

Distant voices and the ties that bind

identity, politics and Somali diaspora youth

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As Somalia approaches two decades of ‘statelessness’, a generation has grown up to know a country riddled with violent conflict and political turmoil. Many Somalis from this era have resettled and grown up in the West.

With reports of a small number of young Somali men going back to Somalia to fight alongside insurgent groups, the position of youth within the Somali diaspora – caught between their host and their home countries – has come under intense scrutiny by Western policymakers.

The issues that propel young Somalis to join groups designated as terrorists by Western governments are complex, relating to identity formation, diverse generational views, and how different generations engage with the homeland.

Attitudes of Somali diaspora youth need to be contextualized in Somalia’s post-2005 political landscape – a period that has seen the rise and fall of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and the Ethiopian occupation of Mogadishu. Many Somalis have felt that their country has become yet another Muslim nation to fall victim to the ‘war on terror’ and the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’. This period has ushered in a new Somali political consciousness, epitomized by a unified reaction against the Ethiopian occupation.

Transnational Somali identity

An estimated one million Somalis of a total population of about

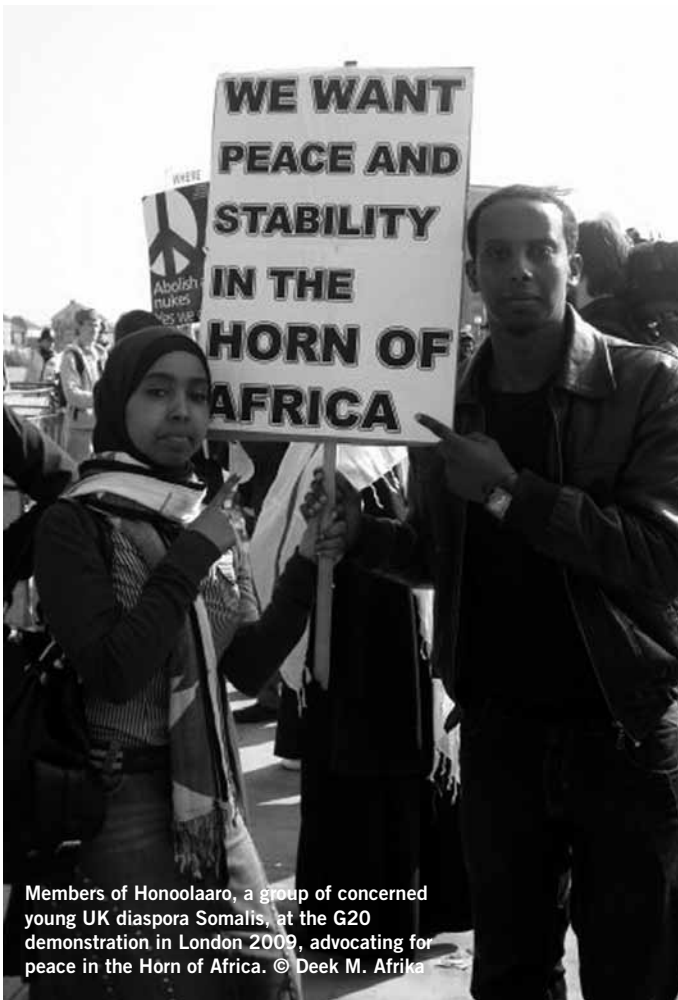
nine million are thought to reside outside Somalia, making the Somali diaspora one of the largest globally, proportionate to population size.

Migration is not a new phenomenon among Somalis. It has occurred within the Somali territories for centuries, with extra-regional movement to Western Europe traceable to Somali seafarers who worked on colonial ships in the early twentieth century, a few of whom ended up settling and forming communities in port cities in countries like Britain and Norway.

Further Somali migration took place after Somalia’s independence, when Somali students went abroad to study in Western universities. Later in the 1970s a large number of Somalis migrated to Gulf states to seek employment and other economic opportunities stimulated by the oil boom.

From the 1980s onwards, as the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) and the Somali National Movement (SNM) insurgencies developed, an increasing number of Somalis opposed to the regime of Mohamed Siyad Barre went into political exile in neighbouring countries, the Gulf states and the West. By far the largest wave of migration has emerged since the start of the Somali conflict and subsequent collapse of the Somali government in 1991.

The majority of those who took flight from the war went to Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen, where thousands still



Members of Honoolaaro, a group of concerned young UK diaspora Somalis, at the G20 demonstration in London 2009, advocating for peace in the Horn of Africa. © Deek M. Afrika

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remain in protracted limbo and displacement as refugees in camps and cities. A smaller but still considerable number were able to migrate further, joining already established communities in Middle Eastern countries, Western Europe, the US and Canada.

