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The Somali Conflict: From Irredentism to Clannish War for Unification

Abstract

This paper examines the Somali conflict, especially how it degenerated from a simple war of ethnic crisis into one of world's most deadly and persistent crises. The paper investigates the interplay of both local and international factors in the escalation of the war. The paper is of the view that clannish interests and selfish leadership idiosyncrasies more than any other factors had been very critical in the conflict. To this end, the paper has highlighted the issue of clan fragmentation of opposition groups as mainly responsible for the prolongation of the crisis. The work concludes on the note that the role of the international community has not been strong enough to significantly address the conflict. It therefore recommends the operation of a federal or confederal system of government as a possible panacea for the crisis.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to examine the Somali conflict as an aspect of ethnic crisis in international relations. Basically, the Somali conflict is an ethnic war for the unification of the Somali people. Non-state actors, represented by semi-ethnic groups in Somalia fought one another in an attempt to register their hegemonic role in the affairs of the country. The conflict has been over power and prestige by the various sub-ethnic or clan leaders of the Somali people. What should be added is the fact that the conflict has persisted because of the existence of pan-Somali

nationalism whose major political goal has been to reunite the Somali people under a single state. It was in line with this that the first set of Somali leaders built the basis of their legitimacy on pan-Somali nationalism and they were urged by the desire to build a single Somali state. In this direction, earlier Somali leaders adopted the strategy of direct diplomatic and military confrontations with the country's neighbours, a strategy that helped to internationalize the conflict on the one hand, while making it an affair of the Horn of Africa on the other hand.

The Somali conflict has assumed the status of one of Africa's longest and deadly conflicts. Indeed, the state has the sordid reputation of a state that has almost disappeared. This is despite the fact that Somalia is, perhaps, the most homogeneous nation on the African continent, although sub-ethnic and clan groups have almost assumed the status of ethnic groups with each trying to protect the interest of its members in the face of unifying factors such as the factors of common language and religion. Somalis are one hundred percent Muslims. The two factors of language and Islam have not sufficiently provided the rallying point and the fulcrum on which to build the Somali state but the latter has helped to attract the attention of some prominent members of the Arab world such as Egypt and Yemen to the Somali question.

It is part of the aim of this paper to examine the interplay of international factors in the development and continuation of the conflict. The paper also attempts some possible resolution of the conflict.

Origin of the Conflict

The origin of the Somali conflict can be traced to some developments in the history of the country. One such development was the outcome of the general election of 1969 which was marred by full scale clannish rivalries, pursuit of selfish activities and unbridled corruption. Another development was the chaotic political situation that started after the ouster of the Said Barre regime and the humanitarian catastrophe that followed.¹ This

signaled the beginning of the appellation of a "collapsed" or "failed" state, which really became a phenomenon as far as Somalia and many other African countries such as Liberia, Rwanda and Nigeria were concerned.²

In retrospect, the Somali conflict has some colonial antecedents. This can be traced to the defeat of Italian fascism in East Africa. The development changed the status of the Italian Somaliland, which was henceforth governed under United Nations Trusteeship. The other territories inhabited by the Somalis remained untouched. For instance, British Somaliland continued to be ruled by Britain, while the Northern Frontier District was administered under the British Colony of Kenya. The other parts of Somaliland such as Haud and Ogaden territories were disputed between Britain and Ethiopia.

A major impact of the balkanization of Somaliland by the world power was the emergence of Somali nationalism, which was mostly promoted by the educated segment of the Somali society. This group wanted a unification of all Somalis in the Horn of Africa under one flag. Earlier, the British had proposed the idea of a "Greater Somalia". It is important to note that the "Greater Somalia" commitment has for many years kept the country at loggerheads with its neighbours, especially Ethiopia and Kenya, which have populations of people of Somali ethnic origin. However, scholars such as Onyekpe and others³ have emphasized the implication of the concept of "Greater Somalia" which basically was an attempt by the British to amalgamate the Somalis. What should be stressed is the fact that the independence of Somalia and the establishment of the Republic of Somalia in 1961 was a turning point of a sort in an attempt to address the political demands of the Somalis as such demands were partly attained. The greater challenge, however, was the unification of the rest of the Somalis territories, which could be achieved despite the efforts of successive governments in that respect.

There were several reasons why the Somali question escalated into a protracted conflict. Firstly, the Somalis had always wanted to unite with their kindred in Somalia but the principle of inviolability of the colonial

borders as enshrined in the Charter of the defunct Organization of African Unity would not allow for that.⁴ This seems to have provided the basis for the resort to violence by the Somalis since there was an absence of a legal framework for the actualization of their aspiration.

