

The Disintegration of Somalia: Will the Logic of Crisis Management Continue

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Somalia was left to its fate, or so it seemed, until it was necessary to deal with the external consequences of conditions within the country, specifically piracy and the consolidation of terrorist organisations. Hence the global dimension of the Somali crisis has come to the fore. However, the tragedy of the Somalis manifests itself in many spheres, most obviously in the lack of a system of order, the absence of basic necessities of life, the violation of human rights, the flight for refuge in Europe, and the brain drain, along with environmental problems, economic decline, and the loss of a collective national identity. So is the world capable of solving the problem of Somalia, or will the option of “crisis management,” which is predicted to lead to more bloodshed, prevail?

In November 1949 the United Nations recognised the independence of Somalia, although the country remained under Italian trusteeship. On June 26th, 1960, the British protectorate of “Somaliland” in the north declared its independence; five days later, Italian Somalia gained independence and united with Somaliland. Thus one can argue that Somalia’s post-independence modern political history got off to a faltering start. In 1967, Adam Abdullah Osman, the country’s first post-independence president, lost the elections and power was transferred to Abdul Rashid Ali

Sharmarke, the father of the current prime minister. Two years later, President Sharmarke was assassinated, to be succeeded by Mohammed Siad Barre. In the midst of the Cold War, Barre chose to side with the Soviet Union; however, Moscow was to abandon Somalia in 1977 in favour of Ethiopia, ruled at the time by the communist Mengistu Haile Mariam. In the late 1980s, Italy was plunged into an internal political crisis and was no longer able to fill the void created by the breakup of the Soviet Union. And when American forces entered Somalia in 1992,

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according to an agreement with the United Nations and under the cover of humanitarian intervention, Rome was caught utterly powerless.

The government of President Siad Barre collapsed in 1991, worn down by armed groups that were established on tribal foundations. In the absence of a government to run the country and in the state of “war of all against all” in which various factions became embroiled in conflicts over food, land and moral or symbolic standing, a peculiar state of affairs emerged. The very existence of Somalia as a country became subject to doubt: famine grew rampant, the humanitarian situation deteriorated, citizens fled from acts of violence, and many in southern Somalia began to fall victim to starvation.

Somalia – in particular the southern part of the country – continued to exist in a state of chaos under the domination of rival warlords, despite various Arab and regional attempts to set up a government. However, in 2006 the dynamics of conflict were to undergo a significant shift when the Union of Islamic Courts took control of Mogadishu. The Union came about gradually, from the heart of the traditional Islamic groups, as a result of the exigencies of running life in the displacement camps and the need to settle disputes.

Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, an Islamic moderate and head of the Union of Islamic Courts, was elected interim president of Somalia in January 2009 under the Djibouti Agreement on national reconciliation. His election divided the ranks of the Islamic Courts between the “moderates,” whom the international community is able to contain, and the radicals, who have been placed on the United States’ terrorist lists.

The election of Sharif Sheikh Ahmed also led to a sharp clash between the president and the Islamic groups, led by an organisation known

as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (the Movement of Warrior Youth), which demands the enforcement of Shari’a law and the departure of foreign forces from Somalia. At the time, there were 5,300 soldiers from Uganda and Burundi among the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces in the country, stationed at vital facilities in the Somali capital and the presidential palace. These forces assumed the task of resisting al-Shabab and stopping them from striking the government of President Sheikh Sharif, to prevent Somalia from falling prey to Al-Qaeda, and ultimately slipping out of control. The al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen movement is considered to be the strongest and most highly trained armed group in Somalia. It has adopted the method of suicide attacks to eliminate its political adversaries. It is a Salafi-jihadist organisation that evolved into its current form over several phases from the early 1990s onwards. Its structure is not based on tribal affiliation but rather on ideology.

Al-Hizb al-Islami (the Islamic Party) – another armed Salafi group – is allied with the al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen movement under the leadership of Hassan Dahir Aweys in the fight against the transitional government and the AMISOM forces. This is, however, a temporary, fragile alliance that has seen various battles that have not yet escalated into a full-blown conflict. There is a sharp contrast between the positions adopted by the two organisations towards sensitive issues, including external relations. Al-Shabaab has announced its ties to Al-Qaeda and seeks to globalise the conflict in the Horn of Africa, while the Islamic Party puts forth a local vision that stops at the establishment of an Islamic government to enforce Shari’a law and ridding the country of interference from neighbouring countries and the West. There are indications that hundreds of foreign volunteers, particularly from the United States, Europe and Central Asia, are fighting among the ranks of al-

Shabaab al-Mujahideen, which means that Al-Qaeda has penetrated directly into Somalia.

