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# Somalia: Whose Country Is It, Anyway?

MARY HARPER

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Visitors arriving at Aden Adde International Airport in the Somali capital of Mogadishu can be forgiven for wondering where they have landed. As the aircraft taxis toward the terminal, concrete bollards appear, painted with the distinctive white star and crescent of the Turkish flag. Shorn-headed, muscular white men in dark glasses stroll around the airfield as if it were their own, directing unmarked planes toward fortress-like enclosures complete with watchtowers and razor wire. In order to leave the airport, one must run a gauntlet of tense, heavily armed Ugandan and Burundian soldiers guarding the exit.

The situation at the airport reflects the state of Somalia as a whole. Since the late 1980s, the country has been without effective central authority and has, in some sense, become a playground for international experiments in state-building, peacekeeping, and disaster relief. Because of its strategic position in the Horn of Africa, proximity to the Arab world, and current

association with al-Qaeda and sea piracy, Somalia has attracted multiple foreign interventions—military, diplomatic, and humanitarian. At times these efforts have backfired spectacularly, like the U.S. military's 1993 Operation Restore Hope, which started off as a largely humanitarian

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venture. The operation ended with the infamous Black Hawk Down incident, when Somali militiamen shot down U.S. helicopters in Mogadishu and jeering crowds dragged the naked corpses of American soldiers through the streets.

Somalia has been fought over and torn apart since the colonial period, when France, Italy, Great Britain, and Ethiopia all staked claims over Somalia and its people, who lived—and continue to live—in an expanse of territory far greater than that enclosed by Somalia's current national borders. Today, there are significant Somali populations in all three of Somalia's neighboring states: Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. In the 1970s, Somalia's war with Ethiopia was in many ways a proxy conflict between Cold War powers. Somalia suffered defeat when the Soviet Union dramatically switched sides, abandoning it as an ally following a call for help from Ethiopia's new Marxist leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The number of foreign powers currently involved in Somalia is perhaps greater than it has ever has been. Kenyan, Ugandan, Burundian, and Djiboutian troops are on the ground as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Ethiopian soldiers are also present in significant numbers, as are military advisers and covert troops from the United States and Europe. Several nations have frigates patrolling off the Somali coast in an effort to combat piracy, while the United Nations has controlled Somali airspace since 1996. Simultaneously, private security companies employing personnel from a wide range of countries operate in some parts of the territory, while in other areas jihadists from South Asia, the Arab world, and elsewhere fight for al Shabab, the al-Qaeda-linked militia that occupies much of southern and central Somalia. Al Shabab has recently lost its main urban strongholds, however, and has resorted to more traditional asymmetric guerrilla-style violence including suicide bombings and targeted assassinations.

Apart from combating the foreign jihadis, the stated aim of these myriad forces is to rid Somalia of al-Qaeda elements and sea pirates and to restore stability. Their presence, however, is highly problematic. Somalis are a proud and independent people who are traditionally hostile to foreign military presence and political interference. In particular, Somalis are suspicious of Kenya and Ethiopia, both of which have established buffer zones along the Somali border and interfere with governance in those areas. For now, many Somalis are grateful to the African Union troops for playing a key role in wresting a number of towns and cities from al Shabab's control, including Mogadishu. It is unclear, however, how long they will tolerate AMISOM, especially as the mission does not appear to have a clear exit

strategy. The longer AMISOM stays, the more likely it is that Somali patience will wear thin.

Many Somalis argue that the presence of so many foreign troops in Somalia means that not enough attention is being paid to building up a strong and integrated national military and police forces. In the short term, outsourcing Somalia's security to the international community may be easier than training, equipping, and integrating the country's numerous militia groups into a unified force. That, however, cannot be a permanent solution.

In addition to domestic security, politics have, to some extent, been taken out of Somali hands. There has been much talk amongst foreign diplomats, academics, journalists, and UN representatives about how Somalis led the recent approval of a draft constitution and the selection of a new parliament and president, marking the end of a long period of political transition. Yet much of the *de facto* political power in Somalia remains in the hands of the UN, the United States, Europe, and other outside actors. Moreover, when politics do not seem to be proceeding the way UN and Western diplomats would like, outside players try to exert pressure in the hope that the process is brought back on course. It often seems that political developments are not Somali-owned at all, but rather guided by a form of external remote control.

The 2011 presidential election, determined by parliamentary vote, is a prime example. Before the election, it appeared that the incumbent head of state Sheikh Sharif Ahmed had developed an agreement with Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, a powerful former parliamentary speaker, which would virtually guarantee his reelection as president. But a flurry of internal maneuvering and diplomatic activity prevented this from happening. It was even rumored that Qatar provided funds for the eventual winner, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, to buy parliamentary votes.

