

Local Peace Aspirations and International Perceptions of Peacebuilding in Somalia

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/12/06/local-peace-aspirations-and-international-perceptions-of-peacebuilding-in-somalia/>

NICOLAS VERBEEK, DEC 6 2020

The political situation in Somalia after the Somali Civil War (1988-1991) seems increasingly intractable from the perspective of the international community. Somali elites have a significant interest in maintaining a status quo of relative instability, since they benefit politically and economically in a war economy (Grosse-Kettler 2004). In this sense, the elites use the grievances for greed, thereby illustrating the entanglement of greed and grievance as conflict initiators (Berdal 2005). While the approach of peace- and state building preferred and implemented by the UN is not able to facilitate internal conflicts because it is not sufficiently supported by the population due to the existing social divisions, interests and cultural peculiarities, successful peace initiatives can be seen at the micro level of municipal administration and business networking (Powell et al. 2006; Mursal 2018). The question that remains is what is the ultimate goal of UN state building in Somalia? Before the civil war, Somalia had never been a united nation state. In circumstances such as Somalia, the establishment of a Weberian liberal state helps much more to cast the particular interests of selected elites into seemingly legitimate forms.

Using Somalia as an example, this essay shows the gap between local ideas of peace structures and the internationally dominant peace narrative of the necessary establishment of a stable central state. By showing that the UN's notion of a stable central state as a guarantor of peace in conflict contexts is an unrealistic construct that does not satisfy the broad public's notions of peace and even stirs up conflict, this essay fundamentally criticizes the dominant equalization of state- and peacebuilding. Somalia shows that in order to install peace the UN must develop alternatives to central state building like hybrid state orders. These can be adapted to cultural and historical conflict contexts, and also critically question the beneficiaries of internationally sponsored state building. In a world of international relations that looks through the lens of the nation state, this appears to be a radical undertaking.

First, the essay traces the development of the UN norm of state building and illustrates the mistaken conflation of peacebuilding and liberal state building. Second, it examines the internationally sponsored implementation of state building in Somalia and illustrates how a successful implementation is effectively spoiled over the years due to converging interests and negative historical experience of statehood. Furthermore, this section shows who benefits from top-down state building, and why the UN's efforts at state-building are doomed to fail and fuel new conflicts. Against the backdrop of the problem analysis of the inaccurate fit between the dominant UN understanding of state building and the conflict context, the essay then sheds light on existing peace initiatives at the micro level and argues that they are most likely to bring sustainable peace. Last, this essay discusses the insights gained in relation to the current understanding of sustainable peace solutions and argues for an alternative context-sensitive approach to classical state-building such as hybrid governance.

The UN's mistaken conflation of peacebuilding and liberal state building

In recent decades, peacebuilding has developed in the Western community of states from the understanding of peace as the absence of violence (Galtung 2013) to the implementation of accountable and inclusive political structures that are considered essential. In this context, the concepts of peacebuilding and state-building have been equated and even described as mutually reinforcing (Grävingsholt et al. 2009). During the 1990s, peacebuilding was closely linked to the concepts of human security, good governance and accountability, along with a trend towards

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more robust peacekeeping missions, which emphasize the development of structures to institutionalize peace (Balthasar 2017). The equalization of the concepts as an expression of the liberal peace paradigm for the rescue of “failed states” was consolidated by the establishment of the Peace-building Architecture of the 2005 World Summit, and finally bound together a few years later by the International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and State building. (Tanabe 2019, 475). The “Responsibility to Protect”, supported by the UN member states, should also be seen in this context, as it gave liberal states not only the right but also the responsibility to intervene in other sovereign states to promote liberal values (Tanabe, 2019). The view that a market democracy is the foundation of peace is manifested in most of the UN peace interventions in the post-Cold War period, where peacebuilding is directed towards the creation of liberal values such as tolerance and pluralism, and state-building is directed towards the creation of liberal states (Eriksen 2009). On the basis of drastic failures in cases such as Yugoslavia, Rwanda, or Angola, it has become clear that the liberal state-building paradigm is crashing down, particularly in its core competencies, such as inter-ethnic reconciliation, social integration or confidence-building, and even has destabilizing side effects that can actively undermine peace efforts (Lemay-Fukuyama 2007; Hebert 2009, 36).

