Diplomacy in a failed state

international mediation in Somalia

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Somalia is the longest-running instance of complete state collapse in the post-colonial era. It has also been the site of some of the world’s most intensive mediation efforts, designed to bring the country’s twenty-year crisis to a close.

Diplomatic initiatives have varied in approach, but all have met with failure. Collectively, they have been the subject of intense debate about what has gone wrong and what lessons can be drawn from them.

Ten challenges for external mediation
For a variety of reasons, the Somali crisis has been an especially challenging case for external mediators.

1. The context of complete state collapse poses unique difficulties. It complicates issues of representation at the bargaining table and adds the daunting task of state revival to the challenges of reconciliation and power-sharing.

2. Somalia has been exceptionally prone to disputes over representation, making it difficult to identify representatives at the negotiating table who are both legitimate (ie able to speak on behalf of a constituency) and authoritative (ie able to enforce agreements reached).

3. Somalia’s susceptibility to centrifugal political dynamics, exacerbated by the fissurable nature of clanism, has made it especially difficult to maintain coalitions.

4. The ubiquity of small arms has increased the number and capacity of potential spoilers. The combination of small arms proliferation and unstable coalitions has prevented any one side from imposing a ‘victor’s peace’.

5. While peace itself is viewed by most Somalis as a positive-sum game, revival of central government is viewed by many as a zero-sum contest and hence a risky enterprise. This is in part because of a past history of predatory state behaviour in Somalia. Somalis want a revived state, but they fear the consequences of losing control of the process to a rival.

6. Regional rivalries in the Horn of Africa have led to proxy wars, entangling the Somali crisis in a broader complex of regional conflict and creating competing diplomatic processes.

7. Standard international negotiating procedures have been in constant tension with Somalia’s rich heritage of traditional conflict management practices, and have generally crowded them out.

8. External mediation has had to proceed on thin and questionable knowledge of Somalia’s complex political dynamics, increasing the odds of missteps by diplomats. The physical isolation from Somalia of the Nairobi-based diplomatic corps is largely to blame for this.

9. More recently, growing US preoccupation with the security threat posed by prolonged state collapse in Somalia has fuelled greater external support for reviving a functional central state that can effectively monitor and prevent terrorist activities. This has reinforced in the minds of Somalis the sense that peacebuilding in Somalia has largely been driven by outside rather than Somali interests.
10. The protracted nature of the Somali crisis has not, as some conflict resolution theories would predict, created a ‘hurting’ stalemate, but has instead deepened divisions and added new layers of complications onto the search for peace.

This latter point is especially important. A case can be made that with each failed peace process, the Somali crisis has become more intractable and difficult to resolve as distrust grows, grievances mount, coping mechanisms become entrenched and the percentage of the Somali population that has a living memory of a functioning central government shrinks.

**Mediation in Somalia since 1991**

Although it is frequently stated that over a dozen national reconciliation conferences have been convened on Somalia since 1991, a closer look reveals that only six were fully fledged national peace conferences.

First, the Djibouti Talks of June-July 1991, at which Ali Mahdi was declared interim President, a move General Mohamed Farah Aideed rejected. This peace process, which convened six factions, was really only a set of negotiations intended to form an interim government. It inadvertently exacerbated political tensions which culminated in the explosion of armed conflict destroying much of Mogadishu in late 1991.

Second, the Addis Ababa National Reconciliation Talks of January and March 1993. This was the linchpin of the UN intervention in Somalia and was meant to provide a blueprint for the creation of a two-year interim government. The Addis Ababa talks convened fifteen clan-based factions and produced a rushed and vaguely-worded accord that sparked tensions between the UN and some armed factions over whether the creation of district and regional councils were to be a bottom-up process or controlled by factions. Armed conflict broke out between General Aideed’s faction and UN peacekeepers, which derailed the mission and blocked implementation of the accord.

