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The Transnational Engagement of the Somali Diaspora: for Whose Benefit? Involvement Between Clans Politics and State-building

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Abstract

The Somali federal government established in 2012 presents still limited capacity to provide for the needs of the population, particularly in terms of livelihood support and security. This creates space for state contestation and for other actors, including Somali clans and Islamist groups, to address people's needs in its place. Current Somali politics thus reverts around multiple sources of governance, which the Somali diaspora inevitably uses to channel support to relatives and trusted networks in Somalia. The diaspora plays a vital role in ensuring income and investments, and participates in state-building initiatives as well as peace and conflict dynamics embroiling the homeland. By doing so, the diaspora is caught in a double and opposite process, as its engagement can at once undermine state-building processes while foster development and security, the latter being key to favour long-term reconciliation and stability. This article seeks to examine patterns of Somali transnational engagement in order to assess its modalities of interaction and its relationship with societal dynamics and the ongoing federal state-building project.

Keywords: Somalia; diaspora; transnational engagement; clan; peace and conflict

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Introduction: Diaspora Engagement in a Still Precarious Security Environment

The House of the People (the lower house of the Somali parliament) elected in 2016 included 105 MPs holding a foreign passport, mostly British, American, Kenyan and Canadian: that is, more than one third of the total seats. The then elected President

of Somalia, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, nicknamed Farmajo, has studied and worked in the US, and holds both Somali and US citizenship. The Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre came to Norway as a refugee in the late 1980s, and he also holds dual citizenship. Although there is not yet information of this kind about the newly elected parliament, a similar outlook would not be surprising. This brief opening on the citizenship representation in the Somali parliament and higher state offices serves as a starting point to reflect on the weight the diaspora has achieved in contemporary Somali politics.

The reasons for such a high diasporic representation in Somali institutions lie not only in the size of the Somali diaspora itself (nearly two million people), which was generated by the forced migrations and family reunifications that followed the dramatic civil war of the 1990s and the subsequent socio-economic destitution. There are in fact at least two distinctive aspects of Somali politics that help explain why the diaspora plays a pervasive role in post-conflict Somalia. Firstly, the protracted relevance of the "clan".[1] And second, Somalis' limited trust in their homeland state institutions. These two aspects stem from both the legacy of the past and the specific Somali context, which is populated by regulating institutions that predate and are alternatives to the state. In fact, Somalia presents us with a history of decentralised political authorities and self-reliance experiences that today are still relevant for explaining patterns of governance preferences, resilience and livelihoods. Besides regulating everyday dynamics, the two aspects mentioned above have implications for Somalia's democratisation and state-building prospects.

In particular, the combination of clan politics and low trust in the state contributes to providing opportunities for contesting political power and institutions, thus slowing down the arduous process of state-building. All the more so as public resources are chronically scarce. In the vacuum left by state institutions, diaspora participation in the homeland's affairs becomes therefore also a survival strategy to overcome the unequal distribution of power and wealth. By the same token, the obligations enshrined in the clan structure, together with investment opportunities and not least the recurrent humanitarian crises and natural disasters, lead the Somali diaspora to engage with the homeland, also through permanent and temporary return (Gallipo 2020).

Against this background, this article aims at providing a panoramic view of the dense network of Somali transnational engagements with the goal of remarking upon the principles and the modalities of involvement, to underline that, for the most part, formal state institutions are not included in solidarity circuits. This will suggest that provision of security and delivering of services to the population remain central to explain the coexistence of state, clans, and other forms of governance that use Islam as part of their ideology, such as Al-Shabaab. If the analysis of any diaspora should always require a description of the historical and social context in which transnational activities are performed, the Somali case specifically requires the researcher to ask not

how society works outside the state, but rather why the state faces enduring difficulties in penetrating and overtaking non-state institutions and networks.

On this note, the next section briefly recounts the trajectory of peace-making and state-building in Somalia in the last two decades. This will help clarify that "states come and collapse, but clan never loses its relevance and reality", which is fundamental to understand how the diaspora interacts at distance with the homeland (Ingiriis 2018a: 69). The article goes on with a section on conceptual and theoretical reflections on diasporas and their forms of engagement, drawing on the thematic academic literature. After that, the article explores the notion of "clan politics", before describing the various forms of diaspora engagement and their main features. Finally, the article analyses the relation between diaspora, conflict/peace and state-building and provides then some final remarks.

Governing the Fragmented? An Overview of State-building Initiatives in Somalia

After the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia has experienced a prolonged period of chaos during which warring factions and "spoilers" have boycotted the numerous reconciliation initiatives, including those sponsored by the United Nations and other international actors, and have undermined government-making attempts (Menkhaus 2007). The first initiative to secure a measure of international recognition since 1991 was the Transitional National Government (TNG), established by the clan elders, religious leaders, businessmen and other prominent figures that gathered at the so-called Djibouti Conference in April and May 2000. This is also when a much contested mechanism in Somali politics was established: the "4.5 formula", which assigns a fixed number of parliament seats to the four larger clans, and a "0.5" to the minorities who claimed to be underrepresented.

