

Somalia: How Colonial Powers drove a Country into Chaos

Interview of Mohamed Hassan

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Somalia had every reason to succeed: an advantageous geographical situation, oil, ores and only one religion and one language for the whole territory; a rare phenomenon in Africa. Somalia could have been a great power in the region. But the reality is completely different: famine, wars, lootings, piracy, bomb attacks. How did this country sink? Why has there been no Somali government for approximately twenty years? Which scandals stand behind those pirates who hijack our ships? In this new chapter of our series "Understanding the Muslim World", Mohamed Hassan explains for us why and how imperialist forces have applied in Somalia a chaos theory.

How did piracy develop in Somalia? Who are those pirates?

Since 1990, there has been no government in Somalia. The country is in the hands of warlords. European and Asiatic ships took advantage of this chaotic situation and fished along the Somali coast without a license or respect for elementary rules. They did not observe the quotas in force in their own country to protect the species and they used fishing techniques -even bombs!- that created huge damages to the wealth of the Somali seas.

That's not all! Taking also advantage of this lack of any political authority, European companies, with the help of the mafia, dumped nuclear wastes offshore Somali coasts. Europe knew of this but turned a blind eye as that solution presented a practical and economical advantage for the nuclear waste management. Yet, the 2005 Tsunami brought a big part of these wastes into the Somali lands. Unfamiliar diseases appeared for the first time among the population. This is the context in which the piracy mainly developed. Somali fishermen, who had primitive fishing techniques, were no more able to work. So they decided to protect themselves and their seas. This is exactly what the United States did during the civilian war against the British (1756-1763): with no naval forces, President George Washington made a deal with pirates to protect the wealth of the American seas.

No Somali state for almost twenty years! How is that possible?

This is the result of an American strategy. In 1990, the country was bruised by conflicts, famine and lootings; the state collapsed. Facing this situation, the United States, who discovered oil in Somalia a few years ago, launched Operation Restore Hope in 1992. For the first time, US marines intervened in Africa to take control of a country. It was also the first time that a military invasion was launched in the name of humanitarian interference.

The famous rice bag exhibited on a Somali beach by Bernard Kouchner?

Yes, everybody remembers those pictures carefully showcased. But the real reasons were strategic. An US State Department report recommended indeed that the United States must stay the lonely global superpower after the Soviet Bloc collapse. To reach that goal, the report advocated to occupy a hegemonic position in Africa, which enjoys a vast amount of raw materials.

However, Restore Hope will be a failure. There was even that Hollywood movie “Black Hawk Down”, with those poor G.I.’s “attacked by the bad Somali rebels”...

US soldiers were indeed defeated by a Somali nationalist resistance. Since then, American policy was to keep Somalia without any real government, even to balkanize it. This is the old British strategy, already applied in many places: setting weak and divided states in order to better rule them. That is why there has been no Somali state for almost twenty years. The United States has implemented a chaos theory in order to stop any Somali reconciliation and keep the country divided.

In Sudan, due to the civilian war, Exxon has had to leave the country after having discovered oil. So isn't letting Somalia plunge into chaos contrary to American interests, which cannot exploit the discovered oil?

Oil exploitation is not their priority. The United States know that the reserves are there but doesn't need it immediately. Two elements are much more important in its strategy. First, prevent the competitors from negotiating with a rich and powerful Somali state. If you consider Sudan, the comparison is interesting. The oil that the American companies discovered there thirty years ago, Sudan is selling it today to China. The same thing could happen in Somalia. When he was president of the transition government, Abdullah Yusuf went to China although he was supported by the United States. US mass media had strongly criticized that visit. The fact is that United States have no guarantee on that point: if a Somali government is established tomorrow, whatever is its political color, it could probably adopt a strategy independent of United States and trade with China. Western imperialists do not want a strong and unified Somali state. The second goal pursued by this chaos theory is linked to the geographical location of Somalia, which is strategic for both European and American imperialists.

Why is it strategic?

The issue is the control of the Indian Ocean. Look at the map. As mentioned, western powers have an important share of the responsibility in the Somali piracy development. But instead of telling the truth and paying compensation for what they did, those powers criminalize the phenomena in order to justify their position in the region. Under the pretext of fighting the piracy, NATO is positioning its navy in the Indian Ocean.



