

## The Cato Institute Study: Somali, Redux — A More Hands-Off Approach

Tuesday October 20th 2009, 11:02 pm

Filed under: [Africa's Annoying](#), [David Axe](#)

*The libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., commissioned this report examining potential new U.S. approaches to the Somali conflict.*



by DAVID AXE

The two-decade-old conflict in Somalia has entered a new phase, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the United States. The elections of new U.S. and Somali presidents in late 2008 and early 2009 provide an opportunity to reframe U.S.-Somali relations. To best encourage peace in the devastated country, Washington needs a new strategy that takes into account hard-learned lessons from multiple failed U.S. interventions. The old strategy favoring military force and reflexive opposition to all Islamists should give way to one emphasizing regional diplomacy and at least tacit acceptance of a government that is capable of bringing order to Somalia.

Whatever the Obama administration's approach to Somalia, it must avoid the failures of the Bush administration. The rise of a popular, moderate Islamic government in 2006 sparked an Ethiopian invasion, for which the United States provided key backing. Washington defended its support of the Ethiopian attack on the grounds that Somalia's Islamic Courts regime was actively harboring known members of al Qaeda, a claim that appears to have been exaggerated.

The resulting Ethiopian occupation of Somalia — in which as many as 16,000 people died — collapsed in early 2009 against the backdrop of one of the world's worst sustained humanitarian crises. Taking advantage of the political and economic chaos, hundreds of desperate Somali fishermen turned to piracy, making the waters off Somalia the world's most dangerous for seafarers.

With the Islamists' return to power earlier this year, under the banner of the new president, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Washington has a rare chance to reset bilateral relations. The Obama administration should work to build a regional framework for reconciliation, the rule of law, and economic development that acknowledges the unique risks of intervention in East Africa.

Somalia's best hope for peace is the moderate Islamic government that has emerged from the most recent rounds of fighting, despite early opposition from the United States and its allies. There are ways in which the United States could help Somalia escape its cycle of violence and peacefully encourage progress by working with this former enemy, but Washington should err on the side of nonintervention.

[Download the report.](#)

(Photo: via Cato)