As a journalist and a close observer of many recent political developments in Somalia, I often feel as though I am watching a series of parallel universes. Interest groups seem to exist in separate bubbles, occasionally colliding, but usually floating independently of one another. Such is the case with the Somalia-focused community at the UN, which includes what is known as the "Nairobi bubble" of well-paid UN officials based in Kenya, a separate and parallel world to the UN Somalia team in New York. The two arms seem to operate at cross-purposes as often as they are cooperating. Even different UN departments compete with one another or fail to communicate effectively. Somali politicians and other wily operators have become experts at exploiting this disconnect, using various sources of

outside assistance for their personal advantage. For example, a UN report leaked in July 2012 said that seventy percent of the millions of dollars earmarked for the development and reconstruction of Somalia had gone unaccounted for, much of it diverted into the pockets of Somali politicians. Somalis in turn have accused the UN of spending much of the money meant for their country on the lavish lifestyle of Nairobi-based UN employees, many of whom rarely set foot in Somalia. In many ways, the vast UN Somalia operation and Somali politicians are mutually dependent on each other. If the challenges in Somalia were to subside and the UN was to withdraw, many UN workers would lose their jobs and some Somali officials would lose lucrative cash flows.

In recent years, a number of newcomers have also entered the picture. Gulf states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have become increasingly active in Somalia, as has Iran. Turkey, however, has made the most concerted efforts of late, effectively making Somalia its foothold in Africa. In August 2011, during the height of famine in Somalia, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan scored a diplomatic coup by traveling with his family to Mogadishu—the first non-African head of state to do so in two decades. His visit served as the catalyst for a massive, highly visible Turkish humanitarian effort in the capital. The Turks donated food, set up a well-ordered camp for the displaced, and converted bullet-scarred buildings into schools and hospitals. Turkish teachers and doctors now live among the Somali population, instead of barricading themselves in

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secure zones at the airport or directing operations from Nairobi. In fact, as one Somali put it, “Turkey has become the McDonald’s of Mogadishu. Their flags are everywhere, just like the yellow arches of McDonald’s are everywhere in America.”

Unlike most other foreign interventions, the Turkish effort has been popular among Somalis. Some Somalis say Turkey has done more for Somalia in a few months than the rest of the world has done in decades; a number have even named their baby boys “Erdogan” after the prime minister. But not everyone views Turkey’s presence quite so positively. A report published in October 2012 by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG)

claims that many countries consider Turkey's role in Somalia to be naïve adventurism. Envy of Turkey's achievements might partially explain this assessment, but the ICG also suggests that Turkey's approach has been too unilateral and has duplicated other, ongoing efforts to improve the situation. The report also critiques Turkey's efforts as too focused on Mogadishu and claims that the Turkish contingent has been manipulated by Somali politicians. It also notes that Turkey's officials have been too close to former President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who has been widely accused of corruption.

Regardless of opinions on Turkey's controversial involvement, the truth is that even if foreign powers were to leave Somalia alone, it would not be able to function as a proper country .....  
 or nation-state as we know it. Decades .....  
 without a strong central government .....  
 have led to severe political disintegration: the country has essentially split .....  
 up into a series of semi-autonomous regions that operate as "statelets," some .....  
 fairly stable, others chaotic and violent. .....  
 The result is a constantly shifting .....  
 patchwork, marked by regions that .....  
 sometimes rub against each other and break into open conflict.

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The most striking example of autonomy is Somaliland in the northwest, which declared itself independent from the rest of the country in 1991. Although it lacks international recognition, Somaliland is a functioning polity and more democratic than the rest of the Horn of Africa. Arguably the most successful Somali region, Somaliland has also experienced the lowest degree of foreign interference, particularly since it developed its own political system from the ground up, marrying traditional forms of authority with more modern, Western-style democracy. For example, the upper house of parliament, or *guurti*, is made up of traditional elders, while the lower house is elected.

Other parts of Somalia operate more as semi-autonomous units such as Puntland in the northeast, where international companies are exploring for oil, and the newly formed region of Jubbaland in the south, which runs along the Kenyan border. Elsewhere, particularly in south-central Somalia, much smaller units—including towns, villages, pastoralist groups, and religious communities—carry out fairly effective forms of self-government and administration. The challenge for Mogadishu will be to balance these disparate forms of authority with each other and the central government.

It is telling that the newly drafted constitution does not yet address the allocation of resources between the regions and the center.

As well as the many “mini-Somalias” within the territory, there is also the challenge of considering “Greater Somalia.” For many Somalis, their true nation encompasses the five points of the white star on the Somali flag that stand for Somalia, Somaliland, and the Somali-speaking regions of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. It could be argued that the years of conflict and instability have led to the creation of a sixth point on the star, representing the global Somali diaspora stretching from Australia to America and from Dubai to Denmark. Somalia will always be “bigger” than the territory it inhabits on the world map.

Many Somalis have used their forced displacement to great effect, creating a highly globalized community of economically dynamic, tech-

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nologically sophisticated entrepreneurs. Their financial and technological acumen both in Somalia and in the diaspora, however, has not been matched by an ability to function well politically. Signs indicate the new authorities in Mogadishu will be different from previous administrations, which did not seem capable of separating violence and corruption from political power. There are also indications that the outside world is beginning to understand Somalia a little better,

ceding more room to Somalis to do things their way and in their time. For example, the international community recently permitted Somalis to choose their parliament, president, and other leaders on Somali soil, rather than forming a government during internationally sponsored conferences outside the country, as has been done over the past twenty years. In the meantime, however, the presence of so many foreign boots on Somali soil and international involvement in its politics will continue to pose serious challenges, both in terms of devising a workable exit strategy and giving Somalis the chance to take charge of their own security and development. ■