As the TNG suffered internal split and did not lead to tangible advancements towards the country's unification, at the new round of talks held in Kenya in 2004 it was eventually agreed to replace it with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the fourteenth attempt to recreate a functioning government in Somalia. It was the TFG to first establish a shared Ministry for Diaspora and Community Affairs in 2009, with the aim of intercepting the diaspora's engagement in the homeland. The newborn TFG had to confront the fierce opposition of warlords that controlled the country and of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU): importantly, the latter had been able to establish forms of local territorial governance and to provide a modicum of social services to the population, under the unifying force of Islam (Saggiomo 2020). Due to security concerns, the TFG initially governed from Kenya and only relocated to Somalia a few months later. But even when the TFG began to convene in Mogadishu, it failed to establish its authority in Somalia.

In 2006, a coalition of warlords formed the so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) in an attempt to contain the growing influence

of the ICU, and likely driven also by a desire to preserve the lawless status quo in which they had thrived as security brokers. Deadly clashes occurred for the control of Mogadishu, but ICU forces managed to gain total authority over the capital and started expanding even in the surrounding cities. ICU's success triggered a response from neighbouring Ethiopia, whose army initiated a series of military operations against the ICU due to the fear that the conflict could spread and undergo Islamist radicalization. On 30 November 2006, the Ethiopian parliament adopted a resolution allowing the government "to take all necessary and legal steps to stave off a declaration of holy war and invasion by the Union of Islamic Courts against the country".[2] Ethiopia's involvement would mark the rapid disintegration of the ICU, which by then was also plagued by internal divisions.

Yet even after the collapse of the ICU, the political environment remained fragile because the TFG was not seen as a legitimate government by the majority of the population (Lewis 2003). According to Gomsrud and Gaas (2010: 2), it became evident to the Somalis that "TFG officials lacked vision and were more concerned with lining their own pockets than with improving security and expanding their territorial control". In 2007, the TFG's failure to reconcile the country and the recrudescence of conflict in Somalia persuaded the United Nations Security Council to authorise the African Union to deploy a peace-keeping mission, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which would last until March 2022. Meanwhile, a new group of Islamist militias was born from the ashes of the ICU: the Al-Shabaab. The group's stated aim was to turn Somalia into a caliphate, displaying also a radical, "jihadist" positioning against the perceived enemies of Islam, identified in the TFG, which had fought the ICU together with the Ethiopian military, the AMISOM troops in the country, and Western countries, especially the United States, all symbols of imperialism. In 2012, Al-Shabaab would formally tie with Al-Qaeda and join the global jihad.

At the end of TFG's interim mandate in 2012 a formal parliament came into power in Mogadishu: the Federal Government of Somalia. Divided into six federal states, it was formed as the first permanent central government in the country since the collapse of the central state in 1991. The new government has since been dealing with sensitive issues like the demarcation of the new federal states, the redistribution of resources and the overcoming of ambiguities in the constitution text (Zoppi 2018). A number of serious challenges need to be tackled today and are useful to assess the shortcomings and the relation between the diaspora and the state-building process in the homeland. First of all, the management of the relations between the central government and the federal states remains one of the key issues for the country's long-term stability as well as one of the main sources of tension. In the absence of a reliable central state, Somalis live under multiple and at times overlapping political orders that respond to clan identities. In northern Somalia, the largest political entities are Somaliland (which declared independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991 although it lacks international

recognition), and Puntland, a semi-autonomous federal state. There are currently four federal member states in central and southern Somalia, in addition to the Banadir Regional Administration, which includes the capital, Mogadishu.

Secondly, Al-Shabaab poses relevant security threats to the federal state: the organisation exerts control in hard-to-reach areas and raises taxes from local population, yet it also delivers in the fields of justice and dispute mediation especially. Meanwhile, it is capable of inflicting mortal attacks in Mogadishu and other urban areas formally controlled by the federal state, spreading insecurity. As Ingiriis (2018b: 513) has rightly underlined, the protracted threat of ambushes and suicide attacks may lead to the point where "insecurity under Al-Shabaab is far better than security under the federal government".

The last point worth noting is the effectiveness of the Somali state itself: in 2018, the Transition Plan for Somalia intended to start a process of transfer of responsibility to the Somali federal government for the planning and delivery of security in Somalia, in view of the end of the AMISOM mission.[3] The plan is not just about the transfer of military operations to Somali forces, a challenge in itself, but it requires a broader approach embracing the various elements that in a society contribute to realise security: ultimately, the transition requires the emergence of effective and delivering institutions. In March 2022, the plan was revised and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) was established to further support the transition and autonomy of the Somali National Armed Forces until 2024. In May 2022, Al-Shabaab jihadists carried out their first attack against ATMIS, storming one of its bases in southern Somalia and killing at least thirty soldiers of the Burundian contingent.[4] As we will see in the next sections, the combination of the challenges presented above contributes crucially in creating space for diaspora engagement with the homeland, in accordance with the principles of Somali politics described earlier. Before looking into that, it is important to define conceptually what is a diaspora and how we can best discern among the various forms of engagement. This is the task of the next section.