A major reason for the clear failure of these missions is the false equalization of peacebuilding and state-building. It is in the nature of state-building that ethnic, religious or other divisions must be overcome to a certain extent to establish shared identities and institutions, and this progress has often been accompanied by violence and conflict throughout history (Cohen et al. 1981; Heathershaw 2008, 621). According to Hobbes, the natural state of anarchy is overcome when the majority of the players delegate their powers to a superior power, the Leviathan, which is an inherently violent undertaking in which diverging interests must be formed into a homogeneous entity (Hobbes 1968; Levene 2000). Accordingly, it is essential to achieve identity standardization, nation building, in order to reduce the costs of maintaining order (Lemay-Hebert 2009). It is thus standardization and hierarchization instead of pluralization and equalization of rules that lies at the beginning of the state-building process. The liberal peace paradigm aims at creating a situation of peaceful coexistence in the face of existing differences between the parties, at a mutual acceptance of rule plurality, while the core of state-building revolves fundamentally opposite around rule unification and standardization (Balthasar 2017; Richmond & Franks 2014). From this dichotomy, it can be understood why the liberal interventions and attempts at democratic state-building in Somalia in the 1990s after the civil war (1988-1991) must be regarded as failed to date, because they offer no foundation for peace because no essential nation-building has taken place before (Goetze & Guzina 2008, 339). Without a process of identity and rule standardization, often a violent process, a Western-style state will not achieve long-term peace, but will be reinterpreted and spoiled as needed by interest groups, as will be shown in the next chapter. On the basis of the insights gained here and in the next section, this essay raises an important question: How can peacebuilding and state-building in the particular context of Somalia be linked in a way that they are not antagonistic to each other?

The failed implementation of sponsored state building in Somalia

There is probably no other issue in which the understanding of the Western community of states and the Somalis are further apart than in the understanding of what constitutes a state. Already during the UNSOM peace mission from 1992 onwards a central government was in fact the element that united all Somalis in opposition (Bradbury 1994). On the one hand, while according to Western understanding, a responsive and effective state is an essential prerequisite for development. On the other hand, the Somali state is perceived by Somalis, on the basis of their experience with the authoritarian government of Mohammed Siad Barre (1969-1991), as an instrument for accumulation of wealth, domination and exploitation (Menkhaus 2007). The Somali state, which in fact failed as early as the mid-1980s, served as an unsustainable patronage system for clientele interests built on foreign aid contributions. The fall of the government in January 1991 and the subsequent factional war favored a war economy in southern Somalia based on banditry and looting (Grosse-Kettler 2004). The rise of warlords and other particular interests that benefit from lawlessness and impunity, as well as massive flight, destruction of public property and a de facto secession of the North, pose challenges to state-building in Somalia that the UN peacekeeping mission (UNOSOM) was unable to meet. Therefore, it left the country in a collapsed state in 1995 (Menkhaus 2007). Somalia illustrates the complexity of spoilers in entrenched conflicts. To this day, spoiler groups effectively undermine any top-down attempts of state-building in order to maintain the existing state of statelessness, with the following groups or motives at play:

1. Clans or factions that feel politically or economically marginalized in the Transitional National Government

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- (TNG). A powerless and externally appointed TNG can be characterized as greedy spoilers. In other words, they can be potentially dealt through political bargaining and external pressure (Stedman 1997).
2. Total spoilers who reject the state-building project because they regard it as a fundamental threat to their political and economic interests in the status quo. These include warlords for whom a closure of the violence market means marginalization, and businessmen who see the state as a symbol of corruption and exploitation (Elwert 1997). Both groups are afraid that the highly privatized Somali market will be severely hit by renationalization and higher taxes (Menkhaus 2007).
 3. Clans and other social groups who firmly reject a renewed central government of a close coalition of clans for fear of a renewed instrument of dominance at their expense (Menkhaus 2007).

