

## **A Significant Milestone: The Return of Somali Studies International Congress to Mogadishu**

**By Abdinur Mohamud, Ph.D., & Melek Eyigun, Ph.D**

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Three decades after the Somali civil war, the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) returned to Mogadishu and held its 15th triennial congress under the stewardship of the Somali National University (SNU) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education of the Federal Government of Somalia.

Beset by prolonged conflict and security challenges for more than three decades, it became logistically impossible to organize such an august gathering in a Somali soil, resulting in the re-orientation of SSIA congresses outside of Somalia. From Hamburg, Germany, to Columbus, Ohio, USA, over a dozen congresses were held since its inception in 1979 under the direction of the SSIA board. For decades, many Somali studies scholars and students wondered if or when will the congress return to Somalia.



Following successful congresses in Hargeisa, Somaliland in 2018 and Jigjiga, Ethiopia in 2021, the former rector of SNU, Professor Hassan Mahadallah, saw an opportunity and took a bold initiative submitting a proposal on behalf of Somalia for hosting the next SSIA congress in Mogadishu in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education led by Minister Farah Sheikh Abdulkadir.

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Fortunately, this timely but daring initiative paved the way for the eventual return of the SSIA congress to Mogadishu, Somalia, which effectively hosted the congress on the date of December 15-18, 2024.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to underscore that conference organizers selflessly delivered a well-planned, well-organized and well-attended educational platform with a variety of multidisciplinary topics that were relevant to Somalia and the Horn of Africa region. The flow and quality of the program as well as the keynote addresses, academic presentations and panelists dispelled any concerns on transparency and independence issues. In fact and contrary to these reservations the conference proved a successful joint effort between SNU, the flagship national university and the Somali Federal Government eager to show a very stable and secure Mogadishu which is ready for business. Attendees included founding members Profs. Abdalla Mansur, Ali Jimale Ahmed, who joined through Zoom, and Poet Said Salah Ahmed.

Other attendees include current conference chair Dr. Abdulkadir Diesow (Mogadishu, 2024) who also served as vice-chair for the SSIA congress in Turku, Finland (1998), Professor Abdulkadir Osman Farah, SSIA conference chair Aalborg, Denmark (2004), and Dr. Abdinur Mohamud, co-author of this article, SSIA conference chair, Columbus, Ohio (2007), and other academics, government officials & students from inside and outside the country.

## **Background**

According to Prof. Lee Cassinelli of the University of Pennsylvania who is a founding member, the foundations of the SSIA were laid initially in an informal meeting of interested scholars in Chicago, USA in 1978. The focus of the new association was to promote scholarly research, both within and outside Somalia, in social science disciplines, natural sciences, and humanities. The aim of the new association was the publication of research-based articles and the promotion of interest in and knowledge of Somalia and its peoples. The founders envisioned the new association to encourage international cooperation and facilitate the exchange of ideas among scholars engaged in research on Somalia and the Somali people. Scholars attending the Chicago meeting include Profs. Charles Gesheker, B.W. Andrzejewski, Said Sheikh Samatar, J. Joseph Pia, Richard Greenfield, and Lee Cassanelli.

Subsequently, the first congress of the Somali Studies International Association convened in Mogadishu from 6–13 of July 1980 with Hussein M. Adam and Charles Gesheker publishing its proceedings twelve years later, in 1992. Following SSIA's successful accomplishments in generating interest and enthusiasm among active and new scholars helped pave the way for strengthening the SSIA to hold 15 triennial congresses to date (with three-year intervals) and few extraordinary conferences such as the one held in Turku, Finland in 1998.

