IT IS TIME TO TALK TO AL-SHABAB

Al-Shabab militants marching at south of Mogadishu, Somalia, on Feb. 17, 2011.

When President Farmajo was elected on Feb. 8th, 2017, the conditions were set for a talk but instead, he vowed to defeat al-Shabab within two years blowing the hope of ever achieving the peace that people had expected of him. Of course, the decision was prompted by security reasons but from a political point view, it was a colossal mistake to declare a war in the face of people's opposition and on an adversary that only dreams death and paradise. The African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is incompetent against al-Shabab, and the fact that it is withdrawing in 2024 without bringing the peace and stability to Somalia is an admission of failure. Al-Shabab has been contained by the American drone strikes but

hard power strategy is unproductive for such group because it has a proven record of weathering all aggressions. So, it is possible to prevent al-Shabab's Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED) but the creed that configures the psychology of self-detonating individual is invincible.

BRUTE FORCE vs CONVICTION

Al-Qaeda regards itself as the true representative of Islam on guard against intrusion of alien modes into the 'divine' message. It is in quest for a virtuous society where the life's daily endeavors are harmonized with the moral righteousness stressed by the Quranic verses closely approximating Islam's heydays and no other path is acceptable. The idea is to strive for both the worldly needs and eternal life at Hereafter, and ideally, worldly progress should not outdo the strive for Hereafter. The loss of this religious formula or tilting towards secularism means *jahiliyyah*, "*as a state of domination of humans over humans, as opposed to their submission to God.*"[1] Al-Qaeda utterly opposes human devised laws and the West's moral strangeness but not its technological gadgetry that is meant to improve the life's daily routine. It encourages economic progress and human rights but only within the perimeters of Islam where God's banner reigns supreme. It blames the West's military interferences and Arab Sheikhdoms' failure to constitute God's law on earth as an impediment for Muslims' hesitancy to succumb to the true 'spirit' of Islam, and on August 23, 1996, Bin Laden declared a war on the West. It views the 'War on Terror' as an act of vengeance powered by the Crusaders begotten attitudes, an opinion shared by many people in the Muslim world.

Like Muhammad who brought order out of chaos over 1400 centuries ago, it believes that what was achieved in Islam's glorious days is achievable in another time, and it uses these ancient historical events as motivation for the heavenly mission. The idea is not an instant military victory but to arouse a perpetual war where the future generations will have the 'privilege' to contribute to its fruition preferring death if they could not be successful, in Islam, success is measured in being the dweller of paradise. It is on a different scale in pursuit of a distant dream, and the completion of this grand religious adventure timelessly

lurks behind the curtain of the future – a timeless quest whose looping days illuminate the distant ambition as more attainable.

On the contrary, the U.S. and allies are overly concerned on the physical aspect of the war believing that eliminating the jihadist insurgents would somehow resolve the terrorism issues. For instance, the Bush administration boasted that it had killed 75% of al-Qaida's key figures but according to Christian Taylor's research study, al-Qaeda has restructured into regional caliphates spreading from Afghanistan and Pakistan to North Africa, the Middle East and beyond, it has recruited an estimated 40,000 more fighters since September 11th, 2001, and al-Qaeda remains stronger and more resilient. For the United States, as the vastly greater power, the primary danger was self-inflicted injury. Al-Qaeda can never defeat the United States but the fact it is still standing against the greatest military power for over 20 years is a de facto success. History lessons show that employing conventional weapons to defeat an ideology as unachievable landmark, and it has been the undoing of many powerful nations. Perhaps the war in Afghanistan is a prime example why the U.S.'s advanced firepower is ineffective against the willpower of Taliban.

On October 7, 2001, George W. Bush announced the start of Operation Enduring Freedom whose objectives were to topple the Taliban regime for hosting al- Qaeda, kill/capture Bin Laden, to prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a safe-haven for terrorists, and to rebuild Afghanistan as a flourishing democratic nation. In truth, the war in Afghanistan was entirely rested on 'whacking' the enemy and the successive administrations were content with merely the violent aspect of the war, and consequently, the stick has outperformed the carrot resulting in undesired outcomes. They had not aimed in translating the soft policy into a practical scheme nor presented an antidote for Afghanistan's social upheavals, instead, more bombs were sent to Afghanistan. So, What did the U.S. get for $2 trillion in Afghanistan? America is in pursuit of vengeance but on the course, it has inflicted 'War on Terror' begotten terror on civilians who were/are innocent of the 9/11 attacks. More than 2,400 American soldiers and more than 38,000 Afghan civilians have died. The real beneficiary of this war is Taliban because it still controls over 60% of Afghan territory, it has discovered its potential strength, and by negotiating directly with the U.S., it had gained

political legitimacy that has undermined the Afghani government. As Dominic Tierney wrote, "*The United States is an impatient crusader: eager to smite tyrants and terrorists but unwilling to invest the time and resources needed to win the peace*"

