



Transcript

Beyond the Transitional Federal Government: Future Viable Options for Somalia

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Nuradin Dirie:

It is great to be here and I thank Chatham House for giving me this opportunity to add my voice into the debate about Somalia and what to do about it. My topic, 'Beyond the TFG: Future Viable Options for Somalia' is likely to evoke one of two responses in your mind. One voice might say something like, 'How brave to attempt to solve what seems an impossible task.' Another voice might say, 'Oh, not again. How many times have we been here before?!' Whether you are optimistic or cynical, I'm going to attempt to use my experience to tell the Somalia story and offer some solutions for its future.

I have seen the Somalia story through several of its stages. As a Somali who grew up in Somalia I was caught up in its civil war in every conceivable way. I lost friends and family and had to move and cope with the physical, financial and psychological trauma that resulted from the great upheaval and disruption in our regular lives.

My family story and the Somalia story were further entwined as we became community activists in our adopted countries, trying to help fellow Somalis to cope with the sudden and momentous changes in their lives. Speaking for those of us who arrived at the shores of this great country, our adopted communities and countries were very welcoming and very generous. Without doubt, we had our share of struggle to adapt to our new life and along the way had to correct a few myths about Somalis.

Speaking of which, the one I had the greatest fun with, appeared in *The Daily Star* newspaper in 2003. On its front page with 'photoshopped' pictures and a large caption, it pronounced, 'Somali asylum seekers have stolen donkeys from Greenwich Royal Park in order to eat them.' The author wrote, 'It is well known that donkey meat is a favoured delicacy in Somalia'. Well I took it upon myself to write to the esteemed gentleman and, as gently as I could, pointed out that eating donkey meat is actually prohibited in Islam! Of course, they published an apology. It took four weeks to negotiate the text and it appeared in the bottom right corner of page 26! But it was an apology nonetheless.

My involvement with Somalia and Somalis was not limited to this country. It also took me back to Somalia itself. First, as a civil society activist I went to add our voice in the political debate and call for the expansion of the political

space beyond the warlords. It's a fight in which we are still deeply engaged - with some demonstrable successes. Next, my involvement was as humanitarian and development worker. It's the work of which I'm most proud because it gave me the opportunity to help my people in every corner of Somalia from Kismayo to Zeyla, Hafun to Hiran, Mogadishu to Merka, Baidoa to Berbera. And finally, I went back as a politician who sought an elected office. Yes, I am one of those invaders with a Foreign Passport who felt a sense of responsibility to do something about Somalia.

I learned quite a lot in the course of my campaign. It was the first time in my life that I had relations with my people 'in reverse'. I was not giving something but requesting something. Canvassing opinions and support from ordinary people - visiting large and small towns and villages and talking to thousands of people. The experience was humbling.

It is by calling on these experiences that I will address today's topic and try to suggest ways forward.

But first, a bit of an update on the story of Somalia as it continues to unfold. It is well known and well documented that Somalia is in crisis. The government is challenged. Killing continues. Instability threatens the whole region. It is a country gripped by violence, death and destruction: a country where tribal and clan allegiances dominate the political psychology rather than national goals and aspirations. And the most vulnerable are always caught in the middle creating the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

Two decades of conflict have produced a worrisome environment for children. For every four newborns only one will make it to their first birthday. Only one in five that survive, will ever attend primary school. In fact, over half of Somalia's inhabitants have never sung a national anthem nor cheered a national football team. And that's because they were born after the civil war in 1991.

In the not so distant past, Somalia had a promising future. It might seem astonishing but in the 1960s Somalia was exemplified as the first democracy in Africa. It was a model of peace, security and rule of law. Somalia could boast a successful multi-party system, freedom of expression and freedom of association for all its citizens. It had a national goal and Somali people were eager to contribute what they could to their country.

Admittedly, the democratic experience did not last long and a military dictatorship superseded it (as was the case in some other African countries). Yet Somalia remained a peaceful, progressive country, full of energy. I remember, as a child, being energised before school by the national student's song on the radio (*'Ardey baan ahayoo, ardey baan ahayoo, ubaxii wadankaan ahayoo'*)¹ I recall doctors visiting my school to give us regular health check-ups. In those days one could also walk to the beach in Mogadishu at three in the morning without fear.

But our success as a nation is not only confined in the past. There are successes in our current story as well. Puntland and Somaliland, that constitute 50% of Somali's geographic area and about 40% of its population, have achieved 19 years of relative stability. They are both fragile but both have inherent strengths they call upon during great challenges in their story. Despite what we hear about the political wrangling in Somaliland today, about the electoral process, I believe Somaliland will be able to achieve another peaceful transition. Abating the fear of transition was very much on our minds when the Presidential candidates in Puntland collectively worked to achieve a remarkably peaceful and civil transfer of power.

Both Puntland and Somaliland have achieved peaceful political transitions three times in their recent history. Each has elected three Presidents. Each has formed three parliaments. And each has passed much legislation that conforms to international standards and norms. Though they did have territorial disputes with each other that caused some military encounters, they were both cautious enough to avert all-out war.

