

**Written Testimony on Somalia to the Canadian House of
Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and
International Development**

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1. Brief

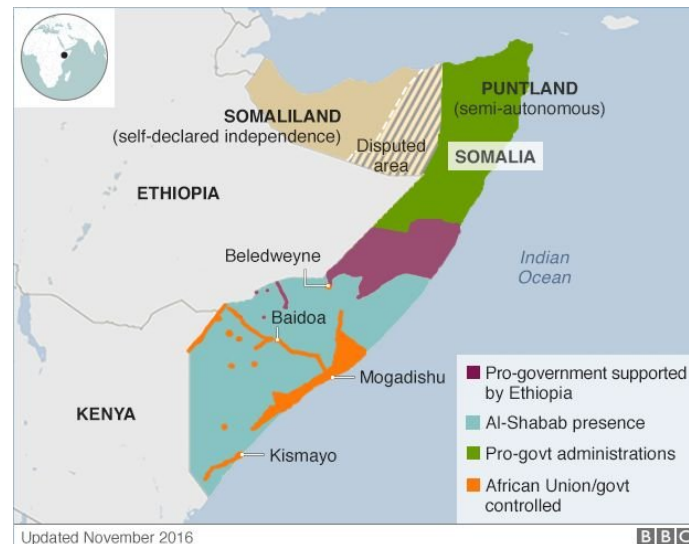
1.1 I have been asked by Canada's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to provide a written statement pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) whereby a study is being undertaken on how Canada can better address the issues of conflict, peace, gender-based violence, security, justice, respect for human rights and economic development in the following countries of Africa: Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

1.2 Although my BBC role involves me reporting from and commenting on the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, I have decided to restrict my testimony to Somalia. This is because I have a deeper, more nuanced knowledge of that country built up over more than twenty-five years of detailed journalism, research and other work focussing on Somalia and its people. I am also an Expert Witness in Somali-related legal cases where meticulous work is required based on sound knowledge of place and context. For the record, I have reported from the ground in all three countries covered in this study.

1.3 Currently I spend several weeks a year in the Somali-speaking territories, including South Central Somalia, the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and the Somali-speaking areas of neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. When I refer to 'South Central Somalia', I mean those parts of Somalia that do not include Somaliland in the north-west and Puntland in the north-east. On the map below, South Central Somalia refers to the territory that is not marked as Somaliland, Puntland or the disputed area between them.

1.3 I also spend significant time with the wider Somali diaspora, which is scattered throughout Europe, the US, Canada, the Gulf, Australia and elsewhere. The diaspora plays a significant role in events back home, in both positive and negative ways. For example, remittances sent from abroad during times of hardship save lives. On a day-to-day basis, they help fund livelihoods, education and healthcare, and provide

start-up funds for business ventures. In contrast, some members of the diaspora play negative roles. For example, some have set up inflammatory ‘news’ websites from their living rooms in Toronto, London and Dubai, which stoke up hatred, conflict and violence back home.ⁱ



Map of Somaliaⁱⁱ

1.4 I submit this testimony as an individual, not as a representative of an organisation. As a BBC journalist, and in my other work, my duty is to report on events and offer analysis in as fair, accurate, independent and balanced way as I can. I do my best to ensure I represent as many sides of the news story and/ or argument as possible, without fear or favour.

2. The security situation

2.1 This part of my testimony will focus on the issues of ‘conflict, peace, gender-based violence and security’ as outlined in the brief.

2.2 Somalia has been affected by serious, destabilising conflict and violence since the late 1980s. Indeed, some experts have argued that the seeds of disaster were sown when Somalia went to war with Ethiopia in the 1970s.ⁱⁱⁱ Over the years, the violence has taken different forms. These include civil war, clan conflict, hostilities between

Somalia's regional states and between the regional states and the federal government, violent Islamist extremism, sea piracy, clashes over property and land, out-and-out banditry and other forms of criminality. Often, several different forms of conflict occur simultaneously.