To sum up, the jihadists are on theological approach that promises the good of this world and the good of Hereafter, and the West is on intellectual propositions that regards religion as a personal matter that is exercised at convenience. Faith cannot be under the intellectual knowledge nor does intellect succumb to illogical fallacies. With such incongruent philosophies, the West can win the battle but based on the historical facts, it cannot win the war.

INVENTED TERRORISM

Since the fall of Somalia's central government in 1991, it was devastated by chaos and violence in an unprecedented scale, and out of desperation, the Somalis resorted to Islam for protection because it was the only law that the feuding chieftains had respected. In June 2004, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) was formed which brought relative peace to Mogadishu and the surrounding areas, it was hailed as a major accomplishment. It was nationalism-based revolt with the intention to build tribalism-free progressive society and political Islam was employed to unify the fighting tribal factions. As a shadow government, it has restored some sort of law and order, instituted functioning courts, and for the first time, the vehicles were able to travel freely without being assailed. It was effectively a social and an intellectual awakening that promised a revival within the acquainted ethical and the cultural concepts. Though Mogadishu's security improvement was met with cheers but for the Western politicians, the discomfort laid the fact that ICU was making progress within the context of Islam, in other words, outside the familiar orbit. They have the tendency to invariably label any Islamic enterprise that does not fit within the Western frame of thoughts and its attitudes as terrorism and ICU was not exempted.

After the 9/11 attacks, Somalia was judged through the spectacles of terrorism and the ICU was accused of harboring the al-Qaeda suspects who were responsible for the bombings of

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the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 probably with no evidence. Due to the disastrous raid in 1993 known as 'Black Hawk Down', Washington was unwilling to send foot soldiers to Somalia, therefore, the CIA started a covert operation by funding the ARPCT, a coalition of Mogadishu's incumbent warlords, to defeat the ICU. It was a marriage of convenience; the CIA wanted them as a surrogate force to capture the suspects and the warlords were paid dogs of war. A famous saying among the Mogadishu residents is that almost all the Islamic scholars have been flown to Mecca (referring to Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. military base in Djibouti). However, the plan has backfired in June 2006 when the ARPCT was routed out of Mogadishu and the ICU consolidated more power by extending its rule as far as Kismayo and beyond. In fact, it was this unholy alliance between the CIA and the warlords that brought al-Shabab into being and consequently, terrorism was invented inadvertently.

On December 6, 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia to defeat the ICU and to incubate the Somalia's embryonic government without probably calculating its eventual outcome. The ICU was overthrown and al-Shabab, the military wing of the ICU, fought a bloody war against Ethiopians in an invasion that lasted for about two years. Exploiting the historical enmity between Ethiopia and Somalia, and the Bush administration's wild wild west approach, al-Shabab got ardent supporters, necessary funds, and a much-needed religious edict that directed the public to unselfishly lay down their lives for the cause. As a result, on January 13, 2009, the Ethiopian troops were forced to withdraw and the invasion has transformed al-Shabaab from an anonymous group to a battled hardened al-Qaeda affiliate and a member of the global jihadi network. Perhaps the trenchant failure was that the Bush administration acted on emotional basis which exclusively overshadowed the practical approach. Instead of concentrating on uncovering the ICU and its strategic roadmap, it has prematurely reacted on limited intelligence, and consequently, the Washington-indorsed invasion has boomeranged by yielding a contrary effect: jihad and al-Shabab was inspired to evolve from a paramilitary group whose task was to secure Mogadishu's business district to the world's fourth deadliest group.

