence into Ethiopian hands. In other words, the invasion was plainly and undeniably a joint war. But as things went sour, the media became complicit in again covering up the U.S. role.

Occupation as 'civil war'

Despite international demands that Ethiopian troops leave, the U.S. backed their continued presence. A popular insurgency rose up within months, and by November 2007, the U.N. had named the situation in Somalia the worst humanitarian crisis in Africa, with some

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600,000–750,000 civilians displaced and living in extremely precarious conditions where aid can't reach them due to the security situation (IRIN, 1/10/08; UNHCR, 12/1/07); an estimated 6,500 civilians have been killed (**Globe and Mail**, 1/1/08).

International organizations have issued reports highlighting flagrant war crimes and human rights abuses committed by the Ethiopian troops, including arbitrary arrests, summary executions, looting, pillaging, collective punishment, targeting of hospitals and indiscriminate bombardment of populated neighborhoods (Human

Rights Watch, 8/07; U.N. humanitarian office, 12/21/07).

The insurgency has vowed to continue fighting until the Ethiopian troops withdraw (**Africa News**, 1/18/08); "There is no solution to the humanitarian crisis with the presence of Ethiopian troops," emphasized the European Union's special envoy to Somalia (**McClatchy**, 12/4/07). But the U.S. has refused to pull its backing, and has incredibly feigned ignorance of crimes and human rights abuses committed by Ethiopian troops (**Globe and Mail**, 1/1/08).

And with rare exceptions—notably

some reports from **McClatchy** and from the **Washington Post's** Stephanie McCrummen (e.g., 1/23/07)—U.S. journalists have done little more than describe scenes of war and misery and wring their hands, repeating official propaganda and failing to connect the dots between U.S. policy and Somali strife.

Some go so far as to call the conflict a "civil war" (e.g., **CBS Evening News**, 4/22/07; **L.A. Times**, 12/5/07; **AP**, 12/16/07), despite the fact that nearly all the fighting is between a Somali insurgency and Ethiopian troops; the official government, composed primarily of warlords allied with Ethiopia, has virtually no popular support and virtually no army, rendering it little more than a puppet in the conflict.

Despite initially publishing some critical reports, the **New York Times** frequently cloaked the U.S. hand in later pieces. In April (4/23/07), Gettleman explained the worsening conflict, its background and the important players involved, naming the Islamic Courts, Ethiopia, Al-Qaeda and the transitional government, but not once mentioning the United States.

Two days later (4/25/07), he explained three factors in the chaos in Somalia: clan rivalry, Islamic fervor and profit. He granted that transitional government leaders "have made mistakes," but "they believe that there are some Somalis—actually, many Somalis—who will never go along with any program." Somali anarchists take the blame, while U.S.-backed Ethiopian troops and their abuses are largely invisible.

A **Washington Post** editorial (4/10/07) argued that some of the responsibility for Somalia's conflict "must go to outsiders," but the only culpability it managed to attribute to the U.S. was a "failure to use their leverage to get peacekeeping forces into Somalia or to pressure the transitional government into cutting deals with Somali groups that are not adequately represented in the government"; the invasion was seen as opening up "a slender opportunity . . . to stabilize Somalia," while the CIA's pre-invasion role merited no mention at all.

As analysts told the Canadian **Globe and Mail** (1/1/08), the U.S. is essentially giving Ethiopia a free hand, with the result being unchecked abuses and increasing support for extremists. Likewise, journalists have too often given U.S. officials a free hand in shaping Somalia coverage, resulting in one more media-enabled disaster in the "war on terror." ■

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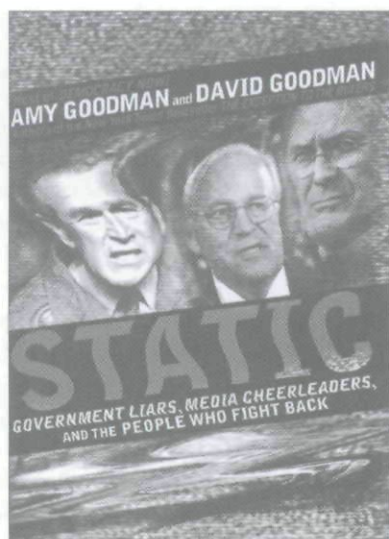
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