Diaspora and Engagements with the Homeland: a Framework of Analysis

Diasporas are by no means homogeneous social units, and this is reflected in the many definitions and interpretations available in the literature (Bruneau 2010). While the conceptual debate about the term "diaspora" in the academia has been prolific, I will adopt here Grossman's (2019: 1267) formulation: "diaspora is a transnational community whose members (or their ancestors) emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity". This definition is concise yet well-suited to represent the Somali case: the preservation of the identity in the diaspora is in fact strictly connected to the continued participation in clan-based practices, which involve clan members also transnationally. The orientation towards the homeland, whether through factual or nostalgic ties, is a key feature usually associated

with diasporas, together with the self-awareness of the group's identity (Butler 2001). Such characteristics may help distinguish diasporas from what otherwise may be defined simply as a transnational community (Faist 2010).

In fact, since the early 1990s, more and more scholars have investigated and differentiated worldwide transnational communities and diasporas emerging in the highly globalising world societies. Scholars have often suggested that transnational communities are mostly generated by voluntary and economic migration, while diasporas find their origin in forced migration, in unsettled nation-state problems, and may have been scattered even before the making of their nation-state (Bruneau 2010: 45). The 1990s is also the decade in which the study of African diasporas became specifically appealing to a wider audience, due to the armed conflicts in the continent which caused significant loss of human life and population displacement, as the Rwandan genocide (1994) and the two conflicts in the Horn of Africa - the Somali Civil War (1991) and the Eritrean-Ethiopian War in 1998 (Manning 2003).

Later, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US prompted political scientists to focus on security issues and on conflict-generated diasporas, including their ability to influence homeland and regional political dynamics or to lobby governments in hosting countries to take specific directions in their foreign policy. Notable examples include the case of the Kosovar Albanian diaspora and the Kosovo Liberation Army, which have been capable of raising money and recruiting soldiers to be sent to Kosovo during the war with Serbia (Perritt 2008; Koinova 2013). The literature has widely covered also the similar experiences of Armenian, Jewish/Israeli, Sikh, Tamil, and Palestinian diasporas (see for example Shain 2002; Sheffer 2003; Wayland 2004; Fair 2005; Lyons 2006; Rubyan-Ling 2019; Toivanen and Baser 2020). The Somali case expands the existing knowledge and the notion of diaspora beyond its purported linkages with a state or national project: re-creating a sense of national consciousness or establishing a state are not necessarily the purpose or aspiration of the engagement, as we shall see. Many instances of diaspora activities operate at more modest and direct levels - which we would call sub-national - requiring thus researchers to apply also (trans)local perspectives (Horst 2017).

The wealth of transnationalism and diaspora studies has been extremely useful and insightful in showing how diasporas not only maintain ties with the homeland, but are also involved in the everyday dynamics of the host society. Sectors in which the dual connection of the diaspora with the homeland and the host country has been more visible and has subsequently attracted academic interest are those of humanitarian assistance, post-conflict reconstruction and development (Turner and Kleist 2013). It has emerged that worldwide diasporas are increasingly contributing to the development of their countries of origin, providing remittances, knowledge transfers, investments, and household support. The participation of the diaspora in homeland societal efforts has enhanced also its potential political power, which a plethora of actors attempt

at intercepting, ranging from international NGOs, donors, informal groups, to African states themselves and the African Union. All of the above have been important to see diaspora members also as agents for promoting peace and development, that is, as peace-*makers* and not just peace-*breakers* (Farah 2016; Rubyan-Ling 2019).

However, Somali associations and NGOs in the diaspora realise ambiguous forms of engagement. On the one hand, these voluntary organisations respond to the mobilising role of kin communities and to the desire of retaining independence from state-led and vast scale responses. This reflects the fact that for diaspora Somalis "an NGO largely remains an alien and donor-driven concept, whereas clan, religious affiliations and associational structures may be blurred in complex ways" (Tiilikainen and Mohamed 2013: 40). It is not rare thus to find associations composed of individuals from the same clan that provide humanitarian support to fellow clan members or to territories where the latter live. As suggested by Saggiomo (2016; 2020), development cooperation should be re-conceptualised to include the "sentimental" component that drives Somali diaspora associations towards achieving their goals, namely the ties that bind the diaspora with its territory of origin. In this sense, cooperation implies not only planning, but also the added value represented by the relationships between individuals, associations, institutional counterparts, political or commercial partners. On the other hand, diaspora associations and civic participation can represent a living laboratory to forge a wider and above-clan solidarity, as I will discuss this later.