Third, the Sodere Conference of 1996-97, convened by neighbouring Ethiopia, which sought to revive a decentralized, federal Somali state at the expense of factions that opposed Ethiopia. A rival peace process in Egypt, the ‘Cairo Conference’, undermined Sodere. The Sodere talks introduced the principle of fixed proportional representation by clan, the ‘4.5 formula’, used subsequently in the country.

Fourth, the Cairo Conference of 1997 convened by Egypt, a regional rival of Ethiopia, to promote a centralized Somali state and elevate the power of Somali factions that boycotted the Sodere talks. The two broad coalitions that emerged from Sodere and Cairo formed the basis for the main political divisions in Somalia in subsequent years.

Fifth, the Arta Peace Conference of 2000 convened by Djibouti. This brought civic rather than faction leaders to the talks and used telecommunications technology to broadcast proceedings back to Somalia. In the end it produced a three-year Transitional National Government (TNG) that empowered a Mogadishu-based coalition at the expense of a pro-Ethiopian alliance. It faced numerous domestic opponents as well as Ethiopian hostility and never became operational.
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Finally, the Mbagathi conference of 2002-04, sponsored by regional organization IGAD, a lengthy conference in Kenya to produce a successor to the failed TNG. With heavy Kenyan and Ethiopian direction, the delegates consisted mainly of militia and political leaders, not civic leaders, and promoted a federalist state. A phase of the talks dedicated to resolution of conflict issues – an innovation intended to prevent the talks from devolving into a mere power sharing deal – never gained traction.

The Mbagathi talks culminated in the creation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in late 2004 and the controversial election of President Abdullahi Yusuf. The TFG was deeply divided at the outset, with many Somalis raising objections about the legitimacy of representation at the talks. The TFG has struggled in subsequent years and has yet to become a minimally functional government or to advance key transitional tasks.

Power brokering
In addition to the six conferences outlined above, a number of other national peace processes were held by external actors but are more appropriately described as peace ‘deals’ – attempts to forge a narrow ruling coalition without wide consultation across Somali society.

In early 1994, for example, a desperate UN peacekeeping mission, the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), tried to broker a deal bringing together three of the most powerful militia leaders at that time – Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf, General Aideed and General Morgan – culminating in the ill-fated ‘Nairobi informal talks’. Such external attempts to broker expedient deals are usually based on a crude and ill-informed understanding of the nature of power in Somalia.

Assessing external mediation in Somalia
Many of the problems encountered in Somali national reconciliation processes have been a reflection of obstacles to peace over which external mediators have had little control. This fact is often forgotten in the rush to criticize international diplomats working to resolve the Somali crisis.

Nevertheless, the quality of external mediation in Somalia has been uneven and has resulted in several missed opportunities for peace. Some of the most common criticisms of external mediation in Somalia are outlined below.

Over-emphasis on state-revival and power-sharing
Arguably the single biggest mistake by external mediators since 1991 has been to conflate the revival of a central government with successful reconciliation, leading to a preoccupation with brokering power sharing deals. Time and again power sharing accords in the absence of even token efforts at national reconciliation have produced stillborn transitional governments.

Lack of international political will
Weak international political will to address Somalia was especially evident from 1989-92 when external attention was distracted by the end of the Cold War and other major global developments. But this was also the case in the post-UNOSOM period, when Somalia was again given only marginal attention.

A related problem has been half-hearted follow through after having reached an accord and the failure of external actors to provide timely, robust support to newly declared transitional governments. This was a central feature of the debate in 2000 and 2001 between those who argued for a ‘wait and see’ approach to the TNG versus those who advocated immediate aid in order to ‘prime the pump’ and build confidence in the fledgling government. A similar debate occurred in 2005 with the TFG.

This latter view stresses that the months immediately following peace accords constitute a brief window of opportunity that is lost if external assistance is delayed and the fledgling government fails to earn ‘performance’ legitimacy in the eyes of the Somali public, by improving public security and provision of basic services.

