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# Book Review by Anna Simons of: Understanding the Somali Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding written by Afyare Abdi Elmi



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This well-written and intriguing study reveals that the project of modernization and/or development has many flaws and remains precarious, with major social problems, many of them new, to overcome.

JON ABBINK, *African Studies Centre, Leiden University*

***Understanding the Somali Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding*, by Afyare Abdi Elmi**

London: Pluto Press, 2010; pp. 224. \$35.00 paper.

Afyare Abdi Elmi is to be commended. He pulls no punches in *Understanding the Somali Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding*. Even better, he gives us a book that is easy to read and helps make sense of the recent past, as well as some of the present. I write “some of the present” because the manuscript clearly went to the publisher before the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was fully underway and before the recent drought devolved into yet another famine. Unfortunately, piracy receives less attention in this account than readers might expect, but that may only further reflect the challenges that inhere in writing books (rather than blogs) about contemporary events.

A second reason for my cautionary note—that this book can only *help* make sense of the Somali situation—is that, as with all things Somali, one point of view will not suffice, and Elmi has *a* particular point of view. That being said, his point of view is well worth paying attention to. He convincingly condemns Ethiopia’s meddling in Somalia, is highly critical of the United States, favors peace building that includes Islamists, and is much more realistic than many about the tensions that inhere in nation- or state-building when clans *and* Islam both continue to hold sway—which, as he points out, they do, both in Somalia and beyond Somalia in the diaspora.

Elmi builds on others’ work to offer a compelling definition of peace: “peace is understood as the presence of skills and processes for dealing with conflicts non-violently” (12). In other words, he does not assume away rivalries, factionalization, or the fighting that is always bound to occur over the levers of power, or over vital assets like ports, airports,

import-export licenses, and the like. As he points out, in the Somali instance, clan affiliations have long been instrumentalized; indeed, thanks to clans and to decades' worth of clan-based conflict, factions come to politicians and/or warlords virtually ready-made.

Meanwhile, only three "institutions" can effectively cross-cut clans and thereby appeal to all Somalis: elders, provided they use *heer* (traditional methods of arbitration) to settle disputes; Islam; and the nation. None, of course, are institutions per se. But neither are they mutually exclusive.

The weakest of these three identities is clearly Somali national identity. No robust sense of nationalism exists. Presumably, if such a thing had been developed, Somalia would not have dissolved into so many competing pieces and parts. Governance stopped being good back in the 1970s, and it took a real turn for the worse, according to Elmi, when President Siad Barre demonized members of the Majertein clan in the wake of Somalia's defeat by Ethiopia in the Ogaden War. Clan-based militias, and not just clan politics, have riven Somalia ever since.

Consequently, anyone who thinks it possible to reconstruct a Somali state by appealing to Somali national identity is chewing more than just qat, while building a functional Somali state that can infuse a sense of nationalism will not work either, without first reaching enforceable agreements about power-sharing, which means determining who gets to discuss who gets to share power, which in turn depends on who is invited to the talks, which itself depends on who is holding them and why. Or to put it differently: examine who has been invited to peace talks in the past along with who has been left out. This generally explains who becomes a spoiler—and why peace never holds.

Elmi finds it particularly egregious that no one ever invites all the players to the table and that discussions are never left up to Somalis alone, though he also acknowledges that if outsiders were not involved, peace talks might not be held at all—which presents just one of the conundrums this slim book elucidates.

External actors loom large in Elmi's account, as well they should. As Elmi makes clear, Somalia's two most powerful neighbors—Ethiopia and Kenya—have parallel though not exactly identical interests in the space formerly known as Somalia. Ethiopia, for instance, wants as weak a Somalia as possible, and would prefer many mutually hostile mini-states. Kenya, for its part, stands to gain little from a strong Somalia except fewer refugees,

though refugees serve a useful purpose since they generate large amounts of easy-to-skim relief money.

Elmi is surely not wrong in these assessments. However, while he alludes to Ethiopia's fraught history with Eritrea, which helps explain Eritrea's support of Somali insurgents in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, he never considers the possibility that Somalia might appear to pose legitimate security concerns from Ethiopia's perspective. Instead, Ethiopia is the perennial aggressor—which, for anyone who believes the Somali-populated Ogaden belongs with (if not also, by rights, to) Somalia, it is.

Elmi is no less trenchant about the United States' role in backing Ethiopia's incursions into Somalia, which he views as woeful. Here it is hard to disagree on two counts. First, the only thing the actions taken by Ethiopia were ever bound to do was unite numerous Somalis against it. But second, and perhaps even more importantly, it makes no sense to try to prevent Islamists from helping to re-create a Somali state. Yet this is what the United States has effectively done, by, with, and through Ethiopia's invasion(s) and its own air and drone strikes.

