

Warlordism and terrorism: how to obscure an already confusing crisis? The case of Somalia

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Civil wars are dirty wars, and as they progress their complexity increases. To make sense of these conflicts, considerable knowledge and understanding of the political background are needed. In addressing this challenge, donors, media commentators and academics continue to frame new concepts—or sometimes, more accurately, new buzzwords: among those that have become prominent over the past decade are ‘complex emergencies’, ‘failed’ (nowadays ‘fragile’) states, ‘warlord’ and ‘terrorism’. To what extent have these catchphrases contributed to a deeper understanding of the situation and better policy responses? Do they tell us more about western perceptions of civil conflicts than about the complex set of problems those conflicts generate?¹

This article focuses on two such terms—‘warlordism’ and ‘terrorism’—primarily within the context of events in Somalia, although some observations have wider relevance. In conceptualizing ‘new’ wars, as they have come to be known,² those notions became popular among academics as well as aid organizations and journalists. A fuller understanding of contemporary discourses on them would usefully draw on methodologies developed by Richard Jackson.³ At the same time, the effects of these notions are, to an extent, context-specific, and the current discussion will limit itself to a more modest frame of analysis.

The purpose here is not to ascertain whether alleged warlords and terrorists care about the academic definition of their activities (although the testimony of Charles Taylor, now under custody in The Hague, might provide new insights on this subject). It is to analyse how these expressions have contributed to building what Michel Foucault called a ‘regime of truth’: vocabulary, assumptions, labels and narratives that function to select and interpret events, emphasizing some and disregarding many others. They become part of a ‘symbolic technology’ that

¹ Examples of such western perceptions might include an emphasis on the bureaucratic dimension of the state, a profound disgust for primary violence (a laser bomb looks less violent than a machete), a set of moral values that make war a crime, an apolitical vision of most conflicts as disconnected from ideological vision, and so on.

² Mary Kaldor, *Old and new wars: organized violence in a global era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999). For a critique, see Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, ‘Les guerres civiles à l’heure de la globalisation’, *Critique internationale* 18, janvier 2003, <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org/cerifr/publica/critique/critique.php#1>, accessed 28 August 2007.

³ Richard Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism: language, politics and counterterrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

contributes to the construction of knowledge, common sense and legitimate policy responses, while excluding and delegitimizing alternative knowledge. The argument presented here is that recurrent mobilization of those terms has become less a way to analyse particular situations than a way to sift information and frame answers to decontextualized questions.

Somalia is one among many recent instances of civil war. What makes Somalia an intriguing case is the conjunction of a set of disparate factors that make the effects of using these terms more visible. First, academic study of Somalia was greatly impaired before 1990 as the dictatorship of Siad Barre suppressed all but sycophants; those who wanted to carry out research had to focus on matters far from contemporary politics, such as history,⁴ economic development or anthropology. The few who wanted to study contemporary politics had to accept that fieldwork would be risky, and after their findings were published nearly impossible.⁵ After the last episode of the Somali civil war broke out in December 1990, this prohibition ceased to exist, but the new security situation continued to stifle academic study and only a small group of academics even attempted to carry out research.

A second factor follows on from this. Most of the research undertaken in this period was carried out by consultants working for the UN or other international agencies. In consequence, many reports were written under terms of reference that reflected the intellectual frameworks of international stakeholders, rather than an objective understanding of the complexities of civil crises.⁶

Finally, and of crucial significance when Somalia is compared with cases like Darfur, the Somali intelligentsia failed to maintain an independent critique. At best, they made up the backbone of donor-financed civil society organizations, where, in the interests of job security, they rarely challenged donors' perspectives on the Somali conflict. At worst, they became the advisers of the very leaders they were supposed to challenge, at least intellectually. Most, of course, went into exile or kept silent within their own society in order to survive.

The first battle of Mogadishu started on the last Sunday of December 1990, at a time when the international community was completely focused on the beginning of the second Gulf War. Western analysts were convinced that the Horn of Africa was going to stabilize now that the Cold War was over: Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgents were winning battle after battle, and the war in Somalia was perceived as the last manifestation of a previous era. In Washington, the overwhelming opinion was that whoever won the latest Somali conflict would have to be endorsed by the US administration.⁷ The international community noticed the predicament of Somalia only in January 1992, months after the second battle of Mogadishu had started in November 1991. The ceasefire that was negotiated in early March

⁴ Among others written at this time, a masterpiece of Somali studies is Lee Cassanelli, *The shaping of the Somali society: reconstructing the history of a pastoral people 1600–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

⁵ A good example is Daniel Compagnon, 'Ressources politiques, régulation autoritaire et domination personnelle en Somalie, le régime Siyaad Barre: 1969–1991', PhD thesis, University of Bordeaux, 1996.

⁶ The author, of course, does not claim to be an exception. He has been part of this group.

⁷ Peter Schraeder, 'La présence américaine dans la Corne de l'Afrique: ruptures et permanences', *Politique africaine* 50, June 1993, pp. 59–73.

marked the beginning of an international intervention that represented, along with the Rwandese genocide, a major failure of the UN in Africa in the 1990s.

