

Somalia on the Brink
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Despite the news that Doctors Without Borders is quitting Somalia after 20-plus years in the country, due to an increase in violent attacks, the biggest war waged in Somalia right now is not between the rebel group al-Shabaab, the fledgling government of Somalia, and the African Union's military mission. It is the war between the Western world and the Somali people.

This may be hard to imagine but it is true. Last week, during meetings in Mogadishu, it became painfully apparent that the real victims in the "war on terrorism"—and specifically how the West is choosing to combat it on the Horn of Africa—are the Somali people.

After meeting with the prime minister, the ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Interior and National Security, and Natural Resources, members of Parliament, the speaker of the Parliament, and civil society leaders, the path toward rebuilding Somalia became clear.

As the recently installed Somali executive and parliamentary branches of government are scrambling to prove their mettle to a very skeptical populace, what the West is doing is actively undermining potential for this poor country's political, economic, and social progress. If Western actors—whether in the U.S., the EU, or elsewhere—care about the future stability of Somalia, they had better change their approach, and fast.

This country hangs in a very delicate balance. While Mogadishu is bustling with business like any normal city, and nothing like the bomb-riddled war zone the world prefers to present in the press, if the international community does not change its approach, we will soon see a resurgence of instability.

First and foremost, America's counter-terrorism approach to Somalia must be rethought completely. Government officials here know that al-Shabaab recruits heavily from the poor and unemployed sectors of Somali society and from clans who are marginalized from the political process. They know that the way to undermine al-Shabaab's power and presence is through economic development and job creation, political participation, and inclusion, and by building the security infrastructure necessary for Somali self-governance. They know that the way to ensure that former fighters do not return to al-Shabaab is through an aggressive rehabilitation and reintegration strategy on par with what Saudi Arabia is doing with its former fighters. And yet, what most of America's Defense and State departments are doing here is antithetical to this goal.

The U.S. and international community's preferred approach is to pump billions into security assistance and next to nothing on economic development and job creation in Somalia. This is not an exaggeration. There is no money for transportation, power and energy grids, hospitals, and schools—all the stuff this necessary for a stable society. Witness this in Baghdad, Kabul, Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, and now in Mogadishu. Additionally, there is little to no effort to support and train a national Somali security sector. Instead, paramilitaries and private security companies like U.S.-based Bancroft are pervasive and the African Union Mission in Somalia continues to get fully funded (with no exit strategy) and with clear economic self-interest in the continuation of violence, paying its soldiers 15 times what Somali soldiers get paid.

Second, the difficulty of doing business in Somalia must be addressed. In meeting with the Chamber of Commerce in Mogadishu last week it became clear that one of the main obstacles to economic development is the lack of a financial system, internationally accredited banks and legal mechanisms for ensuring accountability.

The U.N. Somalia Monitoring Group, a Western-led oversight group that is categorically dismissed by Somali government and nongovernment leaders for doing much to undermine progress and potential in Somalia, is now singlehandedly dismantling Somalia's sole financial effort: their Central Bank. One wonders if the current chair of the Monitoring Group, a former World Bank official based in Nairobi, is following in the footsteps of his Bank predecessors and working to undermine financial self-sufficiency

that would make Somalia less dependent on international financial institutions. This has happened before by the Bank—throughout the developing world—so the suspicion has merit.

Third, the West's penchant for resource exploitation on the African continent has no place on the Horn. Take, for example, the oil and gas exploration deal signed last week between Britain's newly formed Soma Oil and Gas Exploration, chaired by U.K. conservative leader Lord Michael Howard, and the Somali's Minister of Natural Resources, with whom I also met to discuss the country's national environmental policy (the draft of which seems very forward-looking and progressive).

Skeptics in Mogadishu wondered what Britain's recent interest was all about and now it's clear. Estimates of Somali offshore oil stand at 110 billion barrels. In a seemingly asymmetrical negotiated process, the spoils—Somalia gets 12 percent of royalties, minimum of 50 percent of profits, rents for leasing, and a \$200,000 community development fund—may have some financial face value for Somalia but the real test is in the capacity and infrastructure built in the country.

Oil and cash will come and go but what is Soma leaving behind other than unlimited exploration? Very little in capacity and infrastructure it turns out. To Soma's credit, they'll at least be hiring Somalis for basic, low-level service jobs, a practice that is not followed by the myriad international defense and development contractors operating in the mini-"green zone" adjacent to Mogadishu's airport, nor followed by the African Union Mission in Somalia. What a lost opportunity to employ and train Somalis and build out a skilled labor sector.

What is needed, as one Somali businessman put it, is a "godfather"—a country that looks out for the best interests of the Somali people. Currently, Somalis feel there is none, but rather a set of self-interested countries near and far that have a financial stake in a perpetually dis-unified Somalia: from regional meddlers like Kenya and Ethiopia to international "lions," to quote a member of Parliament, like America and the U.K. Every one of them—said one government minister—has their interest. For America and the U.K., it's either counter-terrorism or oil (American oil companies also bought up blocks decades ago). But in both cases, it is clear that the Somali people are not the beneficiaries.

This self-interest by companies and countries is fickle and dangerous and unless economic development is prioritized, instability and insecurity will return. There are plenty of opportunities to pursue, whether it's growing Somali's livestock industry, which currently exports 5 million goats and sheep to the Gulf, reviving Somalia's nascent banana and mango industries, creating a lucrative solar-power energy market, or developing a sustainable fishing industry, there are jobs to be created and Somalis to be trained and hired.

If the world cares at all about the stability and security of a country that has seen more war than most nations, this is the only path to pursue and the most humanitarian one as well. Anything else is mere war profiteering.

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