

Massacre in Somalia: behind tribal conflicts, British geopolitical policy

by Marco Fanini

Had there been no Gulf war, the crisis in Somalia would have been, in all its horror, on the front pages of the world's newspapers. But in fact, the crisis in Somalia is an *extension* of the war in the Gulf, with Somalian civil war being manipulated and exacerbated to serve longstanding British and Israeli interests. And the unfolding tragedy has all but passed unnoticed, even in Italy, which until very recently had a considerable voice in its ex-colony's affairs. This fact has added yet another painful dimension to the massacre of the Somali intelligentsia, which has been exiled to the four corners of the globe since dictator Siad Barre came to power in 1969.

But who cares what happens in Somalia, one of the poorest countries of the world? Its main export and source of wealth is the sale of livestock; it lacks—or so it is said—Kuwait's oil; it does not put streams of petrodollars into circulation, and it is not part of a strategic area like the Middle East.

In general, the civil war in Somalia is being dismissed as an inter-tribal feud, an internal issue in which it is difficult to intervene. Yet, analysis of the situation makes it clear that, behind the tribal struggle, British geopolitical aims are benefiting, particularly in the exploitation of localist divisions.

General Aydid, the leader of the so-called militarist faction in the "Congress of Somali Unity," has been massacring thousands of helpless civilians in his advance through the south of Somalia. It is believed that at least 700,000 inhabitants of the capital, Mogadishu, have fled the south since the battle began in the city in December. In Bravá alone, hundreds of intellectuals, doctors, professionals, and people who formed the administrative fabric of the country have been slaughtered.

That Aydid is not targeting Siad Barre, as is commonly believed in the West, is suggested by the fact that Barre is holed up in the Gedo region, far from Aydid's path. (Gedo is inhabited by members of Barre's own group, the Marehan—whom he armed some time ago.) Instead, the issue is, apparently, a settling of accounts by Aydid's tribe, the Habar Gidir, with the Darod tribe. Actually, in Somali politics, it

is incorrect to speak of tribes; the relevant social unit is the territorial clan. Such clans, widespread among Muslim peoples, are not differentiated on an ethnic basis but by their ancient residence on, and possession of, a territory. Broadly speaking, there are three major Somali clans: the Hawiye, the Darod, and the Isaak.

The Hawiye, who unleashed the final offensive against Siad Barre and drove him out of Mogadishu, inhabit the center of the country. The Darod live mainly along the coast to the north and south of Mogadishu. The Isaak occupy the north, especially the region around the port of Berbera. These three clans are split into various sub-clans which are often caught up in intense rivalry.

For example, the Marehan are a small group belonging to the Darod, to which Siad Barre belongs. Until recently, they held all political power in Somalia. In 1978, the Marehan massacred the Mijurtini, who live along the coast to the north of Mogadishu, and razed their cities to the ground, because the Mijurtini had risen up against Barre. (The Mijurtini are the oldest opposition to Siad Barre, and perhaps the most rational and political.) Yet, General Aydid, a Hawiye from the Habar Gidir sub-clan, in his own propaganda promotes the massacre of the Mijurtini, emotionally exploiting the fact that they belong to the Darod, just like the hated Marehan of Siad Barre. Aydid is using tribal rivalries for his political ends: the physical elimination of the Darod.

Geopolitical players

This policy is being pursued by General Aydid in the interest of his protectors—Ethiopia, Israel, and Great Britain. Ethiopia favors elimination of the Darod, the clan which has always claimed as part of Somalia the Ogaden territory, which Ethiopia currently controls. If the Darod were out of the way, neither the Hawiye nor the Isaak would raise the issue of Ogaden. As a matter of fact, the Hawiye and Isaak are both armed and controlled by Ethiopia.

Israel, which has consistently befriended Ethiopia because of that country's strong Jewish minority, the Falasha, also has every interest in undermining Somalia, a Muslim country affiliated with the Arab League. Thus, in December

1990, a formal deal was arranged whereby Ethiopia would permit the airlift of 1,500 Falasha Jews to Israel, and, in exchange, according to the *Cairo Mena*, Israel would give "backing to confront military escalation against the government by Eritrean forces." That same month, the Ethiopian government began a counteroffensive against the Eritrean front, using arms supplied by Israel. (Eritrea has been fighting a secessionist war against Ethiopia since 1952, the year the Eritreans found themselves annexed to Ethiopia by a United Nations decision.) At almost the same time that Ethiopia began the assault on the Eritreans, in December, General Aydid's forces stormed Mogadishu—not surprising, since Somali rebel forces have run military operations from Ethiopia.