2.3 Since I began my career as a journalist in the late 1980s, I have never seen peace in Somalia. I doubt I will do so in my lifetime. I would dearly like to be mistaken, as it is my view that the Somali people are incredibly dynamic, entrepreneurial, creative and connected. They have to be. They take risks, some considered, some not, in order to survive. For them, up to date, accurate information can be a matter of life or death. No small wonder, then, that the BBC Somali service has provided a lifeline to Somalis across the world since it was launched in 1957.^{iv} I would not be able to do my work on Somalia without my BBC Somali colleagues, past and present. I would also like to pay tribute to all the other Somalis and non-Somalis who have helped me in my work over the years. Too many of them have been killed, maimed or injured during the decades of violence. The toll on mental health has been high with the World Health Organisation estimating that one in three Somalis has been affected by some form of psychological illness.^v

2.4 Since the 'end' of Somalia's transition process in 2012, a new, more positive narrative has been built about a country that has been traditionally viewed as one of the world's most dangerous places^{vi} and the epitome of a 'failed' or 'fragile' state.^{vii} In my opinion, this 'Somalia Rising' narrative is as misplaced, misleading, dishonest and dangerous as the 'Failed State' label as it skews information in one direction, instead of presenting the situation in a fair or accurate way. At times, this positive spin on Somalia has led people to make bad, even life-threatening decisions.^{viii} In my view, the overly negative portrayal of the country in all likelihood has led to poor policy making by foreign donors and others.

2.5 Billions of dollars of international money have been spent and huge amounts of human and other resources invested in trying to solve the 'Somalia problem'. Western powers in particular have been keen finally to present a 'success story'

following their swift and prolonged exit from Somalia after the notorious 'Black Hawk Down' incident in 1993 when jeering Somalis dragged the naked bodies of US servicemen through the streets of the capital, Mogadishu. United Nations (UN) officials like to emphasise that the country's political processes are now 'Somali-owned' even though Somalis and anyone with any knowledge of the country knows they are not. They are, to some extent, teleguided by the US, UN, Turkey, Gulf States, Ethiopia, Kenya and others.^{ix} In my experience, Canada has not come up in conversations with Somalis in this regard, some of whom mock and exploit the UN system to their own advantage. However, I believe that, unless Canada somehow stands apart, it will be lumped in with the Somalis' prevailing, sceptical, indeed cynical and often hostile, view of Western countries and their inhabitants. The situation became particularly delicate in early January 2019 when the new Special Representative of the United Nation Secretary General to Somalia, Nicholas Haysom, was declared *persona non grata* by the Somali government.^x Of course, foreign countries, the UN, aid groups and others have done some extraordinary, brave and useful work in Somalia, perhaps especially when they work with credible, serious-minded local organisations who genuinely want to contribute towards the wellbeing and development of the country.

2.6 It is my opinion that if Canada wants to do something useful for Somalia, it could take some inspiration from individuals like the former Swedish ambassador to the country, Mikael Lindvall.^{xi} He spent five years in his post, gained nuanced and useful knowledge, and escaped the usual mockery and condemnation directed by Somalis towards Western diplomats in the country. Many Somalis I have spoken to say he understood them and did not have what they describe as the off-putting 'arrogance', 'self-interest' and 'stupidity' of many other Western diplomats they have come across. I believe that if Canada genuinely wants to help Somalis and Somalia, its choice of ambassador or other senior diplomat should be carefully thought out. It is my view that this representative should have some kind of presence in Somalia, even if it is in a converted shipping container behind the wire in the 'green zone' at Mogadishu International Airport.

2.7 Canada has a significant Somali diaspora that, like other Somali overseas communities, remains actively engaged with the 'motherland' in both positive and negative ways. It is my opinion that Canada should not view this community as somehow separate or 'other' from Somalis in Somalia. I believe they should be seen as integral parts of each other, able to influence each other constructively and destructively in equal measure.

2.8 In terms of conflict and violence, I believe one of the current most significant threats to Somalia is the ongoing, adaptable and durable presence of the violent Islamist group, Al Shabaab, which has been in existence for more than a decade. In my view, it is crucial not to view the government (often considered the 'legitimate' authority) and Al Shabaab (often considered the 'illegitimate' authority) as two entirely separate, black and white entities. The edges are blurred. One family sometimes has active members on each 'side; individuals in Al Shabaab and the government speak to each other; and channels for some kind of dialogue exist. This is not to say that Al Shabaab is going to give up anytime soon; rather that there are plenty of gray, fluid areas, both in terms of membership and in use of services.