The following countries hosted one or more of the fifteen SSIA congresses since its founding in 1978. Mogadishu, Somalia (1980), Hamburg, Germany (1983), Rome, Italy (1986), Mogadishu, Somalia (1989), Worcester and Boston, USA (1993), Berlin, Germany (1996), Turku, Finland (1998), Toronto, Canada (1999), Aalborg, Denmark (2004), Columbus, Ohio & concurrently with Djibouti (2007), Lillehammer, Norway (2012), Helsinki, Finland (2015), Hargeisa, Somaliland

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(2018), Jigjiga, Ethiopia & Gothenburg, Sweden (2021), and finally a return to Mogadishu, Somalia after three decades in (2024).

Much of the success of the SSIA congresses stem from a strong collaboration between the SSIA board, fondly known as the “Gurti” in Somali, and the organizing committees of host institution(s) and a shared realization that the success of an international congress of such magnitude rests on the ability of the host institutions to collaborate with other higher education institutions in their region as well as raise necessary logistical supports from governmental and non-governmental agencies. Support from host governments is often pursued to ensure smooth immigration processes as well as security and other logistical supports.

It has become a tradition for SSIA congresses to invite host government officials to not only welcome visitors to their country, but to also highlight critical national issues and success stories relevant to the overall conference theme.

The Gurti, which consists of some of the founders and senior academics in the field of Somali studies, as well as recent chairs of SSIA congresses, collaborate on several issues including the selection process for the next congress, announcement of hosting institutions, publication of SSIA conference proceedings, as well as providing technical supports to host institutions. This level of involvement by the Gurti reassures maintenance of higher standards in SSIA congresses, collaboration between institutions of higher learning in host countries and maintaining institutional integrity and independence from the politics of host countries.

Among the notable Gurti members include the late Hussein M. Adam (Tanzania) & Richard Ford, both co-editors of the book ‘Mending Rips in the Sky: Options for Somali Communities in the 21st Century. Others include, Lee Cassinelli, the late Said Sheikh Samatar, Charles Gesheker, Ahmed I. Samatar, Ali Jimale Ahmed, Abdalla Mansour, Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, Marja Tiilikainen, Muddle Suzanne Lilius, Abdi Mohamed Kusow, Jama Musse Jama, among others. The participation of these esteemed members in the review, selection and implementation process ensures organizational continuity, maintenance of standards, and generation of **excitement** among students and scholars.

Highlighting the importance of the concept of “reimagining a common narrative” for the survival of the unity of the Somali people during a challenging time when clan identity and regional narratives are running amuck on Somali society, conference speakers cautioned the potential replacement of their once strong fervor for unity and sense of national identity. Prof. Ali Jimale Ahmed, whose keynote address challenged the audience, particularly the youth, whose future he eloquently stated is at stake, inspired them to think much differently than their parent’s generation by shifting the paradigm and re-imagining a comprehensive new national identity. He highlighted the need for the youth to unite around what he called “the three Qs”, which in a sense may serve as the basis for social transformation and the reengineering of a new national identity and belonging. Paraphrasing the three Qs stated in Somali are as follows:

- 1) Qumane oo la quweeyo: Somalis need to strengthen and support the good doer among them.
- 2) Qaldane oo la qabto: that society restrains the wrongdoer; and finally,

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3) Qatane oo la quudiyo: people should take good care of each other.

Undoubtedly, if Somalis were to heed these basic rules as a guide, the likelihood will be much greater for strengthened social cohesion, erosion and ending of clan conflict, and delivering transformational leadership to lead society at all levels.

Conference attendees also reviewed and purchased new books in the field by local and international authors. These include the new book “ Macallinkeen Allow Kaal” written in the Somali language and authored by Dr. Abdinur Mohamud, the co-author of this article.

The book traces the history & evolution of Somali education system and highlights current education issues facing the nation with suggested solutions.

### **Testimony from a Turkish Academic**

Professor Melek Eyigun’s interest in African history and African studies began in the year 2022 when she read Prof. Chouki El Hamel's "Black Morocco; A History of Slavery, Race and Islam, published in 2014. In line with this interest, she says “I began to follow the work of the Africa Foundation in Turkey and thus became aware of the 15th SSIA Congress”.

