

"SOMALILAND": Haunted by its Founding Mythology? A Response to Professor Jhazbhay's Article

By: Abdalla A. Hirad , April 17, 2006

“Somaliland voluntarily joined Somalia after receiving its independence in 1960. In 1991, after a tragic union with Somalia, Somaliland opted to return to its original British Protectorate boundaries”.

The statement cited above was written by Professor Iqbal D. Jhazbhay, a South African of Indian origin, speaking about Somalia, in his article, “ Somaliland & the African Union”, posted in wardheernews.com on April 12, 2006. Professor Jhazbhay expresses this opinion in search for recognition for a break-away region of the Somali Republic—namely, “ Somaliland”.

Obviously, the Professor prefers the option of war, as announced by the oligarchy politically controlling only a part of the region, to peace within the region and to the reconciliation of the people of the region with their brethren in the rest of Somalia. His preference is clear, as he quotes the following threatening statement from the self-proclaimed leadership in the region, and in his defense of the dismemberment of Somalia: “Somaliland's leaders have defiantly proclaimed that it rather go to war than join Somalia and give up its hard earned independence”.

What independence and from what? I ask

I am a Somali from “ Somaliland”. This sentence alone—I presume—says a lot more about the question of “Somaliland” than Mr. Jhazbhay can ever say about the subject in a thousand-page book. And I disagree with him. By the same breath, I agree with the son of Somalia, Nuraddin Farah, the world renowned novelist, as he is reported to describe “... Somaliland as the best kept secret ...” I am sure he wrote those words not with malice or an intention to dismember Somalia, as Jhazbhay would interpret them to mean, but out of pride with the reported achievements of the region in terms of its relative peace and stability, compared to some other parts of Somalia.

The professor may have craftily taken the statement out of its proper context. Nevertheless, the fact remains that all good Somalis would be proud of “ Somaliland” in that respect. To quote Professor Hussein Adan (Tanzani), though, as Professor Jhazbhay does, in defense of the tenets of the argument for the secession, is equivalent to asking the Pope to argue in defense of Christianity.

The world would have been better swayed by Professor Jhazbhay's article a lot more readily, and perhaps be more sympathetically influenced by it, if he would speak to the plight of the people of Kashmir. In any case, writing speeches for the leaders of “Somaliland”—on occasions, when they visit Johannesburg—does not in its self qualify the good professor to make decisions or prepare internationally targeted policy advisory

notes about Somalia's dismemberment. I would rather that he keeps doing what he has been doing since his newly found contract with the oligarchy—essentially that of lobbying on behalf of the leadership within the Muslim community of Johannesburg, if at all. And even that is—I am sure—contrary to the official policy of the South African government on the territorial integrity and national unity of Somalia. The professor further tries to augment the strength of his devilish insinuation as he continues to argue: “Those who would see Somalia and Somaliland "united" will argue the recognition of Somaliland and will only further fragment the region. That the recognition of Somaliland will render the very term "African Union" a misnomer. That the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia offers hope for change.” And he adds, “Unfortunately, the reality does not speak to this. The country continues to spiral further into a decades-old state of anarchy.”

Here again, and so ostensibly, the Professor—it seems—wishes to see “Somaliland” recognized at any cost—even if that means Somalia spiraling into even greater civil war, than we have seen so far. It is indeed tragic that right minded people like Professor Jhazbhay can easily subscribe to this scenario of doom for Somalia, despite the efforts of the whole wide world to bring about complete national reconciliation in Somalia. A world whose international perspective the professor describes as “uninformed” among other things.

It is saddening to read Professor Jhazbhay's words uttered under the cloak of the African National Congress (ANC) of the Republic of South Africa, and within the sachet of, as he proudly claims to be a member of, the ANC's Commission of Religious Affairs! By comparison, I still find the words uttered by the former and first ever Foreign Minister of post-apartheid South Africa ringing in my ears until this day. We were honored to be in the presence of the Minister at the UN Delegates Launch, in one of the General Assembly Sessions of the UN in the early nineties. He expressed his recollection of his admiration for the industrious people of a sister African country as well as his sorrow for the situation of Somalia at the present, in the one and same statement. He put a question to us, a group of Somalis, in words to the effect of: “what happened to Somalia, which used to produce those seasoned diplomats who had struggled ...” more than all with the people of South Africa over the years, to end apartheid?

