

Stabilization and Common Identity: Reflections on the Islamic Courts Union and Al-Itihaad

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I. Introduction

Portrayed as a failed state and characterized by years of conflict and disaster, Somalia has been the center of much research. Issues ranging from scarcity to piracy have been investigated and discussed. In the search for solutions some issues have been highlighted while others have not been adequately addressed. This intervention focuses on the question of identity because this issue negatively impacts the experience of the Somali people. The remarkable transition from clan rivalry toward relative stability under the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 should be examined in order to understand whether the emphasis on religious identity (Section VI) could potentially overcome the clan-based conflict. Before elaborating on ethnic and clan identity (Sections IV and V), some theoretical principles are introduced (Section II). Considering the failure of secular nationalism (Section V), the ICU umbrella successfully united the Somali people under the values of their shared religion. Unfortunately, this so-called Golden Age lasted for only six months. Hence, it is hard to say whether or not the common religious identity had gained ground against clan identity. Thus, the creation of a legitimate and representative government will only succeed when the question of identity can be appropriately approached.

II. Theoretical Introduction to Identity

According to theorists of group-based social identity, an identity system depends on the social context.¹ Abrams adds that some social

categories can be relatively strong across time and situations.² Turner emphasizes the principle that each identity is shaped as a result of an individual's membership in an in-group, which is in opposition to or in comparison to members of an out-group.³ Islamic Somalia versus Christian Ethiopia, Clan X versus Clan Y, and Islamists versus secularists—these are some of the contrasts that have influenced specific identities for Somalis. But which group is the most important? Which group is on top of the “ladder” for the individual? Is it the group of ‘ethnic’ Somalis, the clan, or the group of Muslim brethren? Depending on the answer to these questions, relationships among the Somali people can be ascertained. In contemporary Somalia we find that a feeling of “Somaliness” is latent but also very weak. Somaliland, which is virtually populated, in addition to other significant kin groups by the whole Isaaq clan (part of the Dir), has been *de facto* independent since 1991.⁴ A similar project has been established in Puntland, which is inhabited by a majority of the Darood clan.

Brown explains, “the ethnic community is constructed around perceptions of cultural sameness that are assumed, by its members, to derive from a common ancestry.”⁵ In this sense, the Somali people do share common traits and beliefs by virtue of a common ancestry. However, differences in lifestyle and language have led some scholars to conclude that the Somali people ought to be divided into various ethnic groups. Assuming that the Somali people form an ethnic nation requires a specific approach in the search for stability, an approach that is different from the one that claims ethnic diversity in Somalia.

Is there an authentic Somali nation or is group particularism too strong to unite the Somali people under one flag? To answer this question, Max Weber's distinction between “ethnic group” and “nation” is very useful.⁶

In Somalia there is a sense of “sameness,” a feeling of belonging, but this only contributes to the “sentiment of ethnic solidarity”⁷ and not necessarily to nationalistic feelings. In other words, the Somali people are bound together as an ethnic group, but have had too many internal differences to become a nation. The separation of Somaliland and Puntland demonstrates this point. In Barker's words, “a nation must be an idea as well as a fact before it can become a dynamic force.”⁸ Connor points out that when analyzing sociopolitical situations, what ultimately matters is not “*what is*” but “*what people believe is*.”⁹ Therefore, this article will evaluate the importance of ethnic, clan, and religious

identity with the aim of examining the identity question in the search for stability in Somalia.

III. "Somaliness," Clan, and Religion: A Somali Eternal Triangle

"*Sheikh tolkiis kama janno tego*" (Even a holy man, faced with the choice of paradise on the one hand, and loyalty to the clan on the other, would without hesitation choose the clan over paradise).¹⁰ This Somali saying summarizes one of the basic problems of Somali society. The traditional clan structure can be seen as a pervasive disease that infects the whole Somali society in its striving for stability. As long as the identification with the clan is perceived as primordial, the unification process will remain complicated.

Emphasizing differences always entails the danger of coming into conflict with the "other." Next to the clan identity almost every person living in Somalia identifies himself as being Somali and as being a Muslim. Consequently, the clan, Somali, and Islamic identities are the three principal building blocks of a unique identity in Somalia.

