Introduction

The Istanbul conference on Somalia, February 23-24, 2016, came at an inopportune time with the perfect storm for Villa Somalia hitting it in the face. Since the first New Deal conference in Brussels in 2013, positive developments took place here and there, of course, thanks to the tenacity of the residents of Mogadishu. But much has been missed. For example, the Federal Government missed important timelines and forfeited key deliverables intended to present them at this conference.

Also, political conditions in the country are as discouraging as they were at the start of the journey; to date, the country is less unified and more fragmented; Somaliland’s secessionist position has hardened; Puntland is reassessing its relationship with Mogadishu; and a loosely affiliated and thinly-glued South Central Somalia is under the shadow of over-confident Al-Shabab militia, not to mention that terror rules supreme in Mogadishu. Villa Somalia also failed to stomp out a culture of corruption at all levels in the government.

Somalis overwhelmingly doubt the capacity of the government to implement its own ambitious plan. In July 2014, Sarah Hearn and Thomas Zimmerman of the Center on International Cooperation, New York University, critically evaluated the promises and prospects of the Somali New Deal Compact. They came to the shocking conclusion that the Mogadishu-based
government has neither the capacity nor the will to implement the Plan, adding that Villa Somalia is suspicious of anyone else implementing the Plan. That “anyone” includes peaceful regions such as Somaliland and/or Puntland.

The timing of the conference also coincided with a time when a particular terrorist attack, anticipated with a healthy dose of certainty for weeks, eventually rocked Villa Somalia’s neighborhood one day after the conference had ended. Meanwhile, at the time of such an unprecedented blast by Al-shabab, about two hundred of the most senior officials, including the President, the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, senior ministers, army officers and top businessmen were out and still remain out of the country. Several employees in the Prime Minister’s office are reported to have been killed in this latest unusually large blast.

Moreover, the Istanbul conference came at a time when Turkish and EU attention was diverted away from Somalia to other hot spots such as the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis in Europe.¹

Much optimism was placed in the past on what the New Deal might do for Somalia. It was hoped that “a new political, security and development architecture framing the future relations between Somalia, its people, and the international community” will materialize in time;” rapid donor alignment and “on-budget” support to the Federal Government of Somalia was supposed to enhance political and security priorities.” Alas, none of the optimistic goals cited in the New Deal compact is realized.²

After three years of holding hands out not to its Allah but to the lords of international aid, Somalia has widespread corruption and less real human and infrastructural development to show. There is little, if any, debate about open theft of the paltry aid that reaches the docks of Mogadishu. Much consensus, however, is emerging that Somalia’s problems stem from its leadership and from the ideology that they adopted.

Leadership and Ideology

Somalia’s reconstruction problems emanate from two sources: leadership and poor ideology. With the election of Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud in August 2012, the Somali populace was ready for a national campaign to rebuild the country. Somalia media at the time ran ablaze with enthusiastic endorsements of his election. Positive editorials flowered major Somali websites. A familiar concept Somalis knew well, self-help (Iska-wax u qabso), was about to be collectively invoked. The beautiful scent of national revival was in the air.

However, all that political capital and national enthusiasm were short-lived mainly because of weak leadership in Villa Somalia.

Predatory external forces that consist of EU members, IGAD countries, and a consortium of NGOs are also culprits in the lack of progress.³ To date more of the decisions impacting Somalia, including security, airspace and financial management, are crafted elsewhere and overseas. The
objectives of predatory neighboring countries in particular, which are also members of the AMISOM peacekeeping forces, are believed to be a source of the erosion of any hope for the normalization of the political climate. Sources close to Villa Somalia suggest that, in fear of jeopardizing his rule, which is widely unpopular throughout the country, President Hassan Sheikh Mahmood often takes subservient postures in his own country’s national affairs.

Somaliland, on the other hand, has to a large extent managed to control outside influences. In an upcoming study, Nick Eubank, a PhD student in Political Economic Business at Stanford University, writes that, in the case of Somaliland, less outside money as well foreign influence have brought political normalization and a healthy dose of democratization. The lesser outside involvement there is, the quicker the normalization of the country could be attained.

Such a theoretical framework is a well-established school of thought in African Political Science literature. Colin Lyse who extensively studied Kenya’s dysfunctional state in the 1970s and 1980s maintained that external monies corrupt national ideologies. He suggested that in a market economy external aid, often a conduit to domination, reduces national polities to subsidiary profiles.