Dr. Melek did not know much about Somalia and was not familiar with the theme and focus of the conference. However, after reviewing literature, she realized that there is a connection with her earlier research on the Ottoman Empire and began further studies on its relations with Somalia. Dr. Melek’s master’s and doctoral studies were both focused on the 19th century history of the Ottoman Empire. In the first phase of her research, Dr. Melek analyzed approximately 250 documents at the Ottoman State Archives covering the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. She later transcribed those documents which were related to security and trade issues with Somalia. In addition, Dr. Melek scanned news articles related to Somalia which were published in Ottoman era newspapers to elucidate the context of the relationship between the two nations. The aim of the research was to unearth hidden information and knowledge about this relationship by reviewing domestic and foreign literature on the subject. In this process, while the researcher’s interest in Somali history enhanced, she also had the unique opportunity to evaluate the Ottoman Empire’s role in Africa in a broader context.

This experience in Somali studies has added new dimension in Dr. Melek’s academic career and enabled her to make contribution to an under-researched field. Following this, Dr. Melek prepared an abstract based on her research findings and submitted a paper with the title: “Ottoman State’s Struggle for Dominance in Somali Territories with Britain, France and Italy in the 19th Century”.

Upon arrival in Somalia, Dr. Melek’s initial impressions were not vastly different from what has been perpetrated through mass media regarding Somalia’s challenges in state failure, conflict and political instability. However, the joyous spirits of the Somali public gave a different impression - one that shows resilience, confidence and trust in the reconstruction of their country. From the moment Dr. Melek set foot on Somali soil, she felt as if she had an ancient connection with this land and its people.

Perhaps this feeling stems from her review of existing literature that places the first traces of human history in this part of the world, as well as a recognition of the mystical power of the Somali people who continue to thrive despite harsh environmental conditions.

Upon clearing up at the airport and on her way to the conference site, Dr. Melek observed the number of security checkpoints she had to clear and the strong presence of security personnel around the airport vicinity. This made her realize existing security problems in the country. Nevertheless, she felt safe and secure with her hosts escorting her to the conference site.

The kind and reassuring behavior by of her hosts, she says “who met me at the airport, provided me assistance throughout my stay in the country, the cleanliness and comfort of the hotel where I stayed were impressive, and the friendly hospitality and care throughout my stay made me all feel welcome”.

While attending the 15th SSIA congress in Mogadishu, Dr. Melek had the opportunity to establish close contacts with members of the organizing committee, staff and other conference participants. She also met and exchanged ideas with Somalis from all walks of life, professions and positions. As a result, Dr. Melek attests to the fact that the foundations of a long-lasting friendship were laid, which will require her to personally nurture and strengthen. Undoubtedly, she adds “this trip to the SSIA congress in Mogadishu offered me a rare opportunity to expand and strengthen my academic horizon and establish new ties with the Somali people”.

The warmth and friendliness Dr. Melek encountered during her stay in Somalia led her to realize that there is a special mutual affection and bond between the peoples of Türkiye and Somalia. Moreover, meeting with professionals who are fluent in Turkish language and culture and who earned their undergraduate and graduate credentials from Turkish higher education institutions, added value to her interactions with the local people. The high level of motivation of these young professionals who returned to serve their country increased her hopes for a stable and prosperous Somalia.

Finally, Dr. Melek keenly observed that Mogadishu needs serious improvements in terms of urbanization and infrastructure development, even though she saw parts of it. She realized that some parts of Mogadishu need a great deal of reconstruction and renewal. It is Dr. Melek’s belief that investments in the fields of security, education, infrastructure and trade among other things are of critical need for Somalia’s national development. Despite current challenges, Dr. Melek believes that Somalia's developmental trajectory offers a promising picture of growth and development.