IV. Ethnic Identity in Somalia: One Ethnic Bloc or Ethnic Diversity?

By sharing the same culture, religion, and language, the people in Somalia seem to have elements that can and should unite them.¹¹ However, this statement needs to be nuanced. Historically, an academic debate has continued between the *Homogenous* and *Heterogeneous* schools of thought.¹²

Scholars of the Heterogeneous school argue that the Somali society is multi-lingual based on the fact that languages like Maay, Jiidu, and Dabarre are spoken alongside the well-established Mahaa (the official Af Soomaali).¹³ The division between Maay and Mahaa is historically interwoven with two separate ways of living. Originally the nomadic-pastoralist Somalis use Mahaa, whereas Maay is the language of the agro-pastoralist people who originally lived in southern Somalia. Although there is a difference in lifestyle and language, the classification into different "ethnic" groups is not as apparent.

The Homogenous school of thought, which is the most accepted one, minimalizes these "small" differences.¹⁴ This claim can be supported to some extent. Firstly, Mahaa became the national language and is the most widely known today. Secondly, it is debated whether Maay and Mahaa are different languages or rather are dialects.¹⁵ Thirdly, all

Somalis share a religion and overall culture (clan structure included). A more detailed theoretical discussion lies outside the scope of this analysis, however.

If, as the Homogenous school of thought claims, the Somalis are a nation, then why is it such a divided one? To answer this question we need to understand the influence of Somali clan structure. Clans and sub-clans are very important structures of protection and social security in a country that has known very little stability in the past years. Most of the literature about Somalia uses the term "clan" instead of "ethnic group" or "tribe."

Whereas the terms "clan" and "tribe" are sometimes used interchangeably, we should not talk about "ethnic group" when describing the different configurations of the Somali people. Nevertheless, there are some minorities that can be legitimately described as separate ethnic groups. Groups with Bantu and Arab descent are not fully recognized or completely accepted as minorities by other Somalis. Rather, they are seen as members of clans in order to assimilate them into this structure.¹⁶

Contrary to external distinctions such as language, culture, and religion, Lewis refers to "invisible differences" to mark clan delineation in Somalia.¹⁷ "Visible differences" like ethnicity and language were hardly presented as reasons for conflict as all Somalis, minorities included, are integrated within the clan system. Hence, a focus on clan tradition is more relevant.

According to the Homogenous school of thought, we have to conclude that the majority of the Somali people are one ethnic group with the belief in a common descent. Somalis claim a common descent from Quraish, the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed.¹⁸ This claim also reflects the high value attached to Islam by all Somalis. Another belief in a common descent refers to the two main branches of the Somali nation: the Samaale and Sab clan-trees. Sab and Samaale are believed to be the ancestors of the agro-pastoralists and the nomadic-pastoralists, respectively. Hence, Hiil, the alleged forefather of Sab and Samaale, is seen as the ancestor of the whole Somali "nation."¹⁹

V. Clan Identity in Somalia

A. Clan Family, Clan, Sub-Clan and *Diya* (*mag*)-Paying Group

For all Somalis, genealogies define the belonging to a given clan.²⁰ Lewis stresses the importance and particularity of clans as follows:

This form of social division...produces what appear to be 'natural' distinctions...this is, consequently, a very powerful cultural construction of socio-political identity since, by definition, it flows in the blood and must be taken for granted.²¹

Further elaborating on the above-described division between Sab and Samaale, this section aims at giving an overview of how the Somali clan system works. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a clan can be defined as "A kin group used as an organizational device in many traditional societies." Membership in a clan is traditionally defined in terms of descent from a common ancestor. This descent is usually unilineal, or derived only through the male or the female line. In Somalia people claim descent from a common ancestor and trace their blood relationships through the male line.²² A Somali expression that explains this patrilineal clan identity is *Xayn iyo xiniin*, meaning the cloth and the testicles: "What is expressed is that paternal relations are like the testicles, they are essential to a man, whereas links through women (e.g., a mother or wife) are like a cloth which can be thrown off without diminishing the whole."²³

