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AN INTERVIEW WITH KENYAN-SOMALI PROFESSIONAL PILOT AND RETIRED ARMY MAJOR MOHAMUD AHMED ISMAIL

By WardheerNews
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***Editor's Note:** WardheerNews brings to its readers an in-depth interview with Mohamud Ahmed Ismail, a distinguished Kenyan-Somali professional pilot and a former retired Major of the Kenya Army. Mr. Mohamud talks about growing up in a nomadic culture in North Eastern Kenya, his professional life as a pilot and the aviation industry in East Africa. The interview was conducted for WardheerNews by Adan Makina, who is currently based in Kenya.*

WardheerNews (WDN): Welcome to WardheerNews Mr. Mohamud. Could you please tell our readers about your background history especially a touch on your education and professional training?

Pilot Mohamud: Thank you brother Makina and the whole fraternity of WardheerNews for having me. It's a pleasure and a privilege I cannot fathom! I was born in the northern outskirts of Garissa, near the small town called Sakha to a Somali camel herdsman way back in the early sixties when Kenya was almost attaining its independence. Three months later my father passed away, May Allah (Subxaanahu Wa Tacaalaa) admit him to Jannah, Aammiin.

I passed through the rigmarole of an orphan in that environmental settings. My mother got married to one of my distant uncles and we had to move to Bura, where people rear cows and are more riverine. By the age of four, I was looking after goats and cows of course, with the tutelage of senior boys, and occasionally girls. By the stroke of fate, I developed some complications on my right leg and it almost became gangrenous. My relatives thought that I was of no use and they brought me to Bura town to join my mum as they presumed me beyond economic value. I got treated in the most painful ways. They pierced five spots of my tight femur with a red hot iron rod. The pains were excruciating and lots of pus and blood oozed out. A few weeks down the line, I was up and able to walk.



I was taken to a local Dugsi or Islamic religious school but I ran away after less than a year as I couldn't sustain the memorization and the constant beatings. My mother took me to the local primary school lest my elder relatives return me to herding. I joined Garissa High School and later I was taken

to do Physiotherapy at a Nairobi College. I was moved by the massacres and the harrowing experiences of the women and children of the infamous 1980 Garissa Gubaay or the burning of Garissa. Immediately, I joined the Kenya Armed Forces in 1981 who were then the alleged culprits of murder and mayhem in Garissa.

WDN: What attracted you to the aviation industry and how did you become a pilot in the first place?

Pilot Mohamud: Well, as was the joining of the Armed Forces, I became a pilot by the stroke of fate. In one of the days of career choices, I thought I should try and do the Pilots' Aptitude Test to avoid doing some heavy physical work. By then, I had never been close to any aircraft. The test was tough and the time given unbelievably was short. Amazingly, I did well and after being Commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, by the then President Daniel Arab Moi, I was among the fortunate ones who were shipped to Nairobi as Flight Cadets.

WDN: What type of aircrafts have you flown and for how long have you been airborne?

Pilot Mohamud: I have flown various types of Aircrafts. Both Fixed Wing and Rotorcrafts or Helicopters are in my licenses. I have flown a total of over 12,000 hours in both categories.

WDN: Are you a member of any aircraft association or organization? If so, what significance do these associations or organizations have on your professional life as an aviator?

Pilot Mohamud: I became a member of AOPA or Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, Member Kelly Lackland Afb Aeroclub, San Antonio, Texas, USA. Once I a member of Aeroclub of East Africa.

WDN: What was the most harrowing experience you encountered while you were a pilot?

Pilot Mohamud: As a pilot risks are an everyday experience. I was shot as a chopper pilot and my copilot lost his left hand and part of his left leg. I had fire in flight but managed it safely by the Grace of Allah. We were caught in massive crossfire between warring factions in Kismayu and we took cover in nearby bushes. My plane wasn't lucky. The only option was bandage the tattered windscreen and bolt for home despite the restrictions on my forward vision from the cockpit. The times I lost engines are various but the training always prepares one for such emergencies.



WDN: In comparison to other African airlines, how would you rate the position of the Kenya airline industry in terms of aircraft maintenance and operations, passenger safety and security?

Pilot Mohamud: Kenya has a high safety record. In the last ten years there have been negligible fatalities. Kenya Civil Aviation Authority of which I have once been the Chief Operations Safety Inspector has very qualified personnel in its Airworthiness, Licensing and Operations. This Regulatory

Authority (KCAA) conforms to the ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices as well as to those of the Federal Aviation Administration or FAA.

Pax safety and Security are shared responsibilities by the Regulator, the Operator and the end user who is the passenger. Always, strictly follow the instructions given by the security personnel, the cabin and cockpit crews. Follow the hostesses or the stewards' instructions and be all eyes to anyone looking suspicious and we will take home safe and dry.

WDN: Ethiopian Airlines has often been cited in the media ([see WardheerNews interview](#)) for being the safest, the most efficient and profitable airline in Africa even though Ethiopia has been through recurring political turmoil, experienced decades of poor leadership, and has been a victim of social and economic instability. As a professional pilot and a keen observer of African airline industry growth, what do you think makes Ethiopia to lead Africa in the airline business?



Pilot Mohamud: Ethiopian Airlines is wholly state owned cooperation. The Ethiopian Government has given it a monopoly and no other competitor has been allowed to be registered in that country. Most of the pilots until a few years ago were serving Air force Pilots. Ethiopians are generally focused and patriotic to what is Ethiopian. They have never been colonized and never borrowed the bad habits of the colonialists, like corruption and large scale dishonesty. Successive military regimes though inept, punished these crimes heavily. Information of what goes on in Ethiopia and Ethiopian Airlines are hardly put in the media. A caveat is always put on negative press. The government has yet to give a press freedom like that gone haywire in Kenya.