2.9 Islamic State is growing in strength and breadth of activity in Somalia. Islamic State Somalia (ISS) emerged in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland (see map above) in or around 2015. The group is no longer restricting itself to its northern base. It now has a presence and carries out attacks in other parts of the country, most notably the capital. According to the Mogadishu-based think-tank, the Hiraal Institute, ISS conducted nearly a quarter of all Islamist targeted assassinations in Somalia from July to September 2018.^{xii}

2.10 I believe the creation of a federal system, which includes strong regional states each with their own president and legislature, has had both negative and positive consequences. Solidifying the states into regional power blocks has hardened attitudes within them. There is currently (January 2019) a serious crisis between the federal government and the regional states; this has happened before. At times tension builds up between states and conflict breaks out, such as fighting between

Somaliland and Puntland which erupts periodically, most recently in 2018.^{xiii} There are also ongoing pockets of clan conflict, clashes over land, criminal activity and other forms of violence.

2.11 I am not going to go into much detail about gender-based violence in Somalia as information on this subject is readily available in public documents, including in the media and reports by the UN and human rights groups.^{xiv} Respected gender and Somalia experts have also dealt with this topic in books, journals and other publications.^{xv} I believe that if Canada wants to help remedy the serious problem of gender-based violence, which also occurs in peaceful parts of the territory including Somaliland, it should take the time to learn about the place of women in Somali culture as well as take into account how and why women and girls are targeted and exploited during periods of conflict or intense and widespread violence. It should be noted that there is disproportionate targeting of women from minority groups, young girls and those who live in camps for the internally displaced. I am of the view that it is equally important to recognise the part played by women in provoking and encouraging conflict in Somalia, and occasionally taking part in the violence themselves.^{xvi}

2.12 After a rocky start, the African Union intervention force, AMISOM, has helped provide security in some parts of Somalia, although the fragility of this security is exposed almost every time AMISOM and/ or Somali government troops withdraw from a town. Within days, sometimes hours, Al Shabaab walks back in and temporarily claims the area. I believe that the only way for violence-ravaged parts of South Central Somalia to experience lasting peace is for the stabilisation force to capture the area and hold onto it for a few years at least, so that the population learns what peace is like. Somalia has a young population, with about 75 percent of those under the age of thirty unemployed.^{xvii} These individuals were born after conflict erupted in the late 1980s and therefore have no concept of what peace looks, smells, sounds and tastes like. They need to 'learn' what peace is and how to live together peacefully. Relevant and therefore meaningful, potentially effective, examples of how peace or at least some kind of security and/ or trust can be

achieved can be taken from Somaliland, and the Somali regions of Ethiopia and Kenya, although with caveats as these areas have their own weaknesses and other problems, including in security-related issues.

2.11 Many Somalis have told me that until they have basic security they cannot have or expect anything else that is durable or predictable. It is my view that, for Somalia to become peaceful, the majority of its population needs to believe there is more to gain from peace than war. Somaliland is proof of this. It was affected horribly by conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s, so much so that its capital Hargeisa was referred to as 'The Dresden of Africa' because it was so comprehensively destroyed by aerial bombardment. It has now built itself up from the rubble of war and is a functioning polity. I also believe that the only way for Somalia to have enduring peace is for Somalis to take responsibility for themselves, and for foreign powers to take a step back, even in terms of security. Somalis are perfectly capable of this. They need to be given the opportunity to prove to the world that they can look after themselves and their country.

3. Security, justice and respect for human rights

3.1 I have addressed several security issues in *Section 2* of this report. In addition, it should be recognised that there are some effective local security forces, even if their methods of imposing law and order are highly questionable. These include elements of Al Shabaab, some clan and other militias in the cities of Baidoa and Kismayo, and the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Although Somaliland's security forces are relatively weak, most of the territory is peaceful most of the time. This is partly because the community polices itself and some traditional dispute resolution mechanisms still function.

3.2 In my view, one of the most shocking things about Somalia is the impunity. There are exceptions, especially in areas where the clan-based legal system, known as *xeer*, works and where there is a semi-functioning judicial system. But in general, the legal system is corrupt, ineffective, inefficient or non-existent. In many government-

controlled parts of South Central Somalia, people travel to Al Shabaab areas or use Al Shabaab's mobile courts to seek justice.^{xviii} If Canada is to help in this regard, it could try to learn how and why Al Shabaab's system is more trusted and effective than the alternatives. This requires open-mindedness and an acknowledgement that some things Al Shabaab does are 'good' for society.

