

## **WHY SOMALIA OUGHT TO SURRENDER ARAB LEAGUE MEMBERSHIP**

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### **Introduction**

For two decades now, Somalis have been bedevilled by one sort of problems after another.. Past efforts to give life back to Somalia have been met with strings of failures. Somalia, today, is experiencing famine of a large scale, causing deaths and sufferings to multitudes of people in Somalia. However, amidst this catastrophe of a biblical dimension, there is hope that all is not lost. The withdrawal of Al-Shabab from the city of Mogadishu is music for the ear. The constitutional talks open a window of hope, making everyone believe that a new dawn is in the offing, and so therefore there is no better time to begin discussing issues that touch upon the soul and the spirit of the Somali people than now. Somalia`s continuing membership of the Arab League is one such issue. In 1974, the then Somali government sought and won membership of the Arab League without consulting the Somali people. Whether membership of the Arab League is a right thing for Somalis is the question that no doubts agitate the minds of many people.

Before going on any further with my subject of discussion, I wish to recall an incident for the benefit of readers here about comments I received once following a publication of one of my articles here. In the said article, "Let Somalis Reclaim the Lost Glory of their Culture and Religion" I had dealt with the subject concerning how Somali culture and religion were about to be swept away following a determined onslaught made on them. My article did not go down well with some of the readers, it seemed, because a number of them wrote letter, accusing me of carrying a grudge against Saudi Arabia that I had mentioned as a source from which those onslaught were coming. They said I was angry because I had been deported from Saudi Arabia. To be specific, they had used the Arabic word "Tarhil" which until then I had not even been familiar with. To me, however, it hardly matters where I live as long as I live with dignity and have peace, and yet I must state here as a fact that I have never lived in Saudi Arabia, and have never lived in any of the Arab countries either, for that matter.

The following discussion on the subject of Somalia`s membership of the Arab League is an attempt to open up a debate on the issue. The material presented here is not exhaustive. For such exhaustive material on the subject we must turn for help in future to Somali professors who I am sure are not in short supply nowadays.

Somalia, in 1974, became a member of the Arab League States. Membership of the Arab League calls for certain well defined requirements, should any country wish to become a member state. While some of the requirements are of a nebulous nature, others are not. The term Arab, as a form of identity, for example, does not yield to any form of definition. It

is neither an ethnic nor a physical category. Most people living in the Arab countries, including minorities, such as Berbers and Kurds, live in a geographical area that has Arabic not only as the official language but also a national one; they share a common culture, history and traditions. But perhaps what most unify Arabs, like all other similar desperate groups that have come together to form an identity of sort, is that they perceive themselves as Arabs.

Somalia, after its destruction in 1991, still retains its membership of the Arab League today - if somewhat nominally - notwithstanding the fact that it hardly satisfies any of the basic requirement needed for a country to acquire membership in such an organisation. To begin with, Somalis are neither physically nor ethnically Arab. They don't have the average physical look of the Arab, and majority do not believe to be ethnically Arabs either. Arabic is not widely spoken in Somalia although, for the same pragmatic reasons that had made the government of Siad Barre to join the Arab League, the same government had to accord Arabic an official status in Somalia. However, due to Somalia's close proximity to Arabian Peninsula, Somalia has witnessed a significant level of interactions involving a population movement from Arabia to Somalia. Nevertheless, unlike large-scale population movement of Arabs that had swept the Levantine region and later Egypt and Maghreb, the population movement of Arabs to Somalia had been of a sporadic nature and hence quite insignificant. Whereas the population movement of Arabs to the Levantine countries, Egypt and the Maghreb, and even the Sudan, had resulted in the indigenous populations becoming Arabs, in the case of Arabs in Somalia, the Arabs became Somalis. Not only do the descendants of the early Arab settlers to the Somali coast look almost Somali today, but they also consider themselves Somalis. The Rer Hamar, the Rer Merca, the Barawani and the Bajun, living at the coast of Benadir, come to mind when one has to reflect on the outcome of this population movement. Other groups with roots in the Arabian Peninsula are to be found in both north and north-eastern regions of Somalia.

As a result of destruction of the Somali states, followed by a senseless, cruel and barbaric civil war in southern Somalia, today there are groups from above mentioned descendants of early settlers from Arabia who, feeling that they have been wronged, have tried to opt out of the Somali identity. To this group belong the Barawani for whom constructing an alternative identity as Arab-Swahili in East Africa, has been made possible by the fact that Somali language is not their mother tongue. Barawani speak Chimalazi, a Bantu related language, closely associated with Kiswahili. For both Rer Hamar and Rer Merca, however, whose mother tongue is Somali, an attempt to opt out of Somali identity has never been an issue worth giving any consideration, notwithstanding the fact that they have experienced the worst kind of atrocities perpetrated on them, by none other than, ironically enough, their own long-standing neighbours, with whom for centuries they have had a close symbiotic relationship. These are people who gave to Somalia the ancient urban centres of Hamar Wein and Shangani, which due to a high level of civilisation they had been enjoying left Ibn Batuta feeling mesmerised. Both cities acted as the fountain of Islamic knowledge, out of which great souls such as Sheikh Uweys and Sheikh Sufi, among others, had drunk heartily. Their beautiful songs and a unique form of dancing is the envy of everyone; they were the home of Haji Mohamed Hussein who had dedicated his life fighting for the liberation and

unity of the Somali people. The people of these cities, now lying in ruins, deserve gratitude but above all apologies.

If majority of Somalis are not Arabs, a question that comes to mind is, why has Somalia wished to become a member in an organisation that is defined through cultural and linguistic criteria? Or to put it somewhat differently, why has the Arab League allowed Somalia to join its ranks, knowing full well that Somalia does not satisfy any of the major criteria for a membership? For an answer to this question, one must look not only at geo-strategic and historical, as well as political circumstances, pertaining at a time of Somalia acquiring membership in the Arab League, but also personal profiles of some Somali political actors who might have instigated the move, allegedly for personal rather than national reasons. Somalia, in the early decades of the 70s, was at a height of its power. Signs of progress in terms of rural development had been there for anyone to see. It was during this time when Somalis had seen their language written for the first time, mountains of sand dunes about to reclaim the most productive agricultural lands were put to a halt; victims of draught from the northern regions of the country were easily settled in the south. Mogadishu became the venue for the Organisation of African Unity conference. In Lagos, in 1976, where Africans as well as people of African origin, had gathered together to showcase their culture, Somali artists performed folk dance that surpassed every other performance put up by other artists. For its achievement Somalia was highly praised, thus making it into a role model worth emulating, especially for Third World countries aspiring for similar progress. That this achievement had been made possible through edicts enacted by a dictatorial regime had mattered less to a world to whom promoting principles of democratic rule was not important, at least not yet.

As part of policy objective, in its relationship with countries of Africa, the west had to wait until the collapse of the Soviet Union, two decades later, to have to do just that. This was a period when the formation of alliances and counter alliances was becoming a marking feature of international relations; and like all such alliances, they were formed for opportunistic reasons. Nowhere, as a truism, is this more evident than in the desire of the Arab League to hurriedly open up its door for Somalia. It is well to bear in mind, however, that without the role played by some well known Somali individuals, as had been mentioned earlier, who had thought out the idea, as well as putting the Somali case for a membership in the Arab League for consideration quite so effectively, Somalia would not have been a member of the said organisation today, since the Arab League would not have been called upon to consider Somalia's membership in the first place. Omar Arte, the then foreign minister of Somalia - as someone who was in the good books of some Arab leaders - tall, eloquent, fluent in Arabic, was the most likely person poised to sell the idea to Arabs that Somalia is worth considering for a membership of the Arab League. Anyway, to countries of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, whether Somalia should merit a membership in the Arab League based on a claim of affinity to Arab and Arabism hardly mattered to them. What mattered to them most was the need to win Somalia from the total embrace of the Soviet Union, thereby warding off any possibilities of having the Soviet Union breathing heavily on their neck. Other Arab countries too had their own reasons for wanting Somalia to become a member of the Arab League. Take, for example, Egypt. Egypt, is a country whose foreign policy