International perceptions of the Somali war were straightforward and naïve: thugs were looting humanitarian aid and a military intervention would allow the population to gain free access to food and thereby escape starvation (a perception not so radically different from the current western line on Darfur). As in Liberia, the use of the term 'warlord' was motivated by a number of considerations that were not unfounded. 'Warlord' was a coinage linking the fighters' taste for war and looting with the acceptance of the use of force, and the egocentrism and lack of political flexibility, evidenced by their leaders. NGOs and media people described in detail how money and resources were extorted. The new leaders' lack of a political agenda was also abysmal: after a few sentences dedicated to democracy, human rights, and the needs of women and children, most of the military leaders had little to say beyond requesting foreign aid and military endorsement to enable them to rule Somalia unhindered. This short description shows why the common use of 'warlord' was not groundless. One might elaborate further on the dynamics of events during the 1990s, through which the term 'warlord' attached a rich semantic field to a scenario that was often seen by western witnesses as morally unbearable. It also generated new vocabulary that produced flashy headlines with little meaning: one deputy special representative of the Secretary General in the UN office in Somalia, Lansana Kouyate, stated to the press in 1994 that 'warlords have become peacelords': a statement that was flatly wrong but nevertheless successfully captured a resonant idiom.⁸

Of course, after 9/11 the emphasis shifted to a new and more up-to-date category: the figure of the 'terrorist', whose status was confirmed—or, more properly, 'defined'—through his inclusion on lists drawn up by the US administration. Again, the success of this idiom was such that when the existence of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu was acknowledged by the foreign media early in 2006 (though they were in place two years before), their members were all seen as belonging to brands of Islamic extremism that were, by assumption, connected to Al-Qaeda. To a large extent, this global description, based on events far away from Somalia with little or no consideration of internal Somali politics, constructed the narratives that were used after 20 December 2006 to justify the Ethiopian and US military intervention in Somalia.

What follows is a brief attempt to provide a double critique of the uses of these two terms, 'warlord' and 'terrorist', with a focus on the Somali case. Those notions were not so widely accepted in academia before they were used to describe the civil war in Somalia, where they had a clear impact in obliterating the core political dimensions of the conflict: they greatly contributed to making it appear as an outbreak of criminal and clan agendas, and lately a cancer bred by Islamist and *takfiri* international networks that should be terminated by military action.

⁸ A recent example is George Peake, Cathy Gormley-Heeman and Mari Fitzduff, *From warlords to peacelords: local leadership capacity in peace processes* (Londonderry: International Centre of Excellence for Conflicts and Peace Studies, Dec. 2004), <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/research/projects/wpl/WlplFull.pdf>, accessed 28 August 2007.

For both terms, this article attempts first to underline their conceptual ambiguity, which partially explains their success, and then to comment on their practical application in the Somali context. In so doing, it raises questions both at an academic level and at a policy level. A more rigorous use of those terms would not have made the reality more difficult to grasp. This does not mean that a better understanding would, by itself, have produced a solution to this crisis. However, a more nuanced analysis would have enabled decisions to be taken with a better sense of the situation on the ground, rather than on the basis of short-sighted views on Somali political actors and a constant labelling of the characters that such a solution would have to accommodate.

'Warlord': a failed entrepreneur or an entrepreneur in a failed state?

Globalization and the end of the Cold War reframed the agenda of civil wars in many different ways. In the Anglo-Saxon world, Charles Taylor quickly came to represent leaders who had no ideological background or commitment, at the helm of predatory armed groups ruthless in their greed. During the Cold War, internal conflicts could be seen as liberation struggles; now they appeared as a monument to crude violence and ethnic hatred, embodying contempt for even minimal political programmes.

'Warlord' is only one of the many coinages advanced in the attempt to make sense of situations such as those of Sierra Leone, Liberia or Afghanistan. Other notions were proposed, such as 'violent entrepreneur'. Where these alternatives were less successful, it was partly because of academic critique (is the 'market' analogy appropriate for the context in which these 'entrepreneurs' are operating?) but also because the term 'warlord' encapsulated a shared perception of a brutal and non-political figure.

Theory and origins

The concept of 'warlord' has a more abstract origin. It was first used by scholars studying the period 1916–28 in Chinese history. The Chinese *Tuchun* and the conflicts in which they were involved generated a model that made sense of a number of different processes: the decay of nationalism into regionalism and/or religious sectarianism; the ability of new regional power centres to forge links with foreign interests; the disintegration of the military hierarchy and the rise of lower-ranking officer strata; and the burdens imposed on the lay population by extortion and violence.⁹

This analysis focuses on subjects of great interest for academia: the weakening and collapse of the state; the emergence of military entrepreneurs whose behaviour was dictated by a patrimonial logic; and the building of a military apparatus

⁹ A good bibliography can be found in the following articles: J. A. G. Roberts, 'Warlordism in China', *Review of African Political Economy* 16: 45/6, Summer 1989, pp. 26–34; Antonio Giustozzi, 'The debate on warlordism: the importance of military legitimacy', Crisis States Development Research Centre discussion paper 13, LSE, Oct. 2005.

that eradicated any threat to its leader and made him an interlocutor for international interests willing to trade and/or exploit natural resources.

While studies of the 'warlord' in China focus on a specific period of history and link the term with the collapse of a dynasty and destruction of an imperial bureaucratic class, attempts to define the concept more universally have fallen flat. One of the most rigorous attempts to establish a definition has been made by Christopher Clapham,¹⁰ who identified three key dimensions: personal rule, the monopolization of economic resources (control of informal markets, humanitarian aid and various trafficking activities), and the absolute need for coercion expressing the lack of any hegemonic project, to use a Gramscian vocabulary.