3.3 I believe great care and open-mindedness should be taken when discussing or working on the issue of human rights in Somalia. Whilst there are internationally recognised standards for human rights, the 'Western model' is not always appropriate for Somalia, perhaps especially in areas still affected by the long decades of conflict. I have seen local human rights models develop from examples set by Somali poets, such as Hadrawi, or emerge during cultural festivals in the Somali territories.

4. Economic development

4.1 Although presented as a broken, fragile state, parts of the Somali economy are thriving, including the livestock sector, import export businesses, and modern telecommunications and financial services. Although the way these work can appear opaque to Western observers, they have their own, often highly effective, logic, much of which is based on trust and sometimes also on clan affiliation.

4.2 Although Turkey's active role in Somalia since the famine of 2011 is complex, and has been further complicated by being caught up in the Saudi versus Qatar crisis, I believe Canada and other Western donors could learn something from the way it has interacted with Somalis and, in some ways, helped to develop and improve life in the country.^{xix}

5. Conclusion

5.1 I believe Canada has the potential to be of help and use to Somalia if it plays its cards right. It has a significant Somali diaspora and it does not have an awful

reputation in Somalia or with Somalis. If it goes into Somalia with its eyes wide open, is prepared to throw away stereotypes, and treat Somalis as equal partners, but also intelligent caution, I believe Somalia-based Somalis, the diaspora – many of whom have ‘one foot’ in Canada, the other in Somalia – and Canada can learn and benefit from each other.

ⁱ Osman, Idil, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

ⁱⁱ This map was produced by members of the BBC Africa Online team with input from trusted Somali journalists and other sources. Although it was published in 2016, and ‘who controls what’ has changed, it shows clearly the different regions/ territories, including Puntland and the self-declared republic of Somaliland. South Central Somalia is the represented by the turquoise, purple and ochre coloured areas.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harper, Mary, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State*, London: Zed Books, 2012.

^{iv} BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/somali/historye.shtml> (accessed January 2019).

^v World Health Organisation, *A Situation Analysis of Mental Health in Somalia*, October 2010, http://applications.emro.who.int/dsaf/EMROPUB_2010_EN_736.pdf?ua=1 (accessed January 2019).

^{vi} Fergusson, James, *The World’s Most Dangerous Place: Inside the Outlaw State of Somalia*, London: Random House, 2013.

^{vii} Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index*, <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/2018/04/24/fragile-states-index-2018-annual-report/> (accessed January 2019).

^{viii} Keating, Michael and Waldman, Matt, *War and Peace in Somalia*, London: Hurst, 2018.

^{ix} BBC, *Somalia: Failed state or fantasy land?* 2 August 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19099442> (accessed January 2019).

^x Washington Post, *Somalia expels top UN official after he criticises crackdown on dissent*, 2 January 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/somalia-expels-un-top-official-after-he-questions-crackdown-on-dissent/2019/01/02/ec1f89da-0e7d-11e9-831f-3aa2c2be4cbd_story.html (accessed January 2019).

^{xi} See <https://www.government.se/sweden-in-the-eu/permanent-representation-of-sweden-to-the-eu/cv-mikael-lindvall/> (accessed January 2019).

^{xii} Hiraal Institute, *Security incidents in the third quarter of 2018*, <https://hiraalinstitute.org/security-incidents-in-the-third-quarter-of-2018/> (accessed January 2019).

^{xiii} International Crisis Group, *Averting war in northern Somalia*, 27 June 2018.

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- ^{xiv} Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2018* and other specific reports on violence and other forms of abuse against women. UN Women Somalia page, <http://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/somalia> (accessed January 2019).
- ^{xv} Keating, Michael and Waldman, Matt, *War and Peace in Somalia*, London: Hurst, 2018; Gardner, Judith and El Bushra, Judy, *The Untold Story*, London: Pluto, 2004.
- ^{xvi} See three of the books already mentioned – by Gardner and El Bushra, Harper and Keating and Waldman.
- ^{xvii} The Guardian, *Going against the drain*, 12 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/aug/12/tackling-youth-unemployment-in-somaliland> (accessed January 2019).
- ^{xviii} Keating, Michael and Waldman, Matt, *War and Peace in Somalia*, London: Hurst, 2018.
- ^{xix} BBC, *The unlikely love affair between two countries*, 15 December 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30447039> (accessed January 2019); Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, *Turkey's Assistance Model in Somalia: Achieving Much with Little*, 2016.