There exist six main clan-families in Somalia. The Digil and Mirifle, both known as Rahanweyne, are regarded as belonging to the Sab clan-tree. Together, the Dir, Darood, and Hawiye clan families form the Samaale clan-tree.²⁴ Furthermore, "Each of these clan families breaks down into a number of clans...and each of these segments into smaller sub-clans...Sub-clans are composed of primary lineage groups and within each of these are the *diya*-paying groups, each of which can act as a corporate unit and as such are the most meaningful and binding level of the clan system for most people."²⁵

A *diya*-paying group is indispensable in the clan system as the most stable political unit. "It is a small corporate group of a few lineages who reckon descent to a common ancestor...and is sufficiently large in numbers to be able to pay the *diya* [or blood money] if need be."²⁶ According to Somali customary law, "no man receives or pays com-

pensation individually.”²⁷ There has to be solidarity among the group’s members. As a member of the group, the individual is both “insurer and insured.”²⁸

Traditionally, clans competed over scarce resources, such as land and water, in order to support their nomadic or agricultural lifestyles. Therefore, a code of conduct to settle disputes, known as *xeer*, was needed.²⁹ Thus, the *xeer* organizes the relationships between different *diya*-paying groups.³⁰ Note that *xeer* in a broader sense also refers to the whole body of Somali customary law, in which these agreements play an important role.

B. Clans, Conflict, and Politics

1. “Overcoming” Clan Disputes to Defeat a Common Enemy

History teaches us that the feeling or belief of being one united ethnic Somali group has been used to mobilize different clans in a struggle against a common enemy. Meanwhile, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the colonial administration, as well as the Siad Barre regime, planted seeds that provoked clan rivalry.³¹ Both in the strife against the colonial rulers and the uprising against Barre, the clans were able to join forces with the common goal of establishing the best Somali way of life. Clans have always been accustomed to local self-government and have never appreciated a highly centralized government for the whole country.³² Simultaneously, the “divide and rule” techniques initiated, first by the colonizers and later on by Siad Barre, intensified the pre-existing antagonisms between the clans.

2. The First Common Enemy: The Colonial Powers

During the colonial era, the Somali clan tradition was indirectly threatened by the politics of the colonizers. The Italians and the British sought to establish a central government based on European premises. Although they did not neglect the clan system (by recognizing the clan elders), the clans began to feel threatened in their particular lifestyles. Accordingly, the political system introduced by the colonial powers became a common enemy for all the clans.

In the Italian Somaliland regions, the divide-and-rule policy existed in the promotion of the nomadic clans from the Mudug and Majertinia regions as elites.³³ This established elite group preserved its power in

the post-colonial period: "Somalia's early post-independence administration was marked not only by a period of competitive democracy but also by pervasive corruption and nepotism based on clans."³⁴

Mahaddala confirms that "Somali anti-colonial nationalism" was nourished by a "national conception of traditionalism," but that it "was built primarily on concrete grievances against the colonial regimes." He also attests that the strongest mobilizing factor was "found in the shared experiences of a common enemy."³⁵

3. The Second Common Enemy: Siad Barre

On October 21, 1969, a coup led by General Siad Barre was successful. Siad Barre, a member of one of the elite clans, became president of this totalitarian regime. Although the regime promised to end "tribalism," an even more polarizing clan-based structure was constructed.³⁶ Barre's famous "MOD" (Marehan, Ogaden, and Dolbahante) alliance symbolized his manipulated clan politics.³⁷ By the end of his rule, Barre's clan-polarizing policy was intensified in a final attempt to retain power in Somalia.³⁸

4. Conclusion: Clans are Sometimes United, but Mostly Divided

Some scholars have defended the case of Somali nationalism. Although the Somali people share some common factors that could potentially fuel nationalistic feelings, it does not mean that this necessarily happened. So far these common "national" features—such as language, culture, and religion—have been underemphasized. What is important is "*what people believe*."³⁹ This essential psychological bond has to be fulfilled if you want to speak about a nation. Shared language, culture, and religion are elements that *can* facilitate the creation of such a psychological bond, but they do not guarantee the existence of a nation. On the other hand, nationalism is not necessary to create peace. Decreasing conflicts by focusing on what unites people can already begin to facilitate a pacification process.

