The Journal of Modern African Studies

http://journals.cambridge.org/MOA

Additional services for ***The Journal of Modern African Studies:***

Email alerts: Click here
Subscriptions: Click here
Commercial reprints: Click here
Terms of use : Click here

The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Rôle in Somali History

David D. Laitin

The Journal of Modern African Studies / Volume 17 / Issue 01 / March 1979, pp 95 - 115
DOI: 10.1017/S0022278X0000519X, Published online: 11 November 2008

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022278X0000519X

How to cite this article:
David D. Laitin (1979). The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Rôle in Somali History. The Journal of Modern African Studies, 17, pp 95-115 doi:10.1017/S0022278X0000519X

Request Permissions : Click here

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

Downloaded from http://journals.cambridge.org/MOA, IP address: 164.11.203.58 on 05 Nov 2013

The Journal of Modern African Studies, 17, 1 (1979), pp. 95–115

The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Rôle in Somali History

by DAVID D. LAITIN*

AT the turn of the century, Sayid Maxamad Cabdille Xasan led a 21-year battle against foreign colonialists in the Somali lands. Then British aircraft mercilessly bombarded his main fort at Talex in 1920, and he died a few months later, his military forces in utter disarray. The *Sayid*, as he is known, is none the less considered the father of modern Somali nationalism. Military defeat did not spoil the lustre of this hero's feats.

In the 1970s, the Somalis were again engaged in a full-scale struggle, this time against the 'colonialist' Ethiopians in the Ogaden. As in the case of the Sayid, there were early and glorious victories, followed ultimately by defeat. But in this war, there has been a major difference. General Maxamed Siyaad Barre, Secretary-General of the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party and President of the Somali Democratic Republic, the leader of the nation during this period, has not come out of defeat as a hero. The greatness of *Siyaad* has been questioned rather than reaffirmed by loss.

In April 1978, some ten months after the great influx of guerrillas from the Somali Republic into the Ogaden Desert, and following their retreat into the Northern Region, the régime of President Siyaad was nearly toppled. A number of high-ranking officers behind the attempted coup received support from soldiers near the capital, hundreds of miles from where the army had retreated. Their action crystallised the deep divisions within the armed forces after their losses at the hands of the combined Ethiopian-Cuban-Russian military effort. The leader of the conspiracy was Maxamed Sheikh Cismaan 'Cirro', and one of his Lieutenants, Abdullahi Yosef Axmed, escaped to Kenya and spoke out publicly against the leadership of Siyaad who, he claimed, had hid in the slums of Mogadishu during the attempted uprising, and afterwards had killed many of his enemies, whether or not they were involved.[1]

* Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of California, San Diego. This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Baltimore, November 1978.

[1] *Washington Star*, 9 May 1978.

0022/278x/79/2828-4050 $02.00 © 1979 Cambridge University Press

This abortive coup is only the most manifest indicator of the President's political position, and by itself does not signal historical ignominy for Siyaad. After all, in 1904, the Sayid's forces were decimated near Ilig when Cismaan Maxamuud of the Majeerteen clan 'sold out' to the British. And during the last months of resistance, most of the Sayid's venom was reserved for the Isxaaq Somalis, who had allied with the British to counter the thrust of his predominantly Daarood armies. It could be argued that the recent struggle was of a similar ilk, and that it merely represented a clan battle in a period in which the leader was somewhat vulnerable. That the conspirators were mostly of the Majeerteen clan, which had considerable power before the Siyaad régime, but then 'lost out' in the present Marexaan-Dhulbahante coalition, makes the analogy between the Sayid and Siyaad plausible.

None the less, Somali historiography has been kinder to the Sayid than it will be to Siyaad. The period between the two World Wars was one of growing unity and strength of the Somali people, leading up to independence in 1960, whereas the years following the 1978 collapse of the Ethiopian front could well be a period of declining hope and fortune.

Although some Somali historians and patriots have pointed to negative aspects of the Sayid's rôle – that he built support by constructing alliances based on birth rather than by articulating a broader, less clan-oriented basis for Somali nationalism – the predominant strain in Somali historiography adulates the Sayid. President Abdulrashiid Shermarkay, Prime Minister and later President of the Republic, spoke of the Sayid as 'a visionary, the father of the modern Somali nation'. And two modern historians, Abdal-Allah Rirash and Sheikh Jaama'a 'Umar 'Iise turn him into a prophet. The more dispassionate Saciid Samatar summarises their view:

> To them, the Sayid is a founding father. In assessing his career, these Somali writers are inclined to compare Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan to Prophet Muhammad of Arabia. To fortify their argument of the heroic qualities of the Sayid, they point to 'three things' which the Sayid shared with the Arabian Apostle: the name, the age (at which they began their respective ministries), and the propensity to wage *jihad*.[1]

An interesting contribution by Abdi Sheikh-Abdi gives a good sense of how many Somalis interpret the Sayid's career:

[1] S. S. Samatar, 'The Search for the Real Mullah: Mohammed Abdille Hasan of Somalia', Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Baltimore, November 1978, pp. 1–4. This paper is the basis for a doctoral dissertation in history at Northwestern University, Evanston.

During the partition of the Somalilands at the turn of the century, the predominantly nomadic and technologically backward Somalis managed to retain a modicum of independence and national integrity largely as a result of the exceptional leadership of Sayid Maxamad Cabdille Xasan. He not only rallied his fellow countrymen against a host of formidable enemies, but he intellectually defined his people's cause. He also gave the British, Ethiopians, and their European allies a good fight before famine, pestilence and superior firepower reduced his rebel army to the status of desperate fugitives in the mosquito-infested swamps of the Shabelle River. But he died undaunted, singing his defiance of imperial domination to the grave as the following poem attests:

> . . .
> Behold how the infidel lays traps for you [Somalis]
> as you become less wary!
> The coins he dispenses so freely now will prove
> your undoing.
> First he will disarm you as though you were
> mere women
> He will deceive you and rob you of
> your lands
> And then burden you with onerous loads as
> though you were donkeys. . .