Another dimension to the conflict can be sought from the international environment of the Cold War era when communist and capitalist ideologies played out in the Horn of Africa. Specifically, in an attempt to realize the concept of Greater Somalia, Somalia invaded the Somali-peopled Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The war became an international issue with the massive military involvement of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Cuba, which brought about the defeat of Somali forces.⁵ The capitalist bloc did not intervene on the side of Somalia but rather remained aloof for strategic reasons best known to them. Earlier before the 1980s, the USSR had backed the Somalis before the regime of Emperor Haile Sellasie was overthrown by the military, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, a young colonel whose dictatorship was camouflaged under proletarian socialism. It was easy and clear for the Soviet to support the Ethiopians against the Somalis in the 1980s because of the so-called spirit of Proletariat Internationalism. Both Ethiopia and Somalia did not find things easy afterwards.⁶ However, the situation in Somalia was worse.

The Somali conflict escalated about fifteen years ago on the demise of the country's first president, Mohammed Siad Barre who stayed too long in office. His action did not prepare his people for orderly succession and the challenges of leadership. In retrospect, Major-General Mohammed Siad Barre took over power after a bloodless coup d'état on October 21, 1969. The reason he gave was that politicians and the civilian government were not forthcoming in realizing the unification of all Somalis in the Horn of Africa. However, a critical assessment of the reasons for the take-over of power by General Barre indicates that the action was partly motivated by the general attitude of the military in African countries during the period. We can recall the military take-over of power in Nigeria, Congo, Benin,

Ghana and other areas during the period.⁷ Arising from this, we can safely say that irredentism; the efforts by an ethno-national or religious group to regain control of territory by force so that existing state boundaries will no longer separate the group, was only a factor for the realization and actualization of personal interests. It was because of this that the Somali conflict was to assume a worse dimension afterwards.

Barre's take-over of power affected the democratic experiment that was being put in place in Somalia. In effect, the constitution and the National Assembly were abolished. The Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) was formed to lead the country through the ideology of scientific socialism that marked the drift of the country and the inclination of the military junta towards the Soviet Union. The government got a lot of financial and moral support from the Soviet Union and this enabled Barre to consolidate his hold on people. The assistance also enabled the government to intensify its plan of unifying the Somalis in the Horn of Africa. To be sure, in 1977, through joint military operations, the West Somali Liberation Movement (WSLM) and the Somali National Army attacked a large part of the Southern region of Ethiopia largely inhabited by Somalis. This consisted of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

Following the death of Barre, General Mohammed Aidid tried to employ force to impose his will on the people. This did not work out well. In the struggle for power, the contending warlords began to fan members of clannish tendencies in form of proto-nationalism. Available evidence suggests that Barre, like Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, had manipulated clan loyalties to stay for a long time in power.⁸ Clan differences and historical antagonism were dug up to support one faction or another until Somalia degenerated into a failed or disappeared state in form of a collection of clans and villages. In the face of this, reactionary tribal leaders who were errand boys of international finance capital gained an upper hand in Somalia.⁹ The Somali conflict has also been complicated by the involvement, either overtly or covertly, of some international powers. In that respect,

the Horn of Africa where Somalia and other countries, such as Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea are located, has been prone to crises because of the interest of some international powers in the affairs of the area. For instance, the neighbouring Arab states of Egypt, Yemen and the modern state of Saudi Arabia have been very much interested in the affairs of the area. For Egypt, the White Nile that is very critical to the survival of the country, flows from the area of the Horn of Africa, specifically Ethiopia. Ethiopia on its part is interested in the politics of Somalia for several reasons. First, the Ogaden desert in Ethiopia shares ethnic identity with Somalia, and the Somalis. Secondly, Somalia provides access to the sea for the landlocked Ethiopia following the independence of Eritrea.¹⁰

Arising from the above, we can say that the Somali conflict represents one of the most protracted conflicts on the African continent. It is therefore important to examine the ethnic dimensions to, and the internationalization of the conflict.

Ethnicization/Clanization of the Conflict

Internal disagreement and external pressure combined to change the direction and intensity of the Somali conflict. Internal factors became obvious after the leadership crisis that characterized the state in the 1980s. The situation was chaotic because of crisis of legitimacy that was caused by the corrupt political leadership leading to public discontent among a large section of the Somalis. This brought about resistance from among the elite who were not accommodated in the system. As the leadership faced desertion from some members of the armed forces who did not like what was going on, the leadership resorted to employing clan or sub-ethnic politics, in which sub-ethnic or clan considerations became the basis of political loyalty. This was to worsen the Somali conflict.

