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## SOMALIA, PICTURING A FRAGILE STATE: FROM COLONISATION TO ISLAMISM (I)

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## SOMALIA, PICTURING A FRAGILE STATE: FROM COLONISATION TO ISLAMISM (I)

### Abstract:

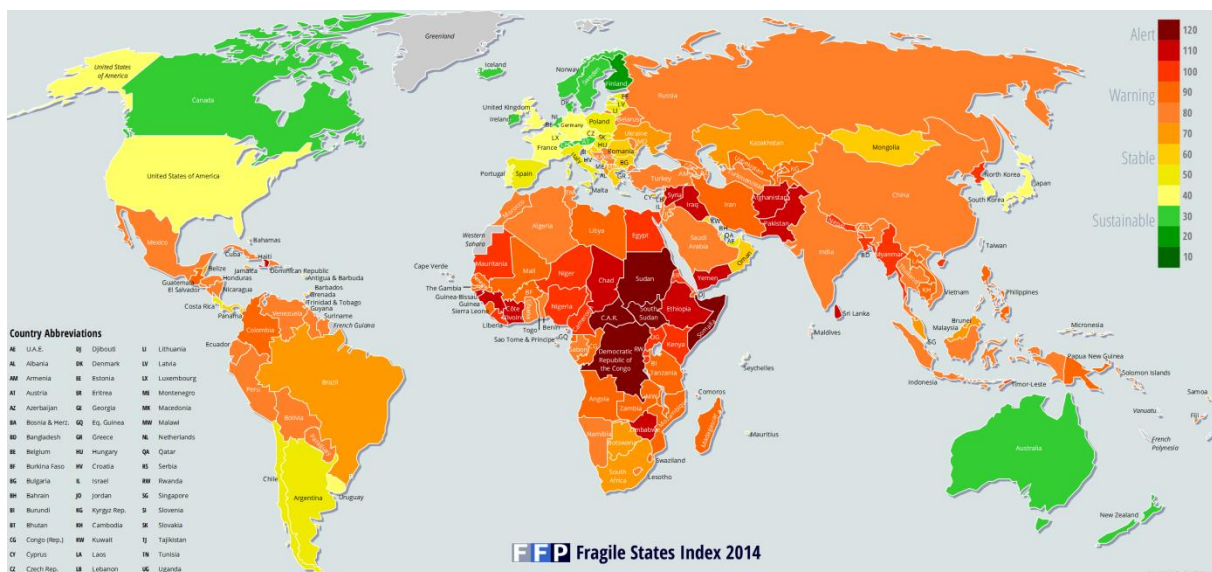
Somalia is one of the weakest links in the conflict route that goes from Nuakchot to Mogadishu. More than 25 years of civil war along with the lack of government structures have made this former Italian colony into so-called fragile state, which sets all the conditions for international terrorism to flourish. To understand how Somalia has become a fragile state, it is necessary to analyse how the country has evolved since the Italian and British colonisation. Somalia has witnessed a somewhat atypical decolonisation process, a long dictatorship under Siad Barre during the Cold War, the emergence of Islamist militias after Barre was deposed due to a long war with Ethiopia, the consequent foreign intervention and finally the emergence about a decade ago of an actual jihadist network that has Al-Shabab as its ultimate expression.

**Key Words:** Somalia, Fragile state, Al-Shabab, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ogaden.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past years Somalia—a result of Italian and British colonisation— has been considered a shining example of a fragile state, which according to Max Weber is defined as that type of state in which the government has lost physical control of the territory and monopoly over the legitimate use of force; therefore becoming incapable of delivering basic services to its population or of acting as a full member of the international community<sup>1</sup>.

According to the annual “Failed States Index” of the American think tank “Fund for Peace”, Somalia ranks last, except for 2014 when South Sudan<sup>2</sup> dropped to the bottom. However, South Sudan was described as a fragile state instead of a failed state, which would have been more realistic.



<sup>1</sup> Santos Villareal, Gabriel Mario: “Estados Fallidos: definiciones conceptuales”, Centro de Documentación, Información y Análisis, SERVICIOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN, Cámara de Diputados. Mexico DF. April, 2009. Available at <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/sedia/sia/spe/SPE-ISS-07-09.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Fund For Peace: “Fragile States Index 2014”. The Fund for Peace 1720 I Street NW, 7 | Washington, D.C. 2006. Available at <http://ffp.statesindex.org/>.

