



Historical Links between the Arabian Peninsula and Somali Peninsula: A Regional Response Based on Partnership

Theodore Karasik

Introduction

To many Western or other non-specialist minds, the idea that the Arabian Peninsula and the *Somalia Peninsula* are closely linked through historical ties and through merchant trade relations seems alien. Many if not all counter-piracy analysts or government officials tend to look at the Somali Peninsula separately from the Arabian Peninsula, or to consider them as part of two distinct ‘regions’. It is known, for instance, that because of proximity, African migrants used Somalia as a transit port onto Arabian Peninsula through Yemen and then into Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This lacunae in the foreign policy literature is surprising in light of the extensive and unique historical relationships that have existed between the people of both areas. The following chapter provides a brief overview of these relationships in order to suggest how these ‘trans-regional’ connections may be leveraged to enhance the current international response against piracy emanating off the coast of Somalia.

Brief Historical Background

Somalia has a long history of cultural, religious, and trade ties with the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, in particular from the introduction of Islam to what is present-day Somalia in the 1400s. Although Somalis ethnically are not Arab, they identify closely with Arabs – and generally more than they do with other Africans. Why is this relevant today? In addition to the position of Arabic as an official language of Somalia and Somalia’s membership of the Arab League, there are other cultural and social dynamics that are often overlooked in the relationship between Somalis and Gulf Arabs.

Many clans in Somali society, which remains highly tribal, claim themselves to be descended from Arab ancestors. Nearly seventy-five percent of the Somali population in Somalia for



example comes from the Dir, the Darod, the Isaaq, and the Hawiye families, which can still be found in the Arabian Peninsula today. Linkages between the two Peninsulas were seen in between the 15th and 19th centuries along the main coastal centers of Somalia which were under the control of Arab merchant families and under the sovereignty of the Sultanate of Oman. Somalis traditionally migrated back and forth between the Somali colonial states and the Arabian Peninsulas part of trade, familial movements (intermarriage in what would be Yemen), and education.

In the 20th century there was a significant increase in migration from Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula. In the 1970s and 1980s, the number of Somalis moving to the Gulf States climbed significantly as employment opportunities opened up with the development of those oil-rich countries' economies. Remittance flows from the Arabian Peninsula soon became the largest source of diaspora funds, with over 60 percent of total remittances to Somalia coming from the Arabian Peninsula states immediately prior to the outbreak of the Somali civil war in 1991.

However, Somalis continued to arrive in Arabian Peninsula states for also other reasons such as to join family members, to pursue religious education, and to avoid the political and violent situation in Somalia. Through this period, the states of the Arabian Peninsula and Somalia developed closer political relations as Somalia became increasingly dependent upon economic aid from GCC states. Partly due to his alignment with GCC state, the then-Somali President Siad Barre chose to side with the United States-led coalition in the First Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. Support for the coalition brought significant economic dividends to Somalia: Qatar canceled repayment of and interest on outstanding loans, while Saudi Arabia offered Somalia a US\$70 million grant and promised to sell it oil at below prevailing international market prices.

Current Relations and the Regional Linkages

In addition to long-standing religious, cultural and economic ties, over the past two decades a new dimension has emerged to their relationships since the beginning of the Somali civil war. In supporting Somalia and its people through the conflict by donating aid countries like Qatar,



Kuwait, Yemen, and Oman have played important roles. But the UAE has emerged as the predominant hub for Somali business and in the post-civil war era, Dubai has become Somalia's key link to the Arabian Peninsula. With the collapse of the Somali government and state institutions, and violence that has forced millions to flee, a large Somali community has found refuge in Dubai. Today an estimated 900,000 Somalis reside in the states of the Arabian Peninsula, with Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and UAE the major diaspora centers.

In the UAE, between 80,000-100,000 Somalis currently reside and number among the country's largest immigrant communities. A large number of Somali-owned businesses are concentrated in the Deira area of Dubai, with large numbers of Somalis running import-export businesses, restaurants, cafes, and hotels. Today Somalis even own three Dubai-based airlines offering direct flights from the UAE to Mogadishu. A large proportion of Somalia's elite also reside in Dubai, such as former President Abdullahi Yusuf, who died in March 2012. President Yusuf was the first Somali president to return to the Somali capital, Mogadishu, since the fall of Mohammed Siad Bare in 1991, serving four years before he handed power to Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in 2008.

