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NEWS FROM AFAR!

Correcting Somalia's Maligned Image: A way forward

By Faisal A. Roble
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On October 29, 2015, a German/Austrian journalist contacted me from Vienna for an interview about Somalia. Sooner after, several questions reflecting the prevailing view on Somalia hit my email rack: the bloody power struggle between moderate forces and terrorists and the prospect for the next twenty years; whether Somalia will be broken into several states; and the country will hold a national election in 2016.

Cognizant of the fact that several international conferences were underway in Vienna at the time of the interview, I made sure that my answers align with the broader view held by Somalis and refute the current institutionalized narrative that one often hears or reads in western media. Despite contemporary entangled politics, [incompetency and endemic corruption at the highest level of government](#), Somalia is and shall recover from its most recent protracted trauma, if only because of its organic nationhood.

What kind of People are Somalis? (Soomaali waa Kuma?)

Somalia and Somalis had for many years projected a singular, albeit positive, image to the outside world, mainly concerning their land and their people. Straddled between the Kush Mountains to the west, the Red sea to the northeast, the Indian Ocean to the east and south, Somalis for generation remained a force to be reckoned with in the highly priced geopolitical region of the Horn of Africa. As much as Ethiopia has been the singular Christian community in the region historically, thus the beneficiary of the mythic fable surrounding Prester John (Samuel Huntington), Somalis have equally been a distinct people in the region, but part of the grater Islamic civilization (Ibna Battuta visited Somalia in the fourteen century, while Ahmed Al-Khazali and his reign in the 16th century reached as far as the border towns between Ethiopia and Sudan).



Dubbed a nation of poets by the 19th century eccentric British traveler, Richard Burton observed that Somalis are woven tightly together by a powerful language and religion (Somali and Islam, respectively).

These two structural factors define their unbridled nationhood. Sir Burton, who extensively traveled through the land of Somalis, thought of them as free-willing, fiercely independence and culturally entrepreneurial.

By encountering the likes of the versatile Cadosh (Geri) in the Marar prairie who accompanied Burton to Harar, the City clerk of Harar who prepared his papers to enter the town (Hawiye), the skillful traders in Saylac (Isaq and Harti), the Mukhalis Raghi (Isse) and the well-connected Haji who took Burton to Sharmarke's court (Gadabursi), plus powerful Garads (Garad Adan, Garad Wiilwaal, Boqor Sharmarke, Ugaas Doodi, etc.), Sir Burton observed fervent Somali communities at the cusp of nationhood as far back as 1840s. (Clan identity is mentioned only to add emphasis on Somali families' integration as far back as 1800s.)

Add to this the skillful utilization of Somali poetry by Said Mohamed Abdule Hassan in his historic war of liberation against European colonialism, or Haji Afqalo's patriotic versus, among many other poets, the leadership of Sheikh Hassan Barsame, and you have a gallant history penned in a positive narrative. More importantly, Somalis' indispensable cultural unity, kinship and a common existential view about their surroundings offer a definition of their true being; indeed, Somalia's own description of their identity is starkly different from that often portrayed by contemporary Western journalistic coverage.

Through their powerful poetry, Somalis eloquently describe and define, so as to leave behind a repository of their being, the lay of their land; this land comprises the expansive Savana land in the Haud, where camel thrives; the fertile agricultural and [best] tropical fruits-producing river banks sandwiched between Shabelle and Jubba rivers, the flora and fauna (myrrh and gum) that binds Hafun with Harardheere, the farming fields of Jarar valley and Jalalaqsi bonded by the Shabelle River, the scorching Guban terrain that ultimately dead-ends in the salt deposits along Djibouti's Red Sea line then merging with the crisp white sands of the panoramic coastal ridges of the Indian ocean that stretch from Ras Guardafui, through Haafun, pass through Hobyo and Banadir upto Ras Kamboni. *This is* the geography that Somalis defended for over a millennium and will do so in perpetuity.

Blessed with the two most important superstructures that define nationhood (common language, religion and a defined geography), Somalis emerged as a viable nation prior to the colonial penetration of the continent. On the contrary, most African nation states have been a byproduct of colonial social engineering. Hence, the believe that Somalis have been a nation and would remain so is tenable, despite present tribulations and traumas caused by the absence of a solid and unified middle class to vanguard state formation.

