



The Islamic Courts and Ethiopia's Intervention in Somali: Redemption or Adventurism?

Professor Said S Samatar

Prof. Said S Samatar, Professor of African History at Rutgers University, was invited to speak at Chatham House on 25 April 2007. He is a well known Somali academic historian and commentator, the author of numerous books and articles on Somali history, politics and culture.

The meeting on 25 April looked at failed Muslim States, with some points of comparison between Somalia and Afghanistan. Prof Samatar argued that Somalia is no territory for Islamic terrorists on account of the patterns of Somali social organization—or more appropriately disorganization—that precludes the possibility of the growth of a large-scale, grassroots jihadist movement.

A record of the discussion can be found on the Chatham House website - <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/africa/papers/> - under 'Other Resources'.

The following is a final text of Professor Samatar's lecture and includes his perspective on Mogadishu's Islamic Courts and Ethiopia's intervention.

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Few writers have failed to notice the formidable pride of the Somali nomad, his extraordinary sense of superiority as an individual, and his firm conviction that he is sole master of his actions and subject to no authority except that of God.

If they have perceived it, however, they have been baffled by the shifting character of the nomad's political allegiance and puzzled by the fact that the **political and jural unit with which he acts on one occasion he opposes on another** (Emphasis added).

I. M. Lewis. *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of pastoralism and politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa.* Oxford: International African Institute. 1999.

P. 1. First published by Oxford University Press for the International African Institute 1961.

I was travelling between two stations in the Ukamba Province of British East Africa, when I saw a large caravan coming along the road. Noticing that the natives in charge differed from any with which I was acquainted, I turned to the corporal of my police escort, a sturdy Baganda, and asked him to what tribe they belonged. Putting his nose in the air, and with an expressive click with his tongue, he replied: **“Somalis, Bwana, they no good; each man his own Sultan.”** (Emphasis added.)

R. E. Drake-Brockman. British Somaliland. London: Hurst & Brackett, LTD. 1912. P. 102. **“Constant in only one thing—inconstancy.” “A Fierce and turbulent race of Republicans.”** Sir Richard Burton, 1854.

Thomas Cargill and Sally Healy have made a trans-Atlantic investment in me. Surely, they will not get an equitable return on their investment. But that does not weigh heavily on my mind.

Chatham House, this venerable institution of British Foreign Policy establishment, scares the day lights out of me. I heard that the likes of Arnold Toynbee and A. J. P. Taylor used to hang out here. Their ghosts, by turns censorious and playful, no doubt still walk the hall ways. Even more awesome I. M. Lewis, at once dean of Somali Studies and doyen of social anthropology, sits there alive and well. What is a former nomad (me, that is) who herded camels in the overheated deserts of the Ogaadeen and who did not learn to read and write until the age of 16, doing here? Who am I to stand on the hallowed ground of Chatham House? Just the same, I am here to stay, at least for the evening.

Since I had sent in the title “Why Somalia is No Territory for Islamic Terrorists,” a great deal has happened. For one thing, even as we speak, The Ethiopian flag is flying—nay, undulating beatifically in the red, green, golden stripes and all-over

Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, and this at the invitation of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government(TFG). This is surely an ironic development, in view of the fact that for ages Ethiopia stood, in the eyes, of Somalis, as the putative foe of the Somalis. Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia's Prime Minister, seems to mean business, determined as he is to turn Somalia into a client state, if not an outright colony. Nuruddin Farah, the Somali novelist, once aptly spoofed Ethiopia as "an empire in rags," whose huddled starving masses are worse off, per capita, than the Somalis. And yet despite the "rags," Ethiopia boasts a battle-hardened professional army that can probably defeat in a conventional war the combined forces of Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya.

So, the new working title should read: **"The Islamic Courts and Ethiopia's Intervention in Somalia: Redemption or Adventurism?"** I'd like to start, if I may, by borrowing a line from Porfirio Diaz, Mexico's truculent dictator near the end of the 19th Century. Despairing over Mexico's existential vulnerability to the machinations of the American colossus to the north, Mr. Diaz lamented: **"Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States!"**

Can that line be modified to read: **"Poor Somalia, so far from Allah, and so near to Ethiopia!"** To judge by the history of Ethio-Somali relations, the "Empire of Rags" has managed historically, nearly always, to have its way with the Somalis; a circumstance that prompts the question: Is it the fate of Somalia to slink in the shadow of Ethiopia?