There is a first aporia. All authors writing on the subject agree that the emergence of warlordism is linked to state decay, but this link is problematic. Sometimes, as in Somalia, it is a consequence of state collapse;¹¹ sometimes it is the cause of state collapse.¹² Warlordism has also been linked to a specific moment in the self-destruction of an armed movement,¹³ which does not by itself imply state failure. Ordinarily, one may expect theory to explain what is the cause and what is the effect.

Yet one can accept that a major component of 'warlordism' is generated by the crisis of the state. Many experts describe countries coping with civil war and warlords as 'collapsed states', but the evidence for this condition is generally superficial and often ascribed to a non-functioning administrative apparatus and/or dictatorial regime. Other aspects of the state are only touched on.¹⁴ For instance, in the case of Somalia, very few experts/scholars have attempted to define what the dimensions of state failure are beyond the virtual absence of administrative capabilities. What was the impact on the bourgeoisie? How was the army reshaped? What about the social fabric? How were regional actors within and outside Somalia impelling or restraining such a process? How and to what extent does this specific form of failure frame the decisions of the political and military actors who emerged after the outset of the war?¹⁵ Moreover, very often the discourse on failed states assumes that at one point in history those states were working 'properly' (that is, more or less in something approaching a Weberian manner); not only are we

¹⁰ Christopher Clapham, 'I signori della guerra in Africa', in Maria Cristina Ercolessi, ed., *I signori della guerra* (Naples: L'Anora del Mediterraneo, 2002). See also William Reno, *Warlord politics and African states* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998). This latter book was by far the most widely quoted.

¹¹ Ken Menkhaus, *Somalia: state collapse and the threat of terrorism*, Adelphi Paper 364 (Oxford: Oxford University Press/International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004).

¹² Reno, *Warlord politics and African states*.

¹³ Robert Buijtenhuij, 'Guerre de guérilla et révolution en Afrique: les leçons du Tchad', *Politique africaine* 1, 1981, pp. 23–33.

¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, *A contemporary critique of historical materialism*, vol. 2: *The nation-state and violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985). For concrete analyses in an African context, see Bruce Bermann and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley in Kenya*, vols 1 and 2 (London: James Currey, 1992), and Jean-François Bayart, *The state in Africa: the politics of the belly* (London: Longman, 1993). The reduction of the state to an administrative apparatus is a good example of the impact aid agencies and liberal economic ideology had on academic categorizing in the 1980s and 1990s. The major failures in post-conflict state-building experiences that we are currently witnessing might suggest that some updating is due on this crucial issue.

¹⁵ For an attempt at analysis by the present author, see the chapter on Somalia in Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, *Les chemins de la guerre et de la paix* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), and 'Mogadiscio dans la guerre civile: rêves d'Etat', *Les Etudes du CERI* 69, 2000.

facing a debatable normative definition of the state (which might not apply even for European states), but also in the case under consideration there is no evidence that such a state existed at any point in history.¹⁶

A second weak dimension of the warlord paradigm is the 'personal rule' aspect. In the vision conjured by warlordism this figure is the central element of a given reality and marginalizes all other components. Everything has to be eventually connected to the warlord. For instance, all definitions underline the existence of a military apparatus entirely controlled by the warlord. Yet the emergence and continuance of an armed group depends not only on resources but also on social conditions, even if, in accordance with R. Charlton and Roy May, we accept the irrelevance of a notion like 'militarism'.¹⁷ The would-be warlord may have little influence over those conditions. To allude to an old debate, there is not only an 'offer' but also a 'demand' for warlords and military leaders.¹⁸

For instance, in the case of Chad in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as described by Martin Doornbos, 'Often it is heard that "Whoever got a gun can play the *hukuma* [government] . . . Youth had only two choices: go to Sudan or become a *suwaar* [rebel]'.¹⁹ Furthermore, Robert Buijtenhuij explains that 'the magic sentence "I am a fighter" has become an actual passport that gives all rights and excuses all blunders and misbehaviours in all kinds of activities'.²⁰ In Somalia, many of the so-called warlords were certainly willing to acquire this status, but were also pushed into this position to perform certain duties and fulfil responsibilities that provided opportunities for others.²¹ The point being stressed here is that the candidate warlord had to accept a number of social patterns that were beyond his own will: often he was as dependent on his people as they were on him.

Moreover, since coercion is the only hegemonic tool in the hands of the warlord, relationships with other social groups are defined by either obedience or opposition. This again constitutes a poor understanding of the complexities that social bonds may create. How, then, can we interpret the existence of other actors who may also enjoy military might but are coexisting alongside warlords? Olivier Roy, for instance, insists that the Afghan warlords should not be confused with the drug traders in Afghanistan, and that agreements were made and respected by both sides.²² In Somalia, lay people would hardly identify a businessman able to mobilize his own private army as a warlord. Obedience cannot be the term

¹⁶ This is one of the many flaws in William Reno's theory of warlord politics.

¹⁷ Roger Charlton and Roy May, 'Warlords and militarism in Chad', *Review of African Political Economy* 16: 45/6, summer 1989.