Thanks to the Minister for the complement; but, here we are, a little over ten years later, with one of his countrymen calling for the dismemberment of Somalia, perhaps unaware that Somalia could help in those days, even if nominally, because it was united, strong and solid in its solidarity with the nations of Africa and the freedom loving world to liberate the sister African nation from apartheid—an effort which is today celebrated by all South Africans no matter what the color of their skin.

A Return to a State of Nature?

I grant that when a civil society is dissolved, a compact disintegrates, a social contract crumbles, or, in more common words—a state fails—there is a tendency for the constituent sub-entities to “return to the state of nature in which they were before”, as John Locke would argue, in his time. There are no qualms about this. Social and political theorists have been in agreement on this fact throughout history. The case of Somalia seems to reflect the facts in a typical reality—I must admit. A reconfiguration back from that “state of nature” is the notion advanced by the theorists of the dismemberment of

Somalia. That “Somaliland” can “shift for itself” now that the “Act of Union” has ceased to exist—in their thinking—since the collapse of government in 1991.

I must hastily state, though, that “Somaliland”, as a phenomenon, does not symbolize a “return to the state of nature”, as its advocates claim, and I will explain the reasons in due course. It simply does not fit that description. There are, however, other ways in which the phenomenon has presented itself since the collapse of government in Somalia, January 1991. It has, indeed, presented itself within “Somaliland”, contrary to the claims that “Somaliland” represents “the state of nature.” Therefore, the mythology of “Somaliland” is crumbling under its weight of myths as we speak, I might already conclude. But bear with me, dear reader, for I will explain how.

The answer in refuting the question of “Somaliland” as a “state of nature” lies in the answer to the question: what constitutes “the state of nature” to which entities might return in Somalia, in the first place? It is pretty clear: clans—organization on the basis of kinship—which has been, and remains to be, the traditional way of organization and structure for the Somali society. Thus, Yasin R. Ali correctly argues in his article “Kismayo and Sool: A thought for Puntland” – A Response”, posted in WardheerNews.com on April 12, 2006 correctly writes:

“... and there’s a perfectly solid reason for that: in the aftermath of the disintegration of Somalia’s central government, the Somali people reverted back to the next level of political unity: the clan. Mogadishu was once the most integrated Somali city in the Horn of Africa region. Today, it is dominated by a single Somali clan-family whose “claim” is grounded on the ideology of traditional land ownership. Under that same ideology, the SNM rebel movement “liberated” Waqooyi Galbeed [NW] regions of Somalia from the former military dictatorship and declared unilateral independence”.

But “Somaliland” does not factor in as a clan territory. The former British Protectorate comprises the land of a number of sub-clans lumped together by the colonial masters of old—particularly the British—without the wishes or will of the natives themselves. “Somaliland”, like all the other partitions, therefore, has been a superimposed reality on the Somali nation, including the Italian colony in the south, later known as the “Italian Trusteeship Territory of Somalia”—which also comprised—still does—a bunch of subclans. The evidence of this fact is widely reflected in the recent history and the nature of the civil war—clan feud being one of its manifestations.

It is, therefore, morally disrespectful to the people of the region, if not to the nation as a whole, to try and re-impose those colonial divisions on the people of the Somali Republic, more than half a century after the British and Italians have left. Needless to mention that it sure feels insulting to the South African people and government—after liberation from apartheid—and to the nations of the African continent as whole, to see a South African drumming up support for the dismemberment of Somalia. I am of the strong conviction that, fortunately, that is not the policy of the government of South Africa.