Dr. Melek presented her research findings to an audience of Somali academics and international researchers who learned new research material on Ottoman-Somalia relations which took place long before Somalia’s independence and unification in 1960. Dr. Melek found the organization process of the 15th congress very effective, and the conference program delivered in a highly professional manner. Moreover, basic needs of participants such as accommodation, transport and security were meticulously met.

As an academic who previously attended international conferences, Dr. Melek attests to the fact that the 15th SSIA congress in Mogadishu stood out in so many ways including its planning, programming, and delivery, with the availability of necessary infrastructure required for academic events. The fact that the large conference hall remained full throughout the three-day event providing equal attention to all keynote presenters and panelists is noteworthy and exemplary. During the conference, Dr. Melek's meetings with other participants took place in a very positive, warm and constructive atmosphere. The fact that the topic she presented attracted a lot of attention and received positive feedback encourages her to continue her research in this field.

In addition, her meetings with government officials, academics from different backgrounds and cultures, rectors, doctoral students, and other participants showed that conference participants were all united around a common consciousness and pursuit for the stability and economic prosperity for Somalia and this region.

The fact that the conference was opened with the participation of the head of state and the presence of high-level state officials throughout the the three-day conference reveals that this event was not only an academic exercise, but a gathering of intellectuals, academics, professionals and concerned citizens who are all focused on the reconstruction of the Somali State. It was particularly noteworthy that throughout the conference, almost all the participants, apart from foreign speakers, made their presentations in the Somali language. This special focus and attention to the mother tongue indicated the seriousness and determination to build a Somali national identity on solid foundations. Dr. Melek's experience on the 15<sup>th</sup> SSIA congress represents a glimpse of what other local and international participants found in attending the Mogadishu congress.

Keynote presentations and panel discussion topics include the following: Effects of climate change, strengthening pillars of statehood, reimagining Somaliness, and the role of education in the reconstruction of the Somali state, among others. The presentations of Prof. Ye Hailin of Tsinghua University in China on security cooperation between China and Somalia and Italian speakers on the importance of educational cooperation between Somalia and Italy were noteworthy. Prof. Ye, for instance, highlighted his long-held desire to retrace ancient travel routes taken by early Chinese explorers who visited coastal towns of Somalia. Fortunately, his dream came true when he received an official invitation to attend the 15th SSIA congress in Mogadishu. He also remarked to the astonishment of the audience that "the same way Prophet Mohammad encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge even to China", that he in turn is seeking knowledge from China back to this part of the world. Moreover, A Qatari speaker on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the strong relations between Turkey and Somalia, which was a striking demonstration of how contemporary politics is reflected in this academic setting. In addition, participants from Arab countries, as well as Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, presented papers aimed at contributing to the ongoing progress in the fields of security, education, and the economy, while expressing shared expectations for the future.

## Future Improvements

Generally, the robust and effective academic platform established by the SSIA congress is expected to enhance interest in future studies on Somalia, its language, culture and peoples which will lead to the development of research centers locally and at international universities. Moreover, the SSIA board aka (gurti) which initially was proactive and effective has lately been inactive due to so many issues. The living Gurti and scholars in the field need to reactivate this august academic platform despite funding and sponsorship challenges to be able to deliver the mission envisioned almost five decades earlier. Special commendations go to the selfless organizing efforts of Professor Marja Tiilikainen of the University of Finland and Ms. Muddle (Suzanne) Lilius for their selfless and unyielding efforts to keep the SSIA torch alive.

As the established tradition of SSIA indicates, scholars attending the last triennial congress may indicate a desire to host the next triennial congress. Generally, verbal requests are followed with a written official request to the SSIA which convenes its board members for review and selection. At the 15th SSIA congress in Mogadishu, Professor Ahmed Warfa of Garissa University in Kenya indicated his institution's desire to host the next triennial congress. However, as the professor indicated over the phone, no official written proposal has been made to the SSIA board which is ultimately responsible for the selection of the next host institution/country and the preferred dates of the conference based on its capacity to meet the logistical and financial demands of holding such an international event.

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