More than this, political events in the Horn of Africa tend to favor the bizarre and unpredictable. For centuries Ethio-Somali interactions have been characterized by an unrelenting state of belligerence. As long as memory serves, the two countries have been on the brink of war, actually twice went to an open war in the twentieth century, once in 1964, then in 1977. Indeed, it is Somalia's loss of the latter war that the coup attempt, by army units commanded by none other than Abdullahi Yusuf,

president of the current fledgling Transitional Federal Government (TFG), that set Somalia on its long course of crisis, climaxing in its collapse in 1991, thus marking the end of Somalia as a state.

Then events took a paradoxical turn in the waning days of 2006 when, suddenly and with the express appeal of the TFG, as well as the tacit prodding of the United States, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and routed the Islamists, many of whom have been killed, captured or cowering in the bushes. Who knew!? But will this be the end of the story? or did the mullahs make a strategic withdrawal in order to return and fight another day? After all, following the Prophet's (PBUH) pattern (Hijrah or flight from Mecca in 622 AD, consolidation in Medina and triumphal march on Mecca eight years later), Muslim warriors throughout the ages, from Usuman dan Fodio of the Nigerian Hausa in the early decades of the nineteenth century to jihadists in our own time, have employed the withdrawal-consolidation-return approach.

No one can foretell the slippery lurchings of history in the Horn of Africa. Did Ethiopia's decisive intervention in Somalia, for example, create a tipping point in favor of the TFG that could serve as a prelude to peace and stability in the Horn of Africa? In any case it could be said, at least for the time being, that there have been winners and losers in this Somalia development. One obvious winner must surely be the TFG which, after months of exile and humiliation, might finally have taken control of the country. A second, still more obvious winner, is bound to be Ethiopia's Prime Minister, whose lightening-speed dramatic victory over the Islamists not only diverts attention from his serious domestic problems, including the opposition to his government by members of his political opponents who claim to have won the last election but were cheated out of the fruits of victory. Many of these politicians are rotting away in jail today. But the victory in Somalia seems to have given him the ammunition to silence them. It would be a treasonable act, Meles would no doubt declaim rhetorically, to criticize the government when the nation is at war. A third

winner may well be the U.S. government, which can not have concealed its delight in seeing the ejection of the Islamists. In view of the on-going fiasco in Iraq, and an increasingly resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, the Bush administration can at least point to some success in the Horn of Africa. Still yet, a fourth winner might be the State of Kenya which has a good reason to believe that, with a stable government in Somalia, Somali refugees who have been pouring into Kenya, thereby threatening to destabilize Kenya's eastern border, will now cease to stream across. A fifth and final winner, perhaps, concerns the image of Africa as a whole. Historically, Africans have been accused of not taking the initiative for their domestic difficulties and always helplessly, hapless and passively, looking to the initiatives of outsiders to save them. Ethiopia's projection of force in Somalia, ostensibly in response to the appeals of a neighboring sister country, belies the image of the passive African. In any case, if Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia leads to peace and stability in that troubled country, Meles Zenawi, bizarrely enough, will go down in history as a hero of Somali nationalism--indeed a mind-boggling prospect to anticipate.

Inevitably, the Somalia muddle seems to have produced an odd couple of losers as well. Clearly President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea has been dragged in the mud once again, as his dog in the fight has been decisively whipped. Egypt also lost. It could be said that the history of the Horn of Africa, throughout the ages, has been the story of a struggle between Egypt and Ethiopia for regional hegemony. In this latest round of Ethio-Egyptian skirmishing, much as Hosni Mubarak in particular, and the Arab world in general, fulminated against "Ethiopia's adventurism in Somalia," Egypt has proven once again to be too timid--perhaps too toothless in the face of an Ethiopian bold action in the Horn--to act in behalf of its Somali clients. Thus, now as in the past, Ethiopia seems to have prevailed!

