

# Human Stability and Conflict in the Horn of Africa

Ms Julia Maxted  
Research Associate, Institute for Security Studies  
(ISS), Pretoria,  
South Africa; Lecturer, Geography Department,  
University of Pretoria, South Africa  
and Mr Abebe Zegeye  
Representative, University of South Africa,

## Introduction

The issues addressed in this paper relate to human security or, as we would prefer to call it, human stability, at the regional, national and subregional levels in the Horn of Africa. Specific attention is paid, first, to steps taken at the level of the African continent towards promoting increased human stability and the prevention of conflict in the region; second, to the development of a conflict-prevention agenda at the subregional level; and last, to steps that must be taken in order to realize these objectives.

Social scientists often feel the need to open discussions by defining key terms, because they find it difficult to communicate successfully even among themselves, let alone with people representing other disciplines. Thus we would like to explain why we prefer to use the term 'stability' rather than 'security'. One could define security as 'the guarantee of safety' as has often been done. One might further define the guarantee of safety as 'the political arrangements that make war less likely, which provide for negotiations rather than belligerence and which aim to preserve peace as the normal condition among states'.

The term 'security' has sometimes assumed sinister overtone in the sense of 'national security'. National security can refer to safety, the likelihood of the absence of war, and the likelihood of negotiations

rather than belligerence, but it can also refer to the preservation of peace as the normal condition for some people within society but not for others belonging to the same nation. National security as a term has also come to denote all purposes of defence, including preparations for belligerence, pre-emptive strikes and even any presumed 'vital' interest. As a result, policies of national security may precipitate insecurity rather than security by being the exclusive tools of those in power. Moreover, when measured against the reality of instability and insurrection, especially in the less economically developed countries today, speaking of 'guarantees' or 'near guarantees' of peace and stability appears to be unrealistic. Because such terms may be ideologically loaded in favour of the ruling classes, a more neutral term such as 'human stability' may take some of the heat out of the debate and add more light to it, hence our preference for the terms 'stability' and 'destabilization'.

The political climate in the Horn of Africa today is influenced by local political and social conflict not only in terms of specific histories and effects, but also in terms of their interaction with forces operating at a global level. The history of the countries of the Horn (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan) since the end of colonialism has largely been one of violent repression on the one hand and insurgency on the other. No matter how governments in the region came to power, in practically every case force has been the means of dislodging them. Succession by peaceful election has been the exception. Independent civil society organizations have proved to be ineffective counters to the power of the chiefs of state and their circles of intimates. The organizations have been banned outright, forced to go underground or carefully monitored to ensure that they are apolitical. In spite of these difficulties, civil society could have a profound influence on governments and military regimes in the Horn. Groups could organize by affinity (for example by age, kinship, gender, work and religion), and could include Church groups, associations of elders, youth groups and trade unions. On the other hand, governments may set constraints on their gathering in public places to pursue common ends.

The level of independence or autonomy of civil society is often regarded as a significant indicator of the degree of democracy in a country. Nation-states attempting to eliminate or control civil society often use authoritarian practices and policies to do so. They often try to create the illusion of a thriving civil society by creating their own official organizations, with a view to mobilizing the

population in public support of goals already formulated by the regime. The so-called GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) is a related phenomenon. Its specific task is to express public solidarity with the regime at international meetings, while claiming to represent civil society. In these circumstances, the intent of the state may be not to depoliticize civil society but to subjugate or disempower it.

This paper looks at the internal conflicts in the Horn of Africa in terms of the balance of power between civil society and the state. Conflict in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is located in a part of the African continent where struggles over economic and political power often take the form of ethnic conflict. This portion of the continent is underdeveloped. The socio-economic systems of the countries in it are often rooted in exploitative relations. Ethnic identities in this region, although they can be 'beneficial' to those ethnic groups that are in power, tend to be used to consolidate and serve the interests of the dominant at the expense of the less powerful groups. The contemporary destruction of the legitimacy and accountability of many of the states in the region results in part from the arbitrariness of their territorial boundaries, originally brought about by colonial partition and then 'transferred' to the local elite at independence. In these circumstances, overlapping ethnic identities between states, especially when used in the pursuit of power, often become a source of conflict rather than of unity. In the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of people have fallen victim to violent conflict and the vagaries of the dictators in the region. In their alienation from the state, many people have fled their countries and become refugees.

