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Somalia: Creating Space for Fresh Approaches to Peacebuilding

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

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The incessant years of famine, disease, and fighting between rival warlords has challenged the peacebuilding community to reconcile differences and find common ground in Somalia. Since the overthrow of President Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia has been without an effective central government. Given the attention on security concerns in Somalia, policymakers often overlook the complexities of the clan regions and the potential for conflict transformation.

In John Paul Lederach's article "Addressing Terrorism: A Theory of Change Approach," two approaches were identified for combating terrorism: isolation and engagement. The isolation approach, preferred by government officials, identifies, targets, and limits the military and economic capacity of individuals and groups who espouse violence. This strategy can have the negative impact of closing off access to information on the ground, impairing objective analysis, and perpetuating extremist voices. The engagement approach requires contact, consultation, and dialogue between the parties. This can increase the accuracy of assessment , the understanding of concerns, and the capacity to identify opportunities. Lederach notes that this isolation can be helpful in stopping short-term threats, but the engagement approach is better suited for long-term political solutions to terrorism.

Isolation

A key group targeted by the United States and others as a terrorist organization, Al Shabaab's has been able to leverage its isolation to capitalize on the "War on Terror." By creating their own discourse of social justice and mediation in opposition to what they see as a foreign interference hostile to Islam, Al Shabaab has been able to fill a void left by an unresponsive international community. Al Shabaab provides an alternative to the chaos present in Somalia where the decentralized nature of the organization makes it very effective at communication, especially with the youth and in areas where the state is absent.

U.S. involvement and aid has been active in Somalia since the Cold War era. The government of President Barre had based its distribution of aid on clan affiliation and identity which set the circumstances for the division of the country after the fall of his government. Near the end of the 1980s the United States had an opportunity to reestablish its relationship and become more flexible with Somalia, however Somalia faded from the international community's list of priorities until the humanitarian crisis in the early 1990s.

With the advent of the "Global War on Terror," however, groups that delivered basic services to the Somali populace faced the prospect of being labeled supporters of terrorism and thus isolated for failing to restrain their efforts. In addition, while the U.S. tacitly supported Ethiopia's invasion in 2006, covert strikes taken to eliminate actors identified as a threat have escalated during the past two U.S. administrations. These factors have all contributed to a growing loss of support from the local population.

Engagement

The capacity of Al Shabaab to frame social problems in the minds of the population has made the group a central actor for any strategy of engagement. Where Al Shabaab is able to gain territorial control with minimal violence by providing basic services, a "human-centered" engagement approach based on the well-being of the population could be effective in building peace.

Alternatively, a sovereign approach to inclusive engagement could promote a strong centralized state to prevent a "vacuum" from being exploited by the particular interests of clans and rival religious groups. "Traditional structures" such as these are the driving force behind social and economic issues. Nationalist sentiments have never taken hold in Somalia for long and unity has only come from outside threats.

Within and among the multiple communities, there are commonalities, such as the Islamic faith, language, and clan traditions. Their inclusion in a process of state formation could establish better linkages between national and local levels of service delivery whereas their exclusion contributes to an atmosphere where interests are brokered through violence. Challenges are abundant when trying to foster unity among the various communities and identities, such as the lack of a central government and infrastructure. Al Shabaab has also denied any proclaimed Somali or clan identity, preferring a grander Islamic identity. However, it could be possible to engender a sense of national unity and build horizontal relationships based on shared elements of ethnicity such as language, ancestry, religion and narrative.

In addition to the singular Somali identity route, establishing inclusive state institutions would require the government to provide services nation-wide and thereby diminish the populace's reliance on clans. These institutions could garner the support of the Somali people for economic and political decisions by providing Somalis a voice in the decision-making process.

Conclusions

Creating space for peacebuilding in Somalia will depend on civilian support and an engagement with actors previously shunned by the international community, rather than broad isolation and waging war. Such support could end up being a balance of benefits and coercion, based on the targeted isolation of a few and greater engagement with the wider population.