But appearance is one thing, reality another. Far from leading to national triumph, Ethiopia's reckless plunge into the Somalia quagmire may well turn out to be a

catastrophic blunder on the part of the “empire of rags,” and may even cost the wily Mr. Zenawi dearly. Ethiopia’s excursion into the Somali bush lands surly entails untold dangers for the highland Abyssinian state. If Ethiopia gets bogged down in the Somali sand dunes, as she is likely to do, this will signal the breaking of the Somali run of back luck with respect to Ethiopia that has plagued the “pastoral” Somalis since recorded times. Given the traditional hostility between Muslim Somalia and Christian-ruled Ethiopia, the Somalis will, undoubtedly, turn against the Ethiopian presence in their land.

A massive insurgency both against Ethiopia and “its fledgling client, the TFG,” is already under way. The Ethiopian national symbol, its coat of arms, as it were, has been, historically, a royal-looking lion. Now the Ethiopian **Ambassa**, or Lion has come down roaring from the highlands into the Somali lowlands in order to lie down with the Somali lamb; but the Somali lamb will not get much sleep! As President George has painfully learned in Iraq, no army, however awesome its firepower, has ever succeeded in putting down an insurgence by military means alone--short of genocide. And genocide is unthinkable in this age of CNN cameras tagging after U. S. platoon patrols. Yet, alarmingly in the Somali case, as Professor Lewis pointed out in his eloquent, short piece entitled: “Ethiopia’s Invasion of Somalia.” I quote:

Reports that the forces of “transitional president” and his Ethiopian allies have committed war crimes against civilians in the course of trying to subdue the citizens is no surprise. Much more surprising, and morally satisfying, [Professor Lewis continues], is the news that the European ministers and officials, who have so vociferously and uncritically supported Abdullahi in his bid to represent himself as Somali President, may also be implicated in these charges.

If Lewis is right--and he usually is in these matters--it'd be quite a spectacle to see European Union officials dragged before the International Criminal Court and tried for war crimes in Somalia.

As Somali resistance to the Ethiopian occupation mounts, the Islamists will surely return—well, they already have-- to create Iraq-like conditions for the Ethiopian forces; and the ensuing mayhem and wanton destruction is likely to drench the country in bloodshed, making unhappy Somalia even more unhappy. Every additional day that Ethiopia stays in Somalia is likely to bring about the apocalypse in the Horn of Africa. Worse still, the United States' sudden shift from covert to overt involvement in the Somali conflict was surely needless, wrong-headed and ill-advised. America's aerial bombardment, for example, in the closing days of December, 2006, of the remnants of the fleeing

Islamists in southwestern Somalia, has further served to inflame global Islamic sensibilities, as it was seen by Muslims throughout the world as another naked aggression by the "Great Satan" against yet another Muslim country.

To their credit, again as Lewis reminds us, the Islamic "courts, in their brief months in power in Southern Somalia, with their mostly humble poorly educated local leaders, did more to restore order and social progress there than the US has done in Iraq in four years." But, to their lasting folly, which they must be regretting now, the Islamists made two self-destructive blunders in the run-up to the Ethiopian invasion. One was their idle, shrill banter of threats of Jihad against the instinctively jihad-fearing Ethiopian state. This has played into the hands of Meles Zenawi by giving him a convenient pretext to take, as he claimed, a drastic action in self-defense against the mullahs.

The second was their imposition on the Somalis their Medieval-style Islamic version of Shariah law, by which they had banned the cinemas, outlawed music and soccer games, and even, allegedly, executed people for not observing the ritual of the five

daily prayers. By this kind of harsh, barbaric impositions, the Islamists would surely have come to discredit themselves in the eyes of the Somalis. In the six months that they ruled

southern Somalia, they managed to make themselves highly unpopular. Now, with their defeat, the Islamists could gradually be transformed in the eyes of Somalis into patriotic martyrs defending their faith and country against Christian invaders. Therefore, it can be argued that the Ethiopian intervention was tragically premature.

Now, to turn to the issue of “Why Somalia is no territory for Islamic terrorists.” Simply put, the patterns of Somali social organization—or more appropriately disorganization—precludes the possibility of the growth of a large-scale, grassroots jihadist movement in Somalia. In fact I’d defy Murphy’s Law to argue that Somalia will never be a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism. Here is why: the Somali polity is shaped, to an extraordinary degree, by a central principle that overrides all others, namely the phenomenon that social anthropologists refer to as the “segmentary lineage system.” (And of course, the masterful authority on the concept of lineage segmentation is here, I. M. Lewis. Which makes me fool-hardy brazen to pretend to speak on the subject in front of him.