Source: Wikipedia

What is the real goal?

To control the economic development of the emerging powers, mainly India and China. Half of the world's container traffic and 70% of the total traffic of petroleum products passes through the Indian Ocean. From that strategic point of view, Somalia is a very important place: the country has the longest coast of Africa (3.300 km) and faces the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, two key points of the region economy. Moreover, if a pacific response is brought to the Somali problem, relations between African in one hand, and India and China on the other hand, could develop through the Indian Ocean. Those American competitors could then have influence in that African area. Mozambique, Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania, Zanzibar, South Africa etc. All those countries connected to the Indian Ocean could gain easy access to the Asian market and develop fruitful economic relationship. Nelson Mandela, when he was president of South Africa, had mentioned the need of an Indian Ocean revolution, with new economic relationships. The United States and Europe do not want this project. That is why they prefer to keep Somalia unstable..

You say that the United States does not want Somali reconciliation. But what are the roots of the Somali divisions?

In order to understand this chaotic situation, we must delve into Somali history. This country had been divided by colonial powers. In 1959, Somalia gained independence through the fusion of the Italian colony in the South, and the British colony in the North. But Somalis were also living in some parts of Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. The new Somali state adopted a star on its flag, each branch representing one part of the historical Somalia. The message behind that symbol: "Two Somalias have been united, but three are still colonized".

Facing the legitimacy of those claims, the British – who controlled Kenya-, organized a referendum in the Kenyan area claimed by Somalia. 87% of the population, composed mainly of Somali ethnics, voted for the Somali unity. When the results were published, Jomo Kenyatta, a Kenyan nationalist leader, threatened the British to throw the colonists out if they gave a part of the territory up to Somalia. So Great Britain decided not to take the referendum into account, and today an important Somali community is still living in Kenya. You must understand that those colonial borders were a real disaster in the Somali case. The border issue was besides the object of an important debate among the African continent.

What was the issue of that debate?

In the sixties, as many African countries became independent, there was a debate between what we called the Monrovia and the Casablanca groups. This later, including among others Morocco and Somalia, resolved that the borders inherited from colonialism be discussed. For them, those boundaries had no legitimacy. But most of the African countries and their borders are colonialism products. Finally, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the ancestor of the current African Union, closed the debate by decreeing that the borders were indisputable: going back over those boundaries would provoke civilian wars everywhere on the continent. Later, one of the OAU architects, the Tanzanian Julius Nyerere, confessed that this decision was the best but that he regretted the Somali outcome.

What will be the impact of the colonial divisions on Somalia?

They will create strains with neighboring countries. During those years when Somalia advocated for revising the borders, Ethiopia became a US imperialism bastion. The United States had also military bases in Kenya and Eritrea. At this moment, Somalia, a young pastoral democracy, wished to build its own army. The goal was to not appear weak in front of the armed neighbors, to support Somali movements in Ethiopia and even to regain by force, if necessary, some territories. But the western forces were opposed to the creation of a Somali army.

So Somalia had tense relations with its neighbors. Was it not reasonable to be opposed to this Somali army project? It would have provoked wars, wouldn't it?

The West did not care about conflicts between Africans but its own interests. The United States and Great Britain were providing and training militaries in Ethiopia, Kenya and Eritrea. Those countries were still under the yoke of very repressive feudal systems. But they were also neocolonial regimes devoted to Western interests. On the other hand, the power in place in Somalia was more democratic and independent. So the West had no interest in providing for a country that could escape its control.

As a consequence, Somalia decided to turn to the Soviet Union. This frightened the Western forces that feared Soviet influence stretching in to Africa. Those fears became more

important with the 1969 putsch.

What do you mean?

Socialist ideas were spread in the country. An important Somali community was indeed living in Aden in South Yemen. However, this is where Britain used to exile persons it considered dangerous in India: communists, nationalists and so on. They used to be arrested and sent to Aden where nationalist and revolutionary ideas quickly developed and affected later both Yemenites and Somalis. Under the influence of civilians with Marxist ideas, a coup d'état was led by officers in 1969 and Siad Barre took power in Somalia.

What were the reasons of that coup d'état?

