



## Reflections on Heritage's Djibouti Conference

By Faisal Roble  
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### Djibouti at its best

I arrived in Djibouti on December 17, 2017 to participate in the conference organized by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS). An uncharacteristically cool weather plus a noticeable festive and celebratory mood in the air due to the city-state's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence made my one week-long stay for the conference all the more pleasant.



*AFI conference (December 18-21), Djibouti, Republic of Djibouti*

Following a long and tiring flight from Los Angeles, upon arrival at Djibouti airport I was led to take a brief respite at the modest VIP launch; it was there that I was received by a wonderful HIPS officer, Mursal Snay, an imposing tall man with easily recognizable Somali features. Inviting me to a cold bottle of water was the perfect overture and a lead up to a short drive to the cool and comfortable Sheraton Hotel - the site of the conference participants' accommodation.

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How did I get to Djibouti was equally interesting. At about mid-July, 2017, having a typical American dinner's breakfast at a cozy boutique hotel near Constitution Avenue, Washington DC, Abdurrahman Aynte, one of the board members of HIPS, asked me if I would be interested to participate in a conference his team was planning.

The goal of the conference was to draw participants from all Somali speaking regions in the Horn of Africa, as well as from the burgeoning diaspora communities. With such a pan-Somali conference, he wetted my appetite right away. At that eventful breakfast, Aynte additionally informed me that his colleague, Abdi Rashid Hashi, executive director of HIPS, who was at the time in Hargeisa doing the final touches of planning, will hopefully get in touch with me. It was not until I went to Djibouti that I met their other colleagues, Abdi Karim Guled, Mursal Snay, and Deqa Abdulahi Moallim.

The conference was a "high level" discussion of issues that face Somalis. Without any comparison, it was truly historic, unique and remarkably one of a kind in my life time; a Somali-owned conference both in content and in the mix of participants.

Dubbing the Conference "*the State of Somalis: Towards Stability, Peace and Prosperity*," HIPS has taken upon itself the gigantic task to probe into what has been historically, politically and socially ailing the Somali people. This is an attempt to foray into complex areas of research about all things Somali.

After witnessing what it had put together, i.e., organizing such a massive and complex conference (and all the more for Somalis) without a single hitch, HIPS is well-equipped than a government to put together a Somali summit of this nature at this juncture – It is so precisely because often governments are saddled with both politics and bureaucracy – sources for inefficiency.

### **Hitting on target Somali diversity Indexes**

Debunking a recently favored Somali complaint – often an offshoot of paranoid and mostly invoked when appraising conferences and meetings – "loomaa dhameyn," meaning it was not inclusive, the Djibouti conference was the opposite; it was an inclusive conference, or "waa loo dhamaa"). It satisfied any number of diversity indexes.

Participants came from as far as Malaysia and Australia, from US (California, Virginia), Europe and the Nordic countries; over 80 percent of the participants came from Somalia and the neighboring countries.

There were outstanding scholars, academics, politicians and diplomats. Those who support the government and others who are members of the budding opposition groups had equal presence. Some of Somalia's most influential and vocal women were also in attendance. By far, this was the most inclusive, albeit high caliber, Somali conference one could attend. Whether it was by

design or accident, participants who hail from Puntland were the largest single group at the conference.

Icing on the cake was that the entire proceedings were conducted in our own language; some of the speakers took the Somali language to new heights where advanced terminologies for economics, political, social and diplomacy were employed.

Moreover, the white man’s favorite tool to probe into the Somali condition – clan concept as a unit of analysis - was never mentioned at once. By far, the participants were extra careful to not focus on the retail politics in the region, but rather look at long term sociopolitical challenges facing Somalis in the Horn of Africa.



*Venue of the meeting - Palais du Peuple (Guriga Umadda Djibouti),*

Coupled with the use of the Somali language was the diversity in its variations of accents ala “Qaldaan” (Waqooyi and Galbeed), “Waloweyn” in its variations, “Somali Suju,” and the host country’s distinct yet deliciously soft enunciation of “huuno waxaan ka idhii...” Everywhere you look, it was all Somali, and beautifully so.

Sitting and listening to a Somali “Suju” poet mesmerize a full capacity audience at the Palais du Peuple (Rugta Ummadda Jabuuti), the highest and most prestigious public space in Djibouti, was a unique experience. To many of us, it was the first time we heard a poet who hails from the Somali region in Kenya. This very issue was an affirmation of the power of the Somali language; it too was educational, you may say, for we could see the organic and unifying nature of the

Somali language in spite of colonial divisions that created artificial boundaries between Somalis at the turn of the last century.

The audience never lost the truth that Somalis are one single nation. After Oromos, they are the second largest linguistic groups in the Horn of African, numbering at least 27 million strong. Whereas Oromos are divided along dialect lines with about four different regions (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Islam), Somalis are united in Islam with one single powerful language both of which have proven unbreakable by many political oddities.

### **Conference in perspective**

At about 1978, that is forty years ago to the date of the conference, another great Somali city called Mogadishu, which was at the time still saddled with the aftermath of the 1977 Ethiopian-Somali war, hosted the historic Association of Somali Studies (ASA) Conference for the first time. Political turmoil, conflict and weak governance were blanketing the entire Horn of Africa region.

To sort out matters in a more meaningful way, a good number of scholars who had years of expertise on the Horn descended onto Mogadishu; the majority of the participants were non-Somalis. The main topic of the day then was Self-determination in the Horn of Africa.