objectives vis a vis Africa has always been governed by the strongest urge possible to find ways and means to secure the eternal flow of the Nile waters for Egypt, even if in the process of achieving its ambitions, Egypt, it means, would have to deny other countries their fair share of the Nile water. Such perception could only result in foreign policy approach bordering on a state of paranoia on the part of successive Egyptian governments. As the possibility of Ethiopia tempering with the flow of Nile water, from where 65% of the Nile water flows to Egypt, had increasingly become real in the minds of Egyptian rulers, hence, for Egyptian policy makers, it was imperative for them to devise meaningful measures to make sure that such a possibility never come to pass. Egypt, in order to pre-empt any such scenario from becoming real, first and foremost, had to sanction Somalia's membership of the Arab League. Once, as the most powerful Arab country, Egypt had shown a desire to have Somalia join the League, it would prove quite easy for the rest of the other member states to follow suit. By guaranteeing Somalia's membership of the Arabic League, Egypt has managed to kill two birds with one stone. On one hand, Egypt would keep Somalia, as an Egyptian satellite, away from the reach of Israelis for whom Egypt had a fear that that it might try woo Somalia into joining the growing sphere of its interest in the African region, on the other hand, in supporting the irredentist aspirations of Somalia, Egypt would help embroil Ethiopia in a constant state of conflict with Somalia, thus denying Ethiopia any chance of having a breathing space, in case of Ethiopia wishing to temper with the flow of the Nile water. Somalia, situated at the mouth of the Red Sea, by now a permanent member of the Arab League in 1974, would also help contribute to the dream of Arab countries wishing to have the Red Sea act as an Arab lake.

If the above mentioned factors were enough reasons, from the perspectives of the Arab countries, to grant Somalia membership of the Arab League, what are the reasons that had made Somalia wish to become a member of the said organisation? Two critical factors determined reasons for Somalia becoming a member of the Arab League States. These are economic and political factors. A secure seat in the Arab League, according to the expectations of Somali political actors, would automatically translate into an economic fortune for Somalia; secondly, Somali political actors assumed that membership of the Arab League would also result in the Arab League's unwavering political support to Somalia, in case of Ethio-Somali conflict taking place in future. Since Somalia joined Arab League, in 1974, until its demise in 1991, much water has passed under the bridge in international affairs. The world balance of power, to begin with, following the demise of the Soviet Union, had shifted in favour of the West, only for the West to find itself at the loggerhead with what is now called Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, there has been an increasing rise in the forces globalisation. Naturally, from out of this changing pattern of international forces, a realignment of new forces had emerged. These forces are identified with non state actors appearing in one of the following forms: civil societies with secular or religious orientations, terrorist organisations as well as large criminal syndicates. The influence that some of the non state actors, especially those from the Arab countries, have had on Somali people in terms of their religious cultural and political outlook, hence their national identity, is by far greater in magnitude than could ever have been achieved under the tutelage of any other agency. What those influence are would form the subject matter of another discussion in future. Meanwhile, let us take a brief look at the relationship existing between the Arab

League member countries and Somalia to determine whether the expectation of each of the two entities had been met in any considerable way. Economically, Somalia has not benefited much from the Arab League membership. Certainly, if Somali policy makers were hoping for Manna to come from the Arab League, it would not take long before meeting with disappointment. The only way Somalia could have benefited economically was in providing the Arabs countries with opportunities for investments, which Somalia was unable to do for reasons of absence of a well developed economy that could guarantee returns to investors. But perhaps the greatest obstacle to foreign investment finding roots in Somalia could be attributed to a Somali government that was unwilling to encourage foreign investment to take place in Somalia. It is unlikely that even if they were presented with an opportunity for investment, the Arab League countries would have taken advantage of the situation, given the nature of most of their economies that were quite weak; those that were not weak economies lacked any meaningful organisational, managerial and technical skills as well as other important factors necessary for planning, undertaking and executing large economic ventures. However, now that some of the Arab countries have almost succeeded in overcoming their weakness, and are investing in the African markets in large scale, Somalia cannot take advantage of the opportunity due to an absence of a state with viable state structures in place.

