

Reflections on Somalia, or How to Conclude an Inconclusive Story

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I. Introduction

Recent popular accounts of Somalia remark upon yet another Kenyan-based peace initiative; a resurgence of armed conflict in Mogadishu; an admission by the Ethiopian government that it has embarked on military incursions into Somalia; a dispute between the self-declared states of Somaliland and Puntland; and another pending humanitarian crisis in one or more regions of the country. In many respects, these media accounts from and about Somalia could have been written five years earlier except that the stories have much graver political and even military stakes and consequences in the new post-September 11 era. While some of the broad issues concerning Somalia persist, the specifics of political wrangling and alliances, civic movements, and peacekeeping strategies and outcomes constantly change. Indeed, Somalia remains a story that is very much unfolding, and one in which today's accounts quickly become *yesterday's news*. The political and social contexts are so fluid that some of us are hesitant to pencil conclusions for fear that they will be invalidated in a matter of weeks or perhaps even days. Furthermore, the complexity and hidden histories and texts underlying many political issues in Somalia discourage definitive scholarly positions, especially by non-Somalis.

Nonetheless, during the past three years, I undertook the contradiction-laden, often frustrating task of bringing closure to my own research and writing about Somalia, which spans about eighteen years. In recently completing the book *Somalia: Economy Without State*, I try to synthesize a process that is still in the making.¹ The book tells the story of what has occurred in a region of southern Somalia since the govern-

ment's collapse in 1991. It portrays this narrative through the lens of two important segments of Somali society, traders and pastoralists, and through one significant activity, cross-border trade. Yet even with this restricted agenda, writing about Somalia has been as paradoxical as the country itself. Since the collapse of any vestiges of a central government, it has been difficult to match my own accounts of Somali social and economic life with the descriptions of chaos, hunger, and anarchy that frequently appear in the Western media. Assessing a situation that has been so badly misrepresented — while not meaning to condone it — is equally problematic. Depending on one's perspective, Somalia can invoke both elements of economic optimism (a free-wheeling, stateless capitalism) and political pessimism (a Hobbesian example of anarchy and violence). The book challenges stereotypes of anarchy, "tribalism" (clanism), and economic doom by showing that the Somali economy and governance did not collapse with the departure of the United Nations and other international agencies in the mid-1990s. The fact that Somalia proved to be less of a social and economic "basket case" than popular and "expert" accounts portrayed it to be was a strong motivating factor for completing the book.

In this short essay, I address a set of issues that are especially pertinent and often hotly debated in Somali studies, yet without adequate context they can be easily misunderstood. With only a cursory "read" of the Somali situation, these misunderstandings can lead to disastrous policy prescriptions and misdirected interventions, as witnessed in the case of U.S. and UN efforts in the country during the 1990s. I will also use this opportunity to pose a limited set of questions that stem from my book, some of which can only be partially answered at this point.

II. How Unusual is Somalia?

In some respects, the Somali case, in which a recognized government has not existed for more than twelve years, is unprecedented in the post-World War I era of states and nations. Nonetheless, the Somali case holds important lessons for large parts of Africa and the rest of the world, including central Asia, where stateless or near-stateless conditions prevail. In many of these regions, local communities have had to resort to their own devices while defending themselves against brutal warlords, global opportunists, or other extremists. In such cases, the so-called informal or "second" economy takes over and begins to account for much larger proportions of the economy than that of wage

earners, registered companies, and official businesses. It is said that in the northwest borderlands of Pakistan, illegal trade is so formalized that there is even a shopping center with a “branch” of the British department store Marks and Spencer, “selling a range of the retailer’s (smuggled) own-label goods.”² And all of this takes place in Pakistan, a country that by African standards has a reasonably strong central government, a fairly robust formal economy, and a well-developed military force. On the African continent, this brings to mind the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. On a less spectacular scale, the domestic economies of Ghana, Mozambique, and Tanzania have also witnessed a partial collapse during recent periods when the formal sector accounted for very little real economic activity. Thus, even without a government, it may be more accurate to view Somalia’s stateless economy as an extreme along a continuum of formal to informal (or legal to illegal) commerce rather than as a distinct case. It is a question of degree, not difference.

