



A President in Search of Foreign Trips

By Hirsi Ashkir

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A regular feature of criticism against the Somali President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, has been how often he goes on foreign trips. Amin Amir, the famous and sometimes infamous political satirist captured this debate in his most recent cartoon. The President is seen asking his advisors soon after returning from a foreign trip, if there are any other international conferences he could attend. One of his aides replies that there are none but they can attend the inauguration of Halima Maow, a name associated with a fictional, simple minded village character in Somalia, click here to view the [cartoon](#). At the time of writing this article, the President was in [South Africa](#).



Is this characterisation of the President fair? In this article we analyse the President's travel patterns since 2013: where he has visited, for how long, purpose and most importantly the cost and returns on these trips; and whether the funds could have been better utilised elsewhere. I compiled this information by reviewing news publications from Somali websites, which have a chronological publication of events in Somalia, including the Presidents foreign trips. I also looked at government budgets and conducted interviews with key contacts in government (past and present)

The frequent flier President

Since 2013 President Hassan Sheikh has spent 198 days outside of Somalia in 61 foreign trips. The countries he visited are Burundi, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, S. Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, UK, US, UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Japan . As

Table 1: Where has the President visited, how often & how long?

| Countries Visited | Number of Visits | Total Days in Country |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Burundi | 1 | 1 |
| Djibouti | 2 | 3 |
| Egypt | 5 | 14 |
| Ethiopia | 7 | 16 |
| Kenya | 6 | 12 |
| Nigeria | 1 | 2 |
| Rwanda | 1 | 2 |
| S. Africa | 1 | 2 |
| South Sudan | 1 | 3 |
| Sudan | 2 | 4 |
| Uganda | 2 | 3 |
| Belgium | 3 | 8 |
| Denmark | 1 | 5 |
| France | 1 | 4 |
| Germany | 1 | 5 |
| Italy | 1 | 3 |
| Turkey | 4 | 14 |
| UK | 3 | 17 |
| US | 5 | 32 |
| UAE | 4 | 9 |
| Jordan | 1 | 5 |
| Saudi Arabia | 3 | 13 |
| Kuwait | 1 | 3 |
| Qatar | 2 | 7 |
| Japan | 2 | 11 |

shown in the chart, he has spent the most time in North America and Europe, where he stayed for 88 days, most notably spending 32 days in the United States. In 2013 he spent 92 days outside of the country, particularly in January and February where he spent a total of 25 days outside Somalia. He travelled less in 2014, spending a still high 79 days out of the country.

The purpose of these trips are mostly courtesy calls or to attend international conferences without specific definitive importance for Somalia. There are a few exceptions, including the high profile New Deal [conference of September 2013](#), which lasted for two days. The President's other trips have not resulted in any policy or political goals; or agreements that improved the condition of Somali's.

How much does all this travelling cost?

It is important to note that the Somali government faces numerous and pressing challenges and currently operates on a tight budget. Total government revenue in 2013 was US\$110 million, which increased to \$142 million in 2014. Most of this revenue is used for recurrent cost, with the important offices of the President, parliament and security apparatus receiving the bulk of these funds. In 2013 and 2014 the budget for the President was \$3.7 million and \$4.3 million dollars respectively. Officials close to his office indicate that on a typical trip, the President is accompanied by 12 – 18 staff, consisting of security and protocol staff; advisors, communication staff; ministers and family members. Our estimated costs for tickets, accommodation, food and miscellaneous is \$40,000 per day, although this figure is likely higher. We estimate that the cost of the total 192 foreign trip the President has undertaken since 2013 at almost \$8 million dollars, roughly \$4 million dollars a year. Sadly, we see no discernible foreign trip that the President has made which can justify this wasteful spending of meagre government resources.



By all indications the misuse of state resources on foreign trips has got worse under the current Prime Minister Omar A/Rashid, who has spent over 33 days of his first 100 days outside of Somalia. On a recent trip to Qatar he led a 25 member delegation at a significant expense to the government and as I write this article, he is on a multi-country foreign trip. The deputy Prime Minister is also out of the country.

What could \$8 million dollars buy?

