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Somali diaspora and homeland relations

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Introduction

Somalia is often referred to as the longest-running humanitarian catastrophe in the world. The country has been plagued by armed violence, civil strife and insurgencies, piracy, droughts, and famines. With the absence of an effective central government, and with an overarching disorder, the society has adopted certain coping mechanisms, and established indigenous order. The Somali diaspora is often credited as one of the factors that sustain and reinforce these coping mechanisms. Since the start of the civil war in 1991, Somalis fled from their country to seek safety and can today be found in all continents (Horst, 2008). The result is an estimated 1–1.5 million strong Somali diaspora (Sheikh and Healy, 2009). The very size of this diaspora demonstrates

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that the Somali society as a whole has become a globalized one. Here in the UK they form a considerable migrant group with an estimated population of more than 380,000. This article provides a brief introduction to the Somali diaspora and their relations with their homeland. It illustrates their transnational practices and the role of communications in their engagement with Somalia. The article concludes with recommendations for further studies on the complex relations between diasporas and their homelands and the role(s) of communication in enabling multifaceted levels of homeland engagement.

As a colonial ruler, the UK has historically been closely connected to Somalia and, because of this colonial linkage, there has been a long tradition of Somalis settling in the country. The Somali migration to the UK can be divided into 3 distinct groups: Somalis who arrived as seamen and steel workers during the colonial period, those that fled the 1991 civil war, and Somali-Europeans moving to the UK seeking social tolerance and better economic opportunities. However, Somalis have not permanently left their country of origin to start a new life elsewhere. In an age of globalisation, characterised by accessible transportation and rapid communication, the Somali diaspora have remained intimately connected with their homeland. Diasporas engage in various transnational practices, such as remittances, relief, investment in development projects or for-profit ventures, and political activism. Diasporas can also be a source for local knowledge and understanding, foreign direct investment, market development, technology transfer, philanthropy,

tourism, political contributions, transfer of experiences on democratic governance and general influence in the home country (Newland and Patrick, 2004). Additionally, diasporas have the advantage of being sometimes perceived and interpreted as “one of our own” within societies in their country of origin, and as such can get an insider perspective on development priorities, bypassing challenging or stagnant institutions and barriers. This can give diasporas advantages over development NGOs.

Development, Humanitarianism and the Somali Diaspora

It is commonly acknowledged that the most successful migrant businesses arise in the crevices created by transnationalism. For example, in shipping and cargo companies, import and export firms, labour contractors and money transfer houses known as ‘hawilad’ (Basch et al., 1994: 55), which have greatly invested in communications services. The creations of these facilities significantly enhance the memories of and connections maintained with the homeland by the Somali diaspora.

There is also evidence that Somali diaspora families who have the necessary means often return to Somalia. Estimates of summer visitors to Somaliland from the UK, for instance, are as high as 10,000 per year, creating a seasonal economy that injects significant amounts of money into the local service industry. The Somaliland diaspora has always been an active element in the equation of state building and the restructuring of the political system of Somaliland (Hammond and Vaughan-Lee, 2012).

Somali diasporic media

The media facilitates much of this homeland engagement. The Somali media based in the diaspora has become pivotal and dominates the Somali media landscape. This is predominantly due to it costing very little to set up, having access to credit cards and the technical infrastructure in the West that is at the diaspora’s disposal as well as having a stable and secure environment surrounding them. The majority of the Somali media is owned by diaspora based individuals or they are the majority stakeholders and investors (Osman, 2015).

The Somali diaspora has utilised the improvements in communication technology as the Internet in particular ‘presented an opportunity for them to communicate, regroup, share views, help their groups at home and organise activities’ (Issa-Salwe, 2011: 54). Much of the engagement with development and humanitarianism is enabled by media platforms. Community members often refer to how they saw a particular project or campaign on Somali TV stations or

websites and consequently participated in them. But as these products of transnational media dissolve distance and suspend time, they 'create new and unpredictable forms of connection, identification and cultural affinity' (Gillespie, 1995: 7). The Internet is also an opportunity to promote political identity.

The opportunities presented by globalisation in fact open up greater possibilities for territorially bounded connections, facilitated by online platforms, where people who are attached to particular homeland territories engage with one another politically in ways that can translate to online activities.

The Somali websites that have sprung up in various parts of the world depict a deeply divided society, one that is at the same time both integrated and fragmented. Diasporic media plays a performative role in facilitating diaspora engagement with conflict dynamics by providing spaces to promote political, religious and/or clan-centred dialogue, encouraging a culture of non-recognition towards minorities and marginalised groups. This results in the reproduction of an us-vs-them environment that can lead to harmful mobilisation (Osman, 2015). In sum, diasporic media in addition to facilitating platforms for development and humanitarian engagement, also transnationalises and 're-creates' the conflict amongst diaspora communities who then engage with the conflict at home, producing a cyclical re-creation of conflict.

Conclusion

What we have is therefore a complex reality when it comes to Somali diaspora engagement with the homeland. We have diasporas that engage as a) agents of peace and development, b) 'spoilers' who negatively affect conflict and peace dynamics and c) actors supporting both peace and violence simultaneously.

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A key problematic variable here is that the clan animosity that escalated from the war has remained a 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg, 2014) and continues to brew amongst the Somali diaspora both in action and in memory.

Diaspora communities have seen their political weight grow in the 21st century (Demmers, 2002) and this is partially related to the changing patterns of conflict and the increasing flexibility and speed of technology and transportation, global human mobility and connections. However, the argument often brought forth by scholars of globalisation that groups are much less territorially bounded needs further scrutiny. The opportunities presented by globalisation in fact open up greater possibilities for territorially bounded connections, facilitated by online platforms, where people who are attached to particular homeland territories engage with one another politically in ways that can translate to offline activities. In the Somali case, there is a deeply entrenched imagined connection to the homeland territories that is reinforced and fortified by diasporic media.

Current academic discourse regarding diasporic media often centres on its capabilities to help immigrants preserve their identities and maintain ties with their homeland. It is considered to be responding to the specific needs and conditions of immigrant communities (Bailey et al., 2007), as well as allowing a transnational bond to be created with countries of origin and therefore to sustain ethnic, national and religious identities and cultures (Aksoy and Robins, 2003:93). While these notions hold much truth, and the Somali case reaffirms them, diasporic media enables diaspora communities to engage in a greater capacity than what has thus far been acknowledged. It is this complexity that needs to be further unpacked and scrutinised if we are to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of diaspora engagement and find ways to consolidate constructive diasporic efforts.



Dr Idil Osman has worked for over 12 years as a national and international journalist for the BBC, the Guardian and the Voice of America, spending the majority of her career covering stories from the Horn of Africa. Through her work, she has developed a vast network of media contacts including those based in the region and the diaspora. She has authored publications that focus on media, migration, development, conflicts in the Horn of Africa and diaspora communities in Europe. She completed her PhD in Journalism and is an expert on diasporic media and development communications.

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