In order to examine the plurality of forms and purposes of diaspora engagement, it is useful to proceed with the prior identification of the various levels of interaction involved. For the purpose of this article, I adopt the approach developed by Van Hear and Cohen (2017), who have distinguished three "spheres" of diaspora engagement: the private household and the extended family; the sphere of the community, intended as a group, wider than the family, who know each other or *know of* each other; and finally the larger public sphere of the "imagined community", which includes involvement in political parties and movements, public demonstrations or lobbying for political purposes in the host country, in the homeland or in the international arena. This division of diaspora engagement into separate spheres is very functional to capture the dynamics of interaction with the homeland and also to reflect on the state role in each of the levels. At the same time, it helps avoid generalising and homogenising approaches to diaspora that may be rooted in definitions based only on common identity and culture (Annovi 2020). In fact, diaspora engagement is diverse, plural, and significantly framed by the context of settlement they live in, and by the type of societal, state, market and community experiences they are exposed to in these places. Moreover, the Somali diaspora as many others is politically fragmented, and viewpoints may be different across groups, organisations, and individuals.

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The Somali Diaspora and Clan-based Politics

For the sake of a general description, Somali emigration in recent history can be divided into three main waves (Gundel 2002). The first consisted of seamen and people working in the maritime sector in general, who arrived in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in Italy, Northern Europe and the UK. The second wave was fostered by the oil boom in the early 1970s, and thus composed of guest workers that would arrive in the Middle East until the 1980s. However, the present Somali diaspora originated mostly in the aftermath of the dramatic events that involved the country since the late 1980s: in 1988, the Barre's government bombarded the country's northern towns, whose inhabitants and clans were suspected of having connections with the underground opposition. When conflicts turned into outright civil war in the early 1990s, a wave of refugees and forced migrants (over 1,000,000) left the country to both neighbouring and more distant countries such as European ones and the US, where thousands of refugees were resettled. In the following years, family reunifications have further enlarged the various diasporic groups, while the protracted instability in the country did not provide conditions for a significant return. It is estimated that in the early 2020s, almost 2,000,000 refugees, displaced people, emigrants and their descendants live outside Somalia (Kleist and Abdi 2021). The largest groups are found in the Arabian Peninsula (some 550,000), Kenya (280,000), northern America (235,000), Ethiopia (223,000), Scandinavian countries (165,000) and the UK (110,000).[5]

Whatever their location, the literature suggests that the Somali diaspora is engaged in multiple transnational practices, producing and reproducing practices of care and reciprocity through both material and immaterial contributions to households and development and relief activities (Farah 2016). Considering the population living in Somali-speaking territories, it emerges that the political and demographic weight of the diaspora community has been increasing in the previous two decades, and that understanding diaspora and transnational practices is necessary in order to grasp power dynamics in Somali society.

When dealing with Somalia's recent history, clan-based politics has been indicated in many analyses as the primary cause of the deterioration of the Somali democratic experience (1960-1969), of the bloody social fragmentation of the country and the fatal sliding into civil war, and also as the default way for the Somali diaspora to engage transnationally with the homeland (see for example Lewis 2008; Farah 2016). While clans represent indeed the key social institution to decrypt Somali everyday politics, peace- and conflict-making, as well as diaspora engagement, it is important to avoid the crystallisation of clan relations. Indeed, a rigid interpretation of kinship relations would lead to a view of Somali politics as lost in an unresolvable "clannism", which reflects Eurocentric and colonial readings of African societies (Norman 2022). Instead, clans are flexible and functional entities. Their relations are regulated by the *xeer*, namely the customary laws or social contract, which provides indication for settling

controversies and conflicts in the society. The issue is rather that lineages and identity are subjected to recurrent and protracted political exploitation, which was at work also during the 1990s as a tool to infiltrate institutions, establish clientelist networks and appropriate state resources.

The power of clan networks extends also beyond the political realm. In fact, in the absence of state regulation, economic actors in Somalia have grouped according to kinship relations, turning affiliation into a much more reliable parameter for economic interactions rather than legal guarantees or broader regulations.[6] This also favours the formation of small groups of wealthy businessmen, who develop privileged relations with political elites undermining the trust that non-represented groups have in state institutions. All in all, the peculiarities of the Somali case that have been mentioned above question the very notions of state and democracy or, at least, the traditional meanings attached to it in Western countries. As I have shown elsewhere, the assessment of the Somali diaspora engagement requires the prior understanding of the Somali social contract and of the clan's welfare and security functions, which are essential to move beyond the political fabrication of clan relations (Zoppi 2021; see also Osman 2017).

