



# Event Report

## A Challenging Transition in Somalia: Historical Perspective and Future Implications

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مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الانساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies



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## 1.0. Synopsis

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) hosted Dr. Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas, the former Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Moderated by Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout, the newly-appointed Director of CHS, the lecture provided an overview of key moments in Somalia's modern history and the contemporary challenges the country faces in realizing peace. It saw the diverse attendance of diplomats, scholars, students, and members of the Somali diaspora.

This event arises from CHS' commitments to promoting dialogue and advancing critical inquiry into the drivers of conflict, along with generating solutions for their cessation and national reconstruction. It also seeks to promote the exploration of – in post-conflict contexts – the drivers behind state fragility that lead to violence.

The evening commenced with opening remarks from Dr. Elkahlout in which he introduced the lecture's theme and the distinguished guest. Since the collapse of the state in 1991, Somalia has witnessed great levels of instability, institutional weakness, and protracted armed conflict that have fueled the spread of corruption and nepotism, tribalism, the interference of Western superpowers, poverty and worsening humanitarian crises, and above all the conflict's continuation. Somalia has also witnessed the continued growth of Islamic jihadist groups, particularly the Al-Shabab movement. In the last 15 years, Somalia has undergone a turbulent transitional period and has struggled with the arduous process of rebuilding democratic state institutions. Dr. Elkahlout underlined how the public lecture coincides with Somalia's long-awaited presidential elections that were taking place in Mogadishu.

He then introduced Dr. Ali Gaas as an important figure in guiding Somalia's transitional period and in paving a sustainable path to peace and stability in the country. An economic and political expert from the United States, originally hailing from Somalia, Dr. Ali Gaas' tenure as Prime Minister lasted from June 2011 to October 2012, after which he served as a Member of Parliament. During his premiership, he designed and implemented a roadmap to conclude Somalia's transitional period. From 2014 to 2019, he was appointed President of one of Somalia's federal member states, Puntland. The former minister holds a Master's in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School and a Ph.D. in Economics from George Mason University.

## 2.0. Public Address by Dr. Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الإنساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

Following Dr. Elkahlout's opening remarks, Dr. Ali Gaas began by outlining key characteristics of Somalia's geography, highlighting its size – of which Qatar makes up 1.8% – and its abundance of natural resources that range from bauxite, copper, gold, natural gas, oil, uranium, tin, limestone, iron, and ore. He maintained throughout his lecture that this feature is both a blessing and a curse. Somalia's land is also highly suitable for all kinds of agriculture due to its strategic location between the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Before it was colonized in the 1800s, Dr. Ali Gaas explained how, although Somalia was not a state, it could be characterized as a nation whose people shared common descent, language, and culture. In 1884, the landmark Berlin Conference convened various European powers who divided Africa – an event referred to as the scramble for Africa – and Somalia was split up between different colonial powers. Until its independence in 1960, when the first Republic of Somalia was formed, Somalia was split into French Somaliland (now Djibouti), British Somaliland (large parts were ceded to Ethiopia), and Italian Somaliland.

Dr. Ali Gaas described the period between Somalia's independence and the 1969 military coup as the "years of democracy," whereby people enjoyed many civil liberties, including the right to a fair court trial and freedom from unwarranted searches of homes and properties. This situation was reversed with the military coup led by General Barre, who ruled the country with an iron fist for 21 years. During this time, military coups were also taking place all across Africa. Somalia was governed by a socialist authoritarian dictatorship. However, through social mobilization, Dr. Ali Gaas noted that General Barre's administration experienced some success in its early years, including in formalizing the Somali script, carrying out literacy campaigns, expanding education and health services, and developing roads and other public infrastructures. Yet, he maintained that many of the General's decisions, including the nationalization of banks and commercial farms, greatly weakened Somalia's society and economy by getting rid of incentives. General Barre's government was overthrown in 1991 by clan-based opposition groups, and the country descended into a civil war that saw the complete destruction of state institutions and public infrastructure.

Dr. Ali Gaas then moved to detail key milestones in Somalia's transitional period from the civil war to peace, including the formation of the first transitional government in 2000; the emergence of the Islamic Court Union and their final defeat by the Transitional Federal Government in 2008; the convening of the national reconciliation conference in Djibouti in 2009; the first presidential elections in 2012 and their failure to bring about effective change; and the last presidential elections in 2017, which saw the election of populist leader Mohamed Abdullahi Farhaji.



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الإنساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

Dr. Ali Gaas concluded his lecture by highlighting the following key challenges to stability and progress in Somalia: society's unrealistic expectations of the rate of change and progress, whereby change can only take place in the form of snail-paced small improvements; how the continuation of the conflict worsens society's fabric over time; the overwhelming power of clans in the country that cannot co-exist with a democratic nation-state system; the lack of benevolent leadership and effective institutions that can restrain the recklessness of leaders; the fear of Al-Shabab's growth should Somalia's problems continue to go unaddressed; and the destructiveness of foreign interventions that render Somalia a battleground for proxy wars.

### **3.0. Question-and-Answer Session**

In an engaging question-and-answer session after his public address, Dr. Ali Gaas entertained questions from the live audience, shedding important insight on several issues.