History attests to the fact that no sooner than they obtained their independence from the British and the Italians, the entities (the British and Italian colonized parts) signed an un-negotiated, unconditional union, to break the manacles and political division imposed by the colonial powers. As a matter of fact, on the occasion of the celebrations of Independence, known among Somalis as “Kanna Siib, Kanna Saar”, at the zero-hour of 26 June, in Hargeisa—the Capital of the North—the Somali National Anthem was playing as the blue Somali national flag replaced the British. Needless to emphasize that both the National Anthem and the flag already existed as part of the state paraphernalia of the southern part, which was not even independent as yet. To argue that “Somaliland” existed as a state before July 1, 1960 is, therefore, only a later fabrication.

Indeed, the visiting delegation from the North to Mogadishu to commit to the act of union with the South, immediately after 26 June, refused the advice of the SYL leadership to delay the union by sometime, on the grounds that the visiting delegation had no mandate to discuss options—other than to commit to the act of union. Indeed, the SYL recalled the delegation for continued talks, history goes, only after the masses in Mogadishu took on rioting against the SYL leadership within the next two days or so. And a reunion was committed without any negotiations. The North had to accept the initiatives of the South which had the benefits of ten years of preparation under the UN trusteeship arrangement.

To argue that those clans would seek to return to the state of colonization—after an independence of more than fifty years or accept an icon of that colonial era as a symbol for their new existence—is flawed in theory and insulting to the free spirit and the fabric of the Somali society, and particularly to the people of the region. After all, it took only four days for the people of the then newly independent Somaliland to join their brethren in the other part—the Italian colony—who were, in turn, also anxiously counting the days until they obtained their independence from the Italians—only to amalgamate with the North, the same day they attained their independence, in July 1, 1960.

And it was not a matter of coincidence that the British Protectorate obtained its independence only four days before the independence of the Italian South. It was actually as a result of a conscious and popular demand by the people of the then “Somaliland”, despite the persuasions of the British and its sympathizers from within to wait a little longer for the protectorate to mature into a state, before its union with the South. But with the Haud and Reserve area given away to Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, a few years back; with a suspicion that the British might never leave later; with rumors that Ethiopia was engaged in secret negotiations with the European powers, demanding the annexation of more Somali territory; or, simply, the Somali people fearing a re-amalgamation might never materialize later, immediate reunion was an early and an inevitable choice in the Somali psyche of that day.

Therefore, the “Somaliland Protectorate” had never transpired into a state of its own right to return to in 1991, as some have falsely claimed thereafter. I must re-emphasize that it had only existed for four days in which, essentially, preparations were being made for travel and, in effect, reunion with the other part. Hence, to speak of “Somaliland” ever being a state is also a very flawed assumption. “Somaliland” was, at best, defined by its

colonial history not by its independence of only four days before immediate re-union with that other part of the partitioned Somali nation. A return to the state of “Somaliland” represents a platitude or an empty inanity, at best.

As to the argument that it has been the only option for those clannish sub-entities, comprising “Somaliland”, to “shift for themselves” into a reunion under its banner, after the collapse of government in 1991, one easily finds the banality of the statement in the fact that Somalis in all parts of Somalia have returned to “their state of nature”—the clan organization—as a base to renegotiate from, for reunion. Hence, there has been no entity—no state—in place for “Somaliland” to secede from, as of the day when the government of Somalia collapsed in 1991. There were only clusters of clans everywhere, including the bunch that make up the claimed myth of “Somaliland”. What makes “Somaliland” so different, one might ask, from the rest of the nation in its structure, for its people not to return to the “state of nature”—the clan structure? Or, is it different at all?

On the contrary, one does not need to look hard for the answer in this regard. The dispute over Sool and Sanaag (formerly two regions of the former British Somaliland) between the existing “Puntland” and “Somaliland” stems from the fact that the subclans in those two areas belong to the larger Darood clan, and would rather stay with “Puntland” comprising their kinsmen than be hurriedly bulldozed to become part of a “Somaliland”, which is not of their choice. And there lies one worst kept secret, for Professor Jhazbhay to note, if he would!