To digress for a moment Great Britain, in my view, produced in the 20th century two pioneering social anthropologists, the one having been the late Evans-Pritchard, affectionately known among colleagues as “EP,” on the Nuer of the Sudan, and the other, the living I. M. Lewis on the Somalis. These two have, between them, divided the world of social anthropology. There is no third, excepting perhaps the late A. Radcliffe-Brown.)

Segmentation, that is, is a chaotic non-system that divides Somali society into unstable warring segments and that pits practically all levels of the Somali body politic, including the religious level, against one another, thereby enshrining institutional instability as a norm. Thus, segmentation stands as the root cause of

the reason the Somalis have repeatedly failed to form a centralized national government for nearly two decades now, despite much strenuous trying, principally because the underlying social fabric of the Somali polity militates against centralization. Instead, it ineluctably predisposes them into being extremely individualistic, anarchic and egalitarian with a marked tendency to endless schisms. As I. M. Lewis astutely observed forty-six year ago:

Few writers have failed to (be) baffled by the shifting character of the [Somalis'] political allegiance and puzzled by the fact that the political and jural unit with which [they act] on one occasion [they] oppose on another.

Although I. M. Lewis's searing observation in the above referred only to the nomads of northern Somalia, it in fact brilliantly describes the collective character of the Somalis as a whole; whence I have taken liberties to replace the word "nomad" with Somalis. Lewis, in other words, underscores in scientific language what the Bagandan Sergeant contemptuously expresses in the vernacular: "Somalis, Bwana, they no good; each man his own Sultan." And both observers point to a body politic in which anarchy reigns supreme fueled by the extremes of galloping rapaciousness and run-away individualism with no consequences to indiscriminate pillage ("bililiqaysi") and rape ("kufsasho,") no sense of individual responsibility, and no accountability for crimes against those too powerless to defend themselves; in short no checking mechanisms against the twin curses of human greed and selfishness.

Furthermore, the recent political history of Somalia has shown that among Somalis ethnic loyalty easily trumps loyalty to Islam, making it all but impossible for a Somali religious figure to command the absolute allegiance of his followers—if indeed he manages to muster any followers at all—or to rise to the level of reputed piety and spiritual sanctity as to make his word a law unto others, as is the case with al-Qaeda and other Islamic jihadists elsewhere. Consider, for example, the structure

of the ICU: it is a rickety amalgam of kinship factions rather a single unified Islamic organization, composed of at least eleven separate squabbling groups, nearly each of which represents a different ethnic entity. I could go on to name names in order to delineate the clannish nature of the so-called Islamic courts, but will refrain from doing so for reasons of charity, perhaps of self-interest.

In short, the Islamic courts Union is neither truly Islamic, nor courts, nor a union but a fragile coalition of clans wrapping themselves in an Islamic flag in order to make themselves appear respectable to the international community. And of course to give the U.S. a fright! That they won so easily against the warlords is less indicative of the greatness of their strength and more the lack of support in the Somali populace for the hated warlord thugs.

Curiously, the segmentary law makes success lethal to any Somali group that rises to power and prominence because it works in both centripetal and centrifugal ways. The segments, that is, unify as easily against an interfering foreign force as they splinter when left alone. This is the lesson that recent Somali experience teaches. When the U.S. and other forces of the international community intervened to save Somalia in Operation Restore Hope in the early 1990s, the U.S. appeared to Somalis to be the new Big Boy on the block. Predictably, the segments, who were previously at war with each, banded together behind the late Gen. M. F. Aydiid against America. The result was the disastrous U.S. military reversal on bloody Sunday, October 3, 1993. And when Aydiid in his turn appeared to be the next Big Boy, warlords Muuse Suudi Yalahaw, Muhammad F. Qanyare and others banded together against him. He was duly fatally wounded. Then when in January, 2000, Mr. Abdiqaasim Salad became president of the TNG (Transitional National Government) before the current TFG (Transitional Federal Government) in the 'Arta process in Djibouti, Yalahaw, Qanyare and others brought him down.