In this light, top-down attempts at state-building fail because of the risk aversion of political and economic elites who have established profitable models during the state collapse. In fact, the zero-sum game perception of the Somali elites means that external state-building efforts promote conflict, making it clear that state-building processes and peace-building do not coincide. Since the state is seen as a potential instrument for obtaining foreign aid, coercion and exploitation of opponents, state-building provokes conflict rather than facilitating it. In this context, foreign aid donors face the dilemma of whether they should stick to the do-no-harm principle or accept the possibility of casualties in state-building initiatives (Menkhaus 2007).

While larger sections of the Somali constituency now have a greater interest in predictability and security after the previous war economy improved by UN money flowing into legitimate business models, in many cases this is already served by local governance initiatives, which in turn reduce local incentives to form a superior state. In many respects, Somali elites are interested in the status quo of an externally conducted state building process as a final goal and not as a process towards a central state. According to Hagman (2016), political and economic elites actively exploit the longstanding external commitment to state-building to gain foreign resources by adopting Western rhetoric. Therefore, the international community's fixation on state-building ultimately hinders the much more promising development of other forms of governance at the municipal or local level that can offer real opportunities for lasting peace and development.

Sustainable peace initiatives in Somalia

The repeated failure of international top-down state-building initiatives obscures the successful state-building efforts in the absence of a central government at the level of local communities. These create regional stable peace orders with a certain degree of law and predictability. This development is fed by a coalition of business groups, traditional authorities and civil groups interested in local public order adapted to cultural conditions (Leonardsson & Rudd 2015; Stremlau 2019). Although the multiplicity of informal and formal governance systems does not converge towards the functions of a central state when added together, they have the advantage of a high degree of legitimacy and ownership (Garcia 2017), which contrasts sharply with a central state that endangers unique local political structures through standardization. Among the numerous regional and trans-regional authorities that have emerged in Somalia since the early 1990s, the example of northern Somaliland stands out, which as a separatist state-like entity, in contrast to south-central Somalia, has achieved functional capacities in the area of public security and economic recovery (Garcia 2017). The strong interest of civil society in peace and the rule of law in Somaliland, in contrast to the rest of Somalia, culminated in a transformation of clan-based representation into a multi-party democracy with local, presidential and legislative elections (Menkhaus 2007). Successful entities such as Somaliland are based on local elite bargaining with minimal external influence instead of violent distribution and interest struggles of local groups in the face of external imposition of liberal state building templates (Hagman 2016). A major reason for a reduction of armed conflict in Somalia in the 2000s is an erosion of the power positions of warlords, as they lost the active financial support of the business community and their clans, which, frustrated by the lack of protection services at the municipal level in Mogadishu, joined forces against the warlords and built up their own superior armies under their direct control (Mursal 2018).

From 2006 onwards, the Islamic Judicial Union (SCIC) served as the main source of law and order in Mogadishu and the surrounding area by creating Islamic judicial and law enforcement structures through loosely connected Sharia courts. These efforts were largely welcomed by local communities, as they were moderate in their adherence

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to Somali customary law (Menkhaus 2007; Hills 2014). With the help of UN agencies and international NGOs, these courts also managed governmental tasks at local level, such as the operation of water pipeline systems, the regulation of market places and tax collection. Thus, offering significantly more regulatory and governmental structures than the Somali central state (TNG) (Powell et al. 2006). In the context of the American war on terror, however, the Union was disempowered again by US-supported Ethiopian troops under what experts consider to be hasty accusations of collaboration with Al Qaeda and Al-Shabaab (Bruton 2009). Since the mid-1990s, clan elders have been able to restore parts of their authority in the pastoral areas and are increasingly taking over foreign relations between clans and even in border disputes through diplomatic negotiations with neighboring states such as Kenya or Ethiopia (Burton 2009).