These were the last words of the man who fought the British, the Italians, and Ethiopians for nearly twenty-one years. . .in order to keep his people free of foreign domination. Inevitably, he lost the fight, though he left behind a legacy of nationalism and spirited resistance to colonial rule that would be an example to those who came after him.[1]

The main themes which pervade this passage are recurrent when Somalis consider the Sayid. First, he was fiercely independent and proud. That he died 'undaunted, singing his defiance', and that he railed against any Somalis who took 'coins' from the 'infidel', suggests a firm sense of national dignity. At one point, in taunting the British for engaging too many allies, he claimed that 'if you were strong, you would have stood by yourself as we do, independent and free'.[2] Or more forcefully, these lines exemplify the Sayid's stance:

> Ye have mistaken the hell-ordained and
> Christians for the prophet
> Ye have shamelessly grovelled after the accursed
> Were you nobleman [as you claim] ye would
> loath [the white] infidels.[3]

[1] Abdi Sheikh-Abdi, 'Sayid Mohammed Abdille Hassan and the Current Conflict in the Horn', in *Horn of Africa* (Summit, N.J.), 1, 2, April/June 1978, p. 61.
[2] Ibid. p. 64.
[3] Samatar, op. cit. p. 17.

And he lived by those words. After he escaped from the aerial bombardment, he was besieged by messages from the British that they would give him his own area to rule, with a handsome salary and protection, if he would only surrender. His cryptic responses were clear on only one point: that the British could not bargain with him under any circumstances.[1]

Secondly, the Sayid's stature was enhanced by his use of 'great words'. The Somalis are often brought together through verbal assault, both within themselves and towards outsiders – hence their much acknowledged xenophobia. The Sayid was a master at this. Any Somalis who bargain with the infidels are weak like 'women' and must carry loads like 'donkeys'. Elsewhere in listing British allies against the Somalis, he made a brilliant category error: 'Arabs, and Sudanese, and Kaffirs, and *Perverts*...and Indians and French, and Russians'.[2] That sense of irony can often make military defeat tolerable. And because the Sayid was the undoubted master of classical Somali poetry – with his struggles forming the main theme of his verse – his trials and tribulations have been indelibly printed in Somali historiography. As one elder put it recently, 'Victory without verse is no victory but merely an ephemeral event.'[3]

Thirdly, Sheikh-Abdi is insistent that the Sayid put up a 'good fight' and demonstrated 'exceptional leadership', even although he 'inevitably' lost. The myth of the good fight, reinforced by the evidence of four increasingly expensive British expeditions, and the eventual use of air power to decimate his forces, is essential to Somali historiography. All this assumes that the Sayid was the 'underdog', for if he were expected to win – say, because he knew the terrain, and had the support of the population – there could be no myth propounding the military prowess of Maxamad Cabdille Xasan.

As regards each of these dimensions, partly due to a changed international environment to be sure, but also because of deficiencies in leadership, the performance of Siyaad does not presage an historiography of greatness. The President of Somalia may well have been visionary in social and economic development, but in the fulfillment of the national dream, he has appeared to be heavy-handed and vacillating.

[1] B. G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 194. The author footnotes the major authorities on the Sayid's career.

[2] Sheikh-Abdi, loc. cit. p. 62.

[3] Samatar, op. cit. p. 25.

HE 'BEGGED' FROM FOREIGN POWERS

Disregarding his great predecessor's dictum to avoid taking 'coin' from foreigners, Siyaad has curried favour from various governments, and they have, more often than not, disgraced him in front of his own people.

1. *The Soviets*

Russian aid in the early years of the Somali Republic was responsible for equipping and modernising the army, and when the soldiers dominated the American-supported police force during the 1969 coup, the Soviets achieved a central position in Somali politics.

By mid-1974, about 1,725 Somali soldiers had been to the Soviet Union for training, and the army had as par of its inventory an estimated 150 T-35 and 100 T-54 tanks, mostly fitted with 105-mm guns. Also, more than 300 armed personnel carriers, 200 coastal batteries, 50 MIG fighters, a squadron of Il-28 bombers, and an SA-2 ground-to-air missile complex now belonged to the Somalis. Up to 3,600 Soviet advisers supported this effort,[1] a remarkable figure. Furthermore, in 1975, the Soviet Union made available to the Somalis approximately $63 million in economic credits and grants (out of $67 million for all of Africa). These went towards such schemes as factories for milk and meat, port-dredging operations, and the much heralded 'Giuba Dam' project.[2] The Somalis, in return, permitted the Soviets to control a major military base in Berbera,[3] as well as access to the port of Kismaayo, quite useful as a staging point for exercises by the Russian fleet in the Indian Ocean.

All of these economic and military agreements were symbolised in the signing of a 'Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation' between the U.S.S.R. and the Somali Democratic Republic in July 1974. But despite Siyaad's espousal of Marxist–Leninist 'scientific socialism', most of his countrymen disliked the new alliance. The petty traders were disappointed that thousands of Russians saved their petty cash to exploit the Arab-dominated gold market, rather than lubricate the local economy. The factory managers were often in conflict with their Soviet advisers, accusing them of holding back production.[4] Army

[1] Brian Crozier, 'The Soviet Presence in Somalia', in *Conflict Studies* (London), 54, February 1975, pp. 4–8.

[2] United States Central Intelligence Agency, 'Communist Aid to the Less Developed Countries of the Free World, 1976', ER 77–10296, Washington, August 1977, p. 12.

[3] United States Senate, Committee on Armed Services, 'Soviet Military Capability in Berbera, Somalia', Washington, July 1975, p. 15.

