



## A Mogadishu ‘Killing Field’ Somali Civil War

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Editors Note: *A Mogadishu ‘Killing Field’ is an excerpt from an upcoming book, titled ‘The Somali Clan War’, written by Yusuf Haid, a former head of the Somali Broadcasting Service (Radio Hargeisa and Mogadishu) and Somali National Television. The book is a collection of journal entries of the 1991 Somali civil war in Mogadishu. The book recounts the first two weeks of the conflict.*

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“I think, tribalism is a mental prison... and pride of identity coupled with arrogance is one of the leading factors that limit one’s ability to abandon it.” Duop Chak Wuol

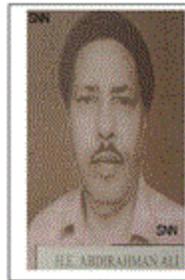
It was the 11th day since the fighting had erupted between the USC (United Somali Congress) movement and the government in Mogadishu. Early in the morning, prior to Morning Prayer, the USC movement attempted to overrun the defenses of Villa Somalia, where the President was continuing to hang on to power. The



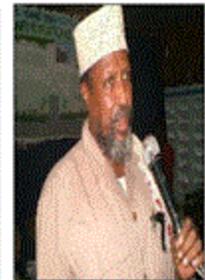
Col. Abdullahi Yusuf  
SSDF



Gen. Mohamed Aidid  
USC



Mr. Abdirahman Tuur  
SNM



Col. Ahmed O. Jess  
SPM

### What is their legacy?

The opposition was badly beaten, and sustained a heavy loss, weakening Hawiye unity and denting USC confidence. Nevertheless, the Habargidir clan, which led the USC movement, was determined. It was going to continue to fight to the end even though some of the other Hawiye sub-clans, including Abgal and Murursade, were thinking about withdrawing from the fight.

Two Libyan ships also had arrived at the Mogadishu port controlled by the government forces. That news further shook the unity of the now wavering Hawiye when rumors circulated that the ships were carrying arms for the regime. Even though, the shipment was a part of previous agreement between the two governments, due to the government's desperate situation, the USC believed the regime would use the arms to help with the ongoing conflict. As a result, to maintain the Hawiye unity, the USC leaders formed a Hawiye committee of elders to try to preserve clan solidarity. The new committee succeeded, and they won over the shaken sub-clans who then agreed to continue the fight.

Unfortunately, both sides (USC and the regime) propagated many wild rumors. One story reported on the defection of the Somali 2nd Vice President, Hussein Kulmiye Afrah, stating that the Vice President took refuge in the Italian embassy. Another rumor alleged that Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, one of Somali's former Prime Ministers, who only a few months earlier had circulated a letter analyzing the Somali situation to the foreign embassies in Mogadishu, was conferring with foreign diplomats. Some people thought, 'if some of Somali leaders had taken refuge in foreign embassies, and others were conferring with foreign diplomats; maybe there was no one working for the Somali people'.

The regime continued to weaken, and the USC militia increased its pressure on it. As the conflict dragged on, the fleeing of prominent government officials out of Mogadishu also increased. The exodus included cabinet ministers, party and military senior officials, and middle and lower government employees. To stop this human drain, the President created 'A Crisis Management Committee'. It was made up of the President, General Abdulqadir Haji Mohamed (a close relative of the President whose father had helped the President when he was a child), General Ahmed Sulayman Abdalle (son-in-law of the President), General Mohamed Ali Samater (the 1st Vice President since 1969), and General Mohamed Said Hirsi Morgan (son-in-law of the President). The President lost the trust of most of the Somali clans. He could not even rely on the tested few who had given him the impression of being faithful and loyal in the past. The people on the committees he named were only family members and individuals who believed they would not have a future if he leaves the political scene, and thus they were compelled to stay loyal to him to the end. The people, who were familiar with his thinking and the dynamics of Somali politics, believed that the President was now out of options. Thus, the committee he named was just another futile attempt to stay in power while the power was continually crumbling. There were no Hawiye, Isaq, or Rahanweyne members on the committee, a sign that these clans were not trusted by the regime anymore and also an indication that clannism had now replaced nationalism.

It was the final stage of the Somali state collapse. A feudal-like, 'mini-clan enclaves', vying for power to replace the State, began to appear all over the country. The Somali name and its symbols, including the blue flag with the white star so dear to all Somalis, and always they kept close to their hearts, disappeared overnight. It was replaced by clan names - Darod, Hawiye, Isaq, or Rahanweyn. The Somali politicians and diplomats, who represented the Somali state in the country and abroad and had once negotiated and dined with world leaders, were reduced to

forming clan committees and arguing with clan scoundrels. The respected Somali national Army generals and colonels humiliated themselves by recruiting and leading a hungry and uncultured clan militia to fight on the clan war battlefield. The weakest of the clans, including mothers and children who had nothing to eat and no place to hide, gathered around the clan committees for help that they would not get.

At midday, I met a friend named Abdqadir who worked for the Ministry of Information. He was a supporter of SSDF movement. After the conflict started, and many people fled the city, he moved with other friends into an abandoned apartment building in the suburb of the city near Abdi Hosh compound. That building belonged to the former Somali Prime Minister, Mohamed Ibrahim Igal. Mr. Abdulqadir, printed flyers and other propaganda material that supported the SSDF movement and its struggle against the regime.

He invited me to his new place to have tea. We entered an empty living room with solar-powered radio communication equipment, printers and duplicators. The speakers on the communication radio were blaring incomprehensible messages that were probably coming from the SSDF militia. He tried to respond, but the transmission was so bad that he became frustrated and started cursing the radio and the people on the other end. The floor of the room was littered with copies of discarded flyers that congratulated USC for the victories it had scored and its association with SSDF.

He looked at me, with information seeking eyes, "What have you heard about the fighting?"

I said, "I haven't heard much, and I don't know what the future holds, but I worry!"

He tried to comfort me. "I talked with some Somalis, who work for foreign embassies, and they told me the situation would get better soon."

It seemed all Somalis were waiting for the foreigners to provide a solution to their problems. I was not sure whether my friend was ill informed or just trying to cheer me. I said, "The regime has already exhausted its energy. It cannot force the opposition to accept a negotiated deal, and it is clear that the opposition has no political agenda. It is only obsessed in removing the President."

The prevailing anarchy and the score setting games between the clans were destroying the country. Both sides were encouraging the 'clannization' of the conflict. If crisis continue consuming the nation, no one would emerge as a victor! After an extended pause I said, "It seems the opposition movements have no idea what it takes to form a government and run it!"

He agreed with me by saying, "I think the opposition did not believe that the Siyad Barre could be removed from the power."

The conflict had now spread throughout the nation, and the security in the regions had rapidly deteriorated. The Army, the police, and other security organs simply melted away soon after the conflict erupted in Mogadishu. The troops and other armed forces took all the weapons and equipment, including artillery pieces, tanks and more, and went and joined their own clans. In every region, people began to retreat to their clan areas and form militias to defend themselves.

When the fighting started in Mogadishu between USC and the government, the other opposition movements- SSDF, SNM and SPM also simultaneously launched operations in their respective clan areas. The SNM entered Hargeisa and Burao, the capital cities of the two Northern provinces of Northwest and Togdher and took control of the government institutions there, removing all government symbols and expelling non-Isaq government employees. The SNM militia also pressured the non-Isaq communities and forced them to flee to their respective clan areas in Ethiopia, South Somalia, and Sool, Sanaag and Ayn regions. On the other hand, the SPM movement, during a same period, caused havoc in Jubbaland, and abused the non-Absame clans, including members of some of the Darod clans who were suspected of supporting the regime. The SSDF moved into the Majerteen regions and began forming local administrations. It also moved some of its forces and leadership into Mogadishu.

I turned again to Abdulqadir, who was busy duplicating a flyer. I asked what he had heard about the fighting. He only answered my question with a question, “Why Darod clan is not united? Do we know what the Isaq clan is doing in the North?”

