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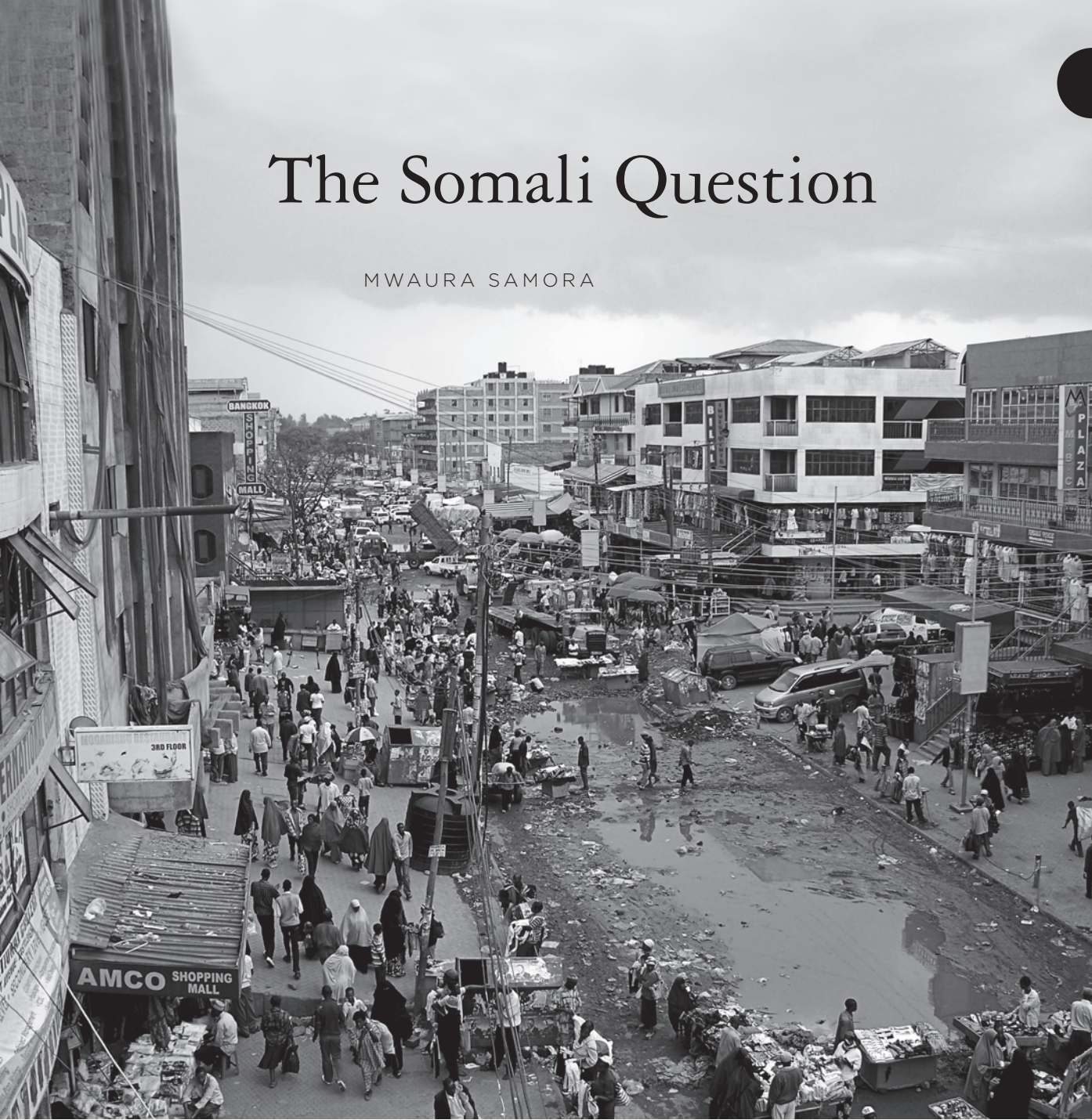
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The Somali Question

MWAURA SAMORA



NAIROBI—Throng of traders haggle and jostle for goods along busy streets, constantly interrupted by the hooting of *matatus*, local public transport vehicles, and the shouting of pushcart drivers, known as *mkokotenis*. This neighborhood is no place for the squeamish. The *matatus* and the *mkokotenis* make their way through deep, water-filled potholes, splashing thick, dark liquid onto crowded sidewalks. Like the badly damaged roads, the sewage system in Nairobi's Eastleigh district was

built by British colonists in the 1920s to service a few hundred working-class Africans and Indians, but now it must bear the waste of over 100,000 residents. Today raw sewage oozes out of thousands of household pipes that have ruptured after decades of neglect. The dark green sludge mixes with runoff in the streets to form a foul porridge of human excrement.

But these pools of unsanitary sludge are not what is deterring thousands of Nairobi-
 bians from coming to “Little Mogadishu,” as Eastleigh is known due to its Somali population. It is the grenade attacks.

Life has not been the same in Eastleigh since the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) invaded war-torn Somalia to hunt down the al-Shabab terror group in 2011. Since then, explosions halt,

at times violently, the buying and selling in this market town. So far, the attacks have claimed at least 20 lives, with many more maimed. Nobody is quite sure when or where the terror will strike next, so whatever visitors still come look over their shoulders constantly. While in the past they strolled the aisles, gawking at the displays, now shoppers just grab what they came for and hop quickly into the next *matatu*.

Thanks to its industrious Somali business owners, Eastleigh is still the only place in Nairobi where people can buy almost anything. From across the Kenyan capi-

tal, shoppers arrive with long, varied lists and leave laden with shopping bags. From clothes to contraband, toy pistols to real guns, in this Somali neighborhood legal and illegal trade thrive in equal measure.

The atmosphere is reminiscent of the medieval trans-continental trade centers along the East African coastline. Five-times daily, a *muezzin’s* call goes out over the loudspeakers of the various mosques here, leading many businesses to close their front doors quickly for prayers.

Al-Shabab and its supporters have been carrying out attacks in Eastleigh and other parts of Kenya in retaliation for the country’s invasion of Somalia. In a recent report, the group warned it may even shift its tactics to target high rise buildings in central Nairobi. The new security threat cannot be fought with the methods used to solve routine street crimes since its perpetrators are not common criminals but religious fanatics. Kenyan authorities need to retrain internal security agents to gather intelligence among Somalis without making them feel intimidated or estranged. The local Somali population needs to be recruited as informers and spies since they are the only ones who can identify al-Shabab elements in their midst. The system of localizing intelligence gathering is bound to be more effective than the indiscriminate large-scale police sweeps that net innocent people and sow seeds of hostility between the security forces and local Somali.

Besides designing systems to crush terrorist cells inside the country, the government should increase patrols along the Kenya-Somalