

**Fixing the Failed State of Somalia:  
Challenges and Opportunities**

**In this statement for the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa and  
Global Health Policy hearing on Somalia, I will:**

- Provide a general overview of the political and security situation in Somalia
- Present my view of the impact of AMISOM troop withdrawal
- Assess the challenges faced by the Somali government in countering extremist groups and discuss how it could be more effective

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**Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and Distinguished Senators:**

Thank you very much for inviting me to testify at this important and timely hearing on Somalia. Working inside and outside the Somali government has given me a unique opportunity to closely observe the challenges and opportunities in Somalia and possible ways to advance the country's elusive peace and state building agenda.

For the past three years, I have been the Executive Director at the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) – Somalia's first think tank. Prior to that, I served as Secretary to the Council of Ministers, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Prime Minister's Office, Communications Director for the Somali President and as a Cabinet Minister responsible for Public Works and Reconstruction (2010/11).

I flew in from the capital Mogadishu, where I have lived for many years, to share what Somali researchers and civil society think should be done to help our country stand on its own two feet.

**Context is important**

Somalia has experienced more than a quarter of a century without functioning and effective state institutions. This is an unprecedented and unique situation and presents multifaceted and manifest challenges. Failure to appreciate the prolonged failed nature of the Somali state and its fragility could result in a misdiagnosis of challenges, a waste of resources and even an exacerbation of the current problems. There are many causes for the slow pace of progress, stagnation or at times regression of Somalia's march to recovery. However, four significant challenges represent a clear impediment to peace building and state building in this troubled Horn of Africa country.

First, one of the most organized and deadly insurgent groups – the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Shabaab – has been working hard to destroy the nascent Somali institutions. Al Shabaab has not succeeded but has blocked meaningful progress for over a decade now. Moreover and more relevant for our discussion, unless a change of strategy is quickly adopted, another Somali expert will be sitting in front of this committee five years from now talking about missed opportunities.

The second reason why Somalia is hovering between being a ‘failed state’ and its current designation as a ‘fragile state’ is the conspicuous absence of the essential resources needed to put the country back on its feet. For starters, let’s consider the national budget of the federal government: about US\$270 million a year, over 99 percent of which is spent paying salaries of civil servants and security personnel. At a minimum, the government would need roughly US\$3 billion a year to implement its own National Development Plan. With such meager resources, the government can’t deliver rudimentary services, let alone defeat Al Shabaab or win the hearts and minds of Somalia’s massive unemployed youth population, which is estimated to be 70 percent of the estimated 12 million citizens.

Landing a man on Mars with equipment sourced from a Dollar Store is more realistic than expecting Somalia to have a functioning state with its current resources, financial or otherwise. The government is trying to expand its revenue base, but it will take years to realistically levy taxes on all of its 18 administrative regions. It only controls the capital Mogadishu, and the rest is in the hands of federal member states (and Somaliland which considers itself as a separate state). The regions jealously guard their sources of revenue such as ports and airports. Somaliland has just transferred 70 percent of the Port of Berbera to UAE’s Dubai World port management company and the government of Ethiopia – against the objections of the Somali government. On 12 March 2018, parliament banned Dubai World from Somalia and labeled that deal as null and void and a blatant breach on Somalia’s sovereignty. This could further complicate the already frozen Somalia-Somaliland talks on unity/secession issues and may also put the fledgling Somali government and the UAE on a collision course.

Thirdly, genuine political inclusivity remains elusive. A winner takes all mentality reigns throughout the country, creating deep political instability. In a country where political and social reconciliation remain a work in progress, Somalia’s elite has failed to rise to the occasion and unite against the common enemy—Al-Shabaab. Instead, they routinely spend much needed resources and energy on political infighting. They have also failed to capitalize on elections which bring fresh opportunities to create an environment conducive to stability in the form of inclusive political dispensation. Regrettably, each new leadership makes the exact same mistakes and spends the next four years fending off political rivals, instead of facing off against Al-Shabaab.

The fourth reason why Somalia's recovery is slow – and often goes dangerously into reverse – is the meddling of external actors with both benevolent and malevolent intentions. Interference by others has ceaselessly muddied Somalia's already troubled waters. The negative energies emanating from both state and non-state actors can be as damaging as the mischief and mediocrity of Somali politicians and the mayhem of Al Shabaab. For instance, during elections, money from overseas and local powerbrokers is used to unseat some politicians and install others. All candidates openly dole out cash to win elections. Meanwhile, the Gulf crisis is playing out dangerously in Somalia. If the negative impact of the dispute between UAE and Qatar is not checked, it could easily destroy all the gains made thus far and will eventually strengthen Al Shabaab's hand. Petrodollars should be used to avert starvation in Somalia – not to put this fledgling country in the middle of a geopolitical power play.

It is because of these profound challenges that it is possible to argue in one sentence – however contradictory or confusing it may sound – that that the situation in Somalia is paradoxically good, bad and ugly all at the same time.

### **Reasons for optimism**

Having listed the litany of challenges, I want to emphasize that Somalia's situation is not only one of doom and gloom. The fact that a representative of a Somali think tank is in the Dirksen Senate Office Building speaking with distinguished US senators about Somalia is, in itself, a positive sign.

Most Somalis believe Al Shabaab are on the wrong path and the wrong side of history and are not afraid to align themselves with their government at the national and regional levels.