Crawford Young, on the other hand, developed a six-pronged toolbox to evaluate national [ideological] choices. One of these tools is the concept of autonomy and self-reliance. He writes:

*Autonomy and self-reliance... enlarges the scope of choice and reduces the impact of external constraints on policy options. The essence of autonomy is the possibility of designing a development strategy that is responsive solely to internal value preferences and images of desired future societal arrangement.*

Young continues to argue that dependency in itself is not a bad thing. Neither is it a viable national strategy, therefore, “playing the dependency game does not necessarily require ideological surrender.” In the case of Somalia, President Hassan Sheikh Mahmood appears to have surrendered both the sovereignty of his nation and any hope for an organic national strategy. He did so by his uncritical acceptance of stringent conditions of the Busan Principles by which conglomerates of international partners, neighboring countries and a consortium of NGOs have more say on the fate of his country than the government of Somalia.

In many Somali circles, the debate is not whether Somalia needs a handout from the international community, but on what terms? In most of its 56 years history, Somalia has been a recipient of international aid. During the early Barre regime, however, such aid was coupled with a national ideology that (1) prioritized the role of self-sufficiency; and (2) international aid or international relation with the outside world was secondary to the goals and objectives of the Somali nation. Current leadership in Villa Somalia reversed that. The Somali Compact, as implemented today, is a document of guidelines that favors the surrendering of Somalia to its highest bidders.
Depending on the New Deal for the revival of the Somali state is risky strategy. In today’s world politics, one may not even find eager bidders to take up Somalia’s unconditional surrender to the West. In “Preparing for the Collapse of the Saudi Kingdom,” *The Atlantic*, February, 2016, Sarah Chayes and Alex De Waal write that “the Somali government enjoys generous donor support, but is priced out of a very competitive political market by a host of other buyers.”\(^6\) In other words, hot spots elsewhere may overbid Somalia, perhaps one reason why the huge sums of monies promised remain pie-in-the-sky.

The New Deal is primarily a security and “war on terror” document. Because of such an orientation, the West in its rational to fight terror has undermined Somalia’s priorities. For example, the heavy emphasis placed on funding and arming AMISOM troops and giving them impunity at the expense of establishing a unified national army to protect and preserve the nation is a collective pain felt by Somali citizens.

Overemphasizing the importance of what Western donors can do for Somalia, which thus far has been the sole ideology of its leadership, is so far proven to be a curse for the country and a source for stagnation in the reconstruction of a sovereign state. Hassan Sheikh Mohmoud’s willingness to make Somalia what Crawford Young called a “patronage” based state has precipitated the erosion of one of the cardinal concepts of nation making - pulling yourself by your bootstraps. In contemporary Somalia, however, any traces of counting on your own have been wiped out of the memories of the elite class.

To its detriment, Somalia has become a nation of “wax isii,” “give me something.” The late professor Said Samatar, known for coining genius phrases about his nation, often invoked the “give me something” to portray the meek and reckless nature of elite strata.

**The meaningless Conference in Istanbul**

There were over three hundred Somalis who travelled to Istanbul to participate the conference, effectively emptying Mogadishu of anyone who could make decisive decisions on national matters. This gave an ample opportunity for the Al-shabab terrorists to stage one of the most devastating attacks on the President’s neighborhood. An equivalent example of this scenario for America would be if, in the middle of unstoppable terrorists, the President, Vice President, top Secretaries but few, top generals, all but one or two of the governors and top businessmen leave Washington DC for a conference. The blood and drug dealers would be ruling the streets of DC. That is exactly what happened in Mogadishu in the week of February 22-25. Al-Shabab with ease blasted the most coveted areas of the City. The ruling elite of the nation took an official leave, and still remain outside the country.
Since the New Deal was established in 2013, some milestones have been achieved. Equally important is that many more have been missed. With competent leadership, the country could have been reunited by now, more territories in the South should have been liberated from Al-Shabab, and a clear pathway to a multi-party system should have been a reality by September 2016.

The Istanbul conference was meant to take place with the following tasks completed:

1. Federation of all states in a way consistent with the constitution
2. A seamless infrastructure for election to take place in 2016
3. Vibrant political parties and all the necessary legal instruments
4. Enhanced security in population centers and the defeat of Al-Shabab
5. An enhanced capacity of the state to deliver services to regions beyond Mogadishu

None of these conditions were fulfilled at the time of the Conference. The pre-drafted communique also reflected a frustration of donors regarding the inability of the Somali government to deliver on its promises. Ahmed Madobe on his part underscored the importance of Puntland’s refusal to participate and the inconclusive nature of the outcome. Following this, the Communique dated February 24, 2016 noted the absence of Puntland from the Forum and called upon the Federal government to “ensure that the people of Puntland are on board in order to allow for the 2016 electoral process to be as inclusive as possible.” It is plausible to suggest that the communique implied that the so-called 4.5 formula of power sharing which the government sold to the UN as the electoral process for 2016 is not endorsed by all.