Throughout my book, I give examples of how Somalia is exceptional in many respects, but not qualitatively different from other regions where states are shallow and weak, and formal economies are moribund. Here again, a non-Somali example illustrates this point. In the case of volatile Liberia, Stephen Ellis points out that the presence of an internationally acknowledged state does not mean government treasuries, national banks, and other official bodies can be any more trusted to guarantee transactions than elsewhere.³ These bodies often operate like informal institutions, with the state having almost no control over their activities. In environments like this, distinctions between formal and informal or official and unofficial are meaningless, even when recognized forms of governance exist. As Beatrice Hibou suggests, the lines between legal and illegal in weak states are extraordinarily blurred: “the division into formal and informal spheres is thus not a useful distinction in Africa, since illegal practices are also performed in the formal sector, while so-called informal economic networks operate with well-established hierarchies and are fully integrated into social life.”⁴ Many African states are officially involved in the “unofficial” export of commodities, such as diamonds and ivory, while illegal businesses operate in the open, often with the implicit support of the state.

What is particularly interesting in the Somali case is the fact that the lack of a recognized government and of national institutions, such as a treasury or judicial system, has not totally discouraged legitimate

international firms from dealing with Somalia or its breakaway states in the north. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC), a well-known pillar of European journalism, has established a formal affiliation with one of Somalia's new media companies. Even British Airways, one of the world's largest airlines, has an affiliate airline that serves Somaliland. As noted in various reports, the transnational firm Dole Fruit, Inc. did not hesitate to take advantage of the absence of a state to exploit Somalia's rich banana sector.⁵

III. What Really Surrounds Clan Hostilities in Contemporary Somalia?

Writing about clans and clanism in Somalia is problematic since it is one of the most heated areas of debate in Somali studies and very difficult to accurately capture.⁶ How does one acknowledge the reality of clan-based politics and hostilities in contemporary Somalia without relying on outdated, empirically flawed notions of clan loyalties and primordial attachments? The segmentary kinship principle of political alliances and trust has always been present in Somali politics, but has assumed more significance recently as faction leaders have deliberately used clanism ("genealogy") as a political weapon. Clans and their territories, in turn, have become forcibly isolated from each other, and their interactions restricted by armed factions. This forced isolationism intensifies hostilities and mistrust between groups. In short, clanism is a reality in Somalia but it is primarily shaped by the larger political/historical context and the vicious politics of greedy opportunists.

For outsiders and journalists, the notion of clan is to perceptions of Somali life what "tribe" is to recent, post-September 11 stereotypes of Afghan politics. These customary units are said to overwhelm all other forms of identity and to symbolize a primitive, uncompromising commitment to ethnic loyalties and an inherent resistance to rational politics and modern governance. That current hostilities and political discourses are expressed in terms of clans and ethnicities sheds little light on the reasons for rural- and urban-based violence or for the frequent reshaping of Somali identities in response to changing external situations. Why have particular identities based on clans or sub-clans (invented or real) emerged only in the past decade and why has most of the conflict focused on urban centers and their control? Instead of searching within "traditional" Somali social structure for explanations

each time a new (or old) clan identity or alliance is expressed or invented, one must examine the external power relations and the material benefits associated with such changes, which have been exceptionally dynamic since 1991.

There is little doubt that the proliferation, fragmentation, and, in some cases, consolidation of clan identities has been strongly influenced by the presence of outside, resource-rich groups, such as the United Nations and Western development agencies. These held static, traditionalist definitions of *clan*, and the necessary resources to reinforce the stereotypes. External agencies frequently worked within a clan idiom themselves, often insisting on proposals from clan “elders,” even when some of these were covertly militia heads.⁷ The number of acknowledged clans quickly multiplied in response to such requests and opportunities, and some of these clan leaders were disguised warlords who claimed to have clan support.

While clans could be united on one front — for example, vis-à-vis external threats by other clans and outsiders — they easily segmented when negotiating representation and benefits along clan lines. This pattern of consolidation and fragmentation, which is the core principle of a segmentary kinship system, was exactly what happened in response to the U.S. armed attack on Mogadishu in 1993, and its aftermath. The United States misunderstood the importance of the segmentary principle on that tragic “Black Hawk Down” day in October 1993, when eighteen American soldiers and several hundred Somalis died.⁸ The U.S. assumed that once it isolated the warlord Farah Aideed, the populace of Mogadishu would not challenge its forces. However, segmentary political systems aggregate, not divide, when confronted by outsiders. At that time, a divided Somali population unified in opposition to what was perceived as an external threat, even though at one level they were supportive of attempts to capture misguided warlords.

Although Somalia’s decentralized political structures draw on the segmentary clan idiom, the society has not descended into barbaric lawlessness or tribalism, as some predicted. In fact, there seems to have been a “re-traditionalization” of kinship and clan structures and a reinvention of social structure in general, as Somali politicians now openly incorporate the “traditional” into political structures. New leaders of the Transitional National Government (TNG) and the break-away state of Puntland in northeastern Somalia have done this by utilizing customary clan-based assemblies and forums and carefully allocating political posts among different clan segments.