Fundamentally, it seems that the nomadic clans (particularly the Darood and Hawiye, have always dominated the political scene in Somalia. Clan-based politics, clan favoritism, and discrimination generated tensions and strengthened clan identity. Nonetheless, attempts to reject the whole clan system can be discovered when reflecting on Somali history. Remarkably, the struggle against a common enemy

caused the clans to overcome their differences (although only temporarily). Shortly after the Second World War, in the struggle for independence, Somali nationalism appeared for the very first time.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, this ideal ceased, as clan affiliations became fundamental in post-independence politics.

When the joint Somali forces defeated Barre, inter- and intra-clan conflicts soon arose again. The power vacuum led to competition to gain the upper hand and ended the unity among the clans. Arguably, divisive tendencies between clans have always been beneath the surface.

Soon after Barre was displaced, it became clear that the divide-and-rule strategy had contributed to the pre-existing rivalry.⁴¹ What followed was a brutal civil war that lasted for almost twenty years, destroying the country completely.

Not only does the clan system clearly include ethnic minorities, it also carries a certain hierarchy that has been abused in the past to claim power. It is notable, as scholars such as Kusow have acknowledged, that certain narratives and ideas about history have shaped the way different clans and groups look at the question of power in Somalia.⁴²

Collectively, the factors outlined above reveal that Somalia has a tradition shaped by differences that cannot be erased even by taking into account unspecified nationalistic feelings. In other words, based on a vision of "Somaliness" that has not been specified or agreed upon, a sense of unity will not be strong enough. Mahaddala describes this as a weak sense of nationhood:

As a traditional society, Somalis did not develop or cultivate these 'national' peculiarities enough to emit those transcendental values that cause people to coalesce and gel together as a nation. To this day, they exist in the mind of the average Somali as empty shells devoid of contents and meaning.⁴³

Only by revisiting the complex history of Somalia and redefining every group's position would it help to create a harmonious sense of unity for all the inhabitants of Somalia. As this would require the almost impossible task of reshaping the political landscape, it seems rather improbable that this could immediately happen. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that tensions are only intensified, due to instability and insecurity. Consequently, society tends to return to the deeply rooted clan structures that have organized social and political

life historically. Unfortunately, this vicious circle of conflict and instability seems impossible to breach.

Providing an incentive to move away from the deeply entrenched inequalities that are grounded in tenacious group affiliations is the only way to create an environment where Somalis can unite. In other words, reconstructing the social identity of the Somali people would help to address the problem of contested identities, strong group affiliations, and inequalities. Efforts to create a representative federal government and Islamic institutions, for example, can be seen as modest attempts in that direction. In both cases, the leaders of these initiatives thought they could redefine Somaliness and overcome internal differences.

Another way to create unity among this divided nation is by appealing to an undeniable common identity shared by all Somalis, namely, the Islamic identity. The greater significance of religion in this case could be emphasized if people would distinguish between the universalism of Islam and the particularism of their clan or ethnic group. In an effort to provide alternatives to corrupt governance, Islam has been used to orchestrate certain institutions, the Islamic Courts Union being one of the most representative in this matter.

VI. The Islamic Identity in Somalia

A. Somalia: An Islamic "Nation"

Somalia has a "unique role in the history of Islamic Africa: as the only country in the whole continent whose population is virtually all Muslim."⁴⁴ From a historical perspective, Islam has already demonstrated its unifying power in Somalia. Much like the Arabs, the different groups in Somalia became "organized and found leadership in the Prophet Muhammad and his succeeding Caliphs."⁴⁵ After the fall of the Islamic empire, the centrifugal force of clanism was revived.