#### *GCC countries' influence on presidential elections*

Regarding GCC countries' influence on the recent presidential elections in Mogadishu, the former minister remarked on the salience of this issue amongst Somalis today, whom often discuss which countries – including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – are backing specific presidential candidates. He added that neighboring countries, including Ethiopia, are also influencing the elections, which is “more dangerous”. Dr. Ali Gaas lamented how millions of dollars are being spent on buying votes, a reality that stands in stark contrast to Somalis' past pride and commitment to hard work. Because politicians are “the best thing money can buy” in Somalia, he emphasized the need for good and benevolent leadership.

#### *Fostering democracy in Somalia*

Dr. Ali Gaas then received a question on the difficulties in adopting a democratic system and moving towards inclusive peace in Somalia given the predominance of the tribal system, which excludes commoners from decision-making. He responded by affirming that realizing this change is a process that takes time. He reminded the audience that before the period of reconciliation and peace agreements between the warring parties, impunity was the law of the land in Somalia: thousands were murdered and those responsible were not held accountable for the murders they committed. This must be addressed first in order for a peace process to be successful. Furthermore, prior to the move toward “one man, one vote”, the country must achieve stability, including by managing the threat of Al-Shabab either through negotiations or through eradicating them completely. For democracy to be a realistic prospect, the Somali government must also adopt modern technologies and standards of public administration – such as voter registration and regular censuses – to be able to reach all Somali



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الإنساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

citizens. Promoting civic education is also a necessary step in this process, according to Dr. Ali Gaas, who added that these measures can start to take place now in the country's safe areas.

#### *Investments in Somalia's natural resources*

The former minister was asked when Somalia can expect to attract foreign investments to benefit from its rich natural resources. He cautioned that the presence of natural resources in a country can be both a blessing and a curse because poorly managed resources can disincentivize innovation and promote inefficiency. Evidence to this claim lies in the fact that the least developed countries in the world – many of them in Africa, including Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Libya with low GDPs – have the most natural resources. Dr. Ali Gaas added that some resource-rich countries, such as the GCC countries, have been able to manage their resources effectively to achieve great levels of development, just as resource-poor countries, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, have also been able to achieve great levels of development through managing and leveraging existing resources strategically. Furthermore, the global move away from fossil fuels toward renewable energies means that Somalia's oil and gas have limited future prospects. For these reasons, it is imperative for Somalia to have good, far-sighted leadership and institutions. To this end, Dr. Ali Gaas referenced the authors of the Federalist Papers as examples of far-sighted leadership.

#### *The issue of Somaliland*

Upon being inquired for clarity on the Somaliland issue and what can be learned from this experience, Dr. Ali Gaas provided an overview of the dispute. Somaliland, according to the former minister, is comprised of areas that were formerly under British and Italian Somaliland. He added that whilst some people from Somaliland want to secede, some prefer to remain part of Somalia. The former minister noted that he initiated dialogue with Somaliland secessionists in 2012. He stated that, in his view, they should be offered a stake in the government – a proposal they will find compelling – to avoid secession.

#### *The role of the Arab League and Western nations in bringing stability to Somalia*

On the Arab League's role to assist Somalia, Dr. Ali Gaas lamented that despite Somalia's history of assistance to Arab states in the twentieth century, Arab states and peoples demonstrated poor treatment of Somalis after the state's collapse in 1991. He described how, although Somalis would otherwise choose to live in Arab countries due to shared language, cultural conservatism, and religion, Somalis have mainly been able to find safety and succor in Western nations. Across the E.U., the United States, and Canada, Somalis have risen to high ranks of politics, such as U.S. congresswoman Ilhan Omar. Somalis in Arab states, on the other



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الإنساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

hand, were experiencing poor treatment. The former minister noted that the spread of instability across the Arab world today does not position most Arab states well to offer assistance to other countries, as their own domestic issues must be addressed first.

Dr. Ali Gaas expressed that the West can engage with Somalia in a more productive manner, including by addressing the Al-Shabab threat. As a former colonial ruler of Somalia, Italy is well positioned to play a more active role in this regard, just as the United Kingdom and the United States engage actively in Sierra Leone and Liberia, their former respective colonies.

#### *Somalia's relations with its neighbors*

An audience member inquired how Somalia's sour relations with its neighbors can become more positive. Dr. Ali Gaas added that Somalia enjoys friendly relations with Djibouti, which is an exception. He expressed that at the end of the day, only Somalis can help themselves – no neighbor, Arab, or Westerner can help Somalis. He cautioned against losing Somalia's sovereignty in the process of ending up dependent on handouts and aid from the international community. Foreign aid, according to Dr. Ali Gaas, has never helped, and should instead be replaced by foreign direct investments. This is an effort that some Arab states are well-positioned to lead.

#### *The elusive search for good leadership*

Upon being inquired about the difficulty of finding good leadership in Somalia amid the rise of the clan-based system, the former minister responded by stating that the turnover of leadership is not as important as the presence of good, stable institutions that outlive leaders and their administrations. He provided the example of Italy which has had 65 administrations since 1945, demonstrating how institutions – strengthened by good leadership – matter more in the long run.

#### **4.0. Key Messages**

Overall, the lecture affirmed the importance of creating strong, stable, democratic institutions for national stability and progress – a process that must be led, first and foremost, by Somalis themselves, not foreign states or international organizations. Dr. Gaas also underlined the necessity of taking a long-term perspective on reconciliation, recovery, and development, as opposed to unrealistic expectations of overnight change.