Forms of Diaspora Engagement

The Somali diaspora is the backbone of Somalia's economy, as the remittances they send home largely sustain livelihood, consumptions, education and medical care, as well as productive activities/investments. In a country where, in 2020, according to UN estimations, 4,100,000 people were food insecure, 2,600,000 were internally displaced and over a third did not have enough water to cover their daily needs, the remittance lifeline translates also into increasing awareness of, and responsibility for, home affairs in the diaspora.[7] It was calculated that in 2019 total remittances amounted to 2,000,000,000 US dollars, more than international aid and foreign direct investments to Somalia.[8]

The majority of the Somalis living abroad, and especially those that were born in Somalia but forced to migrate in the 1990s, send remittances to relatives regularly and participate in other transnational forms of assistance and welfare (for some evidence, see Zoppi 2021). Individuals trusted by local communities and money-transfer operators are key to ensure money transmission from the sender to the receiver. Mobilisation, planning, cash transfers and accountability are ensured also via social networks, instant messaging and online fundraising platforms (Norman 2022). More in general, digital and media tools are well-recognized means through which the diaspora engages transnationally, producing and reproducing homeland peace and conflict dynamics, and creating new narratives with regards to the Somali conflict (Osman 2017). It is thus important to look more closely at how remittances are channelled, and how financial flows interact with the political circumstances retrievable in the homeland.

In the first sphere of engagement identified by Van Hear and Cohen (2017), that of the household, we observe that the support is mainly mobilised following the principles of clan affiliation and of belonging to the same extended family. Individual remittances constitute a primary obligation for most Somali adults in the diaspora, and many perceive the moral and social obligation to provide help also to avoid stigmatisation and marginalisation within the extended family. By the same token, those in Somalia expect diaspora members to be wealthy and capable to allocate money for the family, which is however not always the case (Saggiomo 2022: 52). It is not rare that the obligation to provide financial support creates tension within nuclear families in the diaspora, who have to deal with daily expenses in affluent societies.

The primary goals of remittances are poverty alleviation, namely supporting the purchase of food, education, health care and other recurring expenses of family members in Somali-speaking territories (Benson at al. 2016). Contributions to the family occur also in the case of emergencies such as droughts and flooding, although these cases often involve broader types of engagements that I will explore later. Besides being a lifeline, remittances can also have negative side effects, including increasing social inequality, rise of inflation, long-term dependency, and last but not least support to feuds. Importantly, such type of support includes also the participation in the payment of "the blood price" (*diya* in Arabic, *mag* in Somali), which is the Somali institutionalised system in use to compensate for injuries or killings committed by a *diya* group to a member belonging to another group. Thus, internally the clan works as an insurance system for its members, and externally as a mediating tool to settle disputes and to avoid retaliation and further escalation of violence. The main clan families are divided into clans (*qabiil*), then into smaller genealogical units including the sub-clan (*jilib*), and within each sub-clan into numerous *diya* groups. The latest two levels are where most of compensations and clan insurance is performed. *Diya* groups are fluid social units, whose membership can range from a few people to large portions of sub-clans (depending on the interests at stake), and which take collective responsibility for their own security and for resolving specific disputes with other groups. There is wide evidence that remittances are being used to allow such payments and that kin in the diaspora are mobilised for this specific contribution (Lindley 2006; Zoppi 2021). Therefore, in the experience of many Somalis, the clan's authority is a reliable governance actor capable of assuring safety and security against risks, hence livelihood, in a context where the state cannot deploy an equally fast and effective response or is not trusted to the same level. Diaspora members resort to such governance too, and reproduce the mechanisms in the diaspora.

At the second level of the community sphere, it is possible to note various initiatives in which groups in the diaspora have come together around broader initiatives, such as emergency assistance and relief in response to natural disasters, business and entrepreneurship and civic initiatives (Kleist 2018: 15-16). There are many projects

that focus on topics like education, gender, and local resilience (for some examples see Annovi 2020). "Diaspora humanitarianism" is a significant field of transnational engagement that has been recently favoured by the opening of specific government-funded financial lines devoted to diaspora, such as the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme or the Somalia Strategy by Sida, that is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Diaspora humanitarianism is the true product of transnational connections, and is characterised by "rapid mobilisation and engagement (...) built upon social networks, affective motivations, informal delivery and accountability mechanisms".[9] Not all expressions of Somali diaspora humanitarianism follow a clan logic in delivering support. Some initiatives are able to transcend it and realise instead more inclusive forms of engagement. Young Somalis in the diaspora seem to have especially matured a desire to engage in transnational activities via "a more cosmopolitan sense of civic engagement", often due to the influence of the host society (Arrey and de la Rosa 2021: 256). Their interventions tend to be less tied to clans and focused on the collective welfare of the Somali people (Abdile 2010). The ambition of many young Somalis in the diaspora is "to create some kind of diaspora associations where the person is not a member of this association by virtue of his clan but by his own interest of being part of this Somali diaspora institution", as one young Somali interlocutor who had lived for eight years in Sweden told me (Zoppi 2021: 185). Regarding diaspora humanitarianism and political processes in Somalia, it is possible to discern both positive and negative factors at work. In the former category, fast communication, knowledge of contexts and local needs, and delivery to remote areas can be listed among the assets of having the diaspora directly involved in humanitarian and development projects. However, engagement can also contribute to reproduce divisions and inequalities due to the very way in which extended families are central to welfare and security. In Kleist's words, Somali diaspora humanitarianism "is not centrally coordinated, it does not fit the modes of operation of the international humanitarian system, and it reflects socially and morally embedded frameworks and practices".[10] This does not result necessarily in chaos, but shows rather an appropriation of western-originated notions of humanitarian and development aid to fit the specificities of the context, namely the prevalence of clans and the scarce trust in state institutions to address societal issues.