The situation is very similar in neighbouring states Ethiopia and Eritrea, both former Italian colonies in the problematic region of the Horn of Africa. On the other side of the Bab el Mandel Strait, Yemen—a country that receives every year thousands of Somali refugees— is also immersed in a civil war due to a Shia insurgency that has gained control of many areas within the country. At the same time, a branch of Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP) has emerged as a semi-state within Yemen.

We could argue that three main security challenges are determining the stability of the Somali state, and having an important impact on the regional and international security framework. The first one is piracy in the Aden gulf, which is threatening maritime traffic and oil supply to the West. Even though piracy has been reduced to the point that it is almost no longer a threat, it still obliges the international community to maintain naval forces to control it. The main forces are under the European Union (Atalanta Operation) and NATO (Ocean Shield Operation). The second challenge is human trafficking from Somalia to the north and then to the Mediterranean. The unstable situation in countries like Libya has made it easier for clandestine immigration to Europe to take place, influenced by the deaths of thousands of people in Mediterranean waters. The third challenge is the terrorist threat from the Islamist militias of Al-Shabab, a group that has good relations with Al Qaeda and that has been clashing with the Somali government since 2007.

Thus, this document will first examine the Italian and British colonisation period at the end of the XIX century to then analyse the evolution of the Somali state since its creation in the aftermath of the Second World War, in order to identify the underlying causes that made Somalia a fragile state from the start. The second document that will be further published will analyse the process of state decomposition after the Cold war, the emergence of the first Islamist groups that would seize power for some years, the international military interventions that failed during the 90s and the road to the current state of affairs. Nowadays, Somalia is defined by the invasion of neighbouring countries, anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, the mission of the United Nations and the creation of a national government that intends to take Somalia back to stability, in the midst of great difficulties.

Somalia was Islamised during the Middle Ages and was occupied in 1889. In 1905 it became an Italian colony like Eritrea, before being integrated with Ethiopia in what came to be known as—in a somewhat grandiloquent way— the Italian East Africa, which only lived as a political entity between 1936 and 1941. Although the impact of colonisation was limited, its consequences were very important. A very weak Italian administration mainly focused on the capital Mogadishu and coastal cities was completely unable to control the mainland of the country. Thus, local chiefs acted as intermediaries between the local population and the colonial administration<sup>3</sup>. Somalia was the starting point for the conquest of Ethiopia, which was a more ambitious objective for Italy. Somalia was always the poorest Italian colony and played a very limited geopolitical role. This is why the Italian imprint was much less important in the country than the influence of the rest of the European powers on other African colonies

The situation in the north of the country was dramatically different. The so-called British Somalia was occupied at the same time by the United Kingdom in order both to prevent France from controlling access to the Red Sea and also to use it as a means of securing the strategic port of Aden, which was located in a deserted area of the Arabic peninsula. The British were satisfied with just a minimal control over the territory, and did not pay a lot of attention to discussing an efficient mechanism of conflict resolution within the indigenous administration.<sup>4</sup> Hence when independence came, this wide region in the north became part of Somalia in a peaceful and agreed way and was allowed to keep traditional political structures<sup>5</sup>.

Again under Italian administration in 1949 on mandate of the United Nations—a unique case in the history of the organisation— Somalia became independent in 1960, being the only African country with Cameroon to have been under the control of two different colonial powers. The Afars and Issas region, which was under French administration, became independent in 1977 under the name of Djibouti, along with the Odagen region in the

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<sup>3</sup> Dormira Jamais : « la Somalie n'existe plus », entretien avec Matteo Guglielmo, February 2012. Available at <http://dormirajamais.org/somalie/>.

<sup>4</sup> Samatar, Abdi Ismail: "The state and rural transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884–1986", Madison: 1989, University of Wisconsin Press, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica: "The New Encyclopædia Britannica", (Encyclopædia Britannica: 2002), p.835.

border with Ethiopia and the Somali populated Northern Frontier District in the north of Kenya<sup>6</sup>.