[4] Crozier, loc. cit. p. 9.

officers scheduled for training in the Soviet Union would tell friends that they were being exiled in 'Siberia'. A stunning humiliation occurred after Siyaad had promised Senator Dewey Bartlett that his U.S. military team could look at all the facilities at Berbera. The Russians, who had built docking facilities there for missiles far more sophisticated than the Somalis had access to, evidently refused to uphold Siyaad's promise, and so blocked entry to a key area.[1] Somali officers surmised that the only explanation for the President's invitation of the Americans, was that Siyaad had no idea what the Russians were really building in Berbera.

Siyaad permitted the continuation of an alliance that was seen as the only way to equip his army, so that it could successfully support the Western Somali Liberation Front (W.S.L.F.). Even though the Soviets turned a deaf ear whenever Siyaad broached the subject of 'unredeemed' territory, he assumed that they would be compelled to support Somalia's foreign-policy goals, by virtue of having made such a considerable commitment already and by their need for Somali ports. The President was rudely mistaken.

As early as 1975, when 'war clouds' gathered over the Ogaden Desert,[2] and while Siyaad began to give attention to the organisation of the W.S.L.F., the Soviets started to reassess many of their economic commitments to Somalia. With the emergence of the radical *Derg* in Addis Ababa, Moscow proceeded to seek ties with the new Ethiopian régime, and despite the fact that this was known to be unacceptable to Siyaad, by December 1976 had worked out a military agreement with the *Derg*. Soon afterwards Soviet advisers began to leave Somalia, many of them going directly to Ethiopia.

The Russians were clearly not in favour of the major influx of troops from Somalia into the Ogaden Region during July 1977, and early in August it was reported (I think, incorrectly) that the Americans were promising weapons to Siyaad if he evicted the Russians entirely from Somalia.[3] A few days later, a Reuters dispatch from Moscow quoted *Tass* as reporting that 'regular units of the Somali army' were fighting in 'Ethiopia's territory', clearly suggesting that the Soviets were tilting towards the Ethiopians. Another Reuters correspondent, this time in Abu Dhabi, reported that Somalia had none the less decided to maintain its ties with the U.S.S.R.[4]

[1] 'Soviet Military Capability', p. 15.

[2] See the report by David Ottaway in the *Washington Post*, 10 February 1976; and also Tom Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: a crisis for détente* (New York, 1976).

[3] *Time Magazine* (New York), 8 August 1977.

[4] *New York Times*, datelined 14 August 1977.

By the end of August 1977, a U.P.I. correspondent had quoted 'Moscow' as accusing Somalia of 'armed intervention'.[1] That charge, and an apparent reneging by President Carter of his earlier promise to supply arms to Somalia, led Siyaad to make a hasty journey to Moscow, mainly in order to stop the Soviets from arming Ethiopia. He no longer expected Soviet aid, but tried to use his remaining 'chips' to bargain for an African war, free from foreign intervention. Unfortunately, he could not get an audience with Chairman Brezhnev, and left the Soviet Union humiliated.[2] By October, *The Economist* was reporting that crates of MIG-21 and MIG-23 airframes were being delivered in Addis Ababa, in the midst of increasing tensions between Russians and Somalis.[3]

In November 1977, the Supreme Revolutionary Council announced that all Russian advisers would be expelled from Somalia, and although the reported celebrations in Mogadishu were perhaps less exuberant than those on independence day, they certainly surpassed all since then. But however popular Siyaad became by throwing out Soviet personnel, he had clearly suffered a humiliating defeat. He had curried favour with the Russians, had taken their 'coin' and borrowed their ideology, only to watch them turn against him at the point of critical national concern. Somali pride and dignity were seared.

This misreading of Soviet designs by Siyaad continued even after the retreat of Somali regular forces from the Jijiga-Dire Dawa-Harar triangle. At the U.N. General Assembly on 5 October 1978, the Foreign Minister, Abdurahman Jama Barre (Siyaad's close relation), accused the Soviet Union and Cuba of

> devising a devious tactical plan against Governments of neighbouring countries in fulfillment of imperialist designs and hegemonistic ambitions. The idea is to use Ethiopia as a staging ground for aggression and subversion against Somalia...in an attempt to install puppet subservient regimes in those countries and thereby dominate the region.[4]

But despite a flood of threats from the *Derg*, the Soviets have respected the internationally recognised border between Somalia and Ethiopia.

To be sure, if the Ethiopians had really wanted to pursue the Somali forces into Somalia proper, they could well have ignored Soviet advice, as they are presently doing in Eritrea. The Ethiopians have none the less been provocative: they have at least twice bombarded the Somali

[1] Ibid. 25 August 1977.
[2] *Le Soleil* (Dakar), 31 August 1977.
[3] *The Economist* (London), 8 October 1977.
[4] The Foreign Minister of Somalia, Abdurahman Jama Barre, speaking at the 33rd Session of the General Assembly, New York, 5 October 1978.

village of Abdulqader in June and July of 1978.[1] And Mengistu's threats to invade Somalia are by no means veiled. In July 1977 he had reminded Africans of the Ethiopian adage that 'Trying to snatch what belongs to others, one may lose what one already possesses',[2] and in September 1978 was even more explicit:

> By retaining its forces at its own border, revolutionary Ethiopia has shown its willingness to respect the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity...But the reactionary ruling clique of Somalia has not given weight to all the patience and caution of Ethiopia. The leaders of Somalia still continue to test our patience by their intermittent provocative acts.[3]

That the Soviets have urged restraint in this area has, in an ironic way, undermined the Somali call for international support. In fact, the Cuban troops have not even pursued the W.S.L.F. guerrillas in southern Ogaden, where they might have been caught in the quagmire of an endless struggle against determined small bands. Siyaad was unable to court the Soviets as true allies, but has been equally unable to portray them as enemies bent on Somalia's destruction. If the Sayid was a prickly thorn that disturbed the intentions of the great power of his day, the Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa today is an even more uncomfortable thorn in the flesh of Siyaad.