WDN: In Kenya, Somalis have been leading other ethnic groups in aircraft ownership. What gives Kenya-Somalis leverage over ethnic groups in terms of aircraft ownership?

Pilot Mohamud: The breakdown of the Siad Barre Government has been the harbinger of glad tidings for the Somali Aviation businesses. Due to the lack of good road, rail and sea transport, Aviation transport became the only viable option. The inter-clan wars, the sprawling up of self-styled militias, mercenaries, pirates and gun-totting, ramshackle armed groups whose source of income was to kill, maim and forcefully abduct any vehicle, ship and their valuable cargo has given rise to aviation as the sole transport option. International aid groups and the UN has also been moving their aid cargo by air. Only Somali-owned or competent related entities got entry into the Kenyan aviation arena and the end result was a safe haven and an enhanced aviation industry. So is the sprawling Kenyan Registered aircraft owned mainly by Kenyan-Somalis or anyone else who satisfied the Kenyan Regulatory Authority as to their ability to run a safe and a reliable air industry.

WDN: Everyday, tons of the mind-altering drug known to Somalis as Qaad is delivered to various destinations inside Somalia either by speeding Toyota Land Cruisers nicknamed 'kabeyr' or by ramshackle jets assembled in the former Soviet Union. Have you ever flown aircraft that deliver Miraa to Somalia that you would consider unfit to fly or outrageously dangerous to operate?

Pilot Mohamud: Dozens of aircrafts fly to Somalia carrying these cargo. However, no Soviet made aircraft has been registered in Kenya to ferry Miraa. It's a lie and a misnomer. The carriers have always been American, Canadian and to a lesser extent, European manufactured aircrafts. The Cessna, the Beechcraft, De Havilland, the Hawker Siddeley, and the Fokker are the main aircrafts on these routes.



WDN: How do you see or foresee the future of the airline industry in Kenya in terms of general security transformation, passenger capacity and economic growth?

Pilot Mohamud: The Airline Industry is a very capital intensive one. The future is for those who carry large cargo and passengers. Unless small airlines merge, they are likely to disappear in the doldrums. Since the advent of terrorism, aviation security has taken leaps and bounds. These are daily changing in aircraft design, training and equipment. To or not to introduce armed Air Marshals in long haul inter-continental or continental routes, is still an option nagging government regulators, operators and manufacturers. There is no hard rule of thumb for Aviation Safety and Security but it is always a grand undertaking to regard any threat report or warning as true.

WDN: Are there dangers that discourage pilots from flying into Somali airspace? If there are perceived dangers of any sort, how can they be amended, overcome or rectified so that an airspace that conforms to international standards can be enforced for Somalia?

Pilot Mohamud: There are myriads of challenges that hamper pilots venturing into the Somali airspace. There is no reliable regulatory authority to provide air traffic control and navigation, weather, and search and rescue for Somali airspace. Airworthiness and ground handling services, just to mention a few, seem to be missing. The risk associated with flying into Somali airspace is like flying into a dead airspace with the possibility of meeting air pirates and an alien missile from a mad warlord heavy on a mind-altering substance.

WDN: Are the number of pilots of Somali decent serving in the Kenya airline industry declining or growing?

Pilot Mohamud: I'm proud to say that almost 25% of Kenya pilots are Somalis and they own what they fly. Unfortunately, I don't own any but hope to be a pioneer in the near future.

WDN: Kenya remains a force to reckon with when it comes to being part of peacekeeping missions that fall under the United Nations mandate. During your service in the military, did you take part in peace operations either as a peacekeeper or as an observer in war-torn countries overseen by the United Nations?

Pilot Mohamud: Certainly, yes Mr Makina. I was among six senior Kenyan officers who took part in the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission in 1991-92. I was an observer in Kuwait at the

borders for a while and was later posted to Baghdad as a Liaison Officer. I worked with Senior Iraqi Military Generals and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on how to uphold the Ceasefire Agreements and report breaches to the UN HQ so further action could be taken against the breaching country. It was a tough, demanding job and very dangerous in context.

WDN: In the past, have you trained with Somali or other African pilots from other parts of the world? If so, in which country was the training held and how many were they in number?

Pilot Mohamud: I trained with about five Somali Officers, three Djiboutians and two Bahrain ethnic Somali Air force officers. The five officers from Somalia opted to go to Canada as refugees. The rest of us finished our courses and went back to our respective countries to serve with dignity. I'm happy and proud that I never accepted their cajoling and nagging to become a refugee and asylum seeker.

WDN: Even before the fall of the central government in Mogadishu in 1990, there were Somali pilots who were training in Western countries. Some of these pilots decided to seek refuge in the countries that hosted them during their training sojourn. If you interacted with any of these pilots in the past and know of their current places of refuge, what advice would you give them so they would be of benefit to their impoverished, beleaguered, and war-ravaged nation of Somalia whose aviation industry is, without an iota of doubt, in tatters and deserving of rejuvenation?

Pilot Mohamud: Somalia was in 1989, a country in disarray. Though most of us never expected it to go the way it went, but it was unfortunate that so many officers who were given state sponsorships never made it due to uncertainty or the love of becoming refugees. In later times, the only wish of any Somali anywhere was to be a refugee. This developed into a very untreatable, contagious disease called 'buufis' that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somali youth and still causing considerable harm.

WDN: Thanks for sharing your precious time with our esteemed readers.

Pilot Mohamud: It was a pleasure you having me. Jazzak Allaah Khairan and May Allah Bless you all.

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