Even though decolonisation was in general a peaceful process, between 1949 and 1953 Ogaden and Haud—a border strip located between Somaliland and Ethiopia that was rich in pastures—had to be given to Ethiopia. The reason behind this decision was to satisfy the emperor Haile Selassie, who came back to power after the Second World War and was considered by the US as the best ally in the region during the Cold War. The handover was based on the treaty of 1887 between the United Kingdom and the emperor of Ethiopia Menelik II, in where the British agreed to cede part of the Somali territory in exchange for support in the context of the fight against Somali tribes. Moreover, Britain needed to preserve the relationship with Kenya, whose independence would come in 1960. To this end, Britain would hand over a border strip of the north of Somalia.

Somali aspirations of a territorial reunification were frustrated and the process of self-determination was dictated indirectly from outside. Thus, the break with colonialism was neither real nor violent. All of these reasons explain in good measure the root causes of the current crisis and rivalries in the Horn of Africa.

### **THE FAILED ATTEMPT TO CREATE A “GREAT SOMALIA”**

While in 1969 Gadafi was taking power in Libya, another Italian colony, General Siad Barre took control of Somalia. He would stay in power until 1991, when he was violently overthrown. Eritrea also became independent from Ethiopia in 1991 after a 30-year-long war. Later in 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie was ousted and replaced by a military junta.

The coup d'état of October 21, 1969 can be interpreted as a decisive turning point for Somalia. The country got out of Western influence and started leaning towards a Marxist-Leninist regime under Soviet influence. However, this ideological conversion was more apparent than real, since relations with Italy were maintained and its membership to the Arab League acted as a means of enforcing the Muslim nature of the country. The actual

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<sup>6</sup> Laitin, David D.: “Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience”, University Of Chicago Press: 1977, p.75.

ideology of the Somali regime under Siad Barre was nationalism. Its ultimate goal was to create a Somali national identity that would end with the tribal links that divided and fragmented society. Anti-tribal campaigns, such as Ololeh<sup>7</sup> “burn” in the Somali language—were aimed at asserting the creation of a “Great Somalia” that was to unite and integrate dissident regions.

Nonetheless, this aspiration started gaining momentum after the Somali defeat against Ethiopia in 1977 in the so-called Ogaden war—a war where the USSR shifted alliances and backed Ethiopia instead of its, until then, long time ally, Somalia. Out of betrayal, Siad Barre decided to align with the United States, and thus the strongest army in Africa was created<sup>8</sup>. However, this was not enough to prevent Somalia from slowly descending into a constant decline due to the weakening effect of the war and the flux of Ethiopian refugees on existing political structures. A famine that lasted several years and reached its peak in 1984 was the tipping point for Somalia, which was already deeply affected by fights between political factions, nepotism, official repression and a increasing corruption.

The first armed movements started emerging and creating chaos during this period in the eighties, taking advantage of the fall of the dictator in 1991. Political power was fought for between interim president Ali Mahdi Mohamed and General Farrah Aidid during a civil war that caused one million refugees and more than five million to be severely affected by famine and diseases<sup>9</sup>. Different tribes backed these two opposing faction. The fight for controlling infrastructures and humanitarian aid has become since then an endemic characteristic of the Somali conflict.

Hence, the fall of the Somali state had structural roots because not only institutions collapsed in 1991 but also society ended up divided along tribal lines. The role of tribes was bolstered by the ineffectiveness of state institutions and thus became the main social element that was to influence political behaviour within the Somali society.

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<sup>7</sup> Dormira Jamais : « la Somalie n'existe plus », Opus Cit. pag.5.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsbotham, Oliver y Woodhouse, Tom: “Encyclopedia of international peacekeeping operations”, ABC-CLIO, 1999. pag. 222

<sup>9</sup> Marchal, Roland : « La guerre à Mogadiscio en ligne », Politique africaine, pag 120. <http://www.politique-africaine.com/numeros/pdf/046120.pdf>

## CIVIL WAR AND RESTORE HOPE OPERATION

In April 1992, having in mind the disastrous situation of the Somali population, the United Nations gave birth to the mission UNOSOM in order to alleviate them<sup>10</sup>.

The impossibility of effectively delivering humanitarian aid and the loss of several Pakistani blue helmets as a result of tribal clashes forced the UN to change its mission from peace keeping, which would fall under the Chapter VI of the San Francisco Charter, to a peace enforcement mission under the strictest Chapter VII<sup>11</sup>. It was the first mission to be implemented in the context of the emergence of a new concept that came to be known as “humanitarian intervention”, which was an adaptation of international law that meant to encourage the need to intervene even military in those internal conflicts where civil population was directly affected by the ravages of war and did not have the protection of their respective governments<sup>12</sup>.