¹⁸ As is very well explained by Diego Gambetta in his masterpiece, *The Sicilian Mafia: the business of private protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Martin Doornbos, 'La révolution dérapée: la violence dans l'Est du Tchad (1978–1981)', *Politique africaine* 7, Sept. 1982, pp. 7–8.

²⁰ Robert Buijtenhuij, *Le Frolinat et les guerres civiles du Tchad (1977–1984)* (Paris: Karthala, 1987), p. 320.

²¹ For instance, traditional elders would have their role acknowledged and paid for by the international community as good middlemen and brokers. Businesspeople would be in a position to claim discounts on their protection costs in territories controlled by others because of the risk of fighting.

²² Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: la difficile reconstruction de l'Etat*, Chaillot Papers 73, Dec. 2004, p. 51. Distinctions became blurred when the warlords rallied to the new state. As Roy explains, 'From the time warlords and field commanders lost their political power and rallied round the State, the only opportunity left to competition was the drug trade' (p. 54).

defining their relations. That is why a warlord cannot be considered only as the boss of an armed group.

A third debatable point is linked to patrimonialism, supposedly coterminous with warlordism. Most rulers (including European rulers) mobilize forms of clientelism that may tend to patrimonial practices, as a way to extend their reach and build a constituency.²³ The term 'patrimonialism' is not actually very helpful without a more nuanced understanding of its relationship to individual warlords. A good example of the intricacy of this application is provided by the history of Jonas Savimbi. As a leader of UNITA, he was a 'freedom fighter' in many western quarters until 1992. Then overnight he became a warlord.²⁴ Few analysts dared to point out that the management of his resources was not so evidently patrimonial: his movement, UNITA, was also paying grants to students overseas, feeding a population (for its own internal stakes) and fighting with a political agenda, not merely a predatory and totalitarian war machine. If it were, then how is one to explain the fact that, when Savimbi was killed, UNITA fighters came across as disciplined in contrast to Angolan government soldiers? They did not fit the normal description of a warlord army made up of predatory gangs of thugs. Emphasis on predation edged out all other facets, notably Savimbi's political past, his movement and the international alliances he forged.

For lay people, or for those content to use the term loosely, these arguments are largely irrelevant. They are not (or should not be) for experts and academics, who claim to build and use concepts. We should see a warning in the extensive use and acceptance of the term, especially in conflicts that do not fit the usual western values. Why did no one even talk about the Darfur insurgents as warlords in 2003 and 2004?

A practical critique in the Somali context

Focusing on one case, Somalia, allows us to raise other questions and certainly arrive at answers that are not in line with the generally accepted use of the term 'warlord'. This exercise should be repeated in all cases; as Antonio Giustozzi showed in the Afghan case, the results are interesting enough to challenge lazy academics, donors and aid institutions.²⁵ Let us list the assumptions that need to be challenged, at least for the sake of accuracy.

First there is the perception that warlords are all the same. No distinction is made between one and another. A glance at history shows that some were at one point political leaders with large constituencies (Ali Mahdi Mohamed, Mohamed Farah Aydiid), while others emerged as defecting military commanders with no political background (Omar Finish, Abdi Qaybdiid). Eventually, these people may

²³ Jacques Chirac being the most recent case in French politics.

²⁴ Jackie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich, eds, *Angola's war economy* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2000).

²⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, 'Respectable warlords? The politics of state-building in post-Taleban Afghanistan', working paper 33 (London: Crisis States Programme, LSE, Sept. 2003), and Giustozzi, 'The debate on warlordism'; 'A qui est l'Afghanistan?', *Outre Terre* 16, 2006, pp. 197–213.

appear as of one type before foreign eyes; but they are not considered interchangeable by Somalis.

Although all warlords built and managed their own military apparatus, some had substantial support beyond their evident constituency (Ali Mahdi and Aydiid being the best examples). Some achieved a goal that provided them with popular support, not only obedience through coercion. Abdullahi Yuusuf,²⁶ the current president of the transitional federal government, established Puntland in summer 1998. Although this was possible only because of Ethiopian support and his own military superiority to other leaders in that area, Puntland has quickly encapsulated a regional feeling, and its continued existence in 2007 is testimony to its success. Such an achievement is completely beyond the reach of many. Yet the great majority of the 24 warlords who attended the last reconciliation conference in Kenya (from October 2002 to 2004) appeared to be after a piece of the cake, rather than intent on enforcing an agenda for change.

It is assumed that all warlords are clan-based. As already noted, this has not been always true in the history of the Somali crisis. Clan constituencies split sooner or later at the level of sub-clan, sub-sub-clan and so on. Omar Finish and his once very powerful rival, Muuse Suudi, are considered cousins by Somalis, though the former was empowered by the Transitional National Government in order to oppose the latter. To believe that this process has the same meaning in all cases is to make two important mistakes. The first, a misconception brought about by the segmentary modelling of Somali society, is that all clans function internally in the same way. This is untrue. History, migration and urbanization (let alone the quality of warlords or traditional leaders) have made each clan very distinct, even while they claim many commonalities.