In early 2009, the Harakat Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a (The Movement of the Sunni People and Community), an armed Sufi movement loyal to Ethiopia, decided to take a stand against the al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen fighters, and succeeded in obstructing their expansion towards the central and northern regions of Somalia. The movement set about administering the regions that fell under its control, in cooperation with United Nations officials and local tribal elders and with the benefit of the support and assistance of the local population. It eventually entered into an alliance agreement with the transitional government in Addis Ababa on March 15th, 2010.

The Phenomenon of Disintegration... and Awareness of the Problems

Somalia stands on a total of over 638,000 square kilometres and has a population of roughly ten million people. After the unification of two of its regions following independence in 1960, it is now experiencing a "crisis" of fragmentation and internal cleavages with the activation of various sub-identities. In practice it has become three large regions (semi-statelets) that are registered by international organizations, namely:

1. The Republic of Somaliland, which occupies the north-western regions of the country. A British protectorate prior to independence, Somaliland is bordered by Ethiopia and Djibouti and is home to the vital port of Berbera, which looks out over the Gulf of Aden, and has as its capital Hargiesa. Currently run under President Dahir Rayaale Kahin, Somaliland announced its secession after the fall of the regime of Siad Barre in 1991. Neighbouring

states, Western forces, and international organizations deal with the secession of Somaliland as a *fait accompli*, although it has not been formally recognized by any state in the world. It enjoys a high degree of stability and has effective state institutions and political parties that compete for power.

2. Puntland, which falls within the federal government but enjoys self-rule, is located in north-eastern Somalia and overlooks the Gulf of Aden. It has the longest stretch of Somali coastline and as such its shores witness frequent piracy operations. It has effective state institutions and is currently headed by President Abdirahman Sheikh Mohammed. With Garowe as its capital, Puntland is home to the Port of Bossaso, which borders the Gulf of Aden and is in proximity to the coast of Hadramaut (Mukalla). International organisations are active in these two vast areas, which do not harbour armed military Islamic factions. However, their security is sometimes infringed by explosions, as in October 2008 when the al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen movement sponsored bombings in Hargiesa and Bossaso.
3. The southern and central regions, which are made up of eight provinces that hold approximately two-thirds of the population of Somalia and contain its fertile agricultural land and the rivers Jubba and Shabelle. These provinces are also home to the capital, Mogadishu, a small area of which the government of President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, as well as the international airport, seaport, and presidential palace is secured by Ugandan and Burundian armoured cars and government forces. It also contains the city of Beledweyne (in central Somalia, located 340 kilometers north of the capital, and held by al-Shabaab

al-Mujahideen and the Islamic Party), Baidoa (220 kilometers west of the capital and the former seat of president of the federal government Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, who announced his resignation on December 29th, 2008, thereby clearing the way for the new president, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed), Kismaayo (located 500 kilometers south of the capital and an al-Shabaab stronghold), and Jowhar (the capital of the central Shabelle region, situated 90 kilometers north of Mogadishu). The power of the Islamic factions extends as far as the Ethiopian and Kenyan borders. Most of these provinces are divided between al-Shabaab and the Islamic Party, with the exception of some districts in the region of Galgaduud in the center which are controlled by the Sufi Ahl al-Sunna faction. As the wars have intensified, there has been an increase in displacement and emigration to Kenya and Yemen via Puntland over the Red Sea.

Today discussions are being held over the establishment of more federal entities, the validity of arguments justifying secession (in the north), and over the ideal mode of government: whether it should be central, federal or Islamic. The current reality indicates the sway of fragmentation and secession options – even if in the guise of federalism – given the persistent rounds of conflict in some of the country’s southern regions, which have become an incubator for warring groups. Meanwhile, some areas are experiencing a phase of “crisis adjustment” and recouping some capacity to control political events. They have conducted initial experiments in development in partnership with foreign organizations and through the actions of citizens, which have resulted in some forms of economic development and improved governance mechanisms.

One could argue that Somali society is now entering a phase of “awareness of problems,” marked by acknowledgment of problems and efforts to deal with them in a rational manner. This is crucial to the formation of political awareness that will set the stage for a phase of managing the conflict between the various constituents of society and their problems of coexistence.

