Wars in the Horn of Africa and the dismantling of the Somali State

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A Somália foi uma construção colonial artificial e não conheceu e formação de um Estado sólido e enraizado. A pesar da sua suposta homogeneidade, as suas famílias clânicas funcionam como entidades independentes umas das outras, e parece duvidoso que haja na Somália uma adesão à ideia de um Estado único e abrangente. A derrota militar frente à Etiópia, o fracasso da revolução socialista, e a ressurreição do «clanismo» provocaram o colapso deste Estado no fim dos anos 80. Posteriors esforços internacionais para o reconstruir falharam porque a comunidade internacional ignorou as realidades da lógica política dos clans. A única região onde se conseguiu restaurar estruturas políticas estatais é a da Somalilândia onde têm como suporte uma determinada família clânica. Ora, estas tentativas têm sido rejeitadas a nível internacional, muito embora constituam um modelo claro e bem sucedido para a restante Somália.

Somalia was an artificial colonial construct and had no depth of state formation. Although supposedly homogenous, its clan families operate as independent entities and the reality of any Somali commitment to a single state must be questioned. Under the stresses of military defeat against Ethiopia, and a failed socialist revolution, and the resurrection of «clanism», it fell apart in the late 1980s. Subsequent international efforts to rebuild the state of Somalia have failed because the international community has ignored the realities of Somalia clan politics. The only area to succeed in restoring political structures is Somaliland, basing itself upon one particular clan family; its attempts have rejected internationally, despite having provided a clear, and successful, model for the rest of Somalia.

La Somalie a été une construction coloniale artificielle et n'a pas connu la formation d'un Etat solide et enraciné. Malgré l'homogénéité qu'un leur attribue, ses familles claniques fonctionnent comme des unités indépendantes unes des autres, et il paraît douteux qu'il y ait en Somalie l'acceptation de l'idée d'un Etat unique pour tout le territoire. L'échec militaire face à l'Ethiopie, le débâcle de la révolution socialiste et la renaissance du «clanisme» a provoqué l'éclatement de cet Etat à la fin des années 80. Les efforts internationaux entrepris par la suite pour le reconstruire n'ont pas eu de succès parce que la communauté internationale a ignoré la logique politique des clans. La seule région où l'on a réussi à restaurer des structures politiques d'Etat est cella de la Somaliland où elles reposent sur une famille clanique donnée. Or, ces tentatives ont été rejetées au plan international, malgré le fait qu'elles constituent un modèle clair, et couronné de succès, pour le reste de la Somalie.

The Horn of Africa has suffered almost continuous and intricate conflict over the last two or three decades. The complexities almost allow the use of the word «anarchic», particularly in reference to the collapsed state of Somalia. Certainly, some elements in the confusion may be identified: colonial or post-colonial, ethnic, strategic or ideological factors have a role to play, but none provide the basis for a clear, coherent analysis of the conflicts of the Horn.

Eritrea in its present boundaries was a construct of Italian colonialism, and the struggle against Ethiopia from 1961 was predicated on the basis of an anti-colonial struggle though this is rather more debatable than the liberation fronts, particularly the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, have claimed. It depends, too, upon a controversial re-interpretation of Ethiopian history. Eritrea's recent war with Ethiopia (1998-2000) can be seen as a struggle for status within the former Ethiopian polity, an attempt to seize the regional hegemonic position previously enjoyed by

Mengistu Haile Mariam or Haile Selassie. The struggle of the Oromo Liberation front (OLF) within Ethiopia largely interprets itself as an anti-colonial conflict though this again involves a re-interpretation of both Ethiopian history and the definition of colonialism. Geo-political interests are present, but only partially. There is some strategic interest in the Red Sea coastline of Eritrea; involvement, or possible involvement, in terrorism in Somalia has become of interest to the United States since September 11 2001. It is, however, a region of few if any natural resources, though there may be potential. The countries involved, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland and Somalia are some of the poorest in the world, right at the bottom of the UN's world statistical league tables. There is massive need for international assistance, but as yet little direct exploitation of resources, externally or internally. Neither is likely for the foreseeable future.