2. *The Muslim World*

There is a long tradition in Somali lore, despite claims of common ancestry, of anti-Arab feeling. Although various explanations are offered to explain this hatred, I think it comes from the fact that most Somalis feel exploited by the many Arab shopkeepers. Whatever the cause, they reserve their bitterest passions for jokes and stories about the Arabs.

Thus, when Siyaad and his Foreign Minister, Cumar Arteh Ghalib, successfully managed to secure an invitation to join the Arab League in February 1974, many Somalis were, to say the least, perplexed. The Ministry of Information and National Guidance published a pamphlet to justify Somalia's new rôle. From time immemorial, it argued, Arabs and Somalis have been brothers based on commercial relations, religion, language, ethnic identity, personality – notably pride,

[1] See letter by the Somali Ambassador to the United Nations, Abdirazak Haji Hussein, to the Secretary-General, 19 July 1978.

[2] Statement by Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile-Mariam at the O.A.U. meeting, Gabon, July 1977.

[3] Speech by Mengistu, 'Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution', Addis Ababa, 12 September 1978.

generosity, self-reliance, bravery, and a deep sense of honour. European historiography, according to this publication, emphasises the international movement of peoples, and since Somali–Arab migrations were considered internal their significance was always underestimated:

> The data transmitted to us by [the Arab historian Al-Jabarti] about his ancestors...give us a clear picture of the cultural relations between Somalia and the rest of the Arab countries. The descendants of Al-Jabarti, when in Somalia, considered themselves to be in their own home country.[1]

Rationalisation aside, the purposes of Somalia's moves were quite clear. The Government not only thought that the Arab League was a good conduit for O.P.E.C. aid, but also saw this organisation as a natural ally in its eventual war with 'Christian' Ethiopia. As Cumar Arteh pronounced in his speech at the special session of the Arab League which inducted the Somalis:

> Somalia is ready to play its role fully, in accordance with the aims and objectives of the League in the service of the great Arab cause. Somalia will spare no efforts in reuniting the dismembered Somali people and will restore the integrity of her territory. Moreover, it will never hesitate a moment in contributing to the Afro–Arab understanding which, no doubt, will constitute an honest vision of the problems of the contemporary man and will help our insistence to liberate Palestine and the African territories still under colonial and racial domination.[2]

That Ethiopia was considered one such colonial power was made quite clear earlier:

> But our formal joining of the League has been delayed by reasons outside of our real wish and that of our people. This is so because, as you are aware of, Somalia has fallen a prey to colonialism; its country has been partitioned by three European states, namely France, Britain, Italy, and an African group.[3]

One purpose of membership was amply fulfilled. Somalia received $73 million from the Arab states in O.P.E.C. during 1975 via bilateral concessional assistance disbursements, and $33·4 million during 1976. This overshadows not only Soviet aid, when Somalia was considered by many to be a Kremlin 'satellite', but also the western loans and grants from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, which averaged $28·2 million per year from 1960 to 1975.[4] O.P.E.C. aid has undoubtedly helped to reduce the problems the

[1] Somali Democratic Republic, Ministry of Information and National Guidance, 'Somalia and the Arab League: a wider role in Afro-Arab affairs', Mogadishu, June 1974, p. 21.
[2] Ibid. 'A Review of our Revolutionary Politics', p. 46.
[3] Ibid. p. 40.
[4] O.E.C.D., *Development Co-operation Review, 1977* (Paris, 1978), pp. 209 and 226–9.

Somalis have had to face, notably drought and increasing oil prices.

But like the Soviet Union, the Arab League and the O.P.E.C. states have been reticent to support Somalia when it was a question of 'liberating' its 'unredeemed' territories. To be sure, there are examples of help. Egypt sent jets to help provide Somalia with Russian spare parts,[1] and President Anwar Sadat urged U.S. Congressmen Tsongas and Bonkers to use their influence to resupply Somalia with arms. Saudi Arabia put pressure on the U.S. Secretary of State to issue a policy memorandum that Washington would support the Somalis should the Russians cross their internationally recognised borders. Iran was ready to fly weapons made in the United States to Mogadishu, and although this plan was subverted when American intelligence got wind of the matter, and told the Shah in no uncertain terms that this illegal transfer would not be countenanced, a Minister promised Iranian military aid if Ethiopia were to attack Somalia proper.[2]

None the less, the Muslim world has stayed out of the Somali–Ethiopia conflict. In fact, Iranian statements, in making a clear distinction between Somali losses in the Ogaden and in Somalia proper, lent credence to the Ethiopian definition of the war. And in the crucial month of September 1977, when the Foreign Ministers of the Arab League met in Cairo, and when Siyaad himself was there after his humiliating trip to Moscow, the Arabs decided to remain neutral. Although they condemned foreign interference – that is to say, Cubans and Russians in Ethiopia – they gave no public support for Somalia's war aims.

It would be inaccurate to suggest, given this record, that Siyaad was as much humiliated by the Muslim world as by the Russians. He received important Arab aid, some arms from Egypt, and strong diplomatic support from Iran and Saudi Arabia. But the Arab League as an organisation was more concerned with its general relations with Africa – where Somalia has no support – than with the war aims of one of its members. Furthermore, the President of Libya, who could well have helped the orthodox Muslims of Somalia against the religiously mixed population of Ethiopia, refused to do so, and rather supported the Russian line quite strongly. And so, while a few Muslim states have given aid to Somalia, the Arab world as a whole has remained reticent on the issue of a United Somalia.

[1] *San Diego Union*, 16 February 1978.
[2] *New York Times*, 6 March 1978.