The Manifestations of the Crisis and Diagnostic Analysis

Numerous internal factors have played a part in creating and aggravating the problem. At the political level there is the effect of the colonial legacy, the failure of the liberal democratic experiment, the single-party dictatorship, the monopoly on power, and the retreat of the state’s authority and sovereignty over its territory, amidst an escalating struggle for power. At the economic level, emphasis is often placed on the poverty and economic weakness of Somalia, which is manifested in various sectors (agriculture, industry, trade and services). At the social level, the analysis has focused on causes such as the spread of tribalism, the precedence of sub-state loyalties over loyalty to the state, and the lack of the social infrastructure necessary to establish and maintain the modern state. One could add to these factors other reasons, including the religious schisms that followed the period of dominance by the Islamic Courts from 2006.

Regarding the failure of the modern state in Somalia, it should be indicated at the outset that the concept of the modern state is a complex one, particularly when multiple tribal and religious elements interact with it. Some states are categorized as failed according to criteria that focus largely on development, human rights, and the state’s ability to exercise control over its territory. The failure of the modern state in Somalia can be attributed to several

factors, the most important of which are the following¹:

- The mechanisms of the modern state did not come to Somalia via self-development, but were a colonial legacy. When the Somali political parties demanded the departure of the colonizer, they were unaware of the scale of the threats they were to encounter. Their sole concern was to overthrow colonialism, to sit on its throne and to live its life, without a political class taking shape with the experience to identify where the shortcomings lied. State-like structures are worthless if there is no local vision to sustain them.
- It was the small number of intellectuals educated in the culture of the colonizer who appropriated the colonial legacy, and then devoted themselves to accumulating wealth and milking the government like a cash cow. They assumed government office as a way of participating in legitimized plunder, amid administrative corruption and lack of supervision to curb the embezzlement or theft of public funds.
- Finally, “politicized tribalism” played a role, released from the controls of traditional customs by its interaction with the politics of the colonizer and by being used as a means of achieving personal or factional ends.

Moreover, researchers regard the concept of the state as alien to the nomadic Somalis. Their state as it existed between the years 1960 and 1991 was an exception that endured by virtue of foreign aid and the military might of the regime of Siad Barre. Some have found that regional and local entities suffice to run the country, and that foreign assistance must be directed towards them. They conclude that GDP is not enough to consolidate a modern state, and that a state of this kind will remain dependent on the

¹ Mohammed Ashour, “Reasons for the Somali Problem,” article published in *Islam Online* on October 1st, 2001.

international community. However, the majority of Somalis, who gained their independence before most African peoples, are confident that they can regain their sovereignty because other African states have been able to do so.²

So why are the Somali people afflicted by conflict, given that they are ethnically homogeneous? We may find an explanation in the state of tribalism that dominates political life. However, the historical explanation cannot be overlooked, given the discrimination against the north during the era of Siad Barre. The Somali people have never known the entity of the state; most of them are herdsmen who accepted the state in 1960 as a means – and not as an end – of achieving Somali national unity and in order to acquire the five principalities, including Djibouti, the NFD region, and Ogaden. When the state failed to realize this dream, chaos unfolded among the tribal and other factions.³

The Experience of Dictatorship: A Bad Model

Following independence, during the era starting with the revolution of 21 October, 1969 and lasting until 1991, Somalia had a negative experience of governance. While the period of socialist rule had all the characteristics of a military regime and the shortcomings of an authoritarian state, the “revolution” maintained its mask through outward maneuverings such as constitutionalism, elections, the protection of freedoms, the foundation of trade unions, legislation, and equal opportunities. In other words, the Somali government lived a life of psychological and behavioral schizophrenia: the

² Abdullah Sheikh Mohammed Uthman, *The Civil Conflict in Somalia*, The King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies, Riyadh, p. 107.

³ Dr. Nasr Ibrahim, former Dean of the Institute of African Studies in Cairo, conversation with the *Ikhwan Online* website, June 26th, 2006.

context of events that followed the fall of the regime demonstrates the validity of this harsh judgment. Thus in a state of this type, the political violence and extremism, undisclosed activities, seeking of protection from abroad, and the dangerous retreat to tribalism, doctrine, ethnicity or culture, are not surprising. The avenues of law, impartial institutions, equal citizenship, and hopes for the transfer of power have all been blocked to individuals and groups alike. Somalia has come to resemble many other states whose societies are incapable of safeguarding them from external threats and foreign interference. The state became preoccupied with the interests of the ruling group and forgot to consolidate and order its society. Weakness, fragmentation, and conflict have gained the ascendancy, rendering Somali society incapable of protecting or supporting the state, which is exposed both externally and internally.

