

SOMALIA
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Trampling the Grass

Somalis have a saying about the geo-political realities of their country: 'When the elephants fight, the grass always gets trampled'. The Somali people are the proverbial grass. Almost since independence the country has been caught in the cross-fire of proxy wars. First it was the Cold War, with the United States and the former Soviet Union battling for dominance in the Horn of Africa, a choke-point for Middle East oil. Now it is the 'war' on terror.



ultimately, international terrorists.

Since 1990, all attempts to establish a government in the capital have failed. Countless Somali and foreign educators, doctors and aid workers have been killed alongside dozens of UN peacekeepers guarding a soup kitchen for famine victims and the infamous 1993 Black Hawk Down tragedy.

For reasons only a psychiatrist, perhaps, could explain, Somalis became their own worst enemies, missing opportunity after opportunity to climb out of the abyss. With the US withdrawal and the United Nations' departure, all international intervention ended some sixteen years ago. Entire generations were left devastated, without any kind of security to go to school, work, or raise families and falling to the absolute bottom of the world's development index.

Give us Back our State

The Somali people long for peace. They yearn to have their state back, to be able to live and work without fear of warlords, 'technicals' roaming the streets indiscriminately killing innocent men, women and children, and without outside pressure to adopt radical so-called religious practices that have never been part of their devout Muslim beliefs.

With the Union of Islamic Courts radicals now on the run, and Somalia's Transitional Federal Government able to enter Mogadishu for the first time, there is a chance to save Somalia. But the window of opportunity will not be open long.

Unless the international community firmly steps in with serious, long-term security and development assistance, the living hell could engulf the entire region in a new proxy war between the west and radical international Al Qaeda terrorists. The Somali grass would once again be an elephant's battlefield.

What needs to happen quickly?

● **Disarmament.** This will only be possible with the deployment of international troops. Ethiopia bravely heeded the call of the transitional government, the world should be grateful. Radical religious leaders have long stirred enmity between Somalia and Ethiopia, and both fell victim to proxy Cold War face-offs with both sides changing allegiances more than once. However, Ethiopia should be a natural partner for Somalia, especially in the 'war' on terror.

● **Reconciliation.** Again, international assistance is crucial, as only neutral

parties, without clan links, can settle long-standing tensions. The warlords, truly war criminals, must be brought to justice. We can look to West Africa for an example. After decades of war and tragedy, peace was finally possible in Liberia and neighbouring countries once former President Charles Taylor was indicted.

● Reconstruction and development.

Somalia was not always the world's poorest country. It was never wealthy, given that it is mostly desert where only camels and nomads can survive. But there were fine universities, lush farms, ancient mosques, beautiful architecture, a large number of professional women, proud teachers, pilots, doctors, lawyers, farmers, merchants, and even some famous fashion models. The professional classes have been killed or fled. Generations of children have grown up without proper schooling. But we must start quickly to show people that peace and stability are possible with an elected government, rather than the Islamists.

The world had the best of intentions in Afghanistan and Iraq, quickly to push out regimes that were anathema to freedom and development. However, filling the gap with work, education, infrastructure and stability has proved more difficult. Somalia will not be easy either. But Somalis truly want peace. They lived for centuries as one nation, one people, and can do so again.

The window is open. The grass can grow green again.



WITH THE COLLAPSE OF the Soviet sphere of influence in Africa, the United States and other western powers also lost interest. Somalia was left to its own devices and imploded - becoming the world's first failed state. The country descended into anarchy and chaos, with warlords taking the place of the elephant super powers, crushing the grass throughout what should be one of Africa's least problematic countries. Somalis share one religion, one colour, one language, one history and one culture. Almost without the world noticing or caring, they have lived under different reigns of terror for two generations.

The once beautiful ancient capital, Mogadishu, was split into ten enclaves, each dominated by a different warlord, checkpoints limiting the movement of people and goods and normal economic activity. The city's port was in one enclave, the airport in another, and roads leading to and from all points were controlled by different clan groups. The city became a haven for criminals and,

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