Moreover, political power also became an instrument for projecting clan or sub-ethnic sentiments. It was in this connection that the Merehan clan, to which Siad Barre and his close family belonged, became the

dominant group in Somalia. To get their own share of national wealth, Barre's opponents organized themselves into formidable oppositions based on clan agendas. For example, the Mejerdeen sub-ethnic group formed the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), an armed opposition group to contest power with the Merehan group. The Issaq clan, another sub-ethnic group located in the northern part of the country, formed its own militia group known as the Somali National Movement (SNM) to counter the repressive acts of the government against its clan or its people. Another group emerged in 1987 to protect a section of the Somali people. This was the United Somali Congress, formed by the Hawiye clan, which has inhabited the capital, Mogadishu, and environs for a long time. The Ogaden people on their own formed the Somali Patriotic Front (SPF) to protect the interest of their group. In all of this, Somali society became divided into factions along different sub-ethnic lines, with some implications for the peace and security of the country.

The tendency towards clannish feelings and proto-nationalism can be traced to the geography and history of Somalia. During pre-colonial times the Somalis never built any major centralized polity or state. Rather, they were a segmentary people who lived in villages under the leadership of gerontocrats and mullahs.¹¹ The implication of this background of decentralization affected the way average Somalis perceived a centralized state under a democratic institution despite the factor of ethnic identity that had created an irredentist feeling among them.

Internationalization of the Somali Conflict

The Somali conflict provides a field of experiment for scholars interested in understanding the nature of international conflicts in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The conflict was internationalized because of the prevailing international environment of the Cold War era. The events of the period helped to encourage nationalism among the Somalis.¹²

A major power that participated in the Somali conflict was the Soviet Union that seized the opportunity of the conflict to promote international socialism. Basically, the Soviets were motivated by the geo-strategic importance of the Horn of Africa.¹³ Both the Capitalist and the Socialist blocs were interested in having a stake in the affairs of the Horn of Africa. This became evident when political change occurred in Ethiopia, following the take over of power by the military junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. The United States, which was before that incident an ally and supporter of Emperor Haile Selassie, was expelled from Ethiopia and the country had to reluctantly support Somalia. Ethiopia was able to defeat the Somali army because of the huge financial and moral support from the Soviet.¹⁴

As has been pointed out, the level of involvement of international interests in the conflict was based on their stake in the conflict and consideration usually fundamental to their ideological positions. It has been argued that:

*The 1977-78 conflict contrasted sharply with the localized border skirmishes and clashes of the preceding years. More significantly, it was a war involving states and power outside the Horn of Africa and the African continent...there was a test case which, interestingly, provided some insights into the games played by nations and the underlying calculations.*¹⁵

Some reasons have been given for the change of attitude and strategy by the USSR towards the Somalis, bearing in mind that they were initially supported by the Soviets. It has been argued that the isolation by the Soviet of the Somalis was a "picturesque demonstration of the workings of proletarian internationalism."¹⁶

It has also been argued that the action of Somalia in invading the Ogaden region of Ethiopia was viewed by the USSR as war against a young socialist state, "fraternal to the rest of the socialist world."¹⁷

It should be pointed out that both Eritrea and Ethiopia have been fighting a proxy war in Somalia. The two countries have been accused of waging proxy wars against each other on Somali soil, a report both countries have repeatedly denied.¹⁸ For instance, a statement posted on the Eritrean government web site reads:

*Eritrea firmly rejects all groundless accusations peddled against it in the past few months. As underlined before, Eritrea has never seen Somalia as a proxy battlefield to settle scores with Ethiopia.*¹⁹

Ethiopia on its part has been vehement in rejecting the allegations that it is using its influence in Somalia to wage a proxy war with Eritrea. According to the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi whose country supported the interim government in Somalia, "I have heard of these reports but we do not have troops in Somalia".²⁰ In as much as both Eritrea and Ethiopia would not admit the allegation, it is important to stress that the Somalis were aware of the influence of these countries in the escalation and prolongation of the Somali conflict. This could explain why the Islamic courts in July 2006 refused to agree on a talk with the government unless Ethiopian troops sited around Baidoa relocated.²¹

Attempts to Resolve the Conflict

The international community has been very much aware of the Somali conflict. When the conflict escalated in the early 1990s, a multinational force, the United Task Forces (UNITAF) and later the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), spearheaded by the US under UN authorization, launched "Operation Restore Hope" under the aegis of Resolution 767 of the UN. These two security arrangements achieved little as far as the issue of peace and security in Somalia was concerned. The two missions made some achievements in the area of providing

protection to the people, especially in the area of transportation and assisted in securing some relief materials to the warring factions. Beyond that the two security missions could not secure stability and political settlement in Somalia. According to Ghebremeskel, "the Somali experience was so disastrous that it precipitated re-evaluation of the interventionist policy and led to the abandonment of the 'grand strategy'."²² Following this development, the West adopted a policy of disengagement from Somali.

