



Activating the Diaspora

*A Review of the Somali Diaspora in the US and Its Impact on
Democracy Building in Somalia*

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Introduction

The Somalia Strategy Forum conducts research on the effects of the Somali diaspora in the U.S. on democratization in Somalia. There is an outstanding need to study the diaspora's composition and nature, and to understand how this community's priorities have evolved over time with respect to Somalia.

Massive human migrations have occurred a number of times throughout history, often as a result of a combination of adverse social, political, civil war, economic, religious, ethnic, and environmental conditions. However, due to advancements in technology, communications, and transportation, modern displaced populations are much more closely connected to their countries of origin than previous groups of emigrants. The contemporary Somali diaspora in North America is an instructive example of this. Today, Somali emigrants and their children influence their homeland culturally and economically by maintaining close relational ties, traveling to Somalia, and investing there. This is a great and largely untapped resource that should be utilized in building and developing institutional capacity in Somalia.

The Somali Strategy Forum examines the attitudes and aspirations of the Somali diaspora in North America. *The interests of the Somali Government, the United States, and the Somali diaspora coincide on the objective of stability in Somalia.* This can only be achieved through sound democratic governance, strong infrastructure, robust capacity building, agriculture development, and sustainable economic development systems. Because of this, there is a discernible need to engage the Somali diaspora in a systematic way.

The United States and Somalia

Democracy building is and always has been an important aim of U.S. policy towards developing countries, and Somalia is no exception to this principle. There must be a realization that the diaspora can play a positive and effective role in the process of democratization. U.S. and Somali decision-making circles need to exploit all channels to bring stability to Somalia. Somalia requires special attention because of its fragile situation in the fight against international terrorism. This role has not been easy for Somalia, which continues to pay a price in the form of societal extremism, the alienation of civil society, the degradation of government institutions, and weak economic infrastructure.

Poverty continues to fuel extremism. Poverty and lack of governance are hallmarks of the region due to a lack of resources available to the government. The Somali government is weak and lacks the resources to provide for its population. Furthermore, Somalia's institutions have been weakened as a result of prolonged military intervention and meddling by the African Union. The U.S. and the international community can play important roles by deploying their experiences and resources in this regard.

Compared to the Somali diaspora elsewhere, the Somali population in the U.S. maintains contact with the homeland for two reasons: first, because of the need to marry children to relatives in Somalia; and, second, because the Somali community in North America aspires to assert its influence in the home village, city, or town - most often by establishing schools, mosques, and clinics, or by investing monetarily. Most Somalis work menial jobs or are involved in small businesses that provide services to their local communities such as money transferring services, restaurants, and grocery stores. Given their connection with the homeland and their access to Somali television channels, the Somali diaspora continues to be interested in and knowledgeable about political development, sustainable capacity building, and economic development in Somalia.

The second generations of Somalis in North America are very different from their parents' generation. Most are educated and better integrated into their respective North American societies. They want to retain their Somali identity and remain connected to Somalia, while at the same time are interested in becoming rooted and assimilated into their new North American residency.

The Somali diaspora in North America is well known for its contributions to charitable causes in Somalia and the Muslim world, whether it is building schools and hospitals, offering assistance to famine victims, or contributing to the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons in refugee camps in Kenya or elsewhere. The members of the Somali diaspora in North America are well-respected in their villages and towns in Somalia because they have assisted

their friends and family in settling in North America, or have invested in industry or provided employment for people.

Background

The first generation of Somali émigrés, or “Somali kids,” who arrived in the U.S. at a young age had good opportunities to study in various universities in the U.S., having grown up in the U.S. education system. Nevertheless, there is a big gap between the first U.S.-born generation of Somalis and their older parents due to the disparity of the system they grew up in. As a result, there is a sizable communication gap, as parents do not understand the unique pressures that the younger generations experience in school, jobs, and places of worship.

As the pressure mounts, children who lack access to inter-generational perspectives and supervision tend to move down a path that leads to trouble, be it dissatisfaction with life, dissatisfaction with their connection to cultural roots, unemployment or underemployment, or, worse, illegal activities, violent crime, and ideological extremism. Finding strength and solutions within the Somali diaspora in North America is vital for the future of this young generation.

To address this problem, there must be strong initiatives for ongoing dialogue between the Somali generations facing personal pressure, those Somalis who have successful careers, moderate religious communities, and social scalars. Inter-generational dialogue would help to explain to young emigrant Somalis what it means to have a Somali identity, what the "American dream" means, how to cope with the daily challenges they may encounter, and how to approach and resolve personal conflicts that may arise. For example, establishing community centers that could give counsel and advise to these first generation children would help them face their personal challenges, realize the American dream, and deter them from joining the extremist ideological groups and organizations.

The Somalia Strategy Forum seeks to partner with the U.S. government to teach parents how to guide their kids and educate them about life, origin, country, and the challenges that they faced back in Somalia. The Somalia Strategy Forum will promote Somali Parents Awareness Week where the parents can discuss their history with their children. This program would help to narrow the generation gap and help the first generation Somali to embrace assimilation into the U.S. without forgetting their heritage.

A secure, stable and democratic Somalia, anchored in the international security community, is essential for the people of Somalia and the world at large. The Somali diaspora should be seen as an asset in facilitating this scenario. Involving the Somali diaspora to achieve U.S. objectives towards Somalia and Somalis would be an important step, leading to the empowerment of the Somali

community, the empowerment of Somali women, and contributing to stability and democracy building in Somalia in the long run. In addition, the Somali diaspora is also important to Somalia's government because its remittances are one of the largest source of foreign exchange for Somalia and an important source of liquidity. In recent years, foreign exchange remittances have maintained a steady rising trend.

Conclusions

The interests of the Somali government, U.S. strategic objectives, and the Somali diaspora coincide. *The Somali Strategy Forum acts as a bridge between these groups and is instrumental to democracy building in Somalia.* There needs to be stability in Somalia, and this can only come about through a sound democratic government, new infrastructure, agriculture development, social services, and an economic development system. The diaspora must be engaged in a systematic way. The following recommendations help illuminate the role of the Somali diaspora in democracy building in Somalia.

Funding diaspora-led programs is an effective tool for investing in development projects that can help play a role in democratizing Somalia. Such programs are effective for capacity building, microcredit, government infrastructure, agriculture development, economic system development, schools and health centers, and employment opportunities for people in urban and rural areas. These programs also have an important function in challenging the role of extremist organizations by undertaking charity and rehabilitation work that the Somali government is unable to do because of a lack of resources.

Future Action Agenda

- ☉ The Somalia Strategy Forum will commission studies on what and how the Somali diaspora contributes to Somalia. It is important to study the diaspora in detail and to determine its potential. Before determining what role the Somali diaspora residing in North America can play in the democratization of Somalia, there is a need to study its nature and composition. There is also a need to understand how this community has evolved and what its priorities are in relation to Somalia. Ultimately, involving and engaging the Somali diaspora in the process of democracy building gives them a stake in the process and makes multilateral efforts more likely to succeed.
- ☉ In addition, the Somalia Strategy Forum is exploring the pros and cons of opening negotiations on a free-trade agreement with Somalia, a potentially positive step that would involve the Somali diaspora in the U.S.
- ☉ Finally, the Somalia Strategy Forum is working to promote scholarship programs for students who are members of the Somali diaspora by

enabling them to work for six months on existing U.S.-funded cooperation projects in urban and rural areas of Somalia. Internship programs in various U.S. locations should be made available for young Somali scholars so that they can learn from the U.S. experience and apply that knowledge institution building back home.