To boost his ego and hopes for SSDF and USC association and anticipated victories, I said, “Most of the Darod clans are united, and they are not supporting the regime. As you may know, some of the Darod clans waged war against the regime for many years. These clans, especially the Majerten and Absame ,believe they have suffered greatly. They are determined to get rid of the regime.”

My answer did not excite him. He suspected I did not believe what I was saying. However, he wanted to hear more, “Do we know the position of SNM?”

I was sure he knew what was happening in the Isaq area, especially in the major cities and towns. I said, “The Isaq clan has suffered considerably under the regime, and its SNM movement has been fighting alongside the

USC, SSDF and SPM to unseat the regime. I suspect the Isaq clan is fighting the remnants of the regime in its area.”

His blank gaze suggested his awareness of the activities of the SNM movement. He was also definitely aware of the dilemma his movement, the SSDF was facing. His own clan, the Majerten, needed to solve its internal division before taking on a meaningful role in the Somali conflict. Even though the clan had fought the regime for years and joined with other opposition clan movements, the new political reality had forced the clan to rethink its future. The clan and

its SSDF militia had either to maintain their alliance with other USC, SNM and SPM opposition movements and continue fighting the regime or abandon its struggle to oust the regime and its alliance with opposition movements, and join the few Darod clans defending the regime and 'Darod future'.

Unlike the Hawiye clan, the Darod clan was not united; especially, the Majerten clan, was in catch-22 situation. The appearance of graffiti on the city streets indicated a union between the USC and SSDF and worried the regime, but it meant very little. Both Darod and Hawiye clans did not trust the Majerten clan because of its lack of a clear political position. Furthermore, the USC movement, which was whiffing a scent of victory and was pumping its chest like an angry gorilla, was refusing to accept the rapprochement of Darod opposition movements of SSDF and SPM. The USC was only endorsing congratulations coming from SNM and its supporters.

Mr. Abdulqadir believed that his clan was facing numerous serious internal challenges. On the one hand, one of its prominent generals, Mohamed Said Hirsi, nicknamed Morgan, a son-in-law of the President, wanted his clan to support the regime. He had assembled a formidable militia from his clan at the National Stadium. On the other hand, the SSDF military wing commander, nicknamed Colonel Gadh-Dhere, rejected the idea of defending the regime he had fought for many years. Unfortunately, the man who could unify the clan and could give it a strong direction, the founder and leader of the SSDF, Colonel Abdillahi Yusuf, was languishing in an Ethiopia prison. The clan thus lacked political leadership.

The Majerten clan, which had started the opposition movement of SSDF in Ethiopia, had waged war on the regime for many years. Throughout those years, the SSDF movement not only targeted the regime's security forces, and the Army; it also attacked some of the Darod clans, in particular, the Marehan clan, the clan of the President, and the Dhulbahante clan, a close ally of Marehan. In the process it created for its clan many enemies. It justified its actions because of what the regime did to its people. The SSDF accused the regime of collective punishment of its clan by killing its people, demolishing boreholes and reservoirs, and allowing troops to rape its women. It blamed the regime for massacring livestock to starve the people and thus subdue them. In the cities, the SSDF accused the regime of jailing its prominent members without any due process.

On the other hand, it was hard for the regime to trust the Majerten politicians. The clan had dominated Somali politics since independence and openly opposed the military coup of 1969, that had produced the regime. The President also alienated the clan by denying its active political participation, even though in some cases, the clan members actually held important government positions. A group of disgruntled clan military officers had exploited the mood of the nation and attempted a coup after the Ogaden war in 1978. The relationship between the regime and the clan further deteriorated when the coup failed and most of the ringleaders from the clan were executed without fair trials.

Another Darod clan, the Absame, harbored animosity toward the regime. It formed the SPM opposition movement in Ethiopia and blamed the regime for crimes against its people in Jubbaland. It accused the

regime of collectively punishing its people by killing, raping, and poisoning water well to subdue the clan. The clan also blamed the regime for an unrelenting hostility and vindictive campaigns against its people. Thus, the SPM movement conducted gorilla attacks against government security forces for many years.