Reliable estimates of the size of the Somali diaspora are hard to obtain because of difficulties in collecting disaggregated data, differing residential status and continuing movements of people. But today the largest numbers of Somalis in the West are found in the UK (unofficial estimates suggest as many as 250,000) and North America, particularly in Minnesota and Ohio.

There are also sizeable Somali populations in the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, although there has been a recent trend for Somalis to migrate from these countries to the UK, where there is a larger Somali community, an apparently more multi-cultural society and better economic, educational and religious opportunities.

The Somali diaspora is widely dispersed and experiences of migration and reception differ from one country to another and in different times. This has influenced how Somalis have adapted to their new environments.

In countries such as the UK, Somalis joined existing Somali communities as well as other ethnic Muslim diasporas. Similarly in the US, Somalis found themselves as part of a wider African diaspora, although they still consider themselves different from other African migrants in that they are both Muslim and refugees. In countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway, Somalis were simultaneously the first substantial African and Muslim immigrants, which often brought a host of problems relating to debates on integration and belonging.

Identity formation in the Somali diaspora can be influenced by where people end up resettling and which generation they belong to. Identity crisis and issues of belonging affect older Somali generations less, as their connection to Somalia is stronger and their beliefs more crystallized.

While there is some variation, older Somali migrants have generally reformed along clan identities. They have reasserted their Islamic values and embraced their Islamic identity, and they find it hard to integrate. They constantly look to Somalia and are engrossed by the political dynamics of the homeland, waiting for the possibility to return.

The surge in communication systems in today's globalized era has enabled Somalis to remain connected with their

home country and in touch with families dispersed across the world.

The nature of the long conflict in Somalia has made it necessary for diaspora Somalis to establish strong networks and to engage in a wide variety of transnational activities. Remittances sent by the Somali diaspora, estimated to be US\$1 billion a year, far exceed official aid to the country.

Although most money transfers happen at a household level, they impact at a macroeconomic level by supporting spending, which in turn stimulates trade. A smaller but significant amount is invested directly in business, infrastructure and community-based projects in education and healthcare.

The older Somali diaspora have also played an important political role, participating in successive reconciliation processes to form a Somali government as well as supporting the autonomous governments in Puntland and Somaliland. Their involvement in political processes at national and sub-national levels can at different times both fuel conflict and facilitate peace, producing some confusion about their contribution to Somali political discourse.

Who am I and where am I from?

Younger Somali generations who left Somalia as children or were born and raised overseas have different identity issues and methods of engagement with the homeland. Socialized and educated in Western countries, they often find themselves between two cultures and do not feel a complete part of either. Therefore questions of 'who are you?' and 'where are you from?' evoke different responses depending on which country they reside in, their relationships with their parents and their understanding of Somali identity.

My own research in the UK shows that young Somalis' understanding of their identities is shaped by their history of mobility. Both those born in the UK and those who arrived as children continue to feel the effects of the war in Somalia because it directly affects their families and the ways in which their adoptive country relates to them.

Likewise their understanding of what it means to be Somali and of issues like the Somali clan structure, which is taught to them by their parents, both shapes and is shaped by their interactions with their family and friends.

But for Somali youngsters in the UK, it is their Muslim identity that is usually the cornerstone of their self-identification. It proves to be a single, permanent and

unifying identity. The phrase 'I am Muslim first and foremost' is one that young Somalis relate to.

A person's identification with their culture can become more entrenched when central elements of it come under pressure or threat, and they can embrace the more controversial aspects of it. In this sense for young Somalis, Muslim identity can take precedence over clan and or national identity.

Somali youths' relationship to Islam can be different to their parents'. They ask questions about their faith and actively search for an Islam that is pure. They search the internet and read books to determine for themselves how to be a good Muslim in a Western society. This quest for deep faith may in turn lead some to bond with radical elements whose agenda is not always peaceful.

The adaptation of the young can also be seen through the lens of hybrid identity. Through multiculturalism youngsters often create hybrid diaspora identities, which allow them to identify with many different sub-identities. In the UK, many Somali youngsters see themselves as having a fluid nomadic conscience that enables them to embrace different identities – being British, Somali, Muslim, black, a specific Somali clan, or an Arab.