Nevertheless, lack of the state in Somalia has not hindered Somalis from undertaking economic activities involving trade relations with Arab countries of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, often to the detriment of Somali businessmen losing profits to unscrupulous Arab traders, lacking in ethical and moral virtues. Occasionally, when it suited its interest, Saudi Arabia had never hesitated to put a stop to Somali livestock imports under the pretext that livestock from Somalia were contaminated with disease. Saudi Arabia would not change its decision even when FAO and WHO, on several occasions, had taken opportunity to convince Saudi authorities that it was safe to import livestock from Somalia. Thus at a stroke of a pain, Saudi Arabia was able to render Somali people destitute; for most of the past two decades; such are people for whom a sale of livestock to Saudi Arabia may mean hope and recovery or death and destitution. Far from Somalis benefiting from economic cooperation with Arab league, it was some of the members of the Arab League who drew economic sustenance from their association with Somalia. And here, I have in mind the Palestinian Liberation Organisation which had received a large swath of land in the most fertile region of lower shabelle to cultivate for commercial purposes.

Somalia, in its political relationship with Arab League countries, has not gained what it had hoped for: total support for Ogaden cause. When Somalia fought Ethiopia in 1976, a number of Arab League countries openly came out in support of Ethiopia. This was a bitter pill to swallow for the Somali leaders who had been taking for granted that membership of Arab League would be enough to guarantee Somalia total political support. Had they had done their homework, well ahead of their asking for a membership of the Arab League, they would have learnt one or two lessons about the nature of international organisations. Most of all, they would have discovered that international organisations don't have a will independent from those of member states constituting them, and that more often than not such organisations are subjected to whims and caprices of member states forming them.

Perhaps it is not so much what the Arab League could have done as what it had not done for Somalia which is important for our discussion. Since the dissolution of the Somali state, Arab League member countries have done precious little, when compared to other stake holders, to give back life to Somalia. Compare this to the support the Arab countries have been giving to the Palestinian cause and you are left wondering if the Arab countries ever acknowledge that Somalia has a problem worth their support. Now that Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister, has shown solidarity with the Somali people by visiting Somalia, delegates from some of the Arab countries are pouring in Somalia in large numbers.

If Somalia had not benefited much from its association with Arab league, on its part, Somalia had contributed a lot to the Arab cause by giving unconditional support to Palestinians when voting against Israel in all UN resolutions. At times, Somalia had been more belligerent towards Israelis than even the Arab countries themselves. Problems between Palestinians and Israelis are of a political nature. Palestinians have been using Pan-Arab ideology exclusively to gain support from their Arab brothers until they have recently discovered the importance of harnessing the support of the Muslim countries for their cause. In this scheme of things, it is quite interesting to know on the basis of what grounds Somalis, both past and present, have been offering their support to Palestinians. Is the support to Palestinians a support for Arab cause, or an expression of Muslim solidarity? Somalis must keep in mind that if they think the Palestinians are their co-religionist and therefore deserve their unconditional support in their struggle against Israelis, I would remind them to give thought to a brotherhood that exist between the two protagonists. I have had the privilege of coming across a number of Arabs, on more than one occasion, taking pride in the fact that they and the Jews have a common ancestor in Ibrahim/Abraham. Is Ibrahim/Abraham also the progenitor of Somalis? He may be of great importance to Muslim Somalis as someone who gave birth to their faith, but as their ancestor he was not. When he sired Isaac and Ismail, the ancestors of Jews and Arabs respectively, somewhere on the plains of Mesopotamia, ancestors of modern day Somalis were busy on the African Rift Valley tending livestock; not their beloved camels, mind you, but cattle as can be witnessed on the paintings at the caves in Las Gaal in Hargeisa. Somalis do not necessarily have to be either Muslims or Arabs to support a cause they think it is just.

It is in the area of human right violations of Somali migrants in the Arab countries that both Arab governments and some members of their populations stand condemned. Somalis have endured constant harassments and sometimes deaths in the hands of governments of both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, Aden, not a long time ago, Somali refugees were shot and killed by Yemeni police force while making a peaceful protest in front of United Nations High Commission Office for Refugees. Before that many had been killed when a mortar landed in their camp. In trying to absolve itself from this dastardly crime, Yemeni authorities claimed that Somalis were unfortunate victims of an accident, as they were caught in the crossfire between two fighting forces. But perhaps the most worrying aspect of the lives of the Somali migrants in Arabia are the widely circulating rumours about Somalis who, while making attempts to sneak illegally into Saudi Arabia, through a long porous border that it shares with Yemen, have been forcefully abducted by Yemenis and are kept by them in dark places as slave labours. As for Somali migrants in Saudi Arabia, life has been marked by