It is not, therefore, the current broken politics that defines who the Somalis are or their existential philosophy of being Somalis. Rather their unique geography accentuated by their exquisitely poetic language (Somali), Islam and a keen sense of their kinship define their lasting nationhood.

However, since 1991, journalists, aid expats and Eurocentric scholars defined the Somali community by its broken politics. Some even went as far as breaking up the country into mini

states. But politics is nothing more than a temporal attribute in a nation's historical trajectory – in other words, the current crisis that engulfed Somalia must be viewed as a temporal phenomenon that will come and pass with changing seasons.

Armed with this keen sense of the deeper existential meaning of the Somali being, I responded to several political question in the following manner.

Q1. How will political power between the most important political and also terrorist actors shift in the next 10 to 20 years due to recent developments?

A1. Power will certainly shift in favor of those who oppose terrorism: Somalia's post-civil war political landscape has been dominated by political Islam and radicalism that begun with the Al-Itah Al-Islam in the early 1990s. The Al-Itihad movement, which is widely viewed to be the origin of the multifaceted political Islam that dominates the country today, morphed into what later on became the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). By the time Ethiopia was commissioned by USA to invade Somalia in 2007, the UIC broke into many religious factions including Al-Islax (Muslim Brotherhood), Ala-Sheikh (the party of former President Sharif Ahmed), Hisbul-Islam which gave birth to Al-Shabab, and Dumel Jadid (new blood an many believe this is the party of President Hassan Sheikh Mahmud).



In the last few years, most of Somalia's religious factions are moving into a direction of normal political engagement (peaceful political participation), by endorsing a new federal constitution and the ballot box as the ultimate arbiter for political discourse. Equally, the ranks of the terrorist group of Alshabab are steadfastly narrowing. Today, terrorist groups are nothing but a minor irritant that wages urban warfare at soft targets; their goal is no longer to seize power but to disrupt the motion of progress towards political normalcy.

There are several factors that may have contributed to the narrowing, or to the diminishing, of the political role (influence) of terrorist groups:

1. More religious groups as well as the populace at large are realizing that violent or political terrorism is not the correct and practical way to get to the power seat.

The formation of regional army (AMISOM) has filled initial security void under which terrorists in the past thrived for some time in Somalia. Despite the gains so far made by AMISOM, this mission's image is progressively waning due to the dominant membership by neighboring countries, whose presence inside Somalia retard rather than advance progress (see the picture on how Somalis view AMISOM)



2. Dependence of Somalia's national institutions on donor funding is encouraging moderate political groups to get bold and challenge methods of political terror. More moderate religious groups have also endorsed the draft constitution as the main tool for restoring Somalia's governance.

Q2. Will there be still a Somali State or will Somalia be split into autonomous regions again?

A2. Somali has not split into states: However, Somaliland has undeniably declared a unilateral secession which is legally refuted by the central government. In the eyes of the world, Somaliland is an integral part of the Somali Federal Government. (*See: Global and Local Challenges, the Unilateral Secession of Somaliland, Horn of Africa Journal, Volume, XXV. 2007*). In order to accommodate Somaliland and other regional interests, the country has adopted a federal constitution (August 2012), which is serving as the main legal instrument and political tool for a national reconciliation. One of the objectives of the constitution is giving more autonomy (politically and economically) to regions such as Puntland, Jubbaland, Southwest, Galmudug and others that are in the making.

The big challenge for Somalia in the next few years is whether Somaliland will abandon its unilateral secession. Either way, even if one believes that governance is being restored at a slower pace, Somali is not on the cusp of disintegration. If it did not disintegrate in 1991, goes the conventional wisdom, a period when internal strife and displacement reached their zenith, it is not plausible to expect a political disintegration to happen when national and regional institutions are being restored.

The Somali state in western parlance has failed in 1991 due to a disastrous civil war. In the Somali psyche, however, warlords took advantage of the weakened institutions following the civil war, which is now a *passé*. During all those trail years, Somalis never abandoned the unity of their country – a unity of the people that is rooted in history, culture and the oneness of their people. Equally, the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League as well as donor countries all stood with Somalia to recover its statehood and protect its territorial integrity.