In the US young Somalis embrace hip-hop culture as well as their Somali and Muslim identities. Young people have their own understanding of and conscious engagement with these different value systems. Managing all these identities and moving between them is a necessary element of being young and of belonging. While some handle this well, others find these transitions between multiple identities difficult and confusing.

Islamic Courts, Ethiopian invasion and a re-awakened generation

Political events in Somalia in 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) took over Mogadishu, captured the world's attention. While the international community raised its eyebrows at an Islamist movement controlling Mogadishu, many within the Somali diaspora, although wary of the ICU's religious ideology, welcomed the positive stabilizing effect that the ICU brought.

Reports of a cleaner, safer city and reopened ports and airports made many imagine a Somalia to which they could return. As a result, young Somalis in the diaspora, particularly young boys, saw the ICU as something positive.

This was to do with the fact there were new faces in the political arena: a change from the warlords. The leaders

were seen as positive role models that young people could look up to.

One of the reasons that young males were so positive about the ICU is that it created the possibility of returning to a city that they had been displaced from at a young age, or had never been to at all. Many Somali girls also welcomed the peace and stability brought by the ICU. But they also felt that the Islamic regime would target women and so, unlike the boys, they could not envisage going back 'home' with the ICU in control.

When Ethiopia invaded Somalia in December 2006 in support of the Transitional Federal Government and ousted the ICU, many Somalis young and old felt angry. The narrative that resonated with the youth was of Mogadishu being occupied by Somalia's historical Christian adversary, and of a Muslim land being occupied by foreign forces with the backing of the West – particularly the US. Their response was a desire to 'liberate Somalia from tyranny' and to end the foreign occupation and the humanitarian and human rights abuses that came with it.

For a few this meant going back to Somalia to join the resistance. My research with young people highlighted that it was not always religion that drove them, but also a sense of nationalism and solidarity. Their desire to return and the need to engage can, in part, be explained by their social exclusion in their host countries. In the UK many young Somalis live in poverty, overcrowded homes and segregated areas in inner-city zones. Somali boys particularly face educational underachievement and high unemployment.

Many young diaspora Somalis are raised in single-parent homes and role models for young boys in particular are hard to find. Somali youngsters are also involved in crimes and currently form the highest ethnic minority in juvenile detention centres in the UK.

These structural factors can be instrumental in creating a sense of alienation among young people, in addition to the pressures of Islamophobia, discrimination and racism. In the US, young Somalis face similar problems, often growing up in deprived areas and being drawn into gang crime.

Institutional responses to terrorism in the West leave Somali youngsters disenfranchised as they are targeted for 'stop and search' police operations or feel under attack for simply being Muslim. Such factors feed into processes that can lead to radicalization. Vulnerable young Somalis feel excluded in the countries in which they live, exacerbating their growing sense of resentment, which can then be exploited.

However, for most young Somalis in the diaspora events in Somalia in 2006 induced more emotional and subtler forms of engagement, such as awareness raising and lobbying host governments to take action against the Ethiopian invasion, or raising funds to help in the humanitarian situation.

In 2008, for instance, Somali university students in London put on a poetry night and engaged in street fundraising as part of a Ramadan appeal to raise money for the internally displaced in Mogadishu. Within four weeks the appeal had raised over £10,000 and helped to feed 600 people for the entire month of Ramadan. This initiative was continued the following year by *The African Future*, an NGO led by young Somali-Americans who use social networking sites such as Facebook to raise money among young Somalis.

This is one of numerous examples of how young Somalis are engaged transnationally with Somalia. Young Somalis in the diaspora are organizing together to address the issues that affect their communities in a creative way.

Next steps?

The Somali diaspora's engagement in Somalia takes place on different levels and is shaped by the different diaspora generations and experiences. Recent events have seen the internationalization of the Somali conflict as the war on terror has been imposed on an already volatile country.

Young Somalis in the diaspora saw the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia as an attack on Islam and thus took it very personally. It is clear, too, that while many young Somalis have hybrid identities and feel different levels of belonging in their host countries, they are also alienated and aggrieved by the structural problems that they and their families face. Western foreign policies in Somalia can affect young Somalis in the diaspora and play a part in what 'radicalizes' people.

However, young Somalis in the diaspora are also using their positions to create political dialogue between Somalia and the countries they live in. This is a policy space that must be harnessed, as their willingness to be engaged has potential to be positive and their dual identity and belonging is something that can create new and fresh answers to peacebuilding in Somalia.

Khadra Elmi is a British-Somali researcher with extensive field research on issues of displacement in all regions of Somalia and the UK Diaspora. She currently works for the Danish Refugee Council in Yemen.