The states of the Horn of Africa are also undermined by acute environmental degradation. An ecological system made viable by cyclical drought has been further damaged by armed conflicts. Pastoralists and other hinterland populations have been among the primary victims. Desertification, drought, environmental degradation and a scarcity of resources have displaced large numbers of people, driving them across national borders as migrants or as environmental refugees. Apart from putting pressure on state boundaries, their arrival sometimes creates feelings of insecurity and intolerance in the local population, which now has to compete for scarce resources. This of course can engender xenophobia and conflict of various kinds in the populations of the receiving countries.

Internal social tensions and external pressure are combining to push people in the region towards cooperative 'groupings' which are better able to respond to the demands of the global economy. Technological innovations, although they have helped nation-states, are now helping to undermine national borders as capital and information flows show scant respect for boundaries. One of the main effects is that, no matter what the origin of social conflicts, it is becoming increasingly difficult to contain them using current state frameworks. The state crisis in Somalia, for example, indicates that a monopoly of power by one group with foreign sponsors may lead to government failure and civil war. Furthermore, in some African countries the distinction between crime and war is becoming blurred.

Many poverty-stricken followers of African warlords find membership of their rag-tag armies preferable to living conditions as civilians in their own countries. Facing such armed bandits, Africa's professional armies are often found wanting. Their budgets are often smaller, their equipment more out of date, their salaries late or unpaid. Morale is sinking. The advantage of war over mere delinquency is that it legitimizes in the name of 'justice' or 'revolution' the use of arms and violence to gain control over the resources of the state. Thus the regular armies of increasing numbers of African states have been defeated and replaced with striking ease by insurgent guerrilla forces whose members are drawn from their own citizens. A major problem for the new regimes thereafter is that even as they start building up new armies, they need to disarm and demobilize various other ethnically-based bands of guerrillas. The situation is further complicated by the need to recruit, train and organize new armies from among people who often remain ethnically polarized. Moreover, the colonial practice of recruiting for the army and promoting members of the 'smaller', less politically powerful ethnic groups has created one of the major sources of the instability plaguing army/state relations in post-colonial Africa. In effect, these relations have become unhinged to the extent that the geo-ethnic make-up of the group that wields military power need not coincide with the position of the group whose members claim the mandate to rule. In such a situation, old prejudices are susceptible to manipulation by elites.

These processes have created post-colonial instability in the region, and open the possibility that state boundaries as recognized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and now the African

Union (AU), may be altered in future. There is an inexorable growth in the list of provinces that have already detached themselves from central authority, with federalism and secession remaining viable options. Although secession as such has thus far been the exception, Eritrea is probably the most relevant example of a successful breakaway. More generally, communities that have suffered at the hands of dominant groups holding military and/or political power claim that their rights as groups should be recognized and that measures should be taken to satisfy their demands.

Having established some of the basic parameters of the often intransigent problems that face governments both in Africa and in general, we now turn to the Horn of Africa itself. People who live in this region have faced pervasive crisis for a very long time. Its dynamics originate at both the local and global levels. The people suffer from the impact of colonialism and authoritarianism, and the rule of those who try to manipulate the state in their own narrow interests. The crisis manifests in many different forms: civil wars, the violation of human rights, the suppression of civil liberties, abject poverty, famine, epidemics, debt problems, population displacement, ecological disaster and disenfranchisement. Marginalized social groups, including women, children, the elderly, the economically destitute and ethnic minorities, bear the brunt.

No end is in site to the crisis in the Horn. Attempts by groups both inside and outside the region to manipulate and control their states generate intense armed conflict among different social groups. These conflicts result in further depletion of resources already distributed unequally, they engender more violence, disruption of economic production and increased demographic displacement.

Eventually, the perennial disorder will destroy the social fabric by promoting militarization, tyranny and mutual animosity; over time it will produce a 'culture of warfare'. The region's bondage to world markets also contributes to the crisis: regional economies are disrupted by unequal exchange and exploitative relations with the West, and the formation of alliances between global capital and the region's economically privileged and ruling political elites.

Another relevant feature of the disorder in the region is the formation and disintegration of centralized states. On the one hand, the centralizing states are negatively affected by the crisis, which can lead to their fragmentation and failure. On the other hand, the states themselves contribute to the escalation of instability. Attempts to centralize the states in the Horn of Africa have often been the cause

of crisis because many of the political and armed conflicts in the region have been aimed at control of state power, which is a central conduit to power and resources.