Q3. Why is it that Somalia and Bosnia, two countries with similar civil wars, developed differently after 20 years of the central conflicts that had happened?

A3. In my opinion, there are three major differences between Bosnia's totally recovery and the stagnation of Somali state reconstruction.

- a) The main difference is that Bosnia had a workable Reconciliation and Truth Commission and peace program. The serious involvement of the UN to help Bosnia establish an international reconciliation and truth tribunal system (as part of a compressive national reconciliation) helped that country to normalize relationships between groups. On the contrary, Somalia never had a meaningful comprehensive reconciliation of any sort beyond moments where political opportunists regularly reached political "*pact*" and traded horses at the expense of the wellbeing of the nation.
- b) Another difference is that Bosnia is located in Europe, a continent with a long history of protection for human rights. Europe can't tolerate a continued anarchy within its geography: But Somalia is in the Horn of Africa which is considered to be one of the most problematic and volatile regions in the world. Anarchy rules supreme in this region. In the eyes of many, Somalia's anarchy is only perceived as a minor disruption to international trade due to a resilient piracy, or the country is suspected of becoming a safe haven for terrorism. Outside those sentiments, the West never paid much attention to helping local forces sort out their problems in a sustainable way.
- c) A third factor that contributed to the stagnation of reconstruction in Somalia lies with its geographical location; Somalia has neighbors whose realpolitik stands in total conflict with the revival of a viable Somali state. Denial Arab Moi, former President of Kenya, said in 2003 in a lecture at the American Defense University, Washington DC, that (paraphrased hers) Somalia would have reconstituted itself had it not been the hidden hand of some of its neighbors. Today Kenya is blackmailing Somalia to seize part of Somalia's Maritime Zone known to be rich in oil resources.

In short, Somalia's problems are both internal as well as external. Only a government with enhanced legitimacy can withstand internal as well as external pressures and put this country on the right course of recovery.

Q4. Do you think elections in 2016 are realistic? And what speaks for and what against them?

A4. One-man one-vote is not possible, and the government has already said so.

The government has not done any of the preliminary work to prepare the country for an election of one-man one-vote. There is no meaningful national election committee that is functional; there is no national laws created to regulate parties and their conducts in elections. Therefore,

several alternative variants for election are so far circulated, all of which deviate from the promised model. Except a [model which recently surfaced three of the most prominent models](#) are as follows:

1. Elections based on the maligned 4.5 formula: This model has been discredited and may not have much appeal both in the Somali community as well as in the donor community. In the last few years, it is proven that rebuilding the state on the basis of clan structure is a wasteful exercise.
2. District based elections. This may appeal to certain groups, especially those who would like to decentralize governance and take the power to elect to the district levels. The challenge is that a big chunk of the districts, where elections should have taken place, have no administrations; neither do these districts have much relationship with the central government in Mogadishu. And it is doubly difficult to administer election in those districts where Alshabab still rules.
3. Regional based elections. This model calls for a system where elections are held in each region. According to this view point, each prospective federal state will be given a measured number of seats. There are so far five Federal Regional governments plus one to be formed soon. Mogadishu, the seat of the central government, is also considered as one region. Of the eight regions sectioned in the Draft Constitution, only Somaliland is missing and remains out of the reach of the federal government. Holding elections that are administered jointly with the help of regional governments may expand the central government's reach and may reunite all the existing administrations.

In concluding the interview, we addressed the question of how the West and AMISOM can help Somalis. My response was simple and straight forward: First, the West, which in a sense partially destroyed Somalia by commissioning Ethiopia in 2007, must help Somalia rebuild its Somali National Army (SNA). Second, Somalia must be helped to consolidate and realign SNA with regional armies, and equip them. Third, a plan of an orderly exit of AMISOM troops from Somalia would enhance the legitimacy of the Somali national government. Fourth, *and this is a big fourth*, holding Somali leaders accountable for their crimes, including massive corruptions, must be part of the West's purported plan, if there is any, to bring Somalia back to live.

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