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Chapter 4

COMMENTARY: (RE) ESTABLISHING THE SOMALI STATE: FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE NATION OR OTHER NATIONS?

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When examining the recent history of Somalia it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the post colonial approach and, in particular, the role of the nation-state has largely been a failure. The fundamentals associated with the state in the West, namely the monopoly of violence, universal security, the implementation of a comprehensive system of taxation and the formation of mutual interdependence and identification across the population are largely absent. Despite these failures, the state as a concept continues to be promoted as the solution to the massive problems facing Somalia.

Support for the concept is not new. In the build-up to independence in 1960, the formation of the Somali nation-state was broadly supported both locally and internationally. Since then multiple fault-lines have become increasingly obvious and embedded. Indeed the extent of the problems has led to severe criticism of the nature of the state with some commentators questioning the extent to which this is an appropriate form of governance. As Ahmed and Green (1999) observe, there is an obvious discrepancy between the decentralised pastoral structures and the centralised post independence state. Yet the extent of the differences and their consequences are rarely considered. Nor, do interventionist accounts consider periods when the region was the most secure in West Africa and in particular what worked then and why. Therefore there is no acknowledgement that,

> Somalis, as with many other ethnic and indigenous groups throughout the world, do not find a meaningful sense of life by being defined as a modern individual via the state. Sustenance, solidarity, and security, for example, are located and identified with sacred places and extended families for many diverse groups such as the Somalis. Any viable alternative to disentangling Somalia from its current and future crises would benefit from recognition and accommodation to the traditional way of life and system of governance (Lauderdale and Toggia 1999: 173).

Consequently, Somali specific solutions are neglected at the expense of the perceived universal healing powers of the nation-state. Under this approach the problems in Somali stem, not from the inappropriate imposition of Western values and structures, but from their inadequate implementation. Thus the solution for Somalia is more Westernisation and not less. The approach is further compounded by,

> The extensive and costly capacity-building efforts of international aid agencies to support police and judiciaries throughout Somalia often presume they are rebuilding a set of institutions for the first time when actually they are trying to make them functional for the first time (Menkhaus 2003: 412).

Furthermore, as Doornbos and Markakis (1994: 87) remark, even though a 'state' was in place for a period, this alone is not a 'sufficiently convincing reason to go back to it again, unless one finds that there were elements in it that are still worth retaining or building upon.'

Despite these serious concerns about the nature and compatibility of the state in Somalia, it remains the proposed structure on which to rebuild the nation. This partly explains international support for the marginalised Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG has promoted the nation-state concept without having the means or support to implement their rhetoric. Why the West should offer such uncritical support for the concept is not difficult to discern. Firstly, it is a Western concept and to question its universal validity would challenge Western hegemony. Second 'reason for this relentless quest for state-building is that the entire international system is constructed around states to such an extent that it cannot handle stateless territories inhabited by people who cannot be classified as citizens of any state' (Møller 2009: 14). Finally, while the 'war on terror' rhetoric has been moderated with the demise of the Bush administration, the underlying counter terror policy remains in place. And because Somalia is considered to be a 'failed' state, it is viewed as an ideal hiding place for international 'terrorists'. Yet the presence of international 'terrorists' currently seems to be limited and there is little evidence of concerted Somali engagement in the global *jihad.* Irrespective of the factual basis for the 'war' being extended into the Horn of Africa, there is clear rational behind Somali's incorporation. For the United States administration the failures of Somalia have to be addressed in order to safeguard the lives and values of Americans from the terror threat. And in a manner that indicates limited shifting in approaches to other regions since colonialism, the only valued proposal to secure American lives is the establishment of a recognisable nation-state that is built according to the Western model for Western benefits.

Recent high profile acts of piracy against international shipping are likely to contribute to the region being subjected to further foreign 'encouragement' for the imposition of state structures. However the history of Western involvement in Somalia suggests that the massive problems facing the Somalis are exacerbated rather than resolved by international intervention and the imposition of related concepts and structures. The recent past also indicates that foreign interference contributes to processes of Somali radicalisation. Indeed one of the ironies of Western intervention has been the noticeable strengthening of collective identification amongst Somalis who are united in their distrust and dislike of America in particular. With increasing irony, American actions can help provoke inter-clan unity under the unifying banner of Islam. Creating such cross cutting appeal has proved beyond the Somali state over recent years. Ultimately there is a danger that policies designed to confront

international terrorists will become self-fulfilling. In other words, American policy and covert attempts to impose Western state structures, institutions and supporters are more likely to contribute to levels of Somali hatred, anger and localised militant forms of Islam. And with very limited opportunities to confront the 'far enemy' within Somalia, there would be a distinct possibility that there would be an extension of focus and radicalisation of discourse and methods and some Somalis would indeed engage in the 'war on terror.'

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