The US involvement in the Somali conflict was significant in some respects. Besides the issue of the war between capitalism and socialism, which first drew the Americans into the war, the Somali conflict represented one of the difficult terrains of unresolved conflicts as far as the government of the United State were concerned.

The Clinton Administration did not do much to resolve the conflict. Clinton believed that domestic politics should be his administration's priority. Public opinion in US did not support a continuation of the country's financial and strategic commitment to the resolution of the Somali conflict.²³ US Security Adviser, during the Clinton Administration, Anthony Lake, actually argued that "those of us who recognize the importance of continued active engagement and support for Africa are confronting the reality of shrinking resources and an honest skepticism about the return on our investments in peacekeeping and development".²⁴

The above development gave rise to the emergence of the so-called Presidential decision Directives, which redefined US commitment to the resolution of African conflicts. In actual fact, US action was informed by the incident that led to bombardment of its huge helicopters by the Somalis who thereafter dragged the bodies of the dead American soldiers around the streets of Mogadishu. This angered the Americans who had to quickly get out of the country and turned over mediation and peacekeeping to the United Nations.

The United Nations intervention in the Somali conflict was predicated on the world body's desire to pursue international peace and stability. It was in this regard that the UN was ready to deploy its strategies of preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peacekeeping

to resolve the Somali conflict. The UN was also ready to deploy its strategy of peace-enforcement and peace-building, when necessary in addressing the Somali conflict. However, the organization was handicapped by some factors such as lack of adequate funds and human resources. The unwillingness of the US to commit enough financial support to the funding of of UN mission in Somalia was another factor. As in the cases of Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, the UN was criticized for lack of commitment to the resolution of the conflict.

It is worthy to note that the UN put in place some measures to address the Somali conflict. The Addis Ababa Agreement of 1993 mid-wifed by the UN and signed by 15 Somali faction leaders was a major effort towards peace.²⁵ The meeting, which was chaired by former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, mandated Ethiopia to settle the various factions in the conflict. A meeting held at the Ethiopian city of Sodere, led to the signing of the *Sodere Declaration*. This declaration did not achieve much beyond its paper level and like many others before it was not a success.

The defunct Organization of African Unity made efforts to resolve the conflict. This was in line with paragraph 15 of the Central Organ of Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, which reads:

*In circumstances where conflicts have occurred, it will be its responsibility to undertake peace-making and peace-building functions in order to facilitate the resolution of these conflicts. In this respect, civilian and military missions of observation and monitoring of limited scope and duration may be mounted and deployed.*²⁶

Every attempt at peace by the defunct OAU failed. But certain steps were made to address the issue of insecurity in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

At the sub-regional level, some efforts were made by major stake-holders in the area to resolve the Somali conflict. For instance, the Ethio-Eritrean Initiative was aimed at bringing about a broad-based conference in which all parties to the conflict would take part. However, the initiative failed because the international community was not actually committed to it.²⁷ Perhaps the UN did not want to any glory to go to the African initiative and the initiators while the US on her part was not interested in investing in "unprofitable ventures". Yet the neighbouring countries were concerned because of the geographical and ethnic proximity that makes them susceptible to a spillover effect from the conflict.

There were other efforts made at the sub-regional level to resolve the conflict. The Horn of Africa Standing Committee otherwise known as the Horn Committee, which was established in April 1992 to resolve the Somali conflict, was a good example of this. The participants who met between May and June discussed political and humanitarian aspects of the Somali conflict. But the initiative was shattered partly because the warring factions had little faith in the whole arrangement. The basic reason for the failure should however be sought in the desire by the UN to establish a parallel peace initiatives that did not actually work. This UN initiative was to prepare the ground for the arrival of the US/UN sponsored cease-fire mechanism called United Task Forces (UNITAF).

Peace initiatives led by Ethiopia, at the sub-regional level, did not really work for the simple fact that the country is not an uninterested party in the affairs of the area. To be sure, Ethiopia has an interest in realizing its long-standing geo-political ambition in the Horn of Africa. This desire to assume the status of a sub-regional hegemon has affected the way Somalis perceive the mediatory role of Ethiopia. Besides, Ethiopia has always wanted a balance of power among the various factions in the conflict because it depends on Somalia and Eritrea for access to sea (the Red Sea). In addition to this, the existence of a strong minority group of the Somalis in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia that does not historically identify with the Ethiopian state is another pointer to Ethiopia's interest in

the conflict, which it pursues through an active diplomatic and military involvement in the conflict.