3. *France and West Germany*

The reputation of Siyaad among the Somalis has also been deeply scarred by diplomatic encounters with France and West Germany. First of all, he had every opportunity to make the French withdrawal from Djibouti difficult and painful. Being part of 'unredeemed' Somalia, several groups there could have been encouraged to embarrass the French President when he visited Djibouti in 1973, but Siyaad did nothing of the sort.[1] On the contrary, he told both Pompidou and later Giscard d'Estaing that Djibouti would be permitted to determine its own future, and that he would not make things more difficult for France. There were a number of 'incidents' in which school children were kidnapped, as well as the French ambassador,[2] and this may have been organised by officials of the Somali Democratic Republic. But judged by the level of past agitation, as in 1967, France had a free hand in leaving Djibouti during 1977.

In fact, Somalia has renounced any territorial claims to Djibouti since independence. In return for such helpful behaviour, most Somalis expected the French to be more sympathetic to their special claims to the Ogaden, because unlike Kenya's Northern Frontier District and Djibouti – the two other segments of the three 'lost' regions – here are to be found a substantial part of Somalia's nomadic population. France, however, offered no reciprocal gestures, and certainly made no effort to support the Somali cause at a Washington conference between the U.S. and the major West European states in January 1978.

The West German case is rather special, because the Somalis did not do anything hypocritical or cowering to urge support, as with the Soviet Union, France, and the Arab League-O.P.E.C. states. In fact, although they demonstrated their dignity and respect for individuals, they were still, ultimately, let down. In mid-October 1977, when Arab terrorists hijacked a Lufthansa plane and made it land at Mogadishu, Somali officials collaborated with the Bonn Government so that German commandos could mount a rescue operation at the airport. At the risk of losing its status as a 'progressive' state on the Arab–Israeli issue, Somalia supported the rights of the hostages.

The West Germans were exuberant, and let it be known that they would help Somalia in its time of need. But a cautious Helmut Schmidt waited until he had conferred with his N.A.T.O. allies before acting

[1] Robert Saint-Véran, *A Djibouti avec les Afars et les Issas* (Cagnes-sur-Mer, 1977).
[2] See *New York Times*, 25 March 1975, for details of the Jean Gueury kidnapping.

on the promised reciprocation. In late January 1978, some three months after the hijacking, fearful that his policy of no arms-supplies to 'areas of tension' in the Third World would be compromised, he granted the Somalis a credit of a mere $12 million.[1] No further assistance was suggested, and no moral support was given for Somali war aims.

4. *The United States*

In April 1977, President Carter instructed his Vice-President, Walter Mondale, and the Secretary of State and National Security Adviser, 'to move in every possible way to get Somalia to be our friend'.[2] In June, an American physician, Dr Kevin Cahill, who had close ties with several American Congressmen and leading Somalis, passed word to Siyaad, probably with little authority, that he could expect American military support should the alliance with the Soviets evaporate.[3] Shortly thereafter, Carter announced that the U.S. had not given up in its hope of wresting Somalia from the Soviet orbit.[4] He met privately with the Ambassador, Abdullahi Addou, and gave vague assurances of American understanding which could have been interpreted as promises of support. By July, a spokesman at the State Department told the press that 'We do think it is desirable that Somalia knows it does not have to depend on the Soviet Union but can obtain arms from other sources.'[5] Many took this as the straw which broke the camel's back in Somali domestic politics. It is said to have drowned opposition to the war based on the fear of eventual Soviet abandonment. (Many Somali officials, to be sure, understood that America was not prepared to help the Somalis in their war, and they will quietly admit that Siyaad was all too gullible in listening to informal promises from Americans.)

Despite the signals coming from the White House down to Dr Cahill, America soon began to 'backtrack'. By August, U.S. military aid promises became burdened by preconditions.[6] It is now clear that pressures from the Departments of State and Defense seriously dampened Carter's enthusiasm in the Horn. It was pointed out to him that all of Africa considered the Somalis to be territorial aggressors, and that too great a price could be paid for the strategic advantages of their coast. He therefore began to waver. The Department of State's position, that defensive weapons might become available if Somalis ceased

[1] *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1978.
[2] Elizabeth Drew, 'A Reporter at Large: Brzezinski', in *The New Yorker*, 1 May 1978, p. 113.
[3] *Newsweek* (New York), 26 September 1977.
[4] *New York Times*, 12 June 1977, section 1, p. 5.
[5] Ibid. 27 July 1977, p. A3.
[6] *Time Magazine*, 8 August 1977.

'aggression', was modified in September 1977, when the same spokesman who had made the initial public commitment announced that 'We have decided that providing arms at this time would add fuel to a fire we are more interested in putting out'.[1] By early October, the United States had decided to remain neutral despite allegations of 'betrayal', and the Somali Ambassador in Washington was quoted as saying that America had 'thrown away a unique opportunity' to enhance its influence on the Horn.[2]

In the following month, the Somalis evicted the Soviets anyway. None the less, America refused to allow Iran and Saudi Arabia to send arms to the Somalis, and in January agreed with its N.A.T.O. allies to permit the Soviets to act alone with the Cubans in their adventure on the Horn. Repeated Somali pleas for U.S. military aid were unfulfilled due to the fact that Brzezinski (who supported the position that Soviet exploits should be contained) could not make a compelling case for assistance, while the State Department, especially the Bureau of African Affairs, was irrevocably opposed to unconditional aid to Somalia.

Compromise plans, involving 'non-lethal' military assistance, were strangled by bureaucratic inertia. In the midst of inter-agency battles, the Somali military position became increasingly precarious. All this reached comic proportions as Siyaad blamed 'western paralysis' coming from the Vietnam war to explain why the Soviets were being allowed 'to take over one way or another the Gulf States with their petroleum energy...Then they plan to dictate to European countries what they want'.[3] The use of such 'cold war' imagery to induce the Americans to counter a Soviet gambit was indeed grotesque, because a few months earlier Siyaad had scoffed at any suggestion of Soviet political designs on the Horn. Furthermore, he was inept in handling the issue of an American military team which Washington proposed to send to Somalia to assess the situation. Siyaad wanted arms, not advice, but the United States held firm and so he capitulated. After this struggle of wills, the State Department arbitrarily decided that it was no longer advisable even to consider military aid. None the less, as late as October 1978, Siyaad was still being tantalised by the expectation of assistance as William Harrop, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, trekked to Mogadishu. But all he could claim was that 'no final decision' had been reached.[4]

[1] *New York Times*, 1 September 1977 dateline.
[2] Ibid. 3 October 1977, analysis by Richard Burt.
[3] *San Diego Union*, 3 July 1978, AP.
[4] *Egyptian Mail* (Cairo), 21 October 1978, p. 1.