The recurrent and insistent claim by the oligarchy of “Somaliland” that all the clans within the region are committed to and supportive of the secession has never been substantiated and is ethnographically and politically refutable. The fact that militia from “Somaliland” and “Puntland” are facing each other in a dangerous confrontation in Adhi Caddeeye, between Burao and Lasanood, hundreds of miles short of the claimed boundaries of “Somaliland”, says it all. The fact also underscores the prediction that the war fronts will multiply should the oligarchy and their cohorts push their luck any further, with or without the full reconstitution of Somalia. There is, therefore, also a greater degree of probability that the hard won peace in the region might be tested to its peril if the secession is pushed to the limit.

“Somaliland”, at best, has, therefore, been a face-saving concoction by—a strategically contrived excuse for the alliance of—the clan elite seeking the secession as matter for falsely demarcating their claimed jurisdiction of influence, in their jockeying for power at the national or regional level. A large proportion of the people of the North—comprising all clans—do not indeed subscribe to the motto and the mantle of the secession. The fact that the people of “Somaliland” had their share of sectarian violence under the banner of “Somaliland” and have had their equitable share of power resources in the Transitional Federal Government”, attest to the fact that “Somaliland” is still a murky political undertaking, if primarily regional rather than national; that, in essence, even the Issac, the majority clan in the area, are divided on the issue; and that, as an issue, the question of the secession can be a quick sand for those not fully informed. Professor Iqbal Daood Jhazbhay comes in handy as one of those victims of ignorance.

However, even if we come to consider some of the experiences of countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea as a *cine qua non* example for the argument towards the fission of Somalia, which the professor celebrates as a great example for the purpose of confusion, the phenomenon did not take place in many other countries, which have survived their civil and political conflict. Countries such as Uganda, Rwanda (which experienced the greatest genocide in modern history), Burundi, Congo, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast all make cases in point, as examples in Africa, in this regard. There have been even some countries elsewhere that have fused again including the two Germanys and the two Yemens, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some are still struggling in the process of re-amalgamation as in the cases of the Sudan and its south, the two Koreas and China and Taiwan.

Finally, and by way of concluding remarks, the unionist constituency in the region has been struggling to outwait the saber-rattling of the secessionists for war, as Jhazbhay confirms, in the above quotation from the leadership of “Somaliland”. They have been waiting for a government of Somalia to come to power as an ultimate option for solutions. And that, in my considered view, has been the safer option than to directly confront the secessionist constituency on a head on collision course, in order to avoid violence in the short term. It seems therefore a stronger pull out of the myth of “Somaliland” by the union-oriented clans in the North is as dangerous as a stronger push for the secession by the secession-oriented clans.

In the long term, however, one hopes dialogue and compromise on all sides will avert an approaching tragedy as a way out. The next safest thing to do is for the region to break up into its constituent clans to avoid unnecessary tension and civil war, so that those clans who wish to secede can freely do so and those who wish to stay united with the rest of Somalia can freely do so. Thus, in all cases, the mythology is bound to crumble for each sub-entity to return to its original state of nature and “shift for itself” as it sees fit. It is a matter for the constituent clans to choose between the scenarios. And it takes all to make it one way or the other.

The frightening thing is that people of Professor Jhazbhay’s mind are of the opinion to push so recklessly for the secession to incite civil war within the region, even sooner than the TFG can ever intervene! And that is the other worse kept secret! Confronted with the efforts of the international community to uphold the territorial integrity and the national unity of Somalia, if possible at all, as a constraint, the Professor simply dismisses the international position as simply “ignorant”, as he wrongfully argues that “these uninformed perspectives are held arguably due to sheer ignorance, stupefied indifference, or a lethal combination of both.”

So much for professor Jhazbhay’s claimed love for “Somaliland”, wisdom in resolving the problem and for his international expertise on the question of Somalia, if at all!

Abdalla A. Hirad
E-Mail:MHirad@aol.com