**Decoupling Somalia from the UN Office**

Besides an extraordinarily large but superfluous entourage, Villa Somalia’s leaders included the President and his Prime Minister, who, on his way to Istanbul, was detained and humiliated by Kenya, a country that is ironically a member of IGAD and AMISOM. The chokehold international partners and IGAD countries hold on Somalia is unprecedented.

The expectation of the organizer of the conference was to see tangible progress in federating Hiiraan and Lower Shabelle. So far, the efforts of Villa Somalia have failed to do so due its incessant manipulation of the state formation process. To underscore that particular failure, the communique emphasized: “We underline the need to complete the state formation process in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle and reach agreement on clarification of the status of Benadir.” In other words, Villa Somali did not do its homework.

Unlike Galmudug, Hiiraan leaders have put a check on the President’s shenanigans, and turned down his last minute maneuvers, including attempts to bribe local and traditional leaders. The fact that the process of federation is not completed is, therefore, a source of huge embarrassment for Villa Somalia, thanks to Hiiraan’s leaders who stood up for their beliefs.
The absence of Puntland and Somaliland from the Istanbul’s conference is another wrinkle, which, according to sources close to Villa Somalia, resulted in the downgrading of the Conference’s expectations. Of the invitees, approximately 70 percent did not come; and those who came sent low-level representatives. On its part, Puntland’s top leaders have decided not to attend but to send a development and education ministers, whose mandate was limited to observe and report back to Garowe only on development. Somaliland released a well-crafted letter of rejection.

Somalia’s fate is decided not by Somalis but by a conglomerate of opportunistic parties who are invariably viewed by the Somali populace with suspicious eyes. The International Community, mostly Europeans, IGAD, neighboring countries, and a consortium of worldwide NGOs, are all players in the Somalia Theater. Representatives from these entities have played more pronounced roles at the Conference, often eclipsing the views of Somali leaders as well as members of the country’s capacity-poor civil society organizations, most of whom play a subsidiary role to Western NGOs. They too complicate Somali issues, whether it is the issue of the Somali maritime dispute with Kenya, the oil prospecting by EU countries, or the territorial integrity of the country.

Take the case of Mr. Michael Keating, the new Chief of the UN Office for Somalia. By all standards, he erred in judgement by blindly endorsing the Villa Somalia proposal concerning the electoral process without giving Somalis sort things out; his hasty decision to endorse the illegal and notorious 4.5 based clan power-sharing both damaged the image of the UN as well as contributed to mistrust between Villa Somalia and Garowe.

The leader of Jubbaland in an unambiguous tone also declared that he was forced to accept the 4.5 clan-based model, implying that he was intimidated by Keating and IC representatives. The unique pain for Jubbaland to be forced to, this time, accept the 4.5 formula is that only one year ago it told the world that it had succeeded to build its parliament based not on clan, but on district appropriation.

Mr. Keating made such a drastic and faulty decision about Somali politics three days after he arrived in Mogadishu. His hasty decision-making style shows the inviolability of IC members. As one old Somali man, who was involved in many negotiations told me, that “he never expected an educated Briton to be so foolishly injudicious.”

As if that was not enough damage to Somalia, unconfirmed reports abound that Mr. Keating favors IC recognition for Somaliland’s independence. Under his leadership, Chatham House organized several high level seminars and roundtable discussion on the possibilities for state “recognition” for Somaliland. One such roundtable seminar was under the heading of “Somaliland’s Place in the World.” Therefore, the timing of President Silanyo’s naming of a high profile committee to work on “recognition” and Mr. Keating controlling the mantle of the IC’s presence in Somalia is all the more worrisome.
Getting things right for a successful and timely reconstruction of Somalia needs a paradigm shift both in leadership and in ideology regarding state rehabilitation. By staying the current course will not achieve the goals of Somalia's reconstruction.

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1 As far back as May 2015, at a conference in which I participated in Rome and hosted by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italian officials and policy analysts were saying that the refugee crisis was not only overwhelming but redirecting EU aid policies away from less pressing problems such as that of Somalia. see http://www.wardheernews.com/somali-perspectives-institutional-policy-challenges
7 Somaliland has always rejected to participated such conference under the banner of Somalia
8 Consisting of 18 names, this is the first time to organize such a high caliber committee to lobby for Somaliland's recognition; http://www.somalilandpress.com/somalilandpresident-names-national-committee-on-recognition-and-sl-somalia-talks/ accessed on February 24, 2016.