In these volatile, risky times, is it unusual for Somali traders and others to rely on their extensive kinship ties and on members of their own clans? These social strategies are very common in contemporary Somalia, but also increasingly characterize informal trade elsewhere in Africa and between the continent and other parts of the world. For example, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga show how kinship (and religious) relations are important to a specific recent trade circuit, the Congo-to-Paris market, that is important for the DRC.⁹ Kinship and clan-based relations are reflected in the regional and international trading diasporas that are so important for Somalia. As in other parts of the world, they aid traders and consumers in gaining access to markets, finance, and information during periods of both boom and bust. Clan-based ties also assist the global trade and remittance networks that have kept the Somali economy afloat. Somali traders and transporters are found throughout East Africa and well into Central Africa and the Middle East (Dubai, Oman, and Yemen) and Europe. These networks have grown in significance with the implosion of the Somali state. A “Greater Somalia” of trade and finance networks has expanded beyond the Horn of Africa to encompass parts of the Middle East and to link numerous international cities to Somalia. Ironically, a Greater Somalia based on trade and transport has been achieved, while a Greater Somalia political state — comprised of Somalia, Somaliland, and Somali areas of neighboring Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti — is now more unrealistic than at any point during the past forty years.

Thus, the difficulty in writing about clans in contemporary Somalia is to avoid sounding like a primordialist or tribalist, while still recognizing the reality of clan-based factions and hostilities. It is true that clans play a role in today’s Somalia and they have greatly shaped local politics and commercial activities (including cross-border trade), but this is only because the larger political context compelled it. The same can be said of the politics of race relations and hostilities in the U.S. or of ethnicity in the former territory of Yugoslavia. Both cases have also been greatly fueled by macropolitical processes. Unlike in the African cases, however, terms like *tribalism* have rarely been used to describe the political situation in the U.S., the Balkan region, or elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

IV. How to Assess the Social Costs of Statelessness

In *Somalia: Economy Without State*, I discuss pastoralists and traders in Somali society, and certain sectors (i.e., trade) that have fared relatively well in the post-1991 era, especially when compared to other social groups and activities. Had the book focused on minority groups in Somalia or on other economic activities, the story would have been different. The reasons that, in the past twelve years, Somali pastoralists have been less seriously impacted than other populations stem from multiple factors. These include:

- With their mobile livelihood system, herders were able to escape some of the violence and destructive behavior of the warlords. When confronted with problems, they could move to another location, a strategy that sedentary farmers and urbanites could not follow.
- In the past, pastoralists were not very dependent upon government services and goods, so that when the state failed, they were less affected than others. Herders maintained more autonomy than others, while government extension services, development programs, and imported technologies rarely benefited them.
- Because so much of the violence and destruction since 1991 has been in urban centers and in key agricultural zones, pastoralists were able to avoid these areas. In fact, the obliteration of large-scale irrigation schemes and other investments in prime grazing zones, such as the Jubba River Valley, may actually have benefited herders by opening up additional dry-season grazing.
- Herders of southern Somalia were already heavily involved in transborder commerce outside of government controls, so when the state collapsed, they were able to continue this activity. However, export market activities in the south were negatively impacted and this has clearly hurt many large-scale traders and wealthy herders.

After 1993, the nutritional status of most population groups, including pastoralists, improved throughout the country, except in local pockets of conflict. Nutritional surveys during 1994 to 1997, “reported generally low rates of malnutrition in most areas of the country (e.g., 3–10 percent),” and among nomadic groups, global rates of malnutrition were similar to prewar levels.¹⁰ According to these findings, pastoralists are usually only vulnerable at the end of the dry season, when

milk and meat production are low. In the same report, it is noted that Somali pastoralists are, "generally healthier than other groups because they are more adaptable, have ready sources of milk and meat (except during periods of drought), and usually take water from sand-filtered water."¹¹ The Famine Early Warning Systems (FEWS) program, in assessing a potential famine in the Jubba Valley, reaches a similar conclusion: "the nomadic population seems not to suffer hunger as the sedentary farmers."¹² It should be noted that the nutritional situation on the Kenyan side of the border is probably equivalent, if not worse, than the condition in southern Somalia. Global rates of malnutrition along the border in the Mandera District, Kenya, have been recorded as high as 57 percent during the most recent drought.¹³