Consequently, the US, under the auspices of the UN, launched “Restore Hope” Operation on October 3 and 4, 1993, in order to capture warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid. The operation was woefully popularised by the film “Black Hawk down”, where it is very graphically described as a poorly designed and executed operation that had to end badly. It was a complete failure and caused the death of 18 American soldiers and more than a thousand Somali combatants. The result of said operation forced president Bill Clinton to withdraw troops, a decision that was followed in 1995 by the complete withdrawal of the 8000 blue helmets of UNOSOM. The country descended into utter chaos.

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<sup>10</sup> UNOSOM I was established to supervise ceasefires and to ensure that supplies arrived safely to distribution centres in the city. Later on, the mandate was extended and more funds were devoted to the mission so that all humanitarian convoys and Somali centres of distribution could be given protection. Available at: <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/past/unosomi>.

<sup>11</sup> To this effect, in December 1992, after a deterioration of the situation in Somalia the Security Council authorised Member States to form the United Task Force (UNITAF) in order to secure humanitarian assistance. UNITAF worked along UNOSOM I to protect the most populated areas and to guarantee that humanitarian assistance was effective.. <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/past/unosomi>.

<sup>12</sup> Fuente Cobo, Ignacio: “Las operaciones de paz en el siglo XXI de la prevención a la intervención”, in Seguridad y defensa / coord. por Pere Vilanova Trías, Rafael Martínez Martínez, 2000, pages. 87-105.

The lack of a central government encouraged the creation by some autonomous regions of the north of the country—including Somaliland, Putland and Galmugug— of their own administrative structures in a context of growing national fragmentation. The country ended up divided in several factions that fought against each other as a result of Somaliland independence almost since 1991 and its neighbouring Putland's autonomy since 1998. Several agreements in January 1997 fostered by Kenya and Ethiopia failed to disarm militias and rebuild the state. The July 2003 reconciliation conference was also unable to stop hostilities. However, some positive steps were undertaken during these years. At the beginning of 2000 a Transitional National Government was created and then renamed in 2004 to Transitional Federal Government. The aim was to establish actual national institutions, starting with the army<sup>13</sup>. All this allowed the writing of a national constitutional project based on federalism and the creation of a Transition Parliament.

Given the internal conflict that Somalia was going through, the new transition parliament— composed equally by representatives of the four main tribes of the country— met in Kenia and named an interim president in October 2004. Putland Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed occupied this post while the Presidency of the government was awarded to Mohamed Gedi, a veterinarian. The lack of real control and internal legitimacy over the territory made it almost impossible for the government to be efficient, despite international recognition and the decision to move the government headquarters from Kenai to Baidoa (south Somalia) in February, 26, 2006.

### ISLAMISTS' SEIZURE OF POWER

In June 2006 Islamists from the so-called Islamic Court Union<sup>14</sup> (ICU) took power, thus displacing the US-backed Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) that was considered the legitimate government of Somalia<sup>15</sup>. The Islamic Court Union was constituted as a heterogeneous alliance that included both moderate and radical

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<sup>13</sup> Central Intelligence Agency: "Somalia". The World Factbook, Langley, Virginia, 23 June 2014. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Profile: Somalia's Islamic Courts. BBC, 6 June 2006, Available at : <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5051588.stm>.

<sup>15</sup> El País Internacional: "La historia reciente del conflicto somalí", 27 December 2006. [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2006/12/27/actualidad/1167174003\\_850215.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2006/12/27/actualidad/1167174003_850215.html).



factions. To the latter belonged Hassan Dahir Aweys, leader of the jihadist group al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI),<sup>16</sup> who was responsible for several terrorist attacks to hotels and markets of Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Jijiga and Harar and who had been linked with attacks to the American Embassies of Kenya and Tanzania in 1998<sup>17</sup>. The armed organisation of Al Shabab (the youth) will emerge from these extremist factions as the young branch of the Islamic Court, which will become notorious in the years thereafter for being one of the international franchises of international jihadist terrorism.