The Somali government was corrupted. He had however the cards in hand to erect the country to the great regional power rank: a strategic position, only one language, one religion and many common cultural elements. This is fairly rare in Africa. But, by missing the economical development of the country, this government has created a context favorable to divisions among clans. Under the pretext of doing politics, Somali elites become divided. Everyone created his own political party, without any real program, and recruited voters among the existing clans. This increased the divisions and turned out to be totally useless. A democracy in a liberal type was in fact unsuitable for Somalia: there were at once 63 political parties for a three million population country! And the government was even not able to adopt an official script, which was creating serious troubles in the administration. Education was weak. Bureaucracy, police and army were, however, established. This later will play a key role in the progressive coup d'état.

“Progressive”! With the army?

The army was the only organized institution in Somalia. As a repressive apparatus, it was supposed to protect the so-called civilian government and the elite. But for many Somalis coming from different families and areas, the army was also an exchange place where there were no borders, no tribalism, no clan divisions. This is how Marxist ideas from Aden circulated among the army. So the coup d'état was led by officers who were most of all nationalist. They did not have a good knowledge of socialism but they had sympathy for those ideas. Moreover, they knew what was happening in Vietnam, and that fed anti-imperialist feelings. The civilians, who knew Marx and Lenin's teachings lacked a mass political party, supported the coup d'état and become the advisers of the officers who took power.

What changes did the Somali coup d'état bring about?

One important positive aspect: the new government quickly adopted an official script. Likewise, the Soviet Union and China were helping Somalia. The students and the population mobilized themselves. Education and social conditions were enhanced. The years that followed the coup d'état were in fact the best ones that Somalia never knew. That is, until 1977.

What happened?

Somalia, which has been divided by colonial forces, attacked Ethiopia to get the territory of Ogaden back. Ogaden was mainly populated by Somalis. At this time however, Ethiopia was itself a socialist state supported by the Soviets. This country had been led for a long time by

Emperor Selassie. But in the seventies, there was an important mobilization to overthrow him. The students' movement, in which I personally participated, made four major demands. First, to nonviolently and democratically resolve tensions with Eritrea. Secondly, to establish a land reform that would distribute the lands to the peasants. Thirdly, to establish the principle of equality among the nationalities; Ethiopia was a multinational country led by elite who did not represent the diversity. Fourthly, to abolish the feudal system and to establish a democratic state. As in Somalia, the army was the only organized institution in Ethiopia and the civilians joined the officers to overthrow Selassie in 1974.

How did two socialist states, each supported by the Soviet Union, enter conflict?

After the Ethiopian revolution, a delegation including Soviet Union, Cuba and South Yemen organized a round table with Ethiopia and Somalia in order to resolve their contradiction. Castro went to Addis Abeba and Mogadishu. To him, Somali claims were justified. Finally, the Ethiopian delegation agreed to seriously seriously its Somali neighbor's demands. The two countries made an agreement stipulating that no provocation should happen as long as no decision has been taken. Things seemed to start well but Somalia did not honor the agreement...

Two days after the Ethiopian delegation returned to its country, Henry Kissinger, a former Nixon Secretary of State, turned up to Mogadishu. Kissinger was representing an unofficial organization: the Safari Club that was among others including Shah's Iran, Mobutu's Congo, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and French and Pakistani intelligence services. The objective of that organization was to fight against the Soviet infiltration in the Gulf and in Africa. Under the Safari Club pressures and help promises, Siad Barre committed a disastrous strategic mistake of attacking Ethiopia.

What were the consequences of that war?

Soviets left the region. Somalia, still led by Siad Barre, integrated the neocolonial network of the imperialist forces. The country had been seriously damaged by the conflict and the World Bank and the IFM were in charge of "rebuilding" it. This has aggravated infighting among Somali bourgeoisie. Each regional elite wanted to have its own market. They made the divisions among the clans' worst and contributed to the progressive dislocation of their country up to Siad Barre's fall in 1990. Since that, any head of state succeeded to him.

But, thirty years after the Ogaden war, the opposite scenario happened: Ethiopia was supported by the United States to attack Somalia...