Siyaad humiliated himself and his people in the way he courted Soviet aid; his actions were equally embarrassing as he attempted to solicit U.S. support. Such are the costs of begging from the great powers!

THE ABSENCE OF 'GREAT WORDS'

That Siyaad appeared to be begging from the great and middle-level powers, and even the non-aligned nations, all for naught, will no doubt continue to plague him. But his leadership in this time of crisis, at least from the Somali viewpoint, had other deficiencies as well.

1. *Exhortatory Speech*

The production of 'great words' was important for the stature of Maxamed Cabdille Xasan, and kept his people aware of their goals and their community:

> We have fought for a year. I wish to rule my own country...I have no forts, no houses. I have no cultivated fields, no silver or gold for you to take...The country is all jungle, and that is no use for you...The sun is very hot. All you can get from me is war, nothing else.[1]

Compare the *bravura* in this threat to the British with the following early statement by Siyaad:

> The Revolutionary Government in accordance with its pronouncements intends to find ways and means of settling our disputes with the neighbouring countries in a responsible manner and I repeat in a responsible manner and in accordance with the OAU Charter. We in the SDR do not intend to kindle a fire in the Horn of Africa...What we intend to do is to press for a peaceful and amicable settlement.[2]

And in the founding speech of the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party, although Siyaad raised the issue of Somalia's 'missing territories', he emphasised that 'disputes among nations should be solved peacefully and in a brotherly, wise manner'.[3]

Although these sentiments are ennobling, they are deficient if the purpose is to plan for and lead a nation into a difficult war. The heroic aphorisms that taunted the Russians or insulted the Ethiopians came from the Somali people, and not from their leader. Siyaad's remarks about the war will not be remembered in the sense of demon-

[1] Sheikh-Abdi, loc. cit. pp. 64–5.

[2] Maxamed Siyaad Barre, *My Country and My People* (Mogadishu, 1970), the text of a speech given in July 1970.

[3] *New Era* (Mogadishu), July 1976, p. 25.

strating Somali superiority despite military defeat. Like the Sayid, he had few great deeds to his credit in the Ogaden war; but by way of contrast, he had many fewer great words.

2. *Private Diplomacy*

Most Somalis have not as yet recognised Siyaad's diplomatic failures, especially as regards Ethiopia, although these are bound to be recalled by future historians. To be sure, there is a real difficulty here, because Ethiopia claims to be both an Empire and part of the decolonised world:

> In order to maintain and to keep that Empire intact, Ethiopia is trying to claim protection under principles which are inimical to the decolonisation process. In other words, it is trying to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds.[1]

Somalia is, therefore, in the unenviable position of having to stand up in world assemblies to proclaim that blacks too can be imperialists.

On the other hand, there seems to be no Somali awareness of the constraints faced by any Ethiopian leader. To the revolutionary *Derg*, as John Harbeson has pointed out, the atrocities which took place in the Ogaden during the régime of Emperor Haile Selassie were of the same magnitude as in other Regions.[2] According to the *Derg*, the Somali population there has no special claim to secession. With that in mind, the guerrilla movement in the Ogaden, if acknowledged as legitimate by Ethiopia, would indeed precipitate the dismemberment of the whole country. An imperial capital without a hinterland is a prospect no Ethiopian leader could contemplate. As long as the Somali Government refuses to recognise this, any pragmatic approach to the *Derg* is doomed from the onset.

And if the various diplomatic thrusts towards Ethiopia have been marked by a conspicuous lack of success, so have (as we saw) Siyaad's efforts in the wider world arena. These failures cannot be fully explained by the fact that Somalia was the first country clearly to violate a central tenet of the Organisation of Africa Unity. Its troops did, in fact, cross an internationally recognised boundary. But their wider cause – self-determination – could well have struck a responsive chord in the world. Why were there so few allies?

Part of the answer lies in the character of Somali diplomacy. In the quiet rooms of international assemblies, diplomats search for com-

[1] Abdurahman Jama Barre to the U.N. General Assembly, 13 October 1977.

[2] John Harbeson, 'Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa', Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Baltimore, November 1978.

promise positions that will garner greater support for their purposes. Tacit bargaining allows them to acknowledge factors they could not publicly admit. Unfortunately for their cause, Somali diplomats rarely engage in these efforts. I have evidence that at no meeting of the Organisation of African Unity have the Somalis even suggested that they would be willing to limit their claims for the purpose of getting the support of other countries. They successfully engineered a resolution at the 31st Ordinary Session of the O.A.U., held in Khartoum in July 1978, which condemned the 'intrusion of...foreign powers' attempting to 'recolonise the continent'.[1] But this made no specific reference to the Horn, and no other African state publicly agreed that the issue should be reopened.

I have other evidence that Somali diplomats refused to acknowledge to the Americans – even for the purpose of negotiating military aid – that their regular soldiers were in the Ogaden. The Somalis knew, and knew that the Americans knew, that they were there! And so the opportunity was lost to try the kind of bargaining that might have yielded some success – for example, 'We will keep these divisions out of Ethiopian territory for at least two years, if you can supply us with a certain number of tanks'.