For major commodity trading, Somali shipping operators use Dubai as a hub for their activities, receiving rice from India, Pakistan, and China to import to Somalia. Somalia's major exports - livestock, meat, and charcoal - are shipped to Dubai. Consequently, Dubai and its Somali residents play a major role in supplying all regions of Somalia with basic needs. Somali's major ports, including Heis, Maidh and Laasqoray in northern Somalia, Haradheere and Hobyo in the Mudug region, and CeelDheer in the Galgaduud region and Kismayo in southern Somalia, are also common ports for merchants from the Arabian Peninsula. The dhows coming to and from these ports dock in ports up and down the Red Sea coast of the western Arabian Peninsula and the southern ports of the Arabian Peninsula by the Gulf of Aden, and on the Arabian Gulf.

Specifically, in the UAE, commercial cargo dhows sail regularly between Somalia and the ports at Dubai Creek, Ajman, and Sharjah. These dhows carry a wide variety of consumer and material goods, including lumber, lubricants, tires, vehicle and machinery parts, complete vehicles, bulk



and processed foodstuffs, consumer electronics, and durable goods. Tires for automobiles and trucks are, by volume, the largest type of cargo shipped to southern Somalia. Total figures of this trade are unknown.

A Regional Response Based on Historical Partnerships

Regionally-based partnerships between Arabian Peninsula merchants and Somali Peninsula merchants who reside in the Arabian Peninsula itself or in Somalia proper offer a promising basis on which to develop further cooperation between Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. Firstly, the UAE's social and cultural appeal is very strong among Somalis. Secondly, the scale of trade between the two Peninsulas helps the UAE position as a regional trade hub which Somalia—like many other regional states—is increasingly becoming dependent on. Thirdly, there are a high number of intermarriages between Arabian Peninsula families and Somalis, specifically in Yemen, which makes the need for such a cross-regional partnership so central. Fourthly, Somali leaders like to visit the UAE, many do so frequently, and the current Somali leadership is still seeking to expand the bilateral political relationship between the UAE and Somalia but also want to see the business community grow because they see Dubai in particular as a major point of rescue for the ailing Somali economy in order to end piracy. A regional partnership built on historical linkages could have an impact on the piracy threat if it was able to help develop key industries in Somalia, providing the 'alternate livelihoods' for coastal communities in Somalia. More aggressive investments by a regional-based partnership would make all participants accountable and would help to centralize transactions and promote transparency. In order to encourage such an increase in investment and business development, a framework able to build trust through a legally-sound mechanism would be required.

Institutionalizing Arabian-Somali Peninsula Links: A Somalia-Arabian Business Council

One such framework to consider is the creation of a Somalia-Arabian Peninsula Business Council (SAPBC) that could be based in Dubai and to be closely linked with the Somali Business Council (SBC). From 2001 until about 2006, the SBC was highly successful:



Advocates for business interests in Somalia and a venue for information-sharing and community-building among its members. Unfortunately, the SBC fell apart in 2006 due to an inability to agree over a new leadership for the group. Now the SBC is being revived at a critical time and should include small and medium sized businesses that would help feed into the SAPBC.

The SAPBC would be an organization that develops the trade and economic relations between Somalia and the GCC plus Yemen, and could provide assistance in establishing business contacts between businessmen in order to develop robust public-private partnerships to boost Somalia's development and facilitate the long-term eradication Somali piracy. The SAPBC could meet quarterly in various Arabian Peninsula and Somalia Peninsula cities to discuss key issues and using the latest social media technology to inform readers of ways to help build new coastal communities in Somalia as well as to build closer relations between the two geographical units in a united effort for healthy multi-lateral relations. Working groups within the SAPBC would be responsible for different streams of investment ideas and projects.

Clearly, an effort such as the SAPBC is seen as a way to find a regional solution to make Arabian Peninsula and Somali Peninsula ties more forceful. The SAPBC combined with a strategic information campaign designed to highlight the positive and historical dimensions of Somali communities on the Arabian Peninsula would help to eliminate the current negative press associated with Somali piracy. Personal relationships and business association among leading actors in the trade networks provide the underlying organizing principles of a robust business network. Overall, further bringing together the two peninsulas via commerce and people to people contacts can help to mitigate Somali piracy.

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