Although Elmi does not say that a Somali cannot be Somali without belonging to a clan, he does say that no clan is strong enough to stitch a state back together or effectively smash its rivals, which is why conflict persists. Look to Islam, in contrast, and you *can* find something that overarches clans, something that all Somalis share. Thus, Islam needs to be considered part of the solution.

In fact, if the United States, Ethiopia, and others are not careful, their actions are likely to drive yet more Somalis toward Salafist and other orientations that Westerners *really* do not like. Elmi does not come out and say this quite so baldly, in part because he is far more interested in drawing attention to what is required to build peace and address Somalia's statelessness. He is not interested in the United States' shibboleths. Yet, he does recognize that so long as terrorism and Islamism preoccupy the United States, its and its allies' actions will force more Somalis to turn to Arab (or even Iranian) sources of support.

This would be unfortunate. It is also unnecessary, especially when one considers that sufficient numbers of Somalis no more want to Arabize than they want to Westernize. The last time I was in the region (several years ago) enough adult Somalis still wanted their children to remain *culturally* Somali that if Washington assisted with these efforts, everyone would be

better served. After all: what language do Somali parents speak when trying to raise their children to be good Muslims *and* good citizens? What food do Somalis eat when they break a fast? What clothes do men wear to mosque on Fridays? Evoke such things for any group of believers anywhere, and *national* attributes begin to emerge.

*Could* culturally strengthening the Somali nation help rebuild a Somali state? This is an unspoken question that haunts Elmi's book. The immediate political science response would be "no." But then ask yourself, who are the only people likely to build a well-governed state? The answer: those who think of themselves as Somali first and members of this or that clan (or mosque) second.

Again, Elmi does not frame his argument in quite this way, but the peace he seeks does require taking what *already* unites Somalis and helping Somalis put this to work. This is why it is impossible to disagree with him when he writes, "The international community's peacebuilding efforts are not ideologically neutral; for the international community, governance and other peacebuilding efforts have to produce, eventually, a liberal democracy and a free market" (12). Elmi inclines against this idea. He wants Somalis to be able to develop something different—something that fits them. There is, as he says, "a mismatch between the Western ideology that drives peacebuilding efforts and the indigenous values and institutions that are present in Somalia" (128).

Elmi hones in on education in particular. He cites the 2007 Millennium Development Goals report, which indicates that "more than 81 percent of school-age children do not have access to education" (113). Tellingly, he never spells out exactly what a Somali "national identity education" should include. Similarly, he favors a more representative government that might consist of a bicameral legislature (along the lines of what has worked thus far in Somaliland), and advocates an inclusive, professional, and well-disciplined Somali security force, but offers few specifics on how to achieve either. This, too, is in keeping with his overall approach. He is much more detailed about what *will not* work (for example, federation or consociationalism) than about what *should* be put in place. I suspect this is because what he really wants to see happen is for committed (but non-meddling) outsiders to assist with a transitional administration that would help rebuild state institutions while simultaneously offering all possible

Somali factions—including Islamists—the protected space within which to “define their issues,” discuss them, and strike a balance.

Is this realistic? Perhaps. However, one thing we know already is where *not* listening to Elmi will lead: to more of the same, while the longer Somalis go without being able to find something inclusively Somali to rally around, the greater the potential for further radicalization and violence—and meddling by external actors who do not have Somalis’ best interests at heart. That alone should be reason enough to take seriously Elmi’s arguments on behalf of Islamist approaches to stabilizing Somalia.

Another reason to take this book seriously: Elmi grinds no academic axes. Instead, this is an accessibly written book that offers plenty of material with which to spark many long overdue discussions—in classrooms, inside the Beltway, and among those both familiar and unfamiliar with all of the Horn’s recent conflagrations.

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***Kumsaa Boroo: Jiruu fi Jireenya/Life and Times*, by Kumsa Boro**

Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2009; pp. 509. \$39.95 paper.

This book is about the life and journey of an Oromo pastor, the Reverend Kumsa Boro, beginning in a small village, Gute, Western Oromiya, where he was born in 1910, and ending in an American metropolis, Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he died in 2002. Starting life as a young cattle herder, he became a revered evangelist and a respected Oromo elder. His 92-year life journey was full of zigzags “punctuated by a succession of personal tragedies,” as Leenco Lata has correctly stated in the blurb. Boro joined the American Presbyterian missionaries in 1920, an event that opened a long chapter in his life. From the missionaries, he received modern education and became a pastor. As an evangelist, he preached the Gospel to the Oromo people, dedicating his time and energy to fight injustice so that the Oromo could enjoy their God-given rights, and respect and human dignity on this earth. In doing this, he carefully walked the thin line between being a preacher and being a human rights activist, and he clearly demonstrated that he could be both at the same time without one role negating the other.