Accordingly, as the strength and influence of the ICU expanded, the segmentary law swung into action to sabotage them by inspiring a counter-coalition of clans to form against them. By the time of the Ethiopian intervention, the UIC were falling into squabbling factions. Then the damned Ethiopians came to restore their respectability.

Shaped thus by the weird quirks of lineage segmentation, the Somalis, as a society, are segmental, warlike, schismatic, and extremely pragmatic, at least as they understand pragmatism.

What is in it for me? A Somali is likely to ask on any given issue. Therefore the ideology of self-sacrifice essential for the rise of a great grass roots movement is alien to his psyche. No Somali, for example, has ever blown himself up for the cause of al-Islam. (Incidentally, I heard from one source that there was a truck-suicide bombing in one of the Ethiopian garrisons. If true, this is indeed a new development.) A classic Somali proverb holds that “once upon a time, Allah and a warrior chieftain named ‘Atoosh began to wage a terrific fight over us (Somalis), and we forthwith went with the chief against Allah, because the chief could deliver the goods faster than Allah could. That is, a Somali would promptly go against the law of Allah, if doing so turns out to be in his perceived material interest. Proverbs are strong indicators of the Somali collective character: “Somaliyi been waa sheegtaa, laakiin been ma maahmaahdo.” “Somalis will tell a lie, but they never codify a lie into a proverb.” Another venerable Somali proverb says: “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.”

Arguably, the Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan, the George Washington of Somali nationalism and the Dante Alighieri of Somali literature rolled into one, did succeed in leading a rather drawn-out, grassroots resistance against the combined powers of Britain, Italy and Ethiopia (1898-1920.) And yet his movement killed an estimated

one million Somalis and precious few infidels. As the Italian Consul in Aden, Cavalliere Pestalozza, the only European to set eyes on the elusive Mullah, reminds us, the Sayyid's movement, having miserably failed to unify Somalis against infidel rule, deteriorated into internecine bloodletting.

What about the Somalilanders? What explains their success in achieving a modicum of democracy and stability? **Why doesn't segmentation wreak havoc on them, as it does in the south? Three factors, in my view, account for their tenuous secret of success:**

First, the Somalilanders fought a long bitter war of resistance against Siyaad Barre's tyranny. The SNM (Somali National Movement) fighters fought in the same trenches, died together, suffered together and, in the course of this, achieved a high degree of solidarity and common purpose. The crucible of fire molded them into a unifying common goal.

Second, because they are so desirous to receive world recognition, Somalilanders seem to have determined to show good behavior before the international community; and hence to keep from hanging out their dirty linen in public. For instance, it is the conventional wisdom that the last election (2003) was won by the opposition party, Kulmiye, led by Ahmed Mohammad Mahamuud "Silaanyo", but that he was cheated out of power through stuffed ballot boxes and other electoral irregularities. Silaanyo was then strongly advised, according to the prevailing view, to refrain from fighting the fraudulent election results in order to preserve the good image of Somaliland before the world community

Third and most important, the traditional institution of elders is still alive and well in Somaliland, but moribund in the south. This goes back to the developmental difference between the two regions during the colonial interlude. For

example when, in 1991-2, Somaliland came close to a civil war, it was the crucial intervention of the elders with their negotiating skills and deference toward one another that saved it from the fate of the south; by contrast, the elders' institution is practically dead in southern Somalia, on account of the economic transformation that destroyed important aspects of the South's pastoral institutions. Ex-Italian Somalia, that is, is too changed to leave an effective role for the balancing hand and conflict management skills of traditional elders. She is stuck in a limbo between the rock of pre-industrial relations and attitudes on the one hand, and the hard place of half-baked modernization on the other.

So, what next for the south? There are three clan groupings that matter in Mogadishu and adjacent lands: the Murursade, the Habar Gidir and the Abgaal. The Habar Gidir are solidly opposed to the TFG. The Murursade, too, as the smallest of the three, seem to be against the TFG. That leaves the numerically strong Abgaal as the critical element for the survival of the rickety TFG. If they go with it, Abdullahi, Geddi and co. have a fair chance of surviving. If the Abgaal, too, go against them, they are certain to be doomed.