Significant literature on self-determination and the rights of oppressed nationalities in Ethiopia was produced. Books like *“War Clouds in the Horn Africa”* by Tom Farer, soon followed by Bereket Habte Sellasie’s *“Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa”* and I. M. Lewis’ *“Nationalism and Self Determination in the Horn of Africa”* hit the racks of university Libraries. National movements such as the Western Somali Movements (WSLF), the Eritrean Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were all conducting war against the fascist regime of Mengistu Haile Marian.

Looming large at the time on Somalia front were the clan-based Somali movements - Somali National Movement (SNM), Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), and United Somali Congress (USC) were either already pressuring Mogadishu or in their embryonic stage. The destruction of first republic of Somalia by these reactionary forces started then in earnest.

Both Ethiopia and Somalis were plagued by their own weighty internal divisions; the war for liberation of oppressed people improved Ethiopian politics while the humpty-dumpty clan movements worsened things for all Somalis

Forty years later, Djibouti, a country that shook off the yoke of colonialism at about the time of that historic conference, partly thanks to the role Somalia played, hosted another historic conference organized by HIPS. Under a newly instituted entity called *“Annual Forum for Ideas”* (AFI), HIPS embarked on a greater mission than ever before, or more than any non-governmental entity. Although this may not be the first time HIPS ventured into a new area, establishing an *“Annual Forum for Ideas”* is without a doubt a welcome innovative move.

Unlike the conditions that surrounded the 1978 SSA conference in Mogadishu, the HIPS conference in Djibouti comes at a time when Somalia is rising from the ashes of destruction.

While its comeback is certain, whether or not Somalia rises at the speed of the proverbial sphinx remains to be seen. What is uncertain, however, as some discussants pointed out, is the fate of the largest and most populous country in the region – Ethiopia – where over 7.5 million Somalis live.

The Somalis in DDS have recently registered impressively steady progress in development. As to Kenyan Somalis, the attainment of solid education seems to have propelled them into be a more influential role in Kenyan politics than deserves their numbers. It is not by any means an exaggeration to agree with the spirit of the conference that Djibouti's political stability is an exemplary asset that had served it well.

The conference highlighted several themes that are qualitatively different from previous conferences, including the 1978 conference in Mogadishu. The overarching themes included instilling culture of good governance in Somalia, encouraging Somalis in DDS forge ahead with the progress and development thus far attained in the last few years, preservation of institutions that enhance stability and the rule of law, and working on mutual issues that cut across borders. In other words, the 2017 issues faced by Somalis are much different from those in the distant past.

### **Looking into the Future**

HIPS officials are set to provide Somalis of all regions irrespective of colonial borders a “global platform of dialogue.” One of the overarching objectives in this new endeavor is to delve deeper into the state of Somalis, and hopefully issue what could be called an annual report card assessing development, governance, rule of law and democratization. It is indeed a herculean undertaking, which I believe HIPS team is committed to.

HIPS team (Abdirashid, Aynte, Abdikarim, Mursal, Deqa, and others) impressed me as self-motivated diverse and highly qualified hardworking young men and women whose only thread that weaves them together is their commitment to advocate for Somalia and for the wellbeing of Somalis in the Horn of Africa.

The AFI would hopefully evolve into something akin to the *Aspen Institute* – that is their hope - where new and out-of-the-box tools and solution to Somali challenges could be deliberated, find solutions, and ultimately implement as progressive public policies. At best, it will host both large and small conferences and gatherings, where Somali thinkers, intellectuals, professionals examine issues (social, economy, and political) of great concern to their society.

To my knowledge, there is no organization or entity anywhere in the region that so far shouldered this task. For that reason, HIPS could use both our intellectual and moral support.

I was personally impressed by how little of a difference Somalia's elite class has; and the potential to come together when foreign forces are out of reach is certain. Even the sudden arrest of one of the leaders of the opposition parties in Somalia, whose news we received right at the start of the conference, did not dampen the mood of the participants. To my delight, I have seen so much positive energy and a willingness by Somalia's elite to work for the greater good.

The conference would not have had the appeal it did without its multi-generational participants; those who were youthful activists at the birth of the Somali nation, or those who could qualify for the post-independence generation like myself who have immensely benefited from the era of peace and development were at an equal representation. Both those who grew up during the tumultuous years leading to the civil war of the 1990s as well as post-civil war generation were well represented. The youngest girls who delivered the conference's token gift – the Qur'an - to the president of Djibouti, Mr. Ismail Omar Guele, was only a teenager who grew up outside Somalia.

I will particularly reminisce if fail to mention Senator Jurille's comparison of the HIPS conference in Djibouti in December, 2017 to another distant conference that took place in Mogadishu in the years when the Somali Youth League (SYL) was thriving – some time in 1948. That comment did it!

A historic closing remarks for the three-day HIPS conference of 2017 was delivered by President Ismail Omar Guele, who knew many of the participants on first name basis. His speech reached back to the difficult days Somalia has seen and the unreserved brotherly support his government and the entire Djiboutian masses gave to their other half. I was impressed by how the president, after taking a picture with the entire conference participants, stayed behind and shook hands and continued to mingle with all of us. For a moment, he seemed to be the president of all of us, irrespective of colonial boundaries.

That feeling of belonging to one nation and have one faith as Somalis was strengthened at the closing reception, when one of Djibouti's singers entertained us with Qaaraami including Raaxeeye, Liilalow and Burcawi. Undoubtedly, the week of December 18 through 22 was a Somali week not only because it was Djibouti's 40 anniversary since its independence, but it was a great gathering of well-meaning Somalis from all corners of the globe brought together by HIPS.

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