As a consequence of clan politics and the prevailing clan system, Somalis primarily had to consider their own clan identity. Nonetheless, one must notice that both the individual and collective identity of Somalis is marked by their religious beliefs. Islam already started to spread throughout Somalia during the first century of the Islamic calendar.⁴⁶

By examining religious identity and elaborating on political Islam in Somalia, we will compare the "glory period" of the ICU with the

previous findings. Bearing in mind that clan differences used to be overcome by appealing to the Somali “national” identity, we want to find out how this differs from the “Islamic uprising.”

B. A Religious Identity

Religious identity should not be confused with religiousness or religiosity.⁴⁷ While religiousness and religiosity refer to the participation in religious activities, religious identity specifically addresses religious group membership regardless of religious activity. Some scholars of ethnicity, such as Nash and Geertz, have repeatedly perceived religious adherence as an integral part of ethnic identity.⁴⁸

In many societies ethnic and religious divisions correspond. However, as Jacobson argues, “it can by no means be assumed that religious identity is necessarily subsumed by ethnic identity.” Rather, it might occur that members of a certain group presuppose that their religious and ethnic dimensions present different and “in some ways incompatible modes of self-definition.”⁴⁹

Although Islam maintains teachings about brotherhood and prohibits the indiscriminate killing of other Muslims, the clan tradition in Somalia has always had the upper hand. Violence and instability were inextricably linked and created an environment where protection of the clan became the most salient occupation.

Until today, Somali politics primarily have been clan-oriented, or at least perceived as being so. In this context, governments fail to be supported by all the clans. Emphasis on shared religious values could perhaps provide different groups with the incentive to shift their perception and stop the blind focus on kinship.

C. An Alternative for Clan-Politics: Political Islam. The Rise of Al-Ittihaad-al-Islamiya and the System of Islamic Courts

The recent history of political Islam in Somalia begins in the mid-1970s. During this first stage, political Islam began as an underground movement due to the repressive Barre regime. Among other reasons, the *raison d'être* of this movement was fueled by the failure of secular nationalist ideology. After the displacement of Siad Barre in 1991, religiously inspired initiatives began to emerge. Two parallel developments shaped the shift towards political Islam in Somalia. In a context of civil war and anarchy, Al-Ittihaad-al-Islamiya and the Sharia courts

provided alternatives and security where clan structures could not. In both cases the common religion played a fundamental role in creating new power structures. This phenomenon would reach a climax in 2006 when the highly supported Islamic Courts Union virtually controlled the whole of southern Somalia and successfully united Mogadishu after sixteen years of conflict.

The high level of security and stability attained by the ICU led external observers, such as Barnes and Hassan, to conclude that this was a Golden Age for Somalia.⁵⁰

1. The Al-Ittihaad Experience

In 1991, Al-Ittihaad-al-Islamiya, which was not organized through clan power, secured its first political success by gaining control in some strategic areas. Al-Ittihaad's general approach can be illustrated by looking at the case of the city of Luuq. Unlike factional militia, the Islamists earned respect among the population for their honesty and open attitude towards international relief. The Luuq hospital can be cited as an example of their good organization and accountability. At that time, hospitals in almost all other regions of Somalia were plagued by corruption and theft.⁵¹ The replacement of customary law by Islamic law and the introduction of free Islamic education embodied Al-Ittihaad's vision.

Confrontations with members of the local Marehan clan highlight how difficult it was for Islamic organizations to position themselves outside the clan system. Efforts to overcome clanism by adopting Al-Ittihaad members of other clans in the governing body of Luuq were not appreciated by everyone. It provoked resistance from the Somali National Front (a secular Marehan faction in the region), who opposed a "foreign front taking control."⁵²

2. From Local Sharia Courts to the ICU

Parallel to the Al-Ittihaad movement, local Sharia court systems were developing in different parts of Somalia. Significantly, there were four important motives behind the creation of these courts.⁵³ Firstly, the *de facto* borders that demarcated areas inhabited by rival clans could be removed as the courts' militia defeated several warlords. This was especially favored by Somali businessmen, but was also supported by other civilians who could finally travel safely again.