The second misconception concerns the very cause of the division of clans. As has just been noted, sometimes new leaders emerged within the clan because they expressed deep divisions that were created even before the civil war; sometimes, they were entrepreneurs who gained backing from powerful allies within their sub-clan, from other clans or even from foreign states. Omar Finish and Osman Atto are good examples of the last case. The first scenario—valid for Mohamed Qanyere Afrah and some others—has rich socio-political implications. The Somali civil war was not a political revolution, yet drastic social changes occurred that were linked to the situation that prevailed before 1991. To put it in a nutshell, throughout Siad Barre's rule, positions and power were often allocated to people who then co-opted members of their own lineage or sub-clan. As witnessed also in other contexts, such as Côte d'Ivoire,²⁷ there was a kind of social division of labour among sub-clans. For instance, although the Abgaal could claim that they were subjugated by the dictatorship, as were other Hawiye clans, most of the Abgaal political and economic elite belonged to one specific sub-clan. The civil war destroyed this division of labour and, typically, Ali Mahdi and Muuse Suudi

²⁶ Frederico Battera, 'La nascita del "Puntland State of Somalia"', *Relazioni internazionale* 50, June–July 1999, pp. 53–58.

²⁷ Ousmane Dembele, 'Côte d'Ivoire: la fracture communautaire', *Politique africaine* 89, March 2003, pp. 34–48.

come from sub-clans other than the previous 'privileged' one. This is only one example of a quite frequently recurring situation in the politics of Somalia and Somaliland.

The reasons why certain warlords emerged are not linked to specific personal entrepreneurship. As noted above, sometimes warlords were filling a vacuum, as were 'traditional leaders'. When the international community got involved in 1992, it worked through the promotion of traditional leaders. Not all clans have a 'Sultan' or 'Boqor': hence these figures were created by political, business or factional entrepreneurs for the sake of getting access to foreign backing and not being (loosely) represented by others. In a number of cases, warlords emerged as the means by which a group of interests (often rallying behind the name of a clan) could make a point, get recognition from the international community (always in need of interlocutors), or show autonomy or resistance towards another warlord. The alleged blind support of clan (or sub-clan) does not correspond much to the reality. For instance, under Mohamed Farah Aydiid, his clan was not allowed to meet without his personal clearance (*contra* the 'pastoral democracy' described by Ion Lewis). But this was not true for all. Ali Mahdi, his main rival, was in no position to command the same kind of allegiance, even had he wished to. The nature of the bonds between clans and warlords cannot be described only in terms of support or dissidence. Coercion is a factor, but does not explain clan support, as is so often claimed in the literature on warlords. Mohamed Qanyere Afrah coerced his own clan to avoid any contest. He was very much disliked because he was a brutal thug. At the same time, he was respected in certain circumstances: for instance, he was not shy about expressing the concerns of his clan to other Somali leaders and the international community.

The notion of 'warlord' has become a way to label predatory behaviour. One may first question whether such individuals are more predatory than others. In all cabinets in Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland, certain officials (president or his close relatives, prime ministers, ministers) have been named by Somalis as the greediest of their time. Again, it is important to be reminded that practices of predation linked to state positions have a long history in Somalia and cannot be attached only to a few 'bad' individuals. The history of counterfeit money in Somalia shows that warlords are not the most successful predators.²⁸ Moralistic judgements obscure analysis.

This list of misconceptions could certainly be extended if there were room to enter into the intricacies of the Somali case. What is important, though, is to emphasize the weaknesses of the warlord model. This does not imply that there were no warlords in Somalia; but in the view of the present author, they were fewer than is generally thought.

Some may argue that in politics, terms are not always used in their right meaning. True; but politics is neither expertise nor academia. The application of

²⁸ For a description, see Roland Marchal, *A survey of Mogadishu's economy* (Nairobi: European Commission, 2002), ch. 2, <http://www.delken.ec.europa.eu/en/publications/Mogadishu%20Economic%20Survey-Final%20Report.pdf>, accessed 8 August 2007.

this label to all armed leaders made the Somali arena more impenetrable for the individuals charged with managing the Somali file, either as diplomats or as aid workers, and reduced Somali politics to the relationships developed between those figures. Other aspects of the reality were either simply not considered or were relegated to a position of second or third importance. The inability to understand how armed factions in Somalia were built and functioned made it impossible for the international community to countenance the emergence of other collective actors. The Islamic Courts, at least, had a better view of what the factional system was offering to society: that is why they were able to weaken it so quickly.

'Terrorist': how to dismiss lessons from the Cold War?

After 9/11, the fashion moved quickly to another kind of threat: terrorism. The 'war on terror' became the ultimate international agenda. Few analysts, let alone any international institution, expressed concern at the instrumentalization of a concept that was not just a figure of speech, but on the basis of which new rules, new mindsets and new practices were created to deal with the novelty of the threat. The criminal justice approach was considered old-fashioned and irrelevant: in Dick Cheney's words, 'old doctrines of security do not apply'.²⁹

As Charles Tilly incisively argued,

terrorism and terrorists become inseparable concepts, coherent entities, efficacious actors and enemies to be eradicated. Students of political processes and collective violence certainly should pay attention to such reification; it exerts a significant influence on world politics. But they should not incorporate the categories wholesale into their own descriptions and explanations of political processes at hand. In particular, social scientists who attempt to explain sudden attacks on civilian targets should doubt the existence of a distinct, coherent class of actors (terrorists) who specialize in a unitary form of political action (terror) and thus should establish a separate variety of politics (terrorism).³⁰

This warning leads us to offer a series of general remarks and a few points based on the Somali situation after 2006 and the narratives that were mobilized to make sense of it.