The examples presented here demonstrate that a so-called failed state is not a government-free space, but that in the absence of a central government, government-like cooperation at the local level occurs which can provide essential functions of public order and, in contrast to the imposition of a liberal state paradigm, can create peace. Since a central state in the Somali region is an inherently conflict-promoting construct due to the social experiences of exploitation and clientelism and the absence of a Somali cultural nation, local peace initiatives based on traditional structures and local conditions can make a sustainable contribution to peacebuilding. This insight must be incorporated into UN peacebuilding strategies. The dangerously liberal equation of state building and peacebuilding must be unpacked, and peacebuilding must develop alternative strategies to the top-down imposition of Western institutions in the light of the lessons learned in Somalia.

Rethinking UN state building: hybrid state order as a transitional phase

Based on the understanding that peacebuilding and the building of a Weberian state are two initially contradictory approaches in Somalia, the two projects will probably have to be approached in practice in an alternating manner that understands the concepts of peacebuilding and liberal state building sequentially and does not mix them up. According to Balthasar (2017), a promising way to establish peace and stability lies in providing national elites with sufficient room for political maneuver to apply peacebuilding and state building situationally. This argument should be rejected by the international community, since it means accepting substantial violence in the process of standardizing identity and institutions for the benefit of an uncertain peace. If external actors become an essential part of the conflict dynamics by actively providing financial and political support to elites with the aim of building a Weberian state, this fires up the conflictual competition of internal groups for recognition and relevance in the process and leads to ineffective governments which, in the existing Somali logic of the state, use the state to accumulate wealth, satisfy clientele interests and dominate over other groups (Hagman 2016).

Instead, the UN must understand the local peace initiatives that are already functioning locally, not as short-term coping mechanisms, as suggested by Mac Ginty & Richmond (2013), but as building blocks of a hybrid state order. A hybridized state combines a central government, which is very limited in its functions (distribution of development funds, public goods, reliable legal system), with the locally functioning traditional governance structures. Such a "mediated state" (Menkhaus 2006) is effective in the face of a low tax base, combines various informal governance systems and ensures potential spoilers by reducing its reach and ambition. By giving freedom to local communities and at the same time meeting the demands of peaceful communities for public goods, such a state gains legitimacy and supports functioning peace. While such a hybrid order is certainly intrinsically highly messy, partly contradictory and partly violent (Hoehne 2013; Mac Ginty & Richmond 2016; Smith 2014), it is probably the only chance for Somalia.

The key point here is to see the hybridization of governance as a transitional process in which the population conducts stable domestic political negotiations and agreements characterized by local ownership and financing, thereby gaining positive experience and trust with the state order. In addition, they develop a sustainable model beyond resource extraction from the top-down state building initiatives of external states. This process, which must be understood as nation-building, can ideally end in a functioning Weberian state, as envisioned by the liberal peace paradigm of UN state building. In this light it is advisable for the UN to focus on the policy recommendations first set out by Hagman (2016):

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1. Concentration of financial support on actors, institutions and processes that have a proven track record in producing social contracts and public goods.
2. Identification of local and national institutions that have a realistic agenda based on domestic resources and political mobilization as potential state-building partners.
3. Work on shared Somali visions of a future inclusive state formation.

Conclusion

This essay has illustrated that the Western equation of peacebuilding and state-building is wrong. These concepts are contradictory. Subsequently, it was shown that based on the misleading conflation of peacebuilding with the top-down imposition of a liberal state model, no successful peace can be implemented in Somalia. Rather, these external state-building attempts fuel conflicts through various spoilers. These spoilers have a historically and culturally conditioned and entirely divergent understanding of the state than the western international community, which sees the central state as an instrument of exploitation and dominance. Based on the presentation of local functioning peace initiatives in Somalia, which have their roots in traditional governance structures, this essay emphasizes the necessity of the implementation of a hybrid state order, which combines a limited central state with existing local governance initiatives. Such a hybrid state order can serve as a transition phase to a Weberian central state, in which confidence-building will enable a reframing of the Somali understanding of the state as well as nation building. Somalia's example suggests that the international community must abandon its ideological fixation on top-down impositions of liberal state institutions and, in many cases, should focus on context-sensitive solutions such as hybrid state orders, as transitional phases for later stable states and peace.

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Date Written: December 2019