Secondly, faction leaders could maintain public support by providing higher levels of security and stability through the Sharia courts system. Healthcare and education became a top priority, crime was reduced, and environmental regulations were implemented.⁵⁴ Even piracy was virtually eradicated during the six months of rule by the ICU.⁵⁵

Thirdly, the courts system lent itself to preventing inter-clan conflicts. Fourthly, for Islamists the courts served to promote the Sharia as the basis for an Islamic state.

One of the first Sharia courts emerged in north Mogadishu in August 1994.⁵⁶ Founded by the locally dominant Abgaal sub-clan of the Hawiye, this court succeeded in restoring law and order. South Mogadishu had to wait until the death of warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed, who strongly opposed “Islamism,” before a Sharia court could be created. Just like in the north of the capital, the dominant clan of the area founded the court. Despite the essential clan roots, the south Mogadishu court was more driven by ideas of political Islam than the north Mogadishu court. In particular, the membership of some former Al-Ittihaad militants was decisive in the shift towards a more Islamist agenda.⁵⁷

With the establishment of the Islamic Courts Union in 2000, the first “significant non-warlord-controlled Hawiye military force”⁵⁸ became a reality in south Mogadishu. In the light of the long history of clan politics this achievement was a milestone.

Three years later, Sheikh Sharif Ahmed revived the Sharia courts system in north Mogadishu after local warlord Ali Mahdi had dismantled it in 1996.⁵⁹ By the end of 2004, all the north and south Mogadishu courts were united under the umbrella of the Islamic Courts Union and expanded their power. Similar to the example set in Mogadishu, other regions of Somalia were also inspired by the experience of Sharia courts. Hiran, Middle Shabelle, Mudug, Nugal, and Bari were some of the first regions to follow the north Mogadishu trend.⁶⁰ Tired of the many conflicts and insecurity, local communities and their key actors saw the Sharia court system as the ultimate remedy.

Obviously the introduction of this new system in such a fragile environment explains the laborious takeoff. Each court faced difficulties, with one being more successful than the other. Islamic courts were often perceived as a clan’s mechanism to attain power in a certain area. Considering the past, this suspicion was understandable but not necessarily legitimate.

Dissatisfaction of the Somali people with the warlords and the rapidly growing popularity of the courts system led to the inevitable confrontation between the ICU and a U.S.-backed warlord alliance. By early June 2006, the ICU, with the public and business community behind it, took over Mogadishu and defeated the warlord alliance. The ICU achieved the unthinkable by successfully uniting Mogadishu for the first time in sixteen years.⁶¹

The fact that the ICU gained large support in a clan-based society and that it could eventually consolidate its power to become a dominant force in Somalia is unique. But how could the ICU overcome internal differences, both on the clan and the ideological level? In order to become clan-neutral and determine their core values, a *shura*, or consultative group, was created.⁶² It consisted of more than sixty different Somali religious leaders, as well as clan elders and businessmen, so as to recognize the diverse group identifications in the Somali community. This council symbolizes the attempt to reconstruct the social identity in which the common religion holds the Somali people together under a clan-neutral authority.

Unfortunately, there was not enough cohesion among all the different groups to prevent various wings from implementing separate policies. Mostly hardline Islamists made statements to discredit the ICU.⁶³ Neighboring Ethiopia supported the unpopular Transitional Federal Government and sought assistance of the U.S. by framing the conflict with the ICU as the “war on terror.”

Hardliners within the ICU supported the confrontation with Ethiopia and could not be stopped by other ICU members from threatening to attack Ethiopian forces.⁶⁴ Thus, the weak structure of the ICU’s leadership allowed extremists to push through their agenda and manufacture a reason for foreign intervention. As the ICU collapsed due to their military defeat, the new Transitional Federal Government backed by Ethiopia, the U.S., and the United Nations, was installed as the official Somali government.

3. Concluding Remarks on the Islamic Courts System

Although many Sharia courts were multi-clan in composition, the courts’ jurisdictions were initially restricted to the sub-clan that dominated the respective region. This logically stems from the fact that the courts had to be created within a clan context. The International Crisis Group argues that the Sharia courts “are less a product of ‘Islamist’

activism than of Somalia's two common denominators: clan and the traditional Islamic faith."⁶⁵ Hence, the Islamic identity helped people to accept the authority of Islamic courts.