Reifying categories

A first remark concerns the issue of definition. As most scholars emphasize, use of terror ranges from intermittent actions by members of groups that are engaged in wider political struggles to one segment in the *modus operandi* of durably organized specialists in coercion (including government-employed and government-backed specialists), and can also be the dominant rationale for distinct, committed groups and networks of activists.

Yet, more often, discourses on terrorism are couched in condemnatory terms

²⁹ Quoted in Samantha Power, 'Our war on terror', *New York Times*, 29 July 2007.

³⁰ Charles Tilly, 'Terror, terrorism, terrorists', *Sociological Theory* 22: 1, March 2004, pp. 5–13.

(‘evil’), while civil war and genocide are castigated less roundly, despite the seriousness of those forms of political violence. In particular, state terror attracts lighter treatment than terror practised by non-state actors. There is no doubt that more people have died because of state-backed violence than in terrorist group bombings. This point, nowadays taken seriously in Afghanistan and Iraq, should also be borne in mind while discussing the situation in Somalia (not to mention other African or Middle Eastern territories).

The events of 9/11 also gave rise to another extremely negative effect: namely, the trend both in the media and in official discourse to identify Islamic extremism with terrorism. The allowable spectrum of political differences, especially where Islam is concerned, is now very narrow: Islamists have to be extremists, and differences between extremists and terrorists are notional.

Two remarks are apposite here. First, all studies of suicide bombers and terrorist groups make clear that religion is, in the great majority of cases, a secondary factor behind political grievances and nationalism: the religious discourse used by these actors is more instrumental than causative.³¹ Second, local extremism cannot be connected with international jihadism or takfirism without hard evidence. Countries like Nigeria, Sudan, Algeria and Somalia have over the last two centuries experienced jihadist movements and had their own national repertoires of religious radicalism. Of course, migrations, the internet, previous wars (such as that in Afghanistan) and globalization might provide key connections. Yet individual connections do not make cells and cells do not make groups. Other ingredients are needed.

This last point brings to mind the strong advice delivered by the theoretician of containment at the beginning of the Cold War. George Kennan warned against treating communism as a monolith. For him, understanding differences among communist organizations was not an intellectual exercise: it facilitated the widening of rifts between them. Yet this advice was hardly applied in the Middle East or in Africa, as shown by the radical western opposition to the Palestinian cabinet led by Hamas,³² and by the western fear to engage the Islamic Courts in Somalia.³³

Too many people endorse the ‘war on terror’ without considering the dysfunctional content of the phrase.³⁴ If this is a war, then terrorists are soldiers, not criminals (who may be stigmatized in their society), and as such are repositories of values such as courage and sacrifice. European states have not publicly argued against this expression, though most European countries pay lip service to the ‘war on terror’ because their counterterrorism philosophy intends to deal with the deeper causes of terrorism. Equally, they do not accept the political consequences

³¹ See e.g. Mia Bloom, *Dying to kill* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004).

³² A good example of this intellectual/political confusion is provided by Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: politics, charity and terrorism in the service of jihad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

³³ See Roland Marchal, ‘Evento: la Somalia’, *Afriche e Orientali* 1, 2007, pp. 4–19.

³⁴ See Clare Dyer, ‘There is no “war on terror”’: outspoken DPP takes on Blair and Reid over fear-driven legal response to threat’, *Guardian*, 24 Jan. 2007.

of using a war-based narrative. Among the causes of terrorism should be listed not only poverty and bad governance, as one often reads in US publications, but also political differences, sometimes even policies supported by the West.³⁵

The militarization of the prevention of terrorism had many detrimental effects for local societies, the United States and democratic states. It is not the most positive move at a time when the US military is reviewing its own *modus operandi* in Iraq and reminding itself of the lessons of the counter-insurgency such as: 'an operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of 50 more insurgents'; 'sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is'.³⁶ If US decision-makers had had access to this booklet and had read it attentively, they would not have given the green light to intervene in Somalia, and it is no surprise that a creeping insurgency has now developed.

This raises another concern about the current trend of US policy in Africa. The establishment of the Africa Command (AFRICOM) will certainly create many more headaches in the US foreign diplomacy bureaucracies. It will eventually militarize foreign policy, making it look increasingly imperial, and create its own opposition in Africa.

The case of Somalia

Somalia became a showcase for the new conflict rhetoric, for both good and bad reasons. The US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in August 1998, and in November 2002 an Israeli hotel and an aircraft were targeted by terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda. In all these cases Somalia was used for logistical purposes, which implies that local cooperation was available. Yet the term 'terrorist' became used to describe the Islamic Courts in Somalia in particular after their victory against factions that rallied under a coalition against international terrorism funded by the US administration.³⁷

The experience of the Islamic Courts and their destruction was perceived for the most part through an international lens: perceptions about the actors were rooted in international labels more than in an assessment of who they were and how they actually behaved on the ground.³⁸ Even the latest and very good report by Human Rights Watch is not entirely free of this misconception. It presents the fight between the Islamic Courts and the factions in Mogadishu in February 2006

³⁵ Richard Jackson, 'An analysis of the EU counterterrorism discourse post-September 11', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20: 2, June 2007, p. 239. See also the paradoxical comment by David Wessel, 'Is fighting poverty the best way to root out terrorism?', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 July 2007, p. 9.