As for Britain's involvement, she seems to be aiming at secession, or at least autonomy, for northern Somalia—the former British colony Somaliland, which is now controlled by the Isaak. This would make possible reintroduction of British influence in the port of Berbera, and its return to its historic splendor as a competitor of the nearby French port of Djibouti.

Given the increasing coincidence of British and American interests, it seems fair to speak of an Anglo-American strategy for the Horn of Africa, especially since, with the Gulf war, the effort to decouple Ethiopia's Mengistu regime from Moscow and bring it closer to the West has borne fruit. In September, Secretary of State James Baker made with his Ethiopian counterpart Tesfaye Dinka a deal which swept aside the Eritreans.

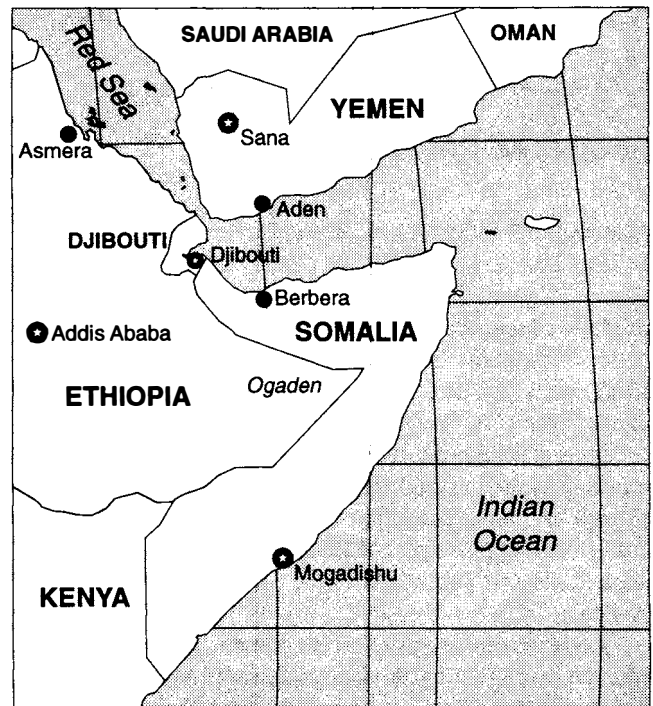
Who is General Aydid?

General Mohamed Farah Assan (Aydid) of the Habar Gidir sub-clan of the Hawiye, is considered a war criminal by his opponents. It was he who led Siad Barre's bloody repression of the Mijurtini back in 1978. Although today he demands to be President and styles himself the liberator, he was one of Siad Barre's closest cohorts, "Military and Security Adviser to the President" from 1978 to 1984, a post which made him chief of the notorious Red Berets. Aydid, for power motives, had opposed Siad Barre at the time of the latter's 1969 coup and had remained in jail until 1975. Then the two men made a deal, and Aydid went from being security adviser, to commander of "military affairs in the central and eastern regions," and finally became ambassador to India in 1989.

Officially, Aydid got his military training in Italy at the Cesana Military Academy in Rome, and in the Soviet Union's Frunze Military Academy. His rivals suspect that he and his officers also got special training from the Israelis. Some time ago, Ethiopia granted Israel the use of two small islands in the Red Sea, across from the town of Aseb, which may have been used for guerrilla training.

As to Aydid's current tactics, undoubtedly the military actions against Mogadishu led by his Hawiye clan have

The Horn of Africa



Major clans of Somalia and their subclans

Hawiye	Darod	Isaak
Abgal Habar Gidir Hawadle	Mijurtini Ogaden Marehan Dubahante	Habar Awal Habar Yonis Habar Jeelo

blown to bits the protocol of understanding signed last October between the Congress of Somali Unity (Hawiye), the Somali National Movement (Isaak), and the Somali Patriotic Movement (Ogaden). As a result, the Isaak in the north have stepped up their secessionist policy, by refusing to recognize the new President Mahdi and proclaiming their administrative autonomy, separate from Mogadishu. And the Ogaden, led by General Jess, are now under fire from Aydid, who wants to exterminate them as being part of the Darod clan.

It seems unlikely that Aydid will succeed, ultimately, in his criminal enterprise, which means there will probably be another stalemate among the three big clans. The basis for an eventual positive diplomatic action, in which Italy especially could be interested, might be President Mahdi, a Mogadishu hotel-owner. Although he is a Hawiye and therefore disliked by the other clans, he might represent a counterweight to Aydid's militarism.