A decade ago, there were hopes that the collapse of the bloody and violent military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia, and of the similarly despotic rule of Siad Barre in Somalia, both in the same year 1991, would provide for a real change. Somalia, however, proved intractable from the start, partly because the collapse of the state proceeded the actual fall of Siad Barre by several years. There was the marked failure of the international community, in particular the US and the UN between 1992 and 1995, to understand the convoluted clan politics of Somalia. Nor have the aspirations of the people of northern Somalia who declared their own independence in 1991 yet been recognised. By contrast, the international community accepted Eritrea's independence, backed by Ethiopia's enforced and in some ways reluctant acquiescence. The two states acquired new leaders, Issayas Aferworki and Meles Zenawi, who were feted by US President Clinton as renaissance princes of a new Africa.

It was a view that had little basis in reality; and it couldn't last. In May 1998, Eritrea invaded Ethiopia, but was forced to make peace after military defeats in May and June 2000. The short but very violent conflict left 60,000-70,000 thousand dead and tens of thousands more wounded.

Although the conflict ostensibly ended in December 2000 the two countries have continued to indulge in overt propaganda against the other, and support each other's dissidents in deliberate efforts to destabilise the other. Eritrea's foreign policy currently appears to be based on the premise that its recent defeat must to be reversed through the destabilisation, even the collapse, of Ethiopia. Ethiopia seems to believe that no peaceful solution to the problems with Eritrea is possible while Issayas Aferworki remains president of Eritrea.

State formation, and state conflict, has a long history in the Horn of Africa, going back to the first organised polity around Axum, some two thousand years ago, which included the areas of northern Ethiopia and southern Eritrea currently inhabited by the Tigrinya speaking people.

Subsequent centres of state power appeared further south among various peoples, Agau, Amhara, Oromo, Sidama and Somali. At the beginning of the 16th century there were two main poles of imperial and state power. One was a Christian empire centred in the regions of Shoa and Wollo and incorporating Amhara, Tigreans and Agau peoples. The other was the Muslim Sultanate of Adal based on the Harla and other pre-Somali peoples of eastern areas as well as various Somali clans. There were also a number of the Sidama states caught between, and making up much of the battleground. These representatives of opposing Christian and Islamic world views fought each other to a standstill in the mid 16th century, despite allying respectively with the super powers of the day, Portugal and the Ottoman empire, providing striking parallels with the relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s.

Their mutual exhaustion in the mid 16th century allowed a new power to emerge, erupting out of the south. The Oromo, co-incidentally animist, within a century had expanded to conquer significant areas of both Adal and the first Shoan empire, and the Sidama states. Adal was fatally weakened and only survived in the city state of Harar and the remote Sultanate of Assieta in the Danakil desert; the Christian empire , abandoning huge areas to the Oromo, retreated to a new centre in the north west, Gondar. There, over the next two centuries, power fluctuated between different regions and peoples. Under a series of powerless emperors in the late 18th century local rulers created a number of virtually autonomous kingdoms, largely ethnically based, Tigrean in the later Ethiopian provinces of Tigrai and Eritrea, Oromos in Wollo, and Gondar, Agau in Wag and Lasta, Amharas in Shoa, Gojjam and Begemeder. The Oromo expansion ran out of steam in the 18th century leaving a number of Sidama states, including Kaffa, Enaryea and Wollamo, still independent. Subsequently a number of Oromo kingdoms emerged, in Wollo, in Wollega and in the southwest Gibe area, with, in many cases, Oromo princes ruling over substantial conquered populations.