³⁶ See the newly released *US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>, accessed 7 Aug. 2007. The quotes are on pp. 37 and 38.

³⁷ For an analysis of this period, see Cedric Barnes and Hassan Harun, *The rise and fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts* (London: Chatham House Africa Programme, April 2007); Roland Marchal, 'Somalie: un nouveau front dans la guerre contre le terrorisme', *Les Etudes du CERI* 135, June 2007 (a draft version in English is available at <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/marchal/>, accessed 8 Aug. 2007).

³⁸ See e.g. the nuanced article published a few days before the intervention by a journalist who was in Mogadishu: Martin Fletcher, 'Battle-scarred nation is at peace with itself . . . but still facing war', *The Times*, 16 Dec. 2007, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article755685.ece?token=null&offset=0>, accessed 28 Sept. 2007.

as an outcome of the terrorist threat, and does not mention key events such as the Aden agreement of January 2007 that made the failure of the factions to rule Mogadishu clear to their own supporters; local contradictions at that time are also ignored.³⁹ The epitome of this distorted view was the status conferred on Hasan Daher Aweys, one of the leaders of the Union of Islamic Courts.⁴⁰

Hasan Daher was listed as a terrorist because he was the head of a group designated by the United States as a terrorist organization on 25 September 2001, al-Itihaad al-Islami. His past position as an Islamist leader does not by itself make him an actual terrorist. Yet hardly any article that named him did not mention his presence on the famous US list, hence implying that he was indeed a hardliner.⁴¹ Yet in the Somali context after June 2006, Hasan Daher sided strongly (to the surprise of many, including this author) with Sheekh Sheriif, whom the foreign media and international diplomatic community described as a moderate. He was certainly one of the most virulent opponents of Ethiopia; but he attended civil society meetings on HIV/AIDS, and when an Italian nurse was murdered in September 2006 he went on air to say that foreigners helping Somalia should be considered honoured guests and protected; he was extremely positive when the European Commissioner Louis Michel visited Mogadishu in December 2006 at the dawn of the Ethiopian intervention. These points are mentioned here not to prove that this leader was an easy-going politician whom George W. Bush should invite to his ranch in Crawford, but to point out that any analysis should take account of these facts.

The same caution should have been applied while discussing the Shabaab, a populist group and Salafi organization within the Islamic Courts whose leaders were adopting *takfiri* stances.⁴² The Shabaab is still described as the Somali group closest to Al-Qaeda. As the membership of this movement grew considerably after June 2006, its radical Salafi ideology, which is alien to Somali customs,⁴³ could hardly have been assimilated by its numerous new adherents. Allegations that Shabaab's members were involved in murdering foreign aid workers stand; yet this was part of a war in which hit squads and factions paid for by the United States and/or Ethiopia were killing or kidnapping religious figures and Islamic militants.⁴⁴ Moreover, as witnessed by the author himself, some in its core leadership in autumn 2006 understood that they could not rule a region or a country against the whole world. Engagement more than labelling was neces-

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Shell-shocked: civilians under siege in Mogadishu', Aug. 2007, <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/somalia0807/>, accessed 21 Aug. 2007, p. 19; C. Timberg, 'Mistaken entry into clan dispute led US black eyes on Somalia', *Washington Post*, 2 July 2006.

⁴⁰ The same status was accorded to Fazul Abdullah Mohammed and Fahid Mohammed Ally, whom the United States has hunted for their roles in the attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

⁴¹ Many forget that any listing is a process that should be questioned. See Karen De Young, 'Terror database has quadrupled in four years', *Washington Post*, 25 March 2007.

⁴² Contrary to the current perception that Salafi people are inclined to terrorism, among the most vocal opponents of the Shabaab in the Islamic Courts were Wahhabi intellectuals.

⁴³ Roland Marchal, 'Islamic political dynamics in the Somali civil war', in Alex de Waal, ed., *Islamism and its enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004).

⁴⁴ This reminder is not in any way a justification, but it underlines that this underground war between 2001 and 2006 had social and political implications that reached well beyond those who were targeted. Popular sympathy for targeted Islamic militants (up to a certain point) was rooted in this situation.

sary then and is still possible. Again, these remarks are made not to argue that the extremists were becoming moderates, but that these two notions, 'extremists' and 'moderates', did not fit the very fluid and contradictory situation the Islamic Courts were facing.

As noted in the first part of this article, labelling and disinformation are the only successful industries in Somalia. Somalis, people in neighbouring states and others actors excel in rumours and manipulations of all kinds. The UN and then the United States faced this obstacle in summer 1993 in the hunt for General Aydiid; and the same problem has persisted since, throughout the international community's constant minimal presence in Somalia. The decision to freeze all assets of the al-Barakaat holding (including a very successful money transfer company and a telecom company) on 7 November 2001 may have been another example of action taken on the basis of a dearth of information, because in the six years since this incident no Barakaat cadres have been prosecuted for terrorist activities. The 2006 reports by the UN Monitoring Group also listed a number of very dubious 'facts' (700 *takfiri* Shabaab fighting alongside Shi'i Hezbollah against the Israeli army in summer 2006 and the like). This Monitoring Group played a strong role in building the narratives necessary for intervention in Somalia and, once more, attests to the manner in which foreigners can easily be manipulated, especially in congruence with US interests.⁴⁵