The inefficiency of the Transitional government paved the road for the ICU to become the most important force in Mogadishu. At the same time, Islamist militants—once a minority—started growing sympathies among the local population. Under the sharia law, the new Eritrea-backed government along its military arm Al Shabab<sup>18</sup> drastically imposed order in the capital and in a great part of the country, while opposing militias sought refuge in neighbouring countries. This was refused by the Intergovernmental Authority for Development, an international organisation made up by Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Transitional Government of Somalia.

Nonetheless, the country was far from peace. Backed by Ethiopia and the African Union, the Transitional Federal Government waged a military campaign in order to recover lost territory, especially in the mainland. The response of the Somalian ICU was a declaration of jihad against the Ethiopian government, which intended for the Somali population from Ogaden in Ethiopia to rise up against central governmental authority. The ultimate goal was to incorporate the region to Somalia<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Hassan Dahir Aweys (Hawiye/Habr Gedir/Ayr/Ayaanle) was a former colonel of the Somali army and veteran of Ogaden War (1977–1978). Hoehne, Markus Virgil: "Counter-terrorism in Somalia: How external interference helped to produce militant Islamism", Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. pag. 13. Available at [http://webarchive.ssrc.org/Somalia\\_Hoehne\\_v10.pdf](http://webarchive.ssrc.org/Somalia_Hoehne_v10.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Reeve, Simon: "NEWS ANALYSIS / U.S. returning to a nightmare called Somalia". December 16, 2001. Available at: <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/NEWS-ANALYSIS-U-S-returning-to-a-nightmare-2840297.php>.

<sup>18</sup> Author: Masters, Jonathan: "Al-Shabab", Council on Foreign Relations, September 5, 2014. Available at <http://www.cfr.org/somalia/al-shabab/p18650>.

<sup>19</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica: Encyclopædia Britannica: 2005, Volume I p.163.

The Ethiopian response came swiftly, and on July 26, 2006, a strong military force made up by 30,000 Ethiopian soldiers<sup>20</sup> invaded Somalia and conquered Mogadishu on December 29, after a fierce battle that caused many casualties. Another defeat took place on January 2, 2007 in Kismayo, which until September 2006 was controlled by the Transitional government but was then occupied by Al-Shabab thanks to the brigade Ras Kamboni<sup>21</sup>. The fall of the last strongholds marked the fragmentation of these groups, whose leaders and majority of fighters fled to Kenya. Sheik Cherif Ahmed, second in command, would surrender on January 27. Thus, the responsibility of jihad fell on Hassan Dahir Aweys.

The new military situation was to some extent corroborated by the United Nations, which allowed by Resolution 1725 (6 December) 2006 a military deployment in Somalia carried out by states of the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the African Union in order to give protection to the Transitional Federal Government.<sup>22</sup>. The international intervention was actually what allowed Al-Shabab to become the dominant local force in the south of Somalia under the leadership of Abdi Ahmed Godane.

## CONCLUSIONS

2006 might be considered as a turning point regarding the analysis of Islamism and violence in Somalia. In 2006 the nature and strategies of Islamism and violence took a turn for the worse and went from a decade of “low intensity conflict” that only concerned local and regional actors to a new stage of global terrorism that was significantly more violent.

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<sup>20</sup> Yare, Hassan. “Troops dig in as Somalia war fears grow”. Relief Web, Reuters, 2006-12-13. Available at : <http://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/troops-dig-somalia-war-fears-grow> .

<sup>21</sup> This militia was a very active Islamist group in the region of Jubalands. Its leader, Hassan Turki, was one of the commanders of the ICU. Roggio, Bill: “Shabaab absorbs southern Islamist group, splits Hizbul Islam”, The Long War Journal, **February 1, 2010**. Available at:

[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/02/shabaab\\_absorbs\\_sout.php#ixzz3OiUuQEqa](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/02/shabaab_absorbs_sout.php#ixzz3OiUuQEqa)

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Security Council: “Letter dated 22 January 2007 from the Chargé d’affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of the Congo to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, 24 January 2007. Available at: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/SOMALIA%20S2007%2034.pdf>.

The consequence of this will be the success of the group Al-Shabab over other local actors and also within the Horn of Africa, thus becoming part of the international network of terrorism that defines modern Islamism. As a result, an international intervention carried out first by regional powers and then by the African Union will lead to the current unstable situation in Somalia.

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