Diaspora Somalis are returning to look for opportunities in their homeland and ways to contribute to the nation building efforts. Businesses are investing and creating employment opportunities however meager. Citizens are joining forces to avert famine and arrest drought induced crises. The national and regional governments are learning to work together. The federal government is strengthening key state institutions such as the capacity of the ministry of finance. International actors including the US and Turkey are making an impact on the security and development fronts.

Other tangible progress includes:

- The establishment of national and regional institutions, however skeleton in nature
- International engagement and interest in Somalia
- The near completion of the federating process of the country
- Civil service salaries being paid
- The establishment of the National Security Council (between the center and regions)

### **Causes for concern**

Despite the collective efforts of Somalis, Americans and other partners and 10 years of hard work and sacrifices, the peace building and state building objectives have not been remotely met. Security in Mogadishu is at all time low. I was a cabinet minister in 2010 when Al Shabaab controlled 80 percent of the city and the government 20 percent, but I knew then where the enemy was. Today I don't. Despite President Farmaajo's pledge to defeat Al Shabaab [within two years](#), attacks have continued over the past year. On October 14 2017, more than 600 people were killed in a car bomb attack so grotesque that even Al-Shabaab didn't dare to claim responsibility. Just two weeks ago, the group attacked Balcad and Afgoye, two towns just outside the capital. Mogadishu itself has been in a semi-permanent lockdown because of supposedly explosive-laden vehicles roaming the city and the fear of complex terror attacks such as the one aimed at the presidential compound three weeks ago.

### **AMISOM's future**

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has made tremendous sacrifices in the ongoing peace and state building efforts in Somalia and should be commended for liberating almost all urban centers from Al Shabaab. AMISOM also provided Somalia's political elite with a security umbrella that has allowed them to get on with the task of fixing their failed state. However, it looks like AMISOM's mission in Somalia has hit an impasse. It has been on a defensive posture for the past five years as its bases and convoys have come under attack from Al-Shabaab, leading to loss of life and military hardware and ammunition. European donors have cancelled significant portions of the mission's funding and other partners also failed to provide much needed equipment such as helicopters. The Somali government wants AMISOM to continue with it is drawdown plans (though not necessarily a full-blown withdrawal taking place all at once) so its security forces can receive donor

support at a fraction of the cost of AMISOM. This is a sensible plan, because as our report (Exit Strategy Challenges for the AU Mission in Somalia) explains, only a professionally-trained Somali army can defeat Al Shabaab.

AMISOM, on the other hand, is seeking a wider mandate including maritime capabilities, which one Somali minister described as mission creep. It also rejects the drawdown strategy. It seems AMISOM plans to coerce the UN Security Council to accept its demands or threaten a unilateral move if it does not get its way. The fact that both Kenya and Ethiopia (two key troop contributing countries) are having their own political problems signals potential uncertainty for the AU mission.

### **Worrisome prospects**

The current strategy to stabilize Somalia is not working. A change of course is in order but unfortunately not in sight. I would even go further and state Somalia may be on a dangerous trajectory. As mentioned earlier, defeating Al Shabaab topped the current government's mandate, and that has not happened. The group is likely to outlive yet another administration. Somalia's parliamentarians, executive and regional leaders also failed in the past year to institute political stability, which is a vital prerequisite for all the priorities this government has to deliver in its remaining three years. Completing the constitutional review process, establishing political parties, instituting an effective and impartial judiciary, curtailing corruption, conducting a census, collecting taxes and delivering on the promise of one-person-one-vote in 2020, all need stable politics and a safe political space.

That stability was not in evidence for much of last year. The national and regional governments were at loggerheads (though problems have tapered off). A former presidential candidate was violently attacked and his guards killed. Government forces raided a prominent lawmaker's home though it was not clear who gave the order – local actors or external powers. All this has created a toxic political environment where trust is low, suspicion is rife and more energy and resources are being poured into the contest between squabbling political camps than Somalia's myriad of problems.

The Somali parliament, the purveyors of all political storms, has just returned from recess. There are reports that some lawmakers want to shake things up by unseating top officials. The fact that the mandates of all of the five regional presidents (governors refer to themselves as presidents) are up and elections must happen does not signal stability. Both external actors and local powerbrokers may pour money into these elections, making 2018 and 2019 years that are dominated by electioneering and the negative energy and distraction from actual work that comes with it.

## **Conclusion**

Somalia's challenges are many, and it will take much time to overcome them all. There are however steps that local stakeholders and international actors can take to help Somalia move forward:

- Friends of Somalia such as the United States should understand that the Somali people have faced the most daunting tasks for the past three decades and have shown extraordinary resilience and resolve in overcoming the prolonged upheaval. As a result, they deserve to be commended and supported in a way that makes a difference. What has been happening in the last quarter of a century is equivalent to giving a painkiller to a patient that needed a heart bypass.
- More importantly, Somalia's international partners should persuade regional actors to spare Somalia from their geopolitical contests. The country is way too fragile to withstand any pressure from outsiders, particularly from rich Arab countries. If others play at proxy wars in Somalia, the net beneficiary will be Al Shabaab.
- Finally, Somali politicians, particularly the national leadership, should not waste the next three years. Instead they should put in place a national strategy to stabilize the country and put it on a trajectory that leads to one-person-one-vote in 2020 and beyond. When Somalis get the politics right, they can get on with the hard work of governing.