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# What to do with Somalia?



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# What to do with Somalia?

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On 23 February 2012 about fifty representatives from the international community and from Somalia met in London for the London Somalia Conference. As much as we would have wished that this conference would be the watershed, the one that really made a difference for Somalia, we are unfortunately afraid that this conference will just be one more in a long line of international attempts at rebuilding Somalia. Already, more than fourteen internationally sponsored peace conference and several military interventions aimed at restoring central authority to the country has failed miserably. Somalia is therefore popularly known as the most 'failed state' in the world, and it has become the very graveyard of externally sponsored statebuilding initiatives. It is not just that more than fourteen attempts to restore a unitary state have failed miserably, but that these efforts have been followed by more and not less conflict. Currently, the Somali state therefore exists only *de jure*. There is neither a real central authority, nor many of the other characteristics generally associated with a sovereign state.

Yet, while a functioning state may be absent, Somali society and different forms of economic organisation still prevails as the Somalis continue to defy the violence and turmoil that they live in and survive. As the Somalis survive, Somalia must also to some degree work, and the question is not only how it works, but if any of these failed initiatives seriously has considered how Somalia works and what the Somalis really needs.

## A lean central state and strong regional units

The various approaches applied to restore and rebuild state authority in Somalia has been deliberately exploited by a combination of political elites, warlords, radical militias, and some regional actors as too many of them believe that they have more to gain from maintaining cascading circles of violence than attempting to break this vicious cycle of an endless 'conflict trap'. The rise of the United Islamic Courts (UIC), and *alshabaab* has shown that as the conflict in Somalia becomes protracted, the actors tend to mutate into more dangerous forms with serious and far reaching security implications for everybody concerned.

External interventions of well intentioned international actors has at times only made things worse by falling victims to this law of unintended consequences. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that was established after two years of peace talks in 2004 has not achieved much success. The TFG has since its creation been ineffective, weak, corrupt, and lacks the credentials necessary to consolidate its authority and put the country back into order.

What is therefore necessary if we are to make progress is to start learning from the past experiences of the proposed solutions of yesterday. For example, the 4.5 formula of power sharing that is used today as an antidote to the conflicts between local actors and clans in Somalia may

well have produced certain draw backs to its very aim of reconciling actors. First of all while clanism is a reality that cannot be denied in Somalia and is a very strong element organising the Somalis society, it is by its very nature dividing and leads to endless fragmentation into sub-sub clans rather than legitimate representation. Second, the clan is not the only identity of the Somalis. The issue of a common Somaliness, the regional dimension, or religion in the form of Islam are equally important other constitutive identities that also must be brought to the fore to serve the purpose of reconciliation and rebuilding.

The dual track policy approach albeit with good intentions of enabling a bottom-up and top-down approaches simultaneously while fighting *alshebaab* and piracy, has fuelled the fragmentation and clanism trends that certainly is threatening the very existence of both Puntland and Somaliland. Indeed, today there are more than 30 regional states in Somalia. The majority of them were announced after the introduction of the dual track policy approach, and most only exists on paper.

## From what is wrong to what is working

With the TFG mandate expiring on 20th August 2012, the recent incremental security gains of pushing *alshebaab* out of Mogadishu comes at times when Somalia is at a cross road of various proposals and models all led by regional and international actors. However, as the nature of the conflict has changed from civil war followed by state collapse and clan warfare into a more globalised ideological conflict between two camps: the radical and now fully *al-Qaeda* affiliated *alshebaab almujahidiin* on one side and the TFG and its allies on the other, the Somali predicament is locked into a 'war or terror' paradigm that makes it very difficult to find pragmatic solutions to the political conflicts and cleavages that lies underneath the seemingly chaos of Somalia.

This recent twist and turn of the conflict are combined with the piracy off Somali coastal water that is a cause of concern for international actors and thereby contributes to the placing of the Somali predicament in the paradigm of international security. As long as this is the dominant approach to Somalia we fail to see that the London Conference can come to constitute the watershed that Somalia is in such need off.

On the contrary, instead of focusing on everything that is wrong with Somalia we should ask ourselves whether a new approach is possible if we ask what is working in Somalia. Indeed, this paradigmatic case of state failure features a range of institutional responses that has resulted in the creation of new hybrid political orders that have been developed and adapted in the chaotic post-1991 environment. These hybrid political orders are structured according to a combination of religious practice (i.e. Islam), clan-based order, and evolving neighbourhood/village/city definitions of order and governance. Somalia may therefore be without a working government formally defined, but it is not completely without governance.

These hybrid political orders – and we used the term 'hybrid' deliberately as they to various degrees combine rudimentary dimensions of the modern state with vernacular institutions and orders – produce different types of institutionalisation of human life and interaction in order to create predictability and thereby some sort of security in an environment dazzled and confused by war. The majority of these currently exists as between and betwixt war and peace, some has fallen already, others undoubtedly will fall, nonetheless others could potentially come to constitute the very building-blocks for the re-emergence of a new version of the



Somali state or Somali states. Thus, leaning towards a decentralised approach to statebuilding where alongside Somaliland, Puntland and Galmudug, other emerging regional states such as Azania and are supported to stabilise themselves.

Such a formula contains a power-sharing arrangement between a lean central government (concerned with certain specific core tasks) and strong autonomous regional institutions which performs most ordinary governmental tasks, including provision of local security and revenue extraction. This could create an enabling environment that makes it possible to create a two chamber federal parliamentarian system at the national level. This could draw upon the experiences of Somaliland while recognising that the conditions that created this political system are not the the same as those currently found in Somalia. If this comes into place, it could constitute a legitimate foundation for engaging in negotiations with the moderate elements of *alshebaab*.

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