The ruling political groups are seldom interested in power-sharing, while formally presenting themselves as promoting representative democracy. These rulers have become clientelist and sectarian, leaving no political space for disenfranchised and marginalized social groups, who often have no choice but to resort to resistance. Consequently, in the Horn of Africa the states themselves have become central elements of the crisis, largely through their incessant quest to centralize and concentrate power.

These states then produce and reproduce façades, seemingly so inextricably caught up in their own political practices that they cannot extricate themselves from the centralizing forces that they created. The only solution then is periodic disintegration of the states.

#### Strategic importance of the Horn of Africa

The region is of considerable strategic importance, even to nations far beyond its borders. There are three main reasons why it has attracted international attention for many centuries. First, it is strategically located: four countries in the Horn of Africa - Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and the Sudan - border two crucial sea routes, on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. These waterways are currently regaining importance in international maritime trade now that a number of Middle Eastern and Asian countries and the Russian Federation are trying to open new markets in Africa in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Moreover, Africa is emerging as a potentially lucrative market for Asian electronic technology, oil has been discovered, and globalization has boosted international trade. These factors have combined to make the Horn of Africa an important region in the international economic arena of the twenty-first century. The Sudan has potential as an oil producer, while the country has significant water reserves and an agricultural capacity that could make it a meaningful contributor to regional development once it attains internal stability. Ethiopia, with its huge water reserves and human resources, can also be considered a possible contributor to regional prosperity, should its internal problems be resolved.

The region also has the most diverse religious and ethnic grouping

in Africa. In view of the tendency for ethnic and tribal wars to erupt throughout the region, this situation requires careful management. Most of the residents of the Horn of Africa espouse Sunni Islam as 'their religion' and most of them can trace their origins to the Middle East.

With its radical religious politics, the region is likely to witness the rise of Islamic radicals trying to impose their version of Islam on others, as has already been the case in the Sudan and some parts of Somalia. The emerging rivalry between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam on the east coast of Africa might well pose a threat in some countries of the region.

Finally, the Horn of Africa has significant agricultural potential. The source of over 80% of the waters of the River Nile and its tributaries, the region could achieve economic prosperity should its leaders assign top priority to making peace. However, representative political participation and economic stability are two major prerequisites before the region can become part of an integrated African economy, even more so now that African decision-makers are putting in place the economically strategic New Africa Initiative.

From the short description given above, it can be deduced that discussing war, peace and development in the Horn of Africa is a daunting task that requires a separate critical analysis of the situation in each country. There is no scope in this paper for such an analysis. Instead, we examine the major source of instability in African countries (the inappropriateness of the Western notion of a centralized state), and address instability, conflict management, prevention and resolution. Identification of the mechanisms available to individuals handling peace and war in this volatile region are often the crucial issues at stake in such analyses.

Western statist theory as a source of instability in Africa

At present, the economic sovereignty of many of the states in the Horn of Africa is being undermined by emerging patterns of globalization. At the same time, banditry and informal cross-border trading networks are growing. A further threat to state autonomy stems from the growing militarization of conflicts. As states become more unstable, low-level warfare, famine, deprivation and political crisis overlap. Those nominally in control of the state are unable to provide security for their citizens, cannot provide the basis for economic improvement, do not fully control their territory and are unable either to co-opt or defeat their opponents. Economic pauperization

and an ideological vacuum, arising in part from the erosion of human rights and the uglier side of nationalism, are giving rise to a proliferation of religious cults and extremism. This is forcing a redefinition of social cohesion and civil space.

Many of Africa's social problems arise from a misconception among Western analysts regarding the construction of centrally organized states. It has been claimed that the centralizing state is universally applicable 'regardless of differences' in social structure and culture of countries. Moreover, the idea of the state as an embodiment of order has been contrasted with its absence, namely an undesirable state of disorder. The Hobbesian conception of the 'state of nature' as a state of anarchy has informed this contemporary political theory of the state. However, many statist scholars (and subsequently state elites) have failed to come to terms with the construction of the centrist state in Africa. According to statist theory, centralized states, together with global forces, emphasize similarity rather than heterogeneity as part of the human condition. Under this rubric, it is claimed that rationality will pull in those people who were traditionally excluded, leading eventually to an identity of interest between all members of society. However, this theory does not address the need of groups to maintain ethnic and religious identity.

The notion of creating a rational order implies the construction of homogeneous nation-states, national identities, centralized bureaucracies, unified legal systems with a set of formal laws and the institutionalization of market capitalism as the only rational economic system. These, it is claimed, represent 'civilized society'. The state's task is to centrally enforce all these features under a 'rule of law'. One of the primary functions of the state is therefore to maintain law and order. The rule of law comes to represent value-free, neutral, institutionalized power relationships. Interpreted in this manner, the rule of law is elevated and becomes a universal benchmark identifying deviance in all societies, regardless of specific traditional polities.