A recent publication by the US Military Academy at West Point on Al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa enables us to go further.⁴⁶ Based on documents emanating from Al-Qaeda members, it provides the backdrop for an intriguing tale of Al-Qaeda's first efforts to expand beyond Afghanistan and Sudan in the Horn. Conventional wisdom suggests, as repeated *ad nauseam* in 2006, that Somalia, because it is a failed state, would be a safe haven for Al-Qaeda.⁴⁷ The findings of the report are drastically different: coastal Kenya—a weakly governed region—provides an environment more conducive to Al-Qaeda activities. In Somalia, Al-Qaeda members faced the same challenges that plague western intervention (extortion, betrayal, clan conflicts, xenophobia, a security vacuum and logistical constraints): 'At one point, Al-Qaeda operatives were so frustrated that they listed going after clan leaders as the second priority for *jihad* after expelling Western forces.'⁴⁸ From 1995, what made Afghanistan so valuable to Al-Qaeda after Sudan was not the absence of state institutions but the protection of a sovereign state. The US report even downplays the taste for *jihad* of the al-Itihaad leadership—including Hasan Daher!⁴⁹

Two last points conclude this discussion. The saga of the Islamic Courts and their derailment is also part of a regional proxy war between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

⁴⁵ For the 2006 reports of the Monitoring Group see <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/751/mongroup.shtml>, accessed 28 August 2007. An attempt at assessment is made by Roland Marchal, *Between gossips and hard facts: the UN narratives on Somalia* (London: Chatham House, Aug. 2006).

⁴⁶ Harmony Project/Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 'Al-Qaida's (mis)adventures in the Horn of Africa', <http://ctc.usma.edu/aqII.asp>, accessed 8 Aug. 2007.

⁴⁷ A statement also made by the International Crisis Group, *Counter-terrorism in Somalia: losing hearts and minds* (Brussels: ICG, 2005), p. 6.

⁴⁸ Harmony Project, 'Al-Qaida's (mis)adventures', p. 6.

⁴⁹ Harmony Project, 'Al-Qaida's (mis)adventures', pp. 40–1.

As Sheekh Sheriif told this author, the first question that was raised in the first meeting with Ethiopians was why the Islamic Courts had warm relationships with Asmara, not whether they were Salafi or jihadist. It was only in the spring of 2007, as the situation in central and south Somalia deteriorated, that the United States started mentioning Eritrea as a major player in the Somali arena. No assessment has yet been made of Asmara's political influence on the Islamic Courts in the second semester of 2006. Certainly, it would have added a very secular flavour to the alleged jihadist agenda which was used to justify the US–Ethiopian intervention.

While Ethiopia justified its intervention in Somalia by reference to the hundreds of foreign jihadists who it claimed were threatening its territory, the reality that emerged after January 2007 was more modest. Not only were the Courts so quickly defeated that it became difficult to believe that they ever posed a serious threat, but most of the foreign passport-holders arrested by the Ethiopian army happened to be of Somali or Ethiopian origin. Very few truly foreign prisoners could be considered valuable assets in the 'war on terror' in terms of their connections to genuine terrorist networks: should a new war be started in Somalia for such a low stake?⁵⁰

Conclusion

This article has set out to show how concepts and notions supposedly framed to enable an understanding of complex crises can have exactly the opposite effect. They contribute to the trivialization of a situation, exclude significant questions, make history irrelevant and frame descriptions in terms that the media and the aid system readily accept, namely moral condemnations and prescriptions.

Among Somali factional leaders there were warlords, and it is likely that a few terrorists may have been protected by cadres of the Islamic courts.⁵¹ Yet *une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps*. The systematic labelling that was practised not only obscured any convincing understanding of the Somali crisis; it also deprived the crisis of political dimensions and, in the heat of the moment, under- or overstated its dangers. One of the consequences was that internal political dynamics were downplayed. For example, Somaliland appears as a safe haven for secularism or a model for the resolution of the Somali crisis: it is neither, and it is also deeply affected by events taking place in central and south Somalia. Few noted that the eviction of the warlords and the emergence of the Courts also reflected the aspiration of a new generation to take the lead, and that this aspiration is shared beyond south and central Somalia.

The successful instrumentalization of the conflict's vocabulary went far beyond the experts and the academics. Policy-makers used these labels too, if not to frame policies then at least to gain support for them. To a certain extent, this is not an abnormal situation. However, as indicated in the case of Somalia, concepts such as

⁵⁰ '8 foreigners held by Ethiopia in terrorism hunt', Associated Press, 12 April 2007.

⁵¹ The very fact that the wife of Fazul was arrested in northern Kenya with cadres of the Courts constitutes circumstantial evidence.

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'terrorism' and 'warlordism' have contributed to narratives that may have extremely damaging effects. The identification of the Islamic Courts with Islamic extremism and terrorists gave legitimacy to the US–Ethiopian intervention in Somalia. The current 'war on terror' allows the US administration to militarize its African policy through the establishment of AFRICOM. US military officials claim that this new structure will work hand in hand with civilians to build boreholes and schools, as European colonial armies did. The problem, as with their predecessors, is that that is not all they do.

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