Significantly, livestock trade and traders have prospered in many parts of the southern borderlands and Somalia generally, challenging the popular images of a collapsed Somali economy. The so-called unofficial trade to neighboring countries has grown, permitting certain groups of Somali traders to weather extreme economic and political uncertainties. Indeed, the government's collapse has clearly been good for the transborder cattle trade with Kenya and the merchants associated with it. It has been less lucrative for average herders in the region, but even they have benefited, especially those located near the Kenyan border. As a commodity, livestock has features that make it amenable to cross-border trade even in situations of widespread insecurity. It is a mobile, high-value commodity that can be transported overland rather than confined to roads, and can be easily moved across borders, a practice that local pastoralists have engaged in since international borders were first demarcated. These characteristics do not hold for most agricultural commodities in the region, which usually require road transport to be commercially viable. Moreover, livestock prices in southern Somalia are less volatile than prices for grains and cereal products. The southern and central Somalia border areas have a major grain deficit, and prices for imported wheat flour and rice can increase astronomically in only a few months. In risk-prone Kismayo, for example, the price of maize more than doubled from February to April 2000.¹⁴ Insecurity and conflict can create artificial food shortages and high prices, but have less impact on livestock prices.

It is important, however, not to equate the relative success of certain segments of Somali economy and society with an overly rosy picture that all is well in Somalia. That simply is not the case. Large segments of society continue to endure terrible deprivations; public institutions

in health and education are largely destroyed; the political situation in the country is still extremely volatile; and brutal faction heads (warlords) have too much influence and military clout. In addition, large numbers of Somalis remain outside of their homeland, many in refugee camps in neighboring countries where conditions are deplorable. Indeed, the large number of Somali refugees and the rapid growth in the Somali Diaspora are telling indicators that all is not well at home. The Somalia paradox has had some “winners,” but it has also had many, many losers, especially women, children, and minority populations. Highlighting segments of the population (traders and herders) and an activity (transborder trade) that attained some successes in the 1990s does not mean that a Somalia without a government has been good for society as a whole or represents a basis for a political solution.

An apt illustration of this point is the plight of the Gosha people. They are the Bantu descendants of former slaves and indigenous agriculturalists who reside in large parts of the Jubba Valley. Their servitude is said to have persisted well into the 20th century, often at the hands of Somali pastoralists, and later on they suffered terrible discrimination and loss of land during the Siyaad Barre regime.¹⁵ Large tracts of their rich agricultural lands were seized in state irrigation schemes during the 1970s and 1980s without any compensation, while powerful Somali politicians randomly expropriated their farms for private purposes, either evicting the Gosha families or turning them into tenants on their own land.¹⁶ Almost immediately after the state’s collapse different militias pillaged their farms and possessions and violently brutalized the populace. Thousands of Gosha perished from famine and physical attack, while others sought refugee status outside the country or in the numerous camps of Kismayo town.¹⁷

On a lesser scale, the same can be said of urban and settled Somalis. After the state’s collapse, urban services and institutions not only disappeared, but warlords stepped in to fill the political vacuum, as they have in other feeble states. Most of them have acted as vicious strongmen who use force and violent means of extraction for economic gain. With the establishment of the Transitional National Government (TNG) in Mogadishu in 2001, the power of the warlords was weakened for a short period. Unfortunately, the renewed attention to Somalia after September 11 clearly opened up “space” for certain warlords and political actors who were increasingly out of the country’s national picture in early 2001. The strong anti-terrorist posturing among warlords

and others has been predictable, if not sadly ironic. Employing the dual specters of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, some faction chiefs have capitalized on Western (especially U.S.) suspicions about the TNG by inaccurately accusing the fledgling government of hosting radical Islamists and terrorists in its ranks. The current context for political reconciliation holds less promise than it did pre-September 11.

V. Is Statelessness Good for Somalis and Somalia?

The book *Somalia: Economy without State* documents some rather amazing phenomena that have occurred in the country in the absence of a government. Some of these are discussed above, but others include the persistence of a relatively stable Somali currency in the 1990s, innovative advances in telecommunications and financial services that have provided the cheapest consumer rates in East Africa, and spectacular increases in live animal exports in some parts of northern Somalia (Somaliland). In light of this, does Somalia need a central state again? Should Somalis and the wider international community allow the country to be fragmented into a series of mini-states? I fervently hope that *Somalia: Economy Without State* is not misread as an endorsement of a certain type of political system; for example, one without a strong central government. Without taking a particular position on the question of the breakaway states of Somaliland and Puntland, let me note some of the reasons why a strong Somalia state is needed:

- *Securing Boundaries against Neighboring States:* Ethiopia has sent its army into Somalia on more than one occasion. Its cordial commercial and political relationships with the breakaway state of Somaliland are at least partial responses to a general disfavor for the TNG with its quest for a unified Somalia. Moreover, the Kenyan government continues to intermittently close its border with Somalia, with disastrous impacts on commerce for southern Somalia. The Kenyan government has implied that it will not engage in a border agreement until Somalia has a legitimate government.¹⁸
- *Protecting its Natural Resources:* Somalia's only two perennial rivers, the Jubba and Shabeelle, flow from the Ethiopian highlands. Bilateral agreements are needed to insure that dams or other impediments are not constructed in their catchments. In addition, massive deforestation to fuel charcoal exports, uncontrolled fishing by foreign fleets, and suspicions of toxic chemical dumping along the

coast are strong environmental reasons why a central state is needed.

- *Negotiating Trade and other Agreements:* Some external state or other body is needed to protect the livestock industry from import bans and horrendous diseases like Rift Valley Fever, and to help it find alternative export markets. Somalia has been subject to devastating import bans from Saudi Arabia because of fears of such animal diseases. Without a unified campaign to confront trade and animal health problems, Somalia's regional (even global) importance in animal trade may come to a screeching halt in the very near future. Even the informal cross-border trade with Kenya is threatened by an unhealthy reliance on one market, Nairobi. A formal campaign by a government to seek alternative markets is required in order to reduce this dependency.
- *Public Institutions for Health and Education:* There is little doubt that without a government, school enrollment and public health services will continue to decline to abysmal levels. In the latter case, public health institutions have been destroyed and the ability to control diseases like cholera and malaria is virtually nonexistent. Health services were minimal in southern Somalia during the 1980s, but at least there was a government to rally international assistance and organize vaccination campaigns. In terms of education, the lack of opportunities partially explains why warlords have been able to extensively recruit from among the youth. Often armed with kalashnikovs (AK-47s), the Somali youth have lost an opportunity to acquire the skills needed to rebuild institutions and industries and to compete regionally.
- *Decreased Reliance on Outsider Assessments and Assistance:* During periods of natural disasters, local communities are dependent upon emergency assistance from NGOs and donor agencies. Local populations continue to confront a fatigued and increasingly unsympathetic donor community from which to seek aid. They also must rely on external assessments and studies to rally international support, and they have little control over the data that is used to assess their own welfare.

VI. Why the World should Care about Somalia

Despite the obvious ethical and moral reasons for caring about Somalia, there are other factors to be considered. Some governments and organizations view statelessness in Somalia and other ungoverned spaces as threats to global security because they harbor threatening diseases, international crime rings, and uncontrolled weapons markets.¹⁹ What is often forgotten, however, is that the “arms culture” in Somalia was initially fueled by massive amounts of U.S. military aid in the 1980s, which totaled more than \$150 million, and by the former Soviet Union’s assistance programs in the 1970s.²⁰ It is hardly coincidental that many of the states (including Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) that figured so prominently in U.S.-based support in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s are those very countries that are terribly conflict ridden and internationally ostracized today. Almost overnight, small states like Somalia no longer seemed to matter after the end of the Cold War.

There is abundant evidence worldwide of how impoverished populations can lose confidence in their nation-states and their “modern” apparatus, encouraging lots of potential “Somalias” in Africa and elsewhere. In 2000, civil strife raged in at least seventeen African countries (including Somalia), a staggering number that has destabilized large parts of the continent, spurred a major exodus of asylum seekers to the West, and reduced foreign investment to a trickle. This alone should be motivation enough for the international community to care about Somalia.

For better or worse, the territory of Somalia is not situated in political isolation, either from its neighbors or from the larger international community. As the previous examples illustrate, the motivations of these external parties are not always benign. Although the absence of a state has not had a particularly devastating effect on certain segments of the population or economy, without a state, Somalia will have problems protecting its resources, sovereignty, and economy.

Notes

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1. Peter D. Little, *Somalia: Economy Without State* (Oxford, U.K.: James Currey Publishers, and Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003).
2. *The Economist* 1995: 36.
3. 1999: 185.
4. 1999: 80.
5. Nduru 1996.
6. See Samatar 1992; Besteman 1996 and 1999; Lewis 1998; and Helander 1998.
7. See United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) 1993.
8. Bowden 1993.
9. 2000.
10. UNDP 1998: 21.
11. *Ibid.*:42.
12. Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) 1996:3.
13. FEWS 1999:3.
14. FEWS 2000: 3.
15. Menkhaus 1989.
16. Menkhaus and Craven 1996.
17. See CARE 1994.
18. IRIN 2001.
19. See Menkhaus 2001:17.
20. See Rawson 1994:164.

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