The concept of the rule of law does not explain changes in the law or its differential application. Consequently, the relationship between alterations in state structures and legal rules remains blurred, as the sanctity of the rule of law is invoked in both appropriate and inappropriate instances. The rule of law fails to explain how concepts of legal equality have changed, for example in the granting of legal status based on gender, ethnicity, race and age. It does not even address discretion in law enforcement or punishment. The statist

approach is universalist and imperialist, but has major self-negations embedded in it. In spite of these, it has been imposing its monolithic conceptual scheme in every part of the world. This includes employing naked force or technologically enforced violence, up to and including genocide. However, the statist approach may also impose itself through diffusion of ideas and training, as well as by indirect rule through co-opting indigenous modern elites.

The ultimate design of Western statist theory is to establish 'universal order' through the central state, an assumed potential order the state itself inherently lacks. This lack is borne out by the catastrophic conflicts taking place among the various alternative state systems. The indices referred to, based on Western constructions of the concept of 'disorder' rather than 'diversity', are now employed by the New World Order as justifications for extermination under the façade of progress.

## Conflict prevention

It is clear that the countries of the Horn of Africa remain, even today, full of conflict and the potential for conflict. What can be done to help? The remainder of this analysis is devoted to answering this question. One of the main consequences of conflict is coerced population movement, creating the need to protect displaced persons at the local, national, regional and international levels. A comprehensive conflict-maintenance system has three functional objectives. The first is the political aim of averting conflict, or at least defusing it in its initial stages through trust-building, coalition-building and negotiated settlements. No conflict-prevention mechanism can be maintained without a viable early-warning and risk-assessment system. Protection for displaced persons should be ensured.

Most African states and regional actors do not have systems in place either to warn them of conflict or to undertake risk assessment. African regional actors such as the OAU are, however, attempting to develop systematic conflict-prevention capacities. One problem is their inability to adequately predict and respond to conflict. This has, in contravention of the spirit of the OAU Refugee Convention of 1969, inhibited their ability to provide protection to displaced persons and prevent population displacement. Subregional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the

Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) exhibit the same inability to prevent conflict because they too lack early-warning and risk-assessment capabilities.

Unless host states and humanitarian actors are supplied with sound information about the location, direction, number and immediate needs of refugees and internally displaced persons, the principal function of the OAU Refugee Convention - to establish a firm legal standard for refugees and ensure their safety and security, thereby decreasing the likelihood of future mass population displacement - cannot be met.

### Conflict management

The conflict-management objective is, by virtue of being most integral to the physical and legal protection of displaced people, the most important. In this context, it works towards preventing the escalation of refugee flows and the protection of internally displaced people. The political objective of conflict management is to promote trust and confidence and ensure peace, security and stability with respect to displaced persons. The aim should also be to minimize the escalation of conflict and to provide humanitarian assistance and case-specific solutions.

A great shortcoming of the OAU has been its inability to manage conflict. Greater emphasis on anticipatory and preventive measures and concerted peace-making and peace-building can, however, lessen the need to resort to complex and resource-demanding peace-keeping operations. Of late, the OAU and IGAD have become more concerned with developing and enhancing their conflict-prevention capabilities, with both being in the process of establishing early-warning and risk-assessment capabilities.

As an interesting aside, perhaps UNESCO might facilitate a project aimed at providing risk assessment and an early-warning system for Africa, starting with the Southern African region and later expanding its activities further north.

### Conflict resolution

The political objective of conflict resolution is to maintain and

sustain peace by building or rebuilding civil society and state institutions to allow for transparency and accountability. At this level, the aim should be to negotiate agreements on the return of displaced persons to their home states and/or places of habitual residence.

The international community, and the United Nations in particular, has a poor record of safeguarding the rights of forcibly displaced people in Africa. African states themselves have a far better record in this respect. Africans appear to be the most committed and best suited to safeguard the rights of Africans, but they lack the financial and logistical resources to provide adequate protection.

The OAU, ECOWAS, SADC and IGAD have all engaged in conflict resolution, with varying degrees of success. The OAU and ECOWAS appear to be the most active in this respect. Although, owing to the technological and military assets at its disposal, SADC appears to have the greatest capability to engage in long-term conflict resolution, all four organizations remain hamstrung by limited resources.