Today, as a result of the duration of the crisis, the Somali people have lost the ability to control events, the environment and even their own conduct. The crisis has produced effects that are entrenched deep within the psyche of citizens, and that have altered their view of the state itself and its functions. Citizens do not regard the state – as is the norm – as the guardian of their interests, and view making demands of it to provide for the essentials of life as futile. The ceiling of demands made by citizens has dropped and is now confined to stability, security and reconciliation. The government is a fallen, bare entity from which protection is not expected.

The International Community: Managing but Not Resolving the Crisis

Because Somalia has come to represent a major moral challenge in today's world, and since no one is now immune to being burned by the effects of the neglect and the failure of the state

– as with the emergence of the problem of piracy – the search for a solution is now of greater importance than ever.

One can grudgingly argue that the international dimension is what is currently catalyzing the current search for solutions. Meanwhile, however, thousands of Somali dead have been ignored, along with the millions of Somalis who have been displaced over the years. The international community did not intervene to save the hundreds of thousands of Somali children who lost their lives, or those who have lost their futures. It paid no attention to the thousands of hectares that were burned, decimated, and stricken by drought, or to the thousands of miles of coastline that have been polluted by the dumping of toxic and nuclear waste. And as a result of the state's failure, Somalia has lost control and sovereignty over its territory, and is ultimately turning into an arena for an open conflict between the United States and Al-Qaeda. The collapsed country has fallen victim once more to its distinct location that attracts international attention.

It is, though, legitimate to question why the solutions to the Somali problem that have been proposed by international organizations have been ineffective. With all the conferences being held for Somalia, and with all the relief and aid funds worth millions of dollars being allocated to the country, why does the crisis remains unresolved and why do the Somali people face yet more misery and suffering day upon day? Since the collapse of the central government, over fifteen international conferences have been held, while more than five governments have been formed and a succession of five presidents has taken office in the space of less than two decades. And they have all ended in collapse and failure.

On February 1st, 2010, a “Pact for Somalia” was published.⁴ The document reveals the international community’s policy towards the country. It states, “the time has come for multilateral action that focuses on resolving the crisis in Somalia, rather than simply managing it,” continuing, “we are faced today with a potential chain of crises linking the Horn of Africa with the situation in Yemen, and that could also reach Afghanistan. And with the increase in military action in Afghanistan, reports indicate that increasing numbers of terrorists are moving to Somalia and Yemen. It is also believed that radical groups in Somalia have established close links with other groups in Yemen, which currently hosts approximately one million Somalis. In addition, incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Aden further fuel instability in the region.”

The joint statement sets out two courses of integrated action for Somalia. The first applies to the short term and stipulates that priority must be given to the achievement of security and humanitarian aid. It demands the reinforcement of the Somali security forces, support for AMISOM, and stepped-up efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the Somali people. The statement adds that a comprehensive, strategy must be formulated with clear references and a timetable for achieving stability in Somalia. It states that this strategy might be launched at an international conference to be held this year, for which careful preparations must be made. Such a conference should involve the countries of the region, the African Union, the Arab League, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and should send out a clear indication of support from the international community to the Somali government.

⁴ “Pact for Somalia,” a dispatch distributed by the Secretariat of the Arab League following a meeting between Secretary General Amr Moussa and Franco Frattini in Doha.

As it is no longer possible to differentiate what is taking place in Somalia from the international and regional conflicts of interests in the Horn of Africa, the achievement of internal reconciliation depends on the degree of consensus possible through the provision of international and regional support necessary to stabilize the current government. The further prolongation of this period of ineffective government institutions – in place since 1991 - gives those who are gaining from the crisis the opportunity to repeat the process of overthrowing governments. In this context, it is possible to take advantage of certain regions in Somalia (including Puntland and Somaliland) that are experiencing relative stability and have made great strides forward in local institution-building. The task is more complex with regard to the Somali capital. Certain basic conditions must be fulfilled, the most important of which is the existence of a serious international interest to ensure that the option of “solving the crisis,” rather than merely managing it, prevails. Conflict management is the dominant approach because the various actors seek to bolster their influence in the country and have become involved in a competition based on multiple incentives, first and foremost geostrategic considerations. Finally, while the eradication of Al-Qaeda has become an arduous and complicated task, it might be made easier if the regional and international interventions that Al-Qaeda feeds off and uses to justify its presence in the Horn of Africa were to cease. Should such a climate and degree of will transpire, a space for civil society institutions, intellectuals, religious scholars and the traditional leadership would open to play a complementary role in tipping the balance in favor of constructive efforts. If not, given that none of the parties to the conflict is able to score a decisive military victory, the state of uncertainty and instability will continue to be the most prominent feature of the Somali landscape for the foreseeable future.