

The way to a new Somalia
By Nadifa Mohamed, The Guardian
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Expats talk of Mogadishu in all its former glory. With the right foreign support that past can be brought back to life

Ask a Somali taxi driver in Streatham or Shepherd's Bush what they remember of Mogadishu and their eyes widen, their hands leave the steering wheel in wild gesticulations and they become poets, rapturously describing it as a jewel, the ancient, sophisticated pearl of the Indian Ocean.

I have my own vision of the capital buried deep in my memory, some time during the few weeks I spent there as a four-year-old, waiting for our Aeroflot flight to London. Someone took me to the top of a lighthouse, and the view from its height is still with me: an expanse of ocean bordered by blindingly white buildings and merging at its fringes with the sky.

A whole generation of Somalis have never known that Mogadishu and instead have to watch nostalgic videos of its former glory on YouTube; the films have a dream-like quality, the camera floating over the city and looking down on pedestrians innocently, carelessly going about their business. The London conference on Somalia a week ago made me wonder if that aspic-preserved world could be brought back to life.

Perceptions of the conference vary widely: some see its proposals for a new body to oversee the nation's finances and to increase the African Union force as nothing more than a colonial takeover of the state; others have a cautious hope that the end of the current venal government, and increased security across south-central Somalia, will bring a political and economic resurgence.

It is hard for Somalis to put aside their cynicism after 24 years of pain and disappointment; they simultaneously live for news from Somalia but fear it too. In the greasy spoons frequented by taxi drivers, bus drivers and small businessmen, the debate over the lamb and rice is over who has been ousted from the government, which clan is up in arms over the ousting, and what retaliation is to be expected.

It is rare to hear support for the al-Shabaab Islamists. They have long since alienated the majority by killing civilians in suicide bombings and harassing popular figures such as Dr Hawa Abdi, whose refugee camp was recently invaded and partly sold off by an al-Shabaab militia. However, what isn't clear is what shape they want the future Somalia to take: will it be one state or many? Will it be democratic? Will equal rights be extended to women? Will the government have a limited role or a wide range of responsibilities and powers?

This summer I will be attending the International Book Festival in Somaliland, a self-declared independent state in the north. The theme will be the future. Poets will travel up from Mogadishu and novelists will bring self-published works. They will be able to travel around Hargeisa, the capital, freely and safely, the din of traffic, markets and music replacing gunfire and explosions. They will meet other Somalis from the south: destitute women begging at the bus station, wealthy businessmen buying up properties and expats getting their yearly dose of camel milk and goat meat. Is it inconceivable that in two or three years there could be a book festival in Mogadishu? That world-class artists such as Maryam Mursal and K'naan might perform in the city of their birth? I think with effective international support that future is within reach.

The western focus on pirates and militants, although understandable, can seem very myopic from a Somali viewpoint; they are the symptoms of dysfunction rather than the causes of it. A UN force of 30,000 went after a few warlords in the early 1990s and only succeeded in entrenching them for a further decade. A saner and less costly strategy would be to emulate the process of reconciliation and institution-building seen in Somaliland.

I have had the privilege of meeting and interviewing many people while writing my second novel about the civil war, from the gregarious wife of the former Somali ambassador to Rome who fled the country with a

bullet embedded in her ankle, to an incredible doctor who refused to abandon his patients despite being targeted by kidnappers and assassins. I hope that there is a role for people like him and Dr Abdi in the forthcoming conferences on Somalia. For my part, I will remain optimistic and plan that return trip to Mogadishu.

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