The creation of a *shura*, the unification of Mogadishu, and the widespread courts system in the whole of south Somalia back the claim that the Somali people were comfortable with the reference to the common religion. Islamic beliefs in a general sense facilitated the search for a common ground. Insecurity, poor governance, and civil war were the common enemies for all Somali people. Although with some hesitation, the Somali population saw the courts system as a good alternative. That the decision was primarily a pragmatic one does not harm the fact that it was driven by the belief that a system based on the shared religion could bring peace in this divided society.

As the Golden Age of the ICU was so short, it is impossible to conclude that clan identity would have become less important. What can be confirmed is that the shift towards political Islam decreased the clan-based conflict. Unfortunately, the loose coalition of leaders with different backgrounds collapsed after the intervention of foreign actors, who wished to emphasize the extremist elements that were latent in the ICU.

On the one hand, the ICU needed to give everyone a voice in the process of looking for unity and stability among the Somali people. On the other hand, the openness and weakness of the leadership structure resulted in the poor coordination of political strategy, which would eventually lead to the ICU's demise. If other ICU leaders could have blown the whistle on the members with an extremist agenda, they may have received more credit from Ethiopia and the United States.

VII. Conclusion

In Somalia, sensitivity about the clan dominates the identity question. In conjunction with clan identity is the lack of a concept of traditional state power and hierarchy. Only under the threat of a common enemy has a "wide network of brothers and cousins"⁶⁶ been formed; first under a secular nationalism, then under the banner of Islam. While the secular nationalist agenda proved to be too weak to unite all Somalis, the Golden Age of the ICU indicated that stability and peace in Somalia is possible. Lewis said about the Islamic courts: "in their brief months in power [they] did more to restore order and social progress there than the US has done in Iraq in four years."⁶⁷ The perceived out-

group Christian orientation of the U.S. and Ethiopia aided the feelings of being a united Muslim population. Shank says:

While geographical encroachment may be the catalyst, it was the ideological territorial encroachment that was the sinewy glue holding the clans together under a paradigm of protection: political Islam...as long as anti-Islamic sentiment was expressed and felt globally, political Islam remained the unifying mechanism for previously disparate clans and sub-clans within Somalia.⁶⁸

To conclude that the courts system's success mainly relates to the religious component is hard to evidence, as the ICU's rule was so brief. Menkhaus points out that, "Somali pastoral life imbues the culture with a strong preference for pragmatism over ideology, not so much as a matter of choice but as a matter of survival."⁶⁹

On the contrary, it is hard to believe that the unification of Mogadishu after sixteen years of internal conflict is merely the result of a pragmatic choice. Only a broad survey could lead to a decisive answer in this matter. It is undeniable that most Somalis feel a "reflexive identification with Islamic causes, even if they are themselves not especially devout." Hence, Somalia is "an Islamic society, deeply clannish and pastoral."⁷⁰ Said Sh. Samatar asserts that segmentation has been the root cause of the failure to form a centralized national government because the "social fabric of the Somali polity militates against centralization."⁷¹

Since social relations are so often constituted by cultural beliefs, Somalis should be given incentives to start believing that the clan is less vital to their primary identity. Focusing on a civic identity, which is distinct from ethnic and clan identity, could be suggested as a solution for the Somali conflict. However, an authority is needed to construct this civic identity.

The *shura* experiment could function as a model for the first step towards an accepted government. A council in which all groups are represented should come together. Shank defends this view by saying:

Failure to include all Somali stakeholders in the dialogue process, even the Islamists considered extremists by the US, will weaken and eventually erode any government's ability to rule with full legitimacy.⁷²

After the collapse of the ICU, the power vacuum was filled by the present TFG. Consequently, the negative image of being a government

supported by foreign actors remains. Where secular nationalist agendas failed, political Islam presented itself as an alternative that could bring peace.

Struggle for power has always been the monopoly of clan politics, regardless of what the conflict concerns. What does matter is that the identity question should be significantly addressed and integrated into the search for solutions in Somalia.

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