It is quite significant, in contrast to South Central Somalia, how both achieved about 40% of school enrolment, 50% of health coverage and about 40% of access to clean water. A colleague commented to me recently that if they were considered to be countries, they both could potentially be on their way to achieving Millennium Development Goals. It demonstrates that modest success is possible.

Another success story that we all know is Somalia's private sector. It continues to create jobs for thousands, delivering goods and services to

¹I am a student, I am a student and I am the flower of my country'.

millions, establishing institutions and creating some Somali millionaires to join the list of the worlds richest.

I am not talking about piracy money but money hard-earned by legitimate Somali companies in Somalia. Much of the global news now is about the 40 million USD that was allegedly received as a ransom last year. But Somali businesses continue to fight against these piracies because they have increased the cost of doing business in Somalia.

But at the central level, after several attempts at establishing a centralised authority, nothing seems to be working. Unfortunately, I am also today of the view that the same fate and curse awaits the current Transitional Federal Government. Despite our best efforts, it will be unlikely that it will achieve its mandate of taking Somalia into an electoral process by 2011. Instead of going through the painstaking constitutional process based on the Transitional Federal Charter, the government embarked on the great diversion of establishing Sharia law without having a compatible model from anywhere in the world to follow.

I will argue that Somalia today does not even have a scholar who qualifies to give a fatwa (*Ijtihad*) on contemporary issues. We would still need to rely on copying fatwas from Muslim scholars in other countries, based on convenience. How long will it take to establish the scholarly and social capacity to institute such a system without even considering international and regional relations? How long it will take us to install a Somali-based Sharia system that can regulate the transnational Somalia issues and a globalised economy that impact us all. How long will this system mature to the level that it can satisfy the different school of thoughts in Somalia? I suggest longer than I would like the fighting to continue.

It is good news to allow political space to political Islam in Somalia. But it should not be at the expense of denying that space to the rest of us. We have to grow together in order to form a system that will work for us all, for our neighbours and for the rest of the world. After all, Somalia is not an isolated island insulate from world affairs.

I believe it was unrealistic to expect this government to achieve the transitional tasks by 2011 (they are expected to stabilise the country, reconcile different factions, establish local governances, engage in legal and

political dialogue with Puntland and Somaliland, review the constitution while agreeing on federal formula, conduct referendum on it after conducting census of course, map political constituencies, open up political parties and conduct the elections).

It is clear this cannot be achieved within the given timeframe. I also believe that any attempt to extend its mandate beyond 2011 will face a monumental legitimacy challenge. For no matter how many parliamentarians and ministers we include in this already inflated government, people simply will not accept it. So what do we do?

First - and right now - it is important to support this government. It is crucial to safeguard the transitional institutions that are a product of 7 years of political process in Somalia: two years of negotiation and 5 years of actual political dynamics. The TFG must not compromise the Transitional Federal Charter and embark on political project we can clearly foresee is not viable at the current climate. It has to reiterate that the Transitional Charter will be the framework to end the transitional period. Yes, it will be difficult, but less than that will self-destruct the existing institutions.

Difficult though it may be, the Transitional Federal Government must also continuously foster a culture of dialogue, forgiveness and inclusiveness. Why? Because if people who have a political grievance are not at the discussion table, they will find some other way to get noticed or to derail the political process. In equal measure, it is also important for opposition groups to be realistic. Not everyone can be part of the political leadership though everyone can have a stake in the political process: even if in opposition. It is also fruitless for the international community to insist on full inclusivity in Somalia. That has never happened anywhere in the world.

These measures are only temporary. What else is there beyond the TFG? For a long time the argument in Somalia has been about whether international intervention is good or if local initiatives are the answer. I have come to distrust absolute black or white answers to everything. I believe most things are grey in this world. In this spirit, I would like to put two propositions forward. One with international flavour and another of a local nature.

Intervention with a difference

Somalia needs help and will need it for the foreseeable future. There is also a widespread consensus that international interventions are sometimes necessary to address the management of peace-processes, the protection of human rights, and to build capacity for rule of law, economic growth and the reduction of poverty. I would also add that with the pattern of radicalisation in Somalia (and undoubtedly there is one) forces of Islamic moderation are also a crucial need for Somalia.

Since 50% of the population has never experienced any form of modern state, there is a great doubt in the minds of these young people about whether modernity can coexist with Islam. I have seen this doubt first hand. These young people would benefit from seeing for the first time, how modern state apparatus can be led by Muslims like them. But in a non-extreme model.

Security and capacity for governance, economic growth and forces of moderation. Where can we find such ingredients of international intervention? How about a state-building intervention that is initiated, financed and staffed by a coalition of Muslim countries? It would have to be specifically designed to build foundations for governance, investment in economic infrastructure and something quite new. We need something I will call a 'moderation package'. An intervention made up of prominent Muslim scholars that can challenge forces of extremism with messages of peace, order and coexistence with the rest of the world. The defining characteristic of this intervention should be that it is a Muslim World project. The UN and the rest of the International community can support this initiative at an arms-length.