3. *Public Diplomacy*

Perhaps even more important than the extreme reluctance to use private channels has been the failure of public diplomacy. The Somalis used the grossest language to describe the United States during the early 1970s, evidently forgetting that one day a change in patron may be necessary for a small country. Will those vilifications be easily forgotten? And as for the Cubans, most diplomats know that they were training Somali guerrillas during 1975, so what is the purpose of now calling them 'imperialists'? Is it inconceivable that the Cubans may be found useful in the coming years by the Somalis? The same is true of their words against the Soviets, who are currently alleged to have 'imperialist designs and hegemonistic ambitions' in Africa.[2] Is this to deny the possibility of future Soviet aid, especially if relations between Moscow and the *Derg* continue to deteriorate? Or do not the Somalis recognise that language of this nature creates constraints against future support – that these words are not quickly forgotten?

The causes of Somali diplomatic ineptitudes are multiple. Siyaad often insists on clearly specified limits as to what his country's represen-

[1] O.A.U. Resolution 641, CM/Res. 620–680 xxxi.
[2] Abdurahman Jama Barre to the U.N. General Assembly, 5 October 1978.

tatives are permitted to do. Furthermore, Somali embassies are often manned by those who do not trust each other fully, and a spy *versus* spy aura within an embassy precludes creative initiatives. Many of the Somali diplomats are politicians and military men whom Siyaad fears politically – they are in 'exile' rather than in service. That the internationally respected Cumar Arteh Qalib was relieved of his duties as Foreign Minister, a position now held by a close relative of Siyaad, a man barely trained in diplomacy, is just one example of the demeaning of the diplomatic enterprise by Siyaad.

Whatever the causes, few countries feel that they can rely on the Somali Government in diplomatic efforts. While only a handful of Somalis are aware of this aspect of Siyaad's performance, many realise that his diplomatic corps has received limited training. Future historians could come to the conclusion that Siyaad squandered a real opportunity of gaining quietly through diplomacy what could not be seized noisily by warfare.

Siyaad's inability to employ 'great words' to articulate his people's cause has indeed reduced the fervour of his forces, and will undoubtedly weaken any claim attesting to his greatness in Somali history. His inability to engage successfully in international diplomacy is equally threatening to his future stature. Great words – whether by means of poetic exhortations to his countrymen, or in the form of private consultation with potential allies – have been absent from Siyaad's political arsenal.

THE MYTH OF THE 'GOOD FIGHT'

The final criterion that Somali historiographers have employed to judge heroic performance is the test of the 'good fight'. Even though he was soundly defeated by foreign forces, the Sayid's stature as a General lies unquestioned. One would think that adulation of Siyaad on just this dimension is assured. A bright picture can be painted of him urging his people to be patient for a little longer, waiting for Ethiopia to tear itself apart. When in 1975 the *Derg* was engaged in the post-monarchical civil war, Siyaad reorganised the Western Somali Liberation Front and prepared for attack. Guerrillas dominated the southern portions of the Ogaden, while regular Somali troops crossed the military strategic Marda Pass, which enabled them to capture Jigjiga and Dire Dawa, and prepare the way for the fall of Harar itself.

All this was proceeding with considerable efficiency – the co-ordination of supplies to guerrillas and regulars, under the supervision

of General Samantar, greatly impressed American military intelligence – until the Cuban troops and their *cache* of Soviet military equipment utterly overwhelmed the Somalis. Not the Ethiopians, but the Soviets and the *Harap Weyne* – 'Big Chests', the Somali epithet for the Cubans – destroyed Somali national liberation. Siyaad, like the Sayid (it is already being argued), had to stand up to the great powers by himself, and it required their most sophisticated weapons to defeat under-supplied Somali troops. Although liberation was not fully maintained in the major cities, Somalis in the Ogaden were able to breath freely for the first time in this century.

But there is a darker picture of Siyaad's performance which could easily predominate. It can be shown that he did not seize the right moment when the Emperor was deposed in Ethiopia, but rather continued to counsel patience. In early 1975, Siyaad was put under increasing pressure by some officers in the Supreme Revolutionary Council to march on the Ogaden. They were supported by many politically influential Somalis, and there was considerable unrest in the capital city in the early months of 1975. At this time, Siyaad was Chairman of the Organisation of African Unity, and obviously thought that this was not the best moment to invade Ethiopia. So he attempted to negotiate with the revolutionary *Derg* for the return of the Ogaden – even although this strategy was doomed to fail – and this gave the new régime enough time to garner its forces. Then, in early 1977, while Siyaad was still counselling patience, Somali units began to move autonomously westwards to the Ogaden. Now it is one thing to counsel patience, but quite another to recall troops from the area they are publicly committed to 'regaining'. The point of this reinterpretation of the 'invasion' of Somali regulars is to suggest that Siyaad did not lead his troops into the Ogaden, but rather followed them there.[1]

Despite victories in the summer of 1977, there were many complaints among the Generals concerning Siyaad's leadership. It was felt that he centralised command with insufficient ability to communicate instructions or to process field data; that he was over-impressed by the importance of crossing the Marda Pass (the key to the British victory over the Italians in 1941), and apparently not aware of the ability of the enemy to use paratroopers to cut into the Somali logistic chain; that he did not send sufficient troops to capture Dire Dawa airfield which would

[1] I do not have any direct evidence to back this view of the origins of infiltration into the Ogaden, but have been given informal support by various Somali informants. Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Somali Democratic Republic, *Go From My Country* (Mogadishu, 1978). Richard Greenfield, who I believe wrote this text, suggests quite clearly that 'no Government could restrain...the Freedom Fighters...further' (p. 43).

have strengthened the Somali position; that he held back the soldiers of the Presidential Guard from the fray, perhaps because they were dominated by his own Marexaan clan; and that he ordered the march on Harar, which had only emotional significance and depleted his forces. The Somalis did not have the weapons or the manpower to take Harar, and many officers thought it suicidal to try.