Criticisms of the President's frequent foreign trips is rooted in the general acceptance that the money could be spent more appropriately on resolving more pressing crisis, such as re-housing internally displaced people (IDP's) in Mogadisho, addressing the plight of Somali cultural icons, who live in squalor in Mogadisho or strengthening the military.

In June 2014 UNHCR estimated that there were 1.1 million Somalis displaced within their country and more than 364,000 of these were in camps in Mogadisho, many of them women and girls. The plight of these IDP's is well known in Mogadisho and has been documented by international human rights agencies such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International.



Two of these camps (*Bar-bulsho* and *Health camp*) – are located on either side of Villa Somalia and are visible from the roof-tops of Uganda House in the Presidential palace. In these two camps, there are roughly 1,000 – 2,000 thousand IDP's, who are refugees in their own country. As highlighted in a 2014 [HRW report](#), these IDP's are vulnerable to rape or sexual exploitation by armed groups, including government and AMISOM troops. These women and girls likely see the President's convoy as it speeds past them on Makka Al-Mukaramma road, when he is on route or returning from a foreign trip. It is fair to say that their situation hasn't improved since Hassan Sheikh came in to power but if the President had dedicated the \$8 million dollars he used on foreign trips on addressing this crisis on his door step, Somalia would have been all the better for it.

Another group of individuals, fewer in numbers but whose plight is just as important is Somalia's cultural icons, who enriched us with their music, poetry and shows in the hay-days of the 1970's and 80's. These icons couldn't have imagined that they would end up living in squalor near Villa Somalia, in the shadow of a ruined Somali theatre whilst their President is constantly overseas with total disregard for their plight. One of these icons, Abdi Tahliil Warsame was found in poor health and living in poor accommodation (to get a sense of how much of an icon Abdi was think Elvis, infused with Michael Jackson and you might get close). When he did finally receive medical attention, it wasn't with government help but through grass root mobilisation of his fans. If the President had made the



choice to travel less, there might have been enough resources to support cultural icons like Abdi Tahliil Warsame. He could have given our musicians the earned right to live in dignity in our scarred Somalia but instead, the President chose to travel.

The government regularly declares that security is its main goal and it is also a central feature of the Presidents six pillar policy but the anecdotal evidence contradicts this. The military budget for 2014 was just over \$49 million dollars which is supposedly used to support the military apparatus in Mogadisho, but soldiers in the city don't receive their salaries regularly (the military budget is controlled by a close relative of

the President Abdullahi Maalin Nur, who will feature in an upcoming publication, so I won't explore his connections to the President here). Soldiers stationed outside of the capital city are lucky if they receive one meal a day. This is why the following story is shocking and gives you an indication of how the President's actions are disconnected from what he lectures in public. On the 31st of July 2014, the President visited [Garbahaarey](#), where he was welcomed by government soldiers who have been battling Al-Shabaab for over two years without assistance from the Federal Government. When the commanding officer explained to the President that the soldiers are yet to receive a salary, the President exclaimed that funds were limited and handed him \$2,000 with each soldier receiving less than a dollar. However, three days later the President had enough funds to lead a 12 person delegation to Washington for a US – Africa summit, the tickets alone cost more than \$120 thousand US dollars. Amongst the President's delegation was his son whose business class ticket, which included multiple stops in other cities, cost almost \$10,000 dollars. The entire cost of the President's eight day trip exceeded \$300,000 dollars. This example is typical of how the President uses state resources and has a direct bearing on why the government has failed to strengthen state institutions, defeat Al-Shabaab and improve security in Mogadisho. Most recently, government soldiers vacated the region of Toora-Toorow due to lack of resources and unpaid salaries. It was also reported that as of May 2015 government employees had [not been paid for four months](#).

In summary, the President's foreign trips are too costly and contribute little to resolving Somalia's challenges and alleviating the plight of Somalis. He has spent close to \$8 million dollars on foreign trips since 2013 which could have been better used to address pressing challenges at home. I am sure he will agree that Somalia's troubles are domestically driven and will not be resolved by visiting foreign capitals, if he is serious about governing he should direct resources towards home.

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