The conflicts between these various political centres, whether in the 16th century or later, can certainly be seen in terms of religion or, as recently most emphasised, eth-

nicity. They also fit plausibly within a paradigm of constant oscillation between expanding and contracting states, between conquests and the subsequent fragmentation of the friable imperial pretensions of Shoa, Adal, Gondar and other pretenders. Ultimately, it proved to be the kingdom of Shoa, ethnically an Amhara-Oromo polity, which proved able to build up the 20th century Ethiopian empire state, by a mixture of conquest and diplomacy, including a series of alliances with the colonial powers, Britain, France and Italy. The empire only reached its greatest extent in 1962, when Eritrea was formally re-incorporated, still carrying the long out-dated, indeed medieval, baggage of the myth of Solomon and Sheba, and substantial feudal overtones particularly in highland Tigrean and Amhara areas. It was only under Haile Selassie that a centralised autocracy was finally achieved, imposed during the 1940s and 1950s, but this rapidly led to significant reactions from former polities, whether semi-feudal baronies or previously independent peripheral states and peoples. The empire, over-extended by the re-incorporation of Eritrea, only survived its triumph by 12 years. In 1974, Haile Selassie was overthrown, to be replaced by a military dictatorship, which attempted to provide a socialist framework to replace the imperial skeleton. Unsurprisingly, given the military regime's close links with the Soviet Union, there was little change in the priority given to centralised control.

The core problem of the Ethiopian polity in the last 40 years has been effort to find an acceptable pattern of government. The most recent version has been the attempt of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) since it took power in 1991 to create ethnic federalism. It has built upon the concept of ethnicity, of regionally based autonomous states, first articulated under Mengistu but refined significantly by the Tigrai Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), the main element within the EPRDF, on the basis of its guerrilla struggle in Tigrai region which started in 1975. The TPLF called upon a concept of Tigrean solidarity, not altogether convincingly articulated as Tigrean nationalism, based upon a common history of oppression and a shared myth of the past. The local ideological basis was originally supplemented by the TPLF's commitment to international socialism, with a leaning towards Albania as a model, aiming to provide for a wider appeal within a socialist Ethiopia suffering under Mengistu's version of a pro-Soviet ideological state. This idea was dropped at the end of the 1980s when it became apparent it would not be acceptable either to Ethiopians or the international community and more specifically the United States. The TPLF, one of the smaller ethnic groups within the Ethiopian state, were left with no alternative ideological basis than ethnically based federalism designed to appeal to the growth in anti-government movements which had proliferated in the 1980s among Oromos, Somalis, Afars and others. It has not yet managed, however, to produce sufficient devolution or democratic structures to satisfy the aspirations of the major ethnic groups in the state. One result has been continued low-level ethnic conflict in peripheral areas, in some cases financed and armed, and certainly encouraged, by Eritrea.

The difficulties inherent in organising federalism on an ethnic basis are obvious, and the example of Yugoslavia in recent years has underlined the dangers. This was certainly one of the factors that encouraged the Eritrean government to go to war with Ethiopia in 1998. Issayas Aferwerki apparently believed that Ethiopia would fall apart into separate states despite the significant levels of control the TPLF/EPRPDF has consistently maintained within the federal structure. In Eritrea, the ruling Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), now the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), by contrast insisted on the necessity of a single central authority, at the expense of both regionalism and ethnicity (Eritrea has nine ethnic groups) to emphasise an Eritrean identity. This had to be coupled with extensive re-writing of Eritrean history, and the need for an aggressive foreign policy in support of a nationalism forged in the struggle against Ethiopia but without real roots in Eritrean history.

The EPLF/PFDJ, which won the war against Ethiopia, was largely based among the Christian highland Tigrinya-speaking agricultural population of the Kebessa, an area historically part of almost all the Amhara/Tigrean states in the region from about 500 BC onwards. The exception was the brief Italian colonial period, 1880s to 1940s. The original impetus for Eritrean nationalism came from the peripheral areas to the north and west, from the Muslim lowland non-Tigrinya speaking, pastoral peoples. Originally, it was ideologically closer to religious separatism than anti-colonialism, and was exemplified by the original guerrilla movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was expelled from Eritrea by the EPLF in a civil war in 1981-82. This left the EPLF and Issayas Aferwerki in the position of presiding over an independent Eritrea, a concept whose greatest supporters, historically, were drawn from the groups the EPLF expelled in the 1980s. Conversely, the main support of the present government of Eritrea comes from groups linked by ethnicity and history to the Ethiopian state to the south that historically incorporated all the Tigrinya speaking populations.