Yes, as I said, since the Restore Hope failure, United States has preferred to keep Somalia in chaos. However, in 2006, a spontaneous movement developed under the Islamic courts to fight against the local warlords and bring unity to the country. It was a kind of Intifada. In order to stop this movement from rebuilding Somalia, United States decided suddenly to support the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) after having refused to recognize it before. In fact, they realized that their project of a Somalia without effective state was no more possible: a movement - furthermore Islamic!- was about to lead to a national reconciliation. In order to sabotage the Somali unity, United States decided to support the TFG. But this later was lacking any social basis and an army. So the Ethiopian troops, commanded by Washington, attacked Mogadishu to overthrow the Islamic courts.

Did it work?

No, the Ethiopian army was defeated and had to leave Somalia. On their side, the Islamic courts were dispersed in several movements that still control a big part of the country today. As for Abdulla Yusuf's transitional government, he collapsed and United States replaced it by Sheik Sharif, the former Islamic Court spokesman.

So Sheik Sharif has passed to “the other camp”?

He used to be the Islamic courts spokesman because he is a good orator. But he has no political knowledge. He has no idea what imperialism or nationalism are. That is why western powers took him back. He was the Islamic court's weak link. Today he chairs a fake government, created in Djibouti. This government has no social base or authority in Somalia. It only exists on the international level because the imperialist forces support it.

In Afghanistan, the United States said they were ready to negotiate with Taliban. Why don't they look for discussing with the Islamic groups in Somalia?

Because those groups want to take the foreign occupier over and to allow a national reconciliation for the Somali people. As a result, the United States wants to break those groups: a reconciliation, through the Islamic movement or through the TFG, is not in the interests of the imperialist forces. They just want chaos. The problem is that today, this chaos reached Ethiopia too, which is very weak since the 2007 aggression. A nationalist resistance movement came to the light over there to fight against the pro-imperialist government of Addis Ababa. With their chaos theory, United States had in fact created troubles in the whole region. And now, they took it out on Eritrea.

Why?

This little country leads an independent national policy. Eritrea also has a vision for the whole region: the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia) do not need foreign powers' interference; its wealth should allow it to establish new economical relationship on the basis of mutual respect. According to Eritrea, the region must get it together and its members must be able to discuss about their problems. Of course, this policy frightens United States that fears that other countries follow that example. So they accuse Eritrea of sending weapons to Somalia and instigating troubles in Ethiopia.

Isn't Eritrea sending weapons in Somalia?

Not even a bullet! This is a pure propaganda as they did against Syria about the Iraqi resistance. Eritrea's vision catches up with the project of Indian Ocean revolution that we spoke about before. The western powers do not want of that and wish to bring Eritrea back to the circle of the neocolonial states under control, such as Kenya, Ethiopia or Uganda.

Are there no terrorist in Somalia?

Imperialist powers have always labeled as terrorists the people who fight for their right. Irishmen were terrorists until they signed an agreement. Abbas was a terrorist. Now, he is a friend.

But we heard about Al Qaeda in Somalia?

Al Qaeda is everywhere, from Belgium to Australia! That invisible Al Qaeda is a logo designed to justify to the public opinion military operations. If United States say to their

citizens and soldiers: “We are going to send our troops into the Indian Ocean in order to probably fight against China”, people would be afraid of course. But if you tell them that it is just about fighting piracy and Al Qaeda, it won’t be a problem. The real goal is however different. It consists in setting forces in the Indian Ocean region that will be the theater of major conflicts in the coming years. This is what we will analyze in the next chapter...

Mohamed Hassan is a geopolitics and Arab world specialist. Born in Addis Abeba (Ethiopia), he participated in student movements on the occasion of the socialist revolution of 1974 in his country. He studied political science in Egypt before specializing in public administration in Brussels. As a diplomat for his country of origin, he worked in Washington, Beijing and Brussels. Co-writer of *L'Irak sous occupation* (EPO, 2003), he has also contributed to books about Arab nationalism, Islamic movements and Flemish nationalism. He is one of the best contemporary experts on the Arab and Muslim world.

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To examine the subject in depth, Mohamed Hassan recommends the following publications:

Mohamed Omar, *The Road to Zero: Somalia’s Self-Destruction*, Haan Publishing, 1993

Babu, Abdul, Rahman Mohamed. *African Socialism or Socialist Africa?* Londres, Zed Press, 1981, 190 p.

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