worries about what immediate future may hold in store for them. What next, they think. Is it a summary deportation, they must be prepared to face or an unsubstantiated criminal allegations resulting in a beheading as form of justice which they should be preparing themselves for. The ease with which Saudi Arabia have been violating the human rights of the Somali people makes one wonders if Saudi Arabia and Yemen ever have any feelings for Somalis as fellow human beings, let alone as fellow brothers in Islam.

In their treatment of Africans from sub-Sahara region, including Somalis and even Sudanese, the Libyans have surpassed everyone else for their cruelty. I dread to think what goes in the minds of the black people, cowering in the basements of abandoned buildings, trembling, teeth gnashing, hiding from the marauding gangs of Libyans, out to snatch and kill them for the simple reason that it is a crime to be black in Libya today. When this abomination is taking place under the nose of western media, the media opted for silence, out of a desire not to rock the boat for the multinational western companies lining up, ready to methodically undertake the exploitation of the resources belonging to gullible but rude and uncouth Libyans. How convenient all this is for the media that without any shame sacrifices truth at the altar of economic expediency. Talk of hypocrisy. In their thirst for the blood of the blacks whom they conveniently accuse of acting as mercenaries, Libyans have not even spared their compatriots - black Libyans - mostly inhabiting the southern region of Sabha. Libya should provide a good lesson to any Somali that still has doubt about his identity. I have read with a feeling of disgust somewhere in the internet some Somali writers arguing about how their colour is not black but caramel, whatever that means.

## **Conclusion**

When all is said and done, the case against Somalia retaining membership of the Arab League is not that the Arabs have failed to stand by Somalis in their moments of trouble or that they have been cruel to Somalis, but simply because majority of Somalis are not Arabs and should not, therefore, belong to an organisation whose criteria for a membership requires that one should speak Arabic and practice Arab culture, both of which are alien to Somalis. Somalis are Muslim but they are not Arabs. Malaysians, Pakistanis and Turks are also Muslims. When the later Muslim nationalities have never surrendered their identities, what reasons are there for Somalis to act different from them? Better still; when Kurds and Berbers are fighting to retain their identity, why must Somalis surrender theirs? It should be clear to anyone by now that Arab and Islam are not synonymous terms. I have always imagined in my mind how uncomfortable a Somali government representative would be feeling in a conference that has brought together Arab participants, and often felt quite sad. Such a person makes me conjure up in my mind the image of someone riding in a horse, lacking a saddle, in a company of other horse riders, bedecked in all their riding paraphernalia. Indeed, such a person would feel out of place. Being part of an identity one does not belong to has one major problem.

Somali children abroad are taught in schools, reminded by their peers as well, that their country is Arab country while parents at home tell them that they are Somalis. This conflicting image of themselves is bound to cause confusions and sow in their young minds a

problem of identity crises. The ambivalent Somali identity has been felt even in international corridors of power. An incident that took place in Mogadishu in 1974 at an OUA conference sums up this ambivalent situation. Omar Arteh Galib was contesting in an election as a candidate for a post of the secretary general of the OAU. The fight was a spirited one and it seemed like Galib was going to win until Nyerere and Kaunda, the then presidents of Tanzania and Zambia respectively, changed the course of events by playing the race card, convincing other African participants of the danger of Arab domination, in case of any success for Arteh's candidacy. Looking at this incident with a benefit of hindsight, I am reminded of the Somali proverb that caution people about the danger of blind imitation. "Dawacadii inte talabadeedi ka tagtay Nabi Maxamed tiisii Gaari waydey" We don't have to behave like the proverbial jackal which having failed to replicate footsteps of Prophet Mohamed lost its own sense of direction. As Somalis we would be at our best only if we could believe in ourselves, remain true to our history, culture and traditions. Therefore, I say, Let Somalis surrender Arab League membership.

Finally, if it is not of any inconveniency to the editors, I would like to kindly propose that they undertake a poll to determine what readers think about the subject of Somalia's membership of the Arab League.

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