

## Neighboring Somalia in the Spotlight

By [Fikru Helebo](#)

Fast moving events of the last three months in neighboring Somalia have overshadowed the more than a year long political crisis in Ethiopia causing the international community to divert its attention to developments in Somalia. The quick ascendancy to power in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a group affiliated with a terrorist group called [al-Ittihad al-Islami](#) (AIAI), has alarmed many in the international community, including countries in the Horn of Africa region.

The ICU, buoyed by a string of military successes it has scored against a group of Somali warlords, who raised [suspicion](#) by calling themselves the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), and the support they have garnered from Somalis for bringing about a semblance of [law and order](#) to the Somali capital in a long time, is talking seriously about establishing an [Islamic state](#) in Somalia. The rise of the ICU, which is led by a fundamentalist Muslim named Sheikh [Hassan Dahir Aweys](#), a former leader of the AIAI and a person listed by the U.S. State Department as a [suspected](#) al Qaeda collaborator, should be a cause for concern for the people of the Horn of Africa and beyond.

The ICU has [the backing](#) of Issayas Afewerki, the strongman of Eritrea, and some nations in the Arab and the Muslim world. Its main protagonist, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia, which is based in the regional town of Baidoa, is backed by the [terrorist regime](#) that is in charge of Ethiopia. The Meles regime in Addis Ababa has [publicly stated](#) that it has the responsibility to defend the TGE. Who gave the Addis Ababa regime the responsibility to defend the government of another country is not yet clear, but the regime has already demonstrated that it means business by [sending in troops](#) into Somalia.

The United States may have [unwittingly helped](#) in propelling the ICU to power in Mogadishu by secretly financing the so-called 'anti-terrorist' Somali coalition of warlords, the ARPCT. The ICU skillfully used the revelation that the ARPCT was funded by Washington to coalesce Somali public support for its goals. The ARPCT may have been put together by the Addis Ababa regime, in part, because it was eager to prove to Washington that it is an indispensable ally in the global fight against terrorism in the post-9/11 world. It is also very likely

that the Addis Ababa regime made a calculated decision to create a scene in Somalia to [deflect](#) attention from its domestic troubles. Recognizing these trends a group of former senior U.S. diplomats have [advised Washington](#) to back moderates within the ICU and discourage the Meles regime from using force in Somalia.

The ICU deserves some credit for bringing about a semblance of stability to parts of Somalia. However, it appears that this short-term stability for parts of Somalia may be coming at the expense of the long-term stability for the Horn of Africa region, if a fundamentalist religious group, like the ICU, is allowed to take root and form a government in Mogadishu. Therefore, it was a wise decision to put a stop to [ICU's advance on Baidoa](#), the seat of the TFG, on the part of Washington and Addis Ababa.

Washington is still smarting from the ARPCT fiasco and [attempting](#) to regain its leverage in the region by criticizing the regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea. This is a good thing, but it leaves much to be desired on the part of US Africa policy makers. Washington needs to learn that depending too much on tyrannical regimes, such as the regime in Addis Ababa, to advance its interests in the region is not the best way to advance US interests in the region and the interest of peace and stability in the Horn of Africa region in the long term.

The situation on the ground in southern Somalia is fluid and favors the ICU at this moment. Washington and the Addis Ababa regime need to recognize that the ICU is seen by most Somalis as a stabilizing force. Any future move against the ICU must be done in consultation with a diverse group of Somalis and the governments of the region, particularly Kenya, and the international community. Somalis are a difficult bunch to figure out, but they are all human beings like all of us and need to be dealt with in a dignified way. That said, however, unless cooler heads prevail in Mogadishu and Baidoa, there a real possibility that a full-fledged war might break out between the ICU and the TFG backed by their foreign sponsors, and this does not bode well for peace in Somalia and the Horn of Africa region.