Finally, the third sphere of the "imagined community" is useful to frame even broader instances of transnationalism, in which a specific manifestation of national consciousness or identity seems to emerge. A sphere of this kind is still very limited in both Somalia and the Somali diaspora and difficult to frame, as kin criteria dominates over instances of civic citizenship. Therefore, we should take with a grain of salt initiatives claiming to speak for all the Somalis (in the diaspora) to avoid the pitfall of homogenising and generalising views. Nevertheless, the fact that such a large sphere finds difficult application to the Somali world is a finding in itself that deserves more

attention. Let us consider some examples. Tellander and Horst (2017) scrutinised the public activism of the Somali diaspora in Norway in the aftermath of the ICU's rise in South-Central Somalia, in 2006 and 2007. The expansion of the ICU was seen by many diaspora members as a positive political initiative finally liberating Mogadishu from fighting warlords. Support grew stronger after Ethiopia's military intervention, which was invited by the TFG to join the fight against Islamists in Somalia. According to the two researchers, the ICU received local and transnational support on religious rather than clan basis. The Ethiopian presence, a foreign country with a troubled regional history with Somalia, was seen in fact as unacceptable and it "awoke a nationalist mindset that went above regional and clan loyalties" (Tellander and Horst 2017: 8). As a consequence of the diaspora activism and lobbying exerted on the Norwegian government, the latter was among the first Western governments to criticise the Ethiopian involvement in Somalia and to reshape its policy and development approach towards Somalia. In this first example, it is especially the condemnation of Ethiopia's intervention to have triggered a sense of national consciousness expanding above the clan level, and thus the diaspora's sympathy for the ICU. However, as Tellander and Horst (2017) themselves reported, there were also many Somalis who supported the internationally recognised government, including diaspora members from Puntland who pushed for a federal solution.

In another example, Norman (2022) indicates that in the immediate aftermath of the 14 October 2017 Mogadishu attack, that killed almost 600 people, Somalis in the diaspora donated regardless of clan-affiliation and under a recognizable sense of *Somalinimo* (Somaliness). The same is true for emergencies and natural disasters that require a fast response: a study by Demac (2021: 48) noted that "when a crisis becomes widespread and critical, such as with the 2016 and 2017 droughts, the diaspora response will aim to reach all of the affected areas, regardless of clan affiliations".

Secessionist Somaliland represents a case of identity claim and aspiration to sovereignty that matches the third sphere identified by Van Hear and Cohen (2017), although with a specific Somali connotation: the self-proclaimed state brings together members of one major clan especially. Despite a developed articulation of its interests and international lobbying by its diaspora, for the moment Somaliland has not achieved recognition by other countries. Hence, even if Somaliland realises a broad sense of community that is engaged transnationally and even recognizes itself into a separate state, it is also breaking away from a broader sense of nationhood that includes also the other parts of Somalia.

A final, *sui generis* case of diaspora engagement that I will review here is that of the ICU, Al-Shabaab and militant Islamism, which have received support and fighters from the diaspora. Such groups have managed to establish some legitimacy among local populations by providing an extremely scarce item in Southern Somalia: *security* (Ingiriis 2018b). In their work on the funding sources of militant organisations in

Somalia, Levy and Yusuf (2021: 1173) confirm that "since the mid-90s, some Somali diaspora communities have viewed the ICU as the most effective option for maintaining law and order in Somalia and staving off warlordism and foreign powers like Ethiopia". A different reading of this quotation suggests that these are goals that the federal state has not managed to achieve: due to the federal state inaction, there have been recent cases of locally-organised resistance by villages against raids and demands by Al-Shabaab.[11] Ensuring security, providing services, delivering justice, and protecting sovereignty are urgent needs of the population, and also segments of the diaspora have eventually traded off state-building with the apparent stability offered by Al-Shabaab and other groups. The available literature suggests that the various Islamist formations utilise and rely on existing clan loyalties to cement local support, but resort then to pan-Somali, and religious narratives and treat local residents regardless of their clan affiliation (Skjelderup, Ainashe and Abdulle 2020). Containing Al-Shabaab requires "addressing underlying grievances that drive recruitment to the group" and focusing on the role of Islam and Sharia courts for promoting reconciliation and peace through cultural and religious ideas about justice and legitimate authority (Abdi and Ramsbotham 2019: 186). These are important considerations, because they illustrate once again that the prevalence of non-state logic is rooted in the lack of security, which is reflected also in the diaspora through all the social mechanisms embedded in the three spheres explored above.