The Dhulbahante clan of Darod sub-clan was caught up in the conflict unprepared. Most of its members supported the regime, and were not trusted by either the Majerten or several other Darod sub-clans. A significant number of its members had held important government positions for many years, and the wives of two of its sons were the daughters of the President. However, many Somali people unfairly accused the whole clan of being spies for the regime. Furthermore, both Majerteen and Absame, who are close relatives (genealogy) of Dhulbahante than Marehan, blamed it for betraying them by allying with their enemy, the Marehan.

Even though, the Darod clan had enough problems, the USC movement succeeded in spreading negative propaganda, demonizing it still more. The USC told its people that the Somali government was just a Darod government, and the Hawiye clan was being denied its rights and was oppressed. It urged its people to take back what was rightfully theirs – the land and the government. In Mogadishu, the USC and its supporters removed all Darod government employees from their positions and replaced them with USC people. In Mogadishu, to belong to the Darod clan became a crime punishable by death.

The USC movement, instead of uniting and bringing together the Somali people and beginning a new era of hope and prosperity, it refused to talk to the other Darod opposition movements, SSDF and SPM. They believed mistakenly, if it ‘liberates Mogadishu’, the rest of the country would follow. This misguided political posture only accelerated the decline of Somali nationalism and the rise of Somali clannism. The USC, SSDF, SNM and SPM and their supporters had failed the Somali people.

I left Abdulqadir's place with mixed feelings. I decided to check my apartment in the African village where we had left our possessions. The USC militia had come close to the African village area, and the Labor Road was now the dividing line between the two fighting ‘parties’. When I got to the Hotel Taleh area, I realized I had entered the firing range of the fighting. Government soldiers and supporting militias were all around and in the Hotel, and the USC militia was firing from behind the barrier wall of the National Fair Ground, and from both sides of Sinai Street. I continued at a brisk pace from the Banadir Secondary School, ducking behind the walls of buildings. Unexpectedly, a man in a ragged military uniform jumped out of the bushes and pointed a gun at me. I froze in my tracks and fumbled an inelible utterance from my dry throat.

He planted the barrel of his gun hard against my chest and demanded, "Who are you? (What is your clan?)"

"I am Somali." I said quickly.

He moved the barrel of the gun to my throat and shouted again, "F--- Somalis! Who are you? I am not asking you again!"

I knew I could not reason with him or tell him to remove the uniform he was given to protect me. Before I could tell him my clan, which was the 'ID' he was asking for, another man emerged from the nearby shade and told him to let me go. The second man, I presumed knew me.

I ran toward 1st July Square. I then took the trail running behind Horsed Club to reach my apartment. The trail ran through an area covered with bushes and sand dunes. There a shocking and repulsive sight came to my view. The area was 'a killing field'. Human corpses covered the ground, and from the state of their decay, they had been killed at different times. Some of the bodies were covered with dry blood and watery like drain dripped from them. Others were swollen and ready to burst. Many had exposed broken bones, held together by their dry and baked skin. Swarm of flies feasted on the bodies, and the ground under them was soaked with their bodily fluids. Mass maggots crawled over each other on some of the bodies, searching for a soggy dark spot to hide from the scourging sun. The smell of the decomposing bodies was unbearable. The toiling maggots, fighting for their lives, however, captured my imagination. I wondered if they were any different from the unarmed and innocent civilians fleeing for their lives. Later, I learned that both sides in the conflict were killing any people who strayed into the areas they controlled if they suspected them of spying.

I finally arrived at my home. It was ransacked, and all the furniture and fixtures were gone. Even the wires in the walls were ripped off. The floor was littered with broken glass and ruined household items. Only the bare walls were still standing. I turned and walked back to my new place in the Medina district thinking all the while of the terrible dark future the nation was facing. There was an enormous task waiting the next generation who would have to rehabilitate their country before their nation could ever be called a state again. For sure, history would not be kind for those who misled their clans to bury the Somali Nationalism and adapted clannism to gain power.

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