This need to emphasise Eritrean identity provides one explanation for the almost continual conflict in which Eritrea has been enmeshed since formal independence in 1993. There has been war with Yemen, problems over the border with Djibouti, and with Sudan, and war again with Ethiopia 1998-2000. Recent internal political problems, and the continuous failure to make any serious attempt to incorporate the Muslim lowland groups largely represented by ELF factions, suggests the government will find a need for further conflict. The hegemonic pretensions of Eritrea, or rather of president Issayas Aferwerki in the Horn and the lower Red Sea reinforce the possibility. Additionally, there are a number of unresolved issues between Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the border despite the near Solomonaic wisdom displayed by Boundary Commission in its recent report. It managed to produce a result allowing both sides to claim victory, but neither got all they hoped or expected, and the original flash-point of Badme was left, deliberately, undefined when the commission reported in March. This will await aerial photographs and the actual delimitation of the border. Whatever the final result, all indications are that tensions will continue.

The other main area of conflict in recent years in the Horn has, of course, been Somalia, one of the clearest examples of a «collapsed» or «failed» state, which has added an extra dimension to the decade or so of conflict from which it has suffered. The failure of the Somali state is usually ascribed to the regime of Siad Barre, but it has a rather longer genesis, arising from its divergent colonial past, and the myths that attended its foundation. One major delusion was that Somalia was the only state in Africa that was ethnically homogenous. This was inaccurate on two levels.

There were minority non-Somali clans in the river valleys, often referred to disparagingly as jeerer (hard hair), or as Gosha, who originate further south and who were, originally at least, Swahili speakers. Secondly, Somalis constitute six clan families, Darod, Digil, Dir, Hawiye, Isaaq, and Merifle, each made up of a multiplicity of clans and sub-clans, including both pastoralists and non-pastoralists. In a practical sense, these clans normally co-operate only in response to an outside threat. Any unity of purpose, historically, has been artificial and impermanent. Somalia, in fact, is a classic case of the imposed colonial state, unlike Ethiopia where state formation in various forms had a long history. All Somalia can offer, with the exception of the partial Somali involvement in the Adal Sultanate of the 16th century, are a few clan-specific sultanates such as the Ajuran in the 17th century and the Majerteen in the 19th century. Territoriality had little relevance to the pastoral clans though control of wells was always important. One effect of the creation of a state was that the concept of territory greatly expanded, and control of land became a major issue with the appearance of plantations along the river valleys of the Shebelli and the Juba.

The state created in 1960 was also composed of two separate fragments, British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somaliland in the south. The difference that this dissimilar colonial background implies was subsequently important as was the fact that they actually became independent individually, if only five days apart. British Somaliland achieved independence first and then voluntarily joined the south when it became independent a few days later by an act of union that was not, in fact, ever ratified. The internal contradictions that followed this unification provided one reason why the original focus of violence on the new state revolved around a national building effort to incorporate Somali minorities in other states, in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. The Somali flag, with its five-pointed star, each point representing a Somali population, symbolised the intention of expanding the alleged homogeneity of the state to encompass all Somalis in a single ethnic nation state.

The failure of these efforts, in Djibouti, in Ethiopia and in Kenya, was, in turn, one of the factors that led to the demise of the parliamentary state in 1969. By then, the dependence upon «clanism» was such that in the 1969 election nearly seventy different political parties were standing, all clan specific. Later that year, Siad Barre acted precisely to remove this political chaos. His solution was a military and socialist dictatorship. He again went to war with Ethiopia, taking advantage of the confusion of the Ethiopian revolution to try and incorporate Ethiopian Somalis into Somalia. The

victory of Ethiopia, aided by Russia and Cuba, coupled with his own arrogance of power, rapidly led Siad Barre back to the dependency upon the clan which he had claimed to repudiate when he came to power. In succession he turned on the Majerteen, the Isaaq, the Ogaden and the Hawiye, using other clan militias, in particular those of his own Marehan clan. Before he finally fled Mogadishu in January 1991, all the main clans had created their own militias as well as political organisations (parties is too coherent a word). Subsequently, a series of «warlords» appeared to lead these militias, usually ex-colonels in Siad Barre's army. «Warlords» is not, perhaps, a strictly accurate term, though it is convenient shorthand, as in Somali terms «warlords» are, in the last resort, clan dependant. Often their «technicals», the equivalent of tanks in the Somali context, are usually supplied by the clan, though some have their own private vehicles as do some businessmen and the Islamic courts.