Diaspora, Conflict, Peace and State-building: Striking a (Complex) Balance

The examples of the previous section have provided, if not the full range, at least a sample of the main forms of engagement employed by the Somali diaspora. The diaspora can count on larger financial resources, better living conditions and access to legal international mobility through their passports. This suggests that the power to make key decisions is distributed also in places that are geographically and perhaps mentally distant from Somalia. At the other end, Somalis in the homeland rely on diaspora support at many levels. As it emerges, the Somali diaspora environment is rather fluid and ambivalent, and at least for the moment it seems to remain committed politically, economically and socially to the homeland. Younger Somalis in the diaspora are partly disengaging from transnational activism, but to degrees that can vary significantly from one diaspora locus to another (Abdi 2015).

More importantly, it should be considered that uninterrupted solidarity exchanges between transnational families, together with sustained emigration from Somalia and return migration of diaspora Somalis to the homeland, contribute to continuously alter the demographic composition of the diaspora. And with it, there is necessarily also a reshuffling of aspirations, societal understandings of the community, trust in institutions, commitment to help, to mention but a few elements. In the light of the above, this section is concerned with putting forward some considerations that can be drawn from such a variety of transnational dynamics.

Let's start from the state. Despite the numerous legitimacy challenges, the establishment of the Somali federal state represents the most promising state-building effort since 1991. However, the present Somali society relies extensively on clan relations, a choice that is motivated not just by the clan's historical grounding in Somalia, but also by the legacy accumulated by unreliable and partisan state institutions. As a consequence, the Somali state and society are still fine-tuning towards a mixed governance institutional landscape in which state and clans can co-exist in mutual benefit rather than in competition or conflict. In other words, Somalia still faces the ontological challenge of "being a state" (de Waal 2020) or, the other way round, the challenge of institutionalising clan-based politics in a more inclusive and efficient manner beyond the "4.5 formula". According to Ingiriis (2018b), the result of this complex coexistence is that contemporary Somalia resembles pre-colonial clan-sultanates, for it features a clan territorialization overlapping with present federal states. In the shadow of these dynamics, Somalis seek and claim belonging to variously defined communities, from the local to the global, through their transnational and translocal practices (Horst 2017).

The drivers and motives behind Somali diaspora engagements in the homeland do not diverge significantly from what just described. Most of the needs one can find on the ground in Somalia are reflected in the words and deeds of the diaspora. Primary support from the diaspora is delivered to members of the extended family. At the community level, the diaspora can hardly follow different paths than clan structures: one of the limiting factor in this sense has been that "most Somali diaspora organisations are initially formed and managed by individuals from the same clan or region, their first selection criteria is assistance to the home location of their sub-clan or clan" (Demac 2021: 49). Despite the various documented attempts by the diaspora to operationalise wider-than-clan societal conceptualisations, the everyday identification of interlocutors, beneficiaries, or territories to be targeted for their engagement is still predominantly carried out through clan schemes. Beneficiaries, on their part, need to prove their identity as members of a specific genealogical group to be sure of receiving support (Norman 2022: 96). Under these circumstances, the diaspora perpetuates clan dynamics in Somalia in both positive and negative ways, while ancestors and genealogical norms continue constituting the social imaginary and shaping the possibility of relations among the Somalis.

Some evidence of mindset change is though retrievable among Somali diaspora's younger cohorts (Arrey and de la Rosa 2021; Zoppi 2021). Younger Somalis, who have been exposed for most of their life to nation-wide solidarity narratives and state-like dynamics regarding political processes, redistribution of wealth, provision of security and welfare, are likely to report a desire to move beyond clans. Some of their actions (family support; personal transnational engagement) already signal a change of practices. However, any possible evaluation is complicated by few variables, including: the country where they live (Norway, the US or Kenya are very diverse) and the years

they have spent there, as well as the arrival of new members of the family in the diaspora, an event that may reinvigorate clan dynamics at least in the short term. Empowerment and financial capabilities may be very limited right upon migration, and therefore it should be recognised, among other things, that a diaspora is composed also of recent migrants and refugees that engage transnationally in more limited ways. Hence, underlining trajectories or trends remains an arduous task for research.

It is worth highlighting that the various constituent elements of Somali society, like customary norms and the clan, do not look like a dysfunctional legacy of a distant past. The Somali diaspora and its engagement appear to be fully embedded within the contemporary world, capitalist markets and developmental discourses and practices. In a globalised world increasingly connected by more efficient logistics, Somali networks have been described through the concept of "kinshipping", namely as a sum of chokepoints, reticulations and connectivities that are "inseparable from the infrastructures and rationalities of capitalist modernity" (Norman 2022: 96).

If it was not an abused term with rather negative connotations, we could talk of "Somalisation". Alternatively, we can describe the underlying approach of Somali transnational engagement as characterised by overall "appropriation". The appropriation of discourses and practices regarding support, civil society engagement, development, humanitarianism, security, peace and conflict. Appropriation then turns the above into Somali ownership of the processes, to make them viable in the Somali world connecting the homeland to its diaspora. And in the Somali world, state institutions are still marginal in many respects.