Effects of the Conflict

From a very credible source, it can be argued that because of the increased in ethnic conflicts and civil wars since the end of the Cold War, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of the world's refugee and displaced persons. The massive migration of people across state borders is fast becoming one of the world's most important post-Cold War humanitarian and security issues. Although the crisis is global, Africa has the largest percentage of refugees and displaced people, due to war. About 60 per cent of displaced people and about 36 per cent of the world's refugees are Africans.²⁸

The Somali conflict is one of the greatest producers of refugees in Africa. It has affected the peace of not only Somalia but also the entire Horn of Africa. Hundreds of thousands of Somali children, civilians especially women - as well as soldiers have perished since the war started more than two decades ago. Many more have suffered from hunger and starvation as a result of the conflict. The conflict has also worsened the refugee situation in the Horn of Africa. Most of the Somali refugees and displaced persons are in UNHCR camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. There was also the problem of looting and rape coupled with incidents of violence, death, ill treatment and summary execution in the camps. The capital Mogadishu is an example of a centre of insecurity, crime, poverty, in addition to being flooded with weapons and narcotics, a situation that has shut it out from the rest of the world. All this is without prejudice to what the crisis cost the UN in its peacekeeping operations. For instance, it cost the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I, UNOSOM II) approximately \$1.64 billion and more than 100 peacekeepers have been killed.²⁹

Current Situation in Somalia

As a result of the Somali conflict, two states have emerged from Somalia. What used to be British Somaliland has declared itself independent. The rest of Somalia previously under Italian colonialism has remained in conflict. A government in exile in Nairobi, Kenya, which was formed by one of the factions, has since returned to Baidoa, one of the towns in Somalia. The Prime Minister, Ali Mohammed Ghedi, headed this government. The capital Mogadishu has remained a volatile zone. It hosts a Sharia Courts Union under the leadership of Shaikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. It is reported that the al-Qaeda group is funding the activities of Shaikh Ahmed. This could explain the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism in the area. The United States is not happy with this development because of the country's war against terrorism. But for now the US does not seem too ready to spare any of its troops since the war against international terrorism began three years ago. So the Somalis have to look inward in search of solutions to their problems.

In August 2006 leaders of Somalia's crisis-ridden government dissolved the cabinet. It was reported that some 40 ministers had quit the cabinet over what they described as Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Ghedi's opposition to peace talks with the Islamic militias who controlled the capital, Mogadishu.³² The crisis had caused a rift between President Abdullahi Yusuf and Ghedi. The situation then was that the president did not believe in an over bloated cabinet of about 100 members, controlled by Ghedi. Although the development that favoured the establishment of a central government that would address the aspirations of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) was hailed as a major achievement towards stability and unification in Somalia, the demonstration of power politics by the United States in the name of fighting al-Qaeda factions has introduced a new dimension to the conflict. The US involvement was like history repeating itself in the event of 1990s when the country intervened in Somalia but ended up being humiliated.

Conclusion

The Somali conflict is an example of how ethnic issues could degenerate into a national conflict. It is a combination of both clan/ethnic and irredentist factors that have escalated the conflict. Our examination of the conflict has shown that both internal and external factors contributed to prolonging the conflict. This factor can explain the outbreak of conflicts and hostility in other parts of the Horn of Africa.

The clan fragmentation of opposition groups has also continued to prolong the conflict. This has meant that Somalia has joined the club of "collapsed states" in Africa. What then should be done to resolve the conflict once and for all or at least to manage it in the interest of peace and security of Somalia in particular and the Horn of Africa in general?

Firstly, there is every need to adopt and apply a regional approach to the management of the conflict. Such an approach is necessary because it would not only need to trace the origin of the conflict, but also to investigate the interests of the various actors, using the relevant methodology. Secondly, the nature of the geographical and cultural dimensions to the conflict calls for a holistic approach from all stakeholders in the conflict. It is obvious that the international community has to do more than ever to be interested in the resolution of the conflict, which would be different from the attitude America under Clinton exhibited. This is because if the fight against international terrorism is to be achieved, the Somali conflict cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the geographical location of Somalia predisposes it to the activities of international terrorism from the angle of Islamic fundamentalism.

The ethnic composition of Somalia may not be that complex but the history of the various clans shows that they were highly autonomous before the European colonial masters brought them together. To this end, we recommend the operation of a federal or confederal system of

government for the state in the event that the conflict is finally resolved. This is because a unitary government will continue to create clannish antagonism in the system.

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