There is as yet no African mechanism that permits individual refugees to bring claims against host state governments or combatants for violating their human rights. Until such structures are instituted, the international community would be well advised to question the authenticity of attempts by African governments and regional actors to tackle problems associated with the plight of displaced persons.

## Conclusion

Where does all this leave the Horn of Africa, with its pronounced propensity for conflict and displacement of people? It is clear that Africa has few resources available to help the region. It is also clear that authoritarian statism has been the rule rather than the exception in the Horn of Africa during the past four decades, and that this has been fostered by international capitalist interests.

There is much speculation about what the future holds for the region. It is still characterized by early mortality, poverty and illiteracy. The short-term solutions most often proffered are greater state influence in the region, more law and order practices based on the Western model, and an increased military presence to quash insurgency and rebellion. However, these solutions come at the

expense of the development of civil society, the search for consensus and a respect for diversity. They tend to exacerbate strife and conflict, despite their apparent concessions to the rule of law, order and security.

The Western response to internal conflict (sometimes termed 'lawlessness') has been to promote and encourage the development of law and order institutions, which often take the form of a strong central military apparatus, larger and more secure prisons, technology to improve surveillance and monitoring, and practices such as 'swift and certain' sentencing, more aggressive policing, curfews and austerity measures. Such law and order antidotes to African 'lawlessness' have the effect of strengthening the officially recognized state regime in each country at the expense of dissenting political views, minority groups and civil society. Indeed, in essence the externally imposed Western model has promoted authoritarian statism in the Horn of Africa despite its putative commitment to democracy, equality and individual rights.

Accordingly, the West cannot delude itself into thinking that it is capable of taking the lead in building or rebuilding civil society in any of the countries of the Horn of Africa. The situation in Somalia bears witness to the disastrous effects of such a strategy. While the international media now point to the \$30 billion spent on the 'humanitarian' mission of the early 1990s and the atrocities committed against Somali civilians by American, Belgian, Canadian and Italian military contingents during the mission, these disasters are only a small proportion of the devastating losses.

This analysis has suggested a number of principles that should be applied when trying to formulate any lasting solution to the conflict in the Horn of Africa:

- Greater democratization needs to be established in the area, especially in the sense of avoiding all forms of authoritarian/hegemonic rule both within and between states.
- A regional cooperation plan, based on present functional contributions to the region rather than on historic conflicts, should be established for the whole of the Horn of Africa.
- The history of conflict in the region as a whole, as well as smaller parts of it, should be used as the guiding principle in formulating any plan for regional cooperation.
- In any plan for regional cooperation, there should be firm and clear sanctions against any form of power dominance, whether by individuals or groups. Instead, the principles of minimum government intervention and equal representation of all in central

institutions should apply.

- A looser form of federal cooperation between states and within governments, with no single state being dominant and no government having the opportunity to assume hegemony over other parties or groupings within its own state, is worth considering for regional cooperation in the Horn of Africa.
- There should be no assumption of cohesion between the regions or within the states of the Horn of Africa in formulating a plan for cooperation between and within states in the region.
- Closely allied to the previous principle, the inclusion of all identifiable interest groups (at least cultural, religious, economic, social and political groups) needs to become a prerequisite in any plan to establish regional cooperation in the Horn of Africa.
- Because Western nations have achieved minimal success in allaying conflict in the Horn of Africa, and have in fact exacerbated the situation, through colonial rule, African nations need to take the initiative in formulating and applying any cooperation plan for the region.
- All Western attempts to interpret internal conflict in the Horn of Africa as 'lawlessness' should be vigorously resisted when formulating a cooperation plan for the region, because perceptions of the conflict as the product of disorder rather than diversity undermines the legitimacy of the struggles fought in the region over centuries.

In view of what has been discussed regarding the future of the Horn of Africa, internal solutions should be sought. The promotion of civil society organizations, kinship structures, social safety nets such as hospices and mutual aid, the independent resolution of disputes and sharing of common resources, may all help to steer the countries of the Horn of Africa in a new direction. This direction would be informed by the lessons learnt from the region's pre-colonial past. Perhaps then the Horn of Africa may become a model for drawing positive results out of the complex historical dialectic of external order and internal conflict. On the other hand it should be recognized that, in the short to medium term, no modern state can afford to ignore the demands of global capitalism. These demands can take many forms, but require the meeting of relatively uniform economic requirements in order for any country or region to become part of the system and share in its benefits. In the Horn of Africa, regional affiliations (of whatever nature, but including close economic