After the retreat northwards towards Hargeysa, Siyaad met his Generals to discuss problems and opportunities, and although it is reported that they were encouraged to speak their minds, six of the most critical were shot. This action, perhaps even more than the catalogue of strategic errors, could well be the major evidence that Siyaad had insufficient respect for his army, and that the war might have gone better for the Somalis had they had a more able national leader. There will be debate for many years to come as to whether the war of 1977–8 was 'heroic', or whether it was ill-timed and ill-managed, and a missed opportunity for the Somali cause. It is more than likely that while Siyaad will appear to have put up a relatively good fight, his military prowess will not become legendary.

CONCLUSION

Maxamed Siyaad Barre has done much for the Somali nation. He has united the people sufficiently for them to agree on the Latin script for the Somali language, now the official medium of communication, and this decision has had a monumental impact on the creation of a literate and aware population.[1] Also, he has responded to the drought which threatened the economic basis of Somali society with forthright courage. The Government has trained and settled nomads to become farmers and fishermen, while development programmes have given the Somalis a spirit of confidence and purpose which has induced both civil servants and ordinary citizens to work hard for common goals.[2]

Also, and quite important for his own legitimacy, Siyaad has begun to reduce the level of fear and oppression within his society. Somalis are beginning to feel that they can talk and joke more freely in public places. In fact, Siyaad, is often 'about town' listening and repeating

[1] See Hussein M. Adam, 'The Revolutionary Development of the Somali Language', University of California, Los Angeles, Occasional Paper in African Studies, forthcoming.

[2] I argued a more moderate position in 'Political Economy of Military Rule in Somalia', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), XIV, 3, September 1976, pp. 449–68, but my point then was not to view the rôle of Siyaad in future Somali history, but rather to evaluate by some objective criteria his performance in comparison to the régime he overthrew.

anti-régime jokes, and is said to have a special relationship with Faarax 'Gololey', the fount of much of the banter. One typical conversation, before the Soviet advisers were evicted, went like this:

> Siyaad: Why aren't you participating in any self-help projects?
> Faarax: You throw out the Russians and I will help carry out their luggage; that will be my self-help.

The stolid, humourless Siyaad has begun to 'open up', and to become a man of the people. This has certainly given his revolution a human face.

The argument in this article – that Siyaad's leadership in the Ogaden conflict will not be considered by future Somali historians to be heroic – is not meant to disparage his other accomplishments. But the deficiencies in his leadership will reduce his internal authority, so that it will become increasingly difficult for him to mobilise the Somalis towards their many developmental goals. His hold over his nation, and his moral authority, are indeed under severe question.

Is there any way that Siyaad can recover? I think there is, especially as I have exaggerated the negative reactions towards his leadership for purposes of contrast with the Sayid. Many Somalis believe that the war has *not* been lost, and that progress is continually being made. Certainly, Siyaad had not abandoned his support of the guerrillas of the W.S.L.F.[1] Moreover, the attempted coup, because it came predominantly from a small segment of a single clan, has reduced the credibility of Siyaad's internal opposition. His political position, while weak, is therefore not precarious.

I have not evaluated Siyaad's statements of his war aims from any viewpoint other than their 'heroic' content. But Siyaad is a man of peace, a man who would love to see some reconciliation with the Ethiopians. I have been arguing that you cannot run a nationalist war by espousing such balanced views. Now I wish to suggest that by more careful delineation of national goals, Siyaad could well regain his image as a Somali hero. He still has the capacity, I believe, to refocus Somali perceptions of their 'unredeemed' territories. The claim for Harar, although it might have some historical basis, is outrageous, in the sense that Ethiopia can never relinquish control of that key city, and Siyaad should counsel his people to discount such a goal.

But the Somali claim for the Haud and the Eastern Ogaden grazing

[1] In fact, substantial gains by Somali guerillas, especially in the Southern Ogaden, have been reported. See the *Los Angeles Times*, 7 March 1979.

lands is a different matter, because here there is room for bargaining and negotiations. Siyaad could rekindle international interest in this problem were he to refocus attention from the Somali historical claim to jurisdiction, or the right of all peoples to self-determination, to the issue of the problem of range management and the development of nomadic collectivities when they regularly cross international borders. Many of these grazing lands are essential for Somali survival, but matter much less to the Ethiopian economy. A boundary claim at the limits of winter grazing in the Haud and the Ogaden – only a small portion of present Somali claims – could well attract sympathetic allies in world assemblies. International recognition of Somali sovereignty over these crucial grazing lands seems a feasible goal for Somali nationalists.

I am not sanguine that Siyaad can make much headway in the present political environment, even if he were to limit Somali claims. The Ethiopians, with victory on their minds, are surely in no mood to bargain. The United States has tried to put pressure on Colonel Mengistu to talk with the Somalis. He refused to listen and talked instead with the Soviets. They then helped to persuade Mengistu to meet with the Eritreans in Khartoum, and it seems clear that he yielded no ground.

But there is indeed a possibility for success. The Soviets, currently out of favour in Somalia, could well reach a new accommodation with Siyaad, and thereby have another chance of creating a pax-Sovieteca on the Horn. The Americans, currently out of influence in Ethiopia, could just as easily find themselves – as they did in the Middle East –the patrons of both sides and therefore capable of organising negotiations. Whether one super-power finds itself dominant in the region, or whether the Americans and the Soviets find themselves face to face because they are supporting different sides, both nations have an interest in stability.

The super-powers want peace, the Somalis want territorial gains, and the Ethiopians want to defuse the demands throughout their state for ethnic self-determination. With this configuration of interests, there is room for manoeuvre. While Mengistu may not be politically equipped to yield to demands for self-determination for Somalis, he might be able to discuss boundary adjustments due to the economic needs of a nomadic population. For Siyaad, regaining the grazing areas of the Haud and the Ogaden, but renouncing Harar and other symbolically important but economically less consequential areas, might bring him much criticism from a variety of groups in Somalia today. But an achievement of that magnitude would be judged important in the future history of Somalia.