I am aware of the huge challenges this proposal will run against. The first will be whether the Muslim World can call itself a unitary world able to collectively enhance peace and liberal global relations? Maybe Somalia is a perfect arena where we can find that out.

Of course, several other questions have to be answered as well. Is there an interest for such an undertaking in the Muslim world? Well, there won't be unless we advocate for it. Is there also a willingness from the rest of the world to see such an initiative take-off? There won't be unless we explain the benefits to the world. Is it likely to happen? I hope it will. I hope the Muslim world will realise it is time to take some responsibility for Somalia.

Local leadership on another level

My second proposition is to let Somalis lead their own state-building process. But, you might ask, who among Somalis can take such a responsibility? Are there the foundations for such leadership? Are there strengths we can draw upon? Is there a coalition within Somalis that we can build? I think there are. For many years the solution for state-building in Somalia was Mogadishu-centric. We believed that without Mogadishu being sorted, Somalia cannot be sorted. I think we've had a pretty good run on that approach. It is time to try something different.

As I mentioned earlier, Puntland and Somaliland have achieved some successes. Different authorities in both areas have acted responsibly most of the time. What is also not known very widely is that at different levels they have flirted with cooperating with each other. A case in point is during the rule of Islamic Courts in the South of Somalia. Authorities on both sides saw a common threat, engaged in behind-the-scenes discussions and agreed to cooperate to see off this threat. They exchanged intelligence information and decided - if the worst came to the worst - to ease the tension between them to conduct joint military operation to see the threat off, if necessary.

I, myself, witnessed another engagement between these authorities when the two top commanders of each of their security force agreed to normalise relations to stop the madness of battles which was killing their own people on both sides. This was in 2005. What prompted this was something very simple and very common in Somalia. In a family in Hargeisa, relatives of a wife and husband became prisoners in Somaliland *and* Puntland. The mother was from Puntland and she found that her brother had been imprisoned by Somaliland forces as a prisoner of war. At the same time, the cousin of her husband, who was from Somaliland, was captured by Puntland forces as a prisoner. This family realising the absurdity of the situation took matters into their own hands and led a campaign.

They engaged with commanders of both the security forces. The mother, for example, used her family relationship with the commander in Puntland and travelled there to make a lot of noise in the capital, Garowe. The commanders took very brave decisions without involving their political masters. They recognised that the people of Puntland and Somaliland were from the same

family. This level of engagement led to voluntary demilitarisation of the area and the exchange of all prisoners.

Cooperation between Puntland and Somaliland is the missing link we were all looking for. It was evidence that state rebuilding in Somalia is most effective when started from the bottom up. Governance can only be led where it has worked in Somalia.

It was shame that these cries for help to forge cooperation between Puntland and Somaliland were not picked up by the international community. Understandably, politicians on both sides are a little hesitant about what reaction they might get from their constituencies if they embark on full cooperation. Authorities in Puntland and Somaliland will need encouragement to overcome this political cautiousness.

To overcome this cautiousness, real development and investment on a massive scale will be needed. The trade off for their people will be the peace dividend they will reap. It would also send a message to the rest of Somalia that 'peace works'. I am not talking about the traditional humanitarian/recovery help. But unlocking reconstruction and development help to the cooperative political body of Puntland and Somaliland. They will need political legitimacy as the centre of Somalia.

Also it is important to invest in the private sector, create mutual bonds of interest and take a Churchillian view in the way that economic cooperation was seen as critical to end war in Europe. We need to work with the private sector and work to ensure cooperation across clan lines to build private institutions and patterns of business investment that defy clan lines.

Together Puntland and Somaliland should be saving and strengthening what is already working in Somalia. Together they can expand it to the rest of Somalia by dealing directly with different communities in South Central Somalia to join their federation. They can extend their hands to other regional leaderships such as Gedo, Bay, Bakool, Hiran, Galgadud, Kismayo and others once we ensure their compact is productive. This is not new. It was recognised by none other than the former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan. He said, '*With Puntland joining hands with Somaliland the first step could be taken towards the resuscitation of Somalia.*' This was 1999.

Conclusion

To recap what I have put forward: Islamic-led international engagement with a moderation programme including permanent assistance from recognised scholars issuing genuine rulings.

Sponsoring Somali inter-regional cooperative dynamics to take the political lead in Somalia and looking at collectively economically beneficial investments (such as export of livestock, fisheries, production of iodised salt, importation and re-exportation, or tourism). Outreach to other regional leaderships. Investment in business/private sector to achieve social ends and ensure cross regional ties and superstructures are created – all as disincentives to conflict.

Maybe we could combine both options. While the international intervention safeguards the South of Somalia, the northern authorities could lead Somalia to a new political stability.

Once again I would to thank you all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nuradin Dirie is a former Presidential Candidate in Puntland. Prior to his Presidential bid, he served as Senior Advisor to the United Nations. He has also coordinated humanitarian aid to Somalia, overseeing the operation following the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

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