Through the three-spheres approach to forms of engagement, this article has provided hints to the lack of factors that could presently support the federal state and create consensus about the ongoing state-building effort. The comparative disadvantage of the Somali state is that its action is presumed partisan until proven neutral, while diaspora experiences a more flexible approach to clan structures, ranging from mandatory contributions to family members to territorial rather than clan-based interventions.

Conclusion

Since the collapse of formal state institutions in Somalia, its population has been on an endless search for security and decent livelihood. The diaspora is massively contributing to these goals. Although the dense network of overlapping diaspora engagements complicates the possibility to underline directions and trends in a clear way, it is safe to conclude that Somalia today appears to be a fervent globalised and diasporic nation before than a functional sovereign state. There are a number of recognisable drivers, regulatory principles and tools for engagement that confer a competitive advantage to clans in attracting and directing diaspora activities. Clan governance, when enacted at its best through customary norms, contains in itself the mechanisms for settling controversies and thus to establish security, namely what the federal government is still

struggling to achieve. Clan relations are capable of determining how diaspora support is channelled, distributed and operationalised. State institutions are instead not always part of the drive chain of such support, and still have a long way ahead to implement checks and balances, to improve political representation beyond the "4.5" rule, and to gain the population's trust. However, clan politics comes with shortcomings, such as divisive politics and rivalries, and a lack of an inclusive, unitary national view.

In this multipolar, competitive if you will, institutional environment, it emerges that Somalis both in the homeland and in the diaspora are therefore still waiting for the definitive, institutionalised provider of welfare and security. For the time being, diaspora engagement should be conceived exactly as the closest form of institutionalised provider of these common goods. However, and perhaps differently from other diasporas, Somalis resort broadly to categories of lineage, affections, clan affiliation rather than (only) strategic planning, cost-effective interventions and other typical principles of developmental work. Somalis' thirst for security leads to a very practical conundrum: on the one hand, by abiding by the clan system, the diaspora risks undermining state-building efforts. In fact, the current practices of the diaspora defy ideas of citizenship and rights, as intended within state legal frameworks. On the other hand, clans provide immediate security, a precondition for reconciliation and decent livelihood, two fundamental rights Somalis have been deprived of since the onset of the civil war. However, due to the reasons mentioned above, it should be considered only a *short-term* security, because in their external relations clans can easily turn into dividing forces rather than promoters of national unity. There is a need to reconcile state governance with clan representation, with the goal of developing institutional solutions capable of providing security to the Somalis, which is the real priority that could fend off the attractiveness of extremist actors and "spoilers" of all kinds. Without steps forward in this direction, it is difficult to conceive a different configuration for Somali politics.

Marco Zoppi, Post-Doc Research Fellow, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna

Notes:

1 - For a historical description of clans, which cannot be dealt with here, the works of Samatar (1989), Gundel (2006) and Luling (2006) are recommended.

2 - Tadesse T. (2006), *Ethiopia votes to 'stave off' Somali Islamist threat*, "Reuters", 30 November 2006, https://www.hiiraan.com/news2/2006/nov/ethiopia_votes_to__stave_off__somali_islamist_threat.aspx#:~:text=ADDIS%20ABABA%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Ethiopia's,died%20in%20a%20landmine%20blast (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

3 - Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2018), "Q&A: Somalia Charts Security Transition", *ACSS*, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/qa-somalia-charts-security-transition/ (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

4 - United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (2022), "Press Statement of the Security Council on Attack Against ATMIS", *UNSOM*, https://unsom.unmissions.org/press-statement-security-council-attack-against-atmis (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

5 - This is a rough calculation based on 2022 UNHCR data on refugees, available on Refugee Data Finder, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=42bB2i (last accessed on 8 April 2023), and on national statistical offices' databases or reports. For Scandinavia, see also Zoppi 2021.

6 - Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022), "Somalia Country Report 2022", *BTI Transformation Index*, https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SOM (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

7 - Oxfam (2020), "Oxfam raises alarm over Somali remittance lifeline", *Oxfam*, https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/oxfam-raises-alarm-over-somali-remittance-lifeline (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

8 - IOM (2021), "IOM supports development of new National Diaspora Policy in Somalia", *IOM*, https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/news/iom-supports-development-new-national-diaspora-policy-somalia (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

9 - Hassan M. A. et al. (2021), "Recognising diaspora humanitarianism", *DIIS Policy Brief*, https://www.diis.dk/en/research/recognising-diaspora-humanitarianism (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

10 - Kleist N. (2021), "Studying Somali diaspora humanitarianism: some methodological considerations", *EASA Anthropology of Humanitarianism Network*, https://ahneasa.wordpress.com/2021/03/14/nauja-kleist-studying-somali-diaspora-humanitarianism-some-methodological-considerations/ (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

11 - See for example Maruf H. (2022), *'Ma'awisley' Militias in Central Somalia. Mobilizing against al-Shabab*, "VOA", 4 October 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/ma-awisley-militias-in-central-somalia-mobilizing-against-al-shabab-/6776048.html (last accessed on 12 October 2022).

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