TERRORISM DESIGNATION

Terrorism is a derogatory label *"that is generally applied to one's enemies and opponents, or to those with whom one disagrees and would otherwise prefer to ignore."* [2] It is used to dishonor and to coerce the opponent to succumb into a certain political stand, it is also a legal permit to harm. The term is subjective by definition swayed by one's moral judgment: "*If one identifies with the victim of the violence, for example, then the act is terrorism. If, however, one identifies with the perpetrator, the violent act is regarded in a more sympathetic, if not positive (or, at the worst, an ambivalent) light; and it is not terrorism*."[3] There are over 109 different definitions of terrorism [4] and almost all of them are in parallel with the West's view on this subject and they justify state perpetrated violence, for instance, Carsten Bockstette of George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, defined terrorism as *"political violence in an **asymmetrical** conflict that is designed to induce terror ..."*[5] On February 28 , 2008, al-Shabab was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization even though it had no prior jihadi career, the impetus for bearing arms was exclusively security reasons, its military activities were confined within Somalia's borders, and the insurgency against the Ethiopian invasion is in accordance with the international law. Al-Shabab was listed not because of its violent methods but its aim to bring Islam into politics. The impetus to label someone or an organization as a terrorist is exclusively interest driven, for example, during the Soviet–Afghan War, President Reagan called the Mujahedeen 'freedom fighters' because their struggle against the communist USSR was in line with Washington's political agenda. In unfavorable situation, President Bush called the Mujahedeen 'terrorists', and the Trump administration has negotiated a peace agreement with them. Due to the nature of politics, the possibility of the U.S. government commending al-Shabab or meeting its leaders at the Oval Office is not a farfetched prospect.

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In Somalia, military interventions have always backfired and the outcome was consistently counterproductive, and the U.S.'s heavy-handed military approach can only contain al-Shabab but it does not change the overall equation. Equally , the Trump administration's

plan to withdraw troops from Somalia clearly indicates that Washington's military involvement in Somalia was started on a short-term mindset and it proves the effectiveness of al-Shabab's wait-out strategy. Paul D. Williams, Professor at George Washington University, has characterized the war against al-Shabab as "...*a stalemate since at least 2016, neither side is likely to achieve a decisive military victory.*" The inability to decisively defeat al-Shabaab leaves only negotiated settlement, for any negotiation, the focal point should be about sharia law because Somalia's constitution defines Islam as the state religion and sharia inspires national legislation, dialogue over issues of sharia offers the government some scope for negotiation. An end can only be reached through negotiation particularly by addressing the pressing issue of sharia law. Also, the West should tolerate the existence of people who conform to a constitution legislated by God however irrational it is through the lenses of Western concepts, after all, the right to differ is democracy's central pillar.

Unlike its predecessor, ICU, al-Shabab is fighting for sharia law and it regards the Somali federal government as an 'apostate' regime for implementing non-Islamic constitution. The U.S. realizes that this war has no military solution but due to the risk of political backlash, it avoids negotiating with al-Shabab directly. Christopher C. Miller, Trump's acting secretary of defense, proposed unorthodox method which calls for reshaping al-Shabab's leadership structure by eliminating the hardcore al-Qaeda-linked leaders and negotiating with the younger nationalistic ones with help of Qatar government. Mr. Miller raised ideas for isolating or eliminating them: Perhaps the younger leaders could be persuaded to rebel against them, or the older cohort could be bought off to sideline themselves from the struggle. Though the idea was aborted but it shows that the U.S. does not see the fuller picture of the war nor wholly comprehend the ideology that propels al-Shabab's fortitude. There are two primary reasons why the U.S. should spearhead some sort of political settlement with al-Shabab despite its al-Qaeda association.

First, like Taliban, the U.S. cannot outlast al-Shabab militarily. In 2012, it has lost vast territories in southern and central Somalia including the port city of Kismayo and the experts were envisioning the group's demise. Al-Shabab is not going anywhere despite the

presence of AMISOM, Somali National Army (SNA), and the escalated American aerial campaign. Second, this war is financially unsustainable. The war is fought on African blood and Western goals and with the current economic downturn due to the Corona pandemic, the West cannot afford to bankroll a perpetual war; AMISOM drains annual cost of about US$1 billion and the U.S. government alone has spent over $2 billion combatting al-Shabaab since 2006 with no results to justify this huge outflow of tax-payers' money. One thing is certain: the U.S. has opened a can of worms and it no longer possesses the ability to exterminate it – only talking to al-Shabab will get America and terrorism out of Somalia, and it is sensible to do it now before losing more time, more wealth, and more blood.

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[1] Jahiliyyah The Oxford Dictionary of Islam

[2], [3] Hoffman, Bruce (1998). "Inside Terrorism" Columbia University Press. p.32 "Google cached copy

 [4] Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman Current Directions in Psychological Science Vol. 15, No. 1 (Feb. 2006), pp. 45–48

[5] Bockstette, Carsten (2008). "Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques" PDF. George C. Marshall Center Occasional Paper Series (20) ISSN 1863-6039.

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