Misdiagnosis
Somalia’s crisis defies easy boilerplate approaches and pre-set templates. Yet far too many diplomatic initiatives in Somalia have been formulaic and have actively resisted tailoring mediation to close knowledge of Somali politics and culture. A related problem is the tendency for external mediating teams to acquire just enough knowledge of Somalia to feel that they have mastered the country, when in fact they have dangerously misread it. Nowhere is the adage ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’ more apt than in Somalia.

Lack of strategy
In several cases important mediation efforts have substituted timetables for a genuine reconciliation strategy. Little thought was given to handling spoilers, security guarantees and other
important issues, leaving mediators susceptible to unexpected surprises and ensuring that the entire mediation effort was reduced to crisis response.

Lack of neutrality
Several national reconciliation conferences were clearly mediated with the intent of producing a political outcome in favour of local allies. Others started relatively neutral, but once the process was underway mediators made decisions which tilted the playing field in favour of one or another political group.

Whenever peace processes led to the declaration of a transitional government, mediators treated that transitional authority as legitimate, even if other Somali groupings rejected it. From UNOSOM in 1993 to the TFG in 2008, mediators’ understandable support for the transitional entities they helped establish has created accusations of bias on the part of rejectionists. This points to an important dynamic in Somalia, namely the tendency for conflict to continue during and after accords have been signed.

Poor quality mediators
In a few instances, Somalia has been saddled with external diplomats with weak credentials and capacity. The result has been embarrassing mistakes and missed opportunities.

Lessons learnt
Despite the multiple setbacks suffered in external mediation since 1991, a number of important positive lessons have been learnt.

First, Somali ownership of the peace process is critical. Negotiations cannot be driven by external actors or they quickly lose legitimacy. Somali ownership means that Somalis themselves must determine agendas, timetables and procedures.

A corollary to this observation is that peace processes that tap into traditional Somali reconciliation practices, especially the essential practices of having negotiators extensively vet positions with their constituencies, will stand a better chance of success. National reconciliation processes in Somalia need to combine the most effective traditional and contemporary peace initiatives. Innovations at the Arta talks established some best practice in this regard.

Second, although representation is deeply contested no matter how it is determined, some systems of representation are better than others. To date external mediators have tended either to privilege either militia leaders on the basis of a crude ‘realist’ belief that those who control the guns control power, or traditional and civil society leaders, in the hope that grassroots representation is more legitimate.

There has also been an uncritical reliance on the 4.5 formula to determine clan representation in talks and in transitional governments, despite widespread objections. There is no easy solution to this conundrum, but it is worth noting that effective hybrid systems of representation have been devised at sub-national peace talks and may offer potential solutions.

Third, we have clearly learned that reconciliation processes cannot and must not be reduced to power sharing deals by political elites. This ‘cake-cutting’ approach has repeatedly failed and is contributing to growing cynicism among Somalis about peace processes. The phase two reconciliation effort built into the Mbagathi peace process was a first attempt to tackle this problem.

Fourth, if the establishment of transitional governments is an unavoidable component of peace accords to extricate Somalia from its twenty year crisis of state collapse, external mediators and donors must press Somali leaders to focus on executing key transitional tasks rather than building maximalist security states.

Fifth, mediators must have a clear strategy to understand and manage spoilers to peace processes. This includes differentiating between ‘intrinsic’ spoilers – warlords and others who have no interest in allowing a revived central government – and ‘situational’ spoilers, whose objections to a peace process have to do with specific aspects of the accord or power sharing arrangements.

Creating political space for a ‘loyal opposition’ would allow groups unhappy with aspects of an accord or transitional government to voice their objections, without becoming rejectionists opposing the entire process.

Finally, it is essential to develop more creative transitional security and stabilization mechanisms that are designed to maximize the sense of security for anxious communities during early phases of implementing peace accords. Boilerplate approaches to the creation of a single security sector, giving those in control of a transitional government the prospect of a monopoly on the use of violence, virtually guarantees the rise of rejectionists and spoilers.

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