The militarisation of conflict in Somalia has continued virtually unabated since the last years of Siad Barre. There was a brief hiatus during the early stages of direct UN involvement in 1992 to 1995 but this rapidly ended with the US failure to attempt any disarmament of the militias, and the US attempts to kill General Mohamed Farah «Aydeed», one of the leading «warlords». The UN has made other efforts to involve itself in peace making from 1991 on, but with equally little success. The main reason has been the UN's stubborn insistence on attempting to restore the single Somali state as it was, using a series of international reconciliation conferences attended by as many «warlords» as possible. These have merely provided for a distribution of theoretical political posts, with various agreements, never intended to be implemented, broken immediately. It is no coincidence that the most substantial area of conflict has been, and remains, Mogadishu, the main resource centre for Somalia, and the place through which international agencies and the UN operated. When the UN left Mogadishu in 1995 there were reported to be 120 dollar millionaires residing in the port area alone. The other main areas of conflict have tended to be the ports through which resources can be expected to arrive, Kismayo, Bosasso, Merca and Brava.

There has been a second and conflicting strategy for the renewal of Somalia, one that recognised the political and economic diversity of Somali clan and regional interests. This was the so-called «building-block» approach, allowing the different clans to set up their own administrative units with the reasonable expectation that they might subsequently come together again at a later stage. For a time this did make considerable progress, with Puntland in the northeast based on the Majerteen clan; an administration in Bay and Bakool for the Merifle; and the Hawadle in Hiran.

Attempts in Benadir region and Mogadishu among the Hawiye were less successful but a start was made. The exemplar was Somaliland, the former British colony, which declared its own independence from the rest of Somalia as the Republic of Somaliland in 1991. It has created a viable state, with a functioning government, judiciary and police force, and has managed its own affairs with considerable success since then despite the deliberate failure of the international community

to grant recognition. In fact, despite the consistent efforts of the UN to undermine its existence, Somaliland has been widely accepted though not recognised. No one will take the first step even though its example has pointed a clear way forward for the rest of Somalia to achieve the loose federal or confederal structure that would appear to be designed for clan politics. The United Arab Emirates has been mentioned as a model.

Although the «building-block» model was making significant progress after 1998 in southern Somalia, the UN, quite inexplicably, reverted to its previous approach and recognised the Transitional National Government (TNG) created at the Arta conference in Djibouti in 2000. This was highly controversial because of the involvement of significant elements from Siad Barre's regime. It also returned to the discredited «top-down» process of organising conferences. The TNG subsequently failed to make much impact on Somali despite having UN recognition and some Arab League support. Its presence also led directly to the creation of an opposing Somali Reconciliation and Reconstruction Council (SRRC) set up under Ethiopian auspices. Its members control well over half of southern Somalia. Another reconciliation conference is planned for Nairobi later this year, the fifteenth. It is unlikely to make much progress if indeed it actually takes place. The SRRC threatens not to attend if the TNG tries to come as a government and to use the conference to try and increase its credibility. The TNG, which still controls no more than a part of Mogadishu, though it has allies in other areas, insists it will be going as a government. Somaliland had made it clear it will not attend in any capacity even that of observer.

Somalia, in fact, moved up the international agenda again after September 11 2001 and the declaration of the US war on terrorism. The reasons, were, and remain, somewhat vague and ill-defined, but central to US interest was the general point that Somalia as a collapsed state was open to manipulation by external bodies like Al-Quaeda or similar organisations. More particularly, the Somali organisation, Al-Itahaad al-Islamia was classified as a «fundamentalist» organisation, close to NIF in Sudan and with links to Al-Quaeda, despite considerable doubts over its current coherence as an organisation. The origins of the suspicions about al-Itahaad lie in its admitted involvement in bomb attacks in Ethiopia in 1994/95, cross-border military attacks, and its links with an anti-government Somali movement, the Ogaden National Liberation front (ONLF), operating in the Somali state in eastern Ethiopia. There were apparently suspicions that those involved in the attack on the US embassy in Nairobi in 1998 may have passed through Somalia under the auspices of al-Itahaad, en route to Kenya. The remittance company, Al-Barakaad was accused of money laundering for Al-Quaeda. In neither case was any concrete evidence produced though Al-Barakaad was effectively closed down with major effects on the internal economy of Somalia. Irrespective of the validity of the accusations, Al-Barakaad was the largest company for small-scale regular personal remittances on which many people in Somalia depend in the absence of any formal economy.

Other concerns have been raised particularly by Ethiopia over the links of the TNG. At one level this has involved the TNG's controversial origins, its relations with Libya and the Arab League, and the support it had from the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. The Ethiopian backed SRRC has also provided very detailed allegations against the TNG, claiming close links with Al-Itahaad and even Al-Quaeda. In fact, however, the US has behaved with surprising caution, continuing its «information collecting mode», with a series of military, CIA and embassy officials from Nairobi investigating on the ground and visiting various areas. It appears that while large scale attacks or bombing may have been ruled out, selective strikes have not. Equally, the US has turned a blind eye to Ethiopia operations inside Somalia backing its allies against supporters of the TNG. Overall, all Somali political factions have been trying hard to demonstrate to the US their support for anti-terrorism.

Factionalism in Somalia has allowed external powers to become involved and they have seized their opportunity, rendering any solution to the crisis of the Somali state all the more difficult. Ethiopia and Eritrea involved themselves in conflict by proxy in Somalia during 1999-2000, and are still doing so with Eritrea provocatively recognising the TNG earlier this year, and supplying it with arms. The Ethio-Eritrean conflict formally came to an end in December 2000 with a peace agreement, but neither side have stopped their propaganda, often vitriolic, or their support for each other's dissidents. Most recently, Eritrea organised the infiltration of Oromo Liberation Front fighters into western Ethiopia and has been backing the Ethiopian Peoples Patriotic Front in northwest Ethiopia. Egypt has consistently been using Somalia as an element in its attempts to influence Ethiopian policies over the Nile. Its main interest is to have a stronger Somalia to balance the power of Ethiopia; its concern remains the issue of the Nile water, despite some progress by the riparian states towards negotiating more equitable agreements. Egypt has therefore backed the TNG, which has been funded by both Libya and Saudi Arabia. There has been a consensus recently that IGAD, Inter Governmental Agency for Development, as a regional body, should take responsibility for Somalia, but IGAD includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan; its members are bitterly divided over Somalia. Not surprisingly, it has been essentially ineffectual.

The conflicts of the last decade in Somalia, as much as those elsewhere in the Horn of Africa continue to raise issues of the relationship of ethnicity with the state, of state formation, and even questions of the desirability or necessity of a single Somali state. One factor stands out in Somalia: the people most capable of answering any such questions are Somalis themselves as they demonstrated in Somaliland where national conferences in Boroma and Burao produced new democratic and secular structures and acceptable solutions to the problems of government for one part of the former Somali state. It is, in fact, difficult to see wider solutions to Somalia's political crisis in the absence of a total ban on external intervention. State formation

in the Horn of Africa remains an ongoing process: Somaliland, if still unrecognised, appeared in 1991, Eritrea in 1993.

Neighbouring Sudan is riven by a conflict between north and south which has raised doubts about the continued viability of a single Sudanese state. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have yet failed to solve questions raised by ethnic minorities, several of which have taken up arms in their struggle for self-determination or autonomy, including Oromos and Somalis in Ethiopia, Afars in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, and Kunama, and Beni Amir in Eritrea. Until feasible solutions can be found and acceptable forms of government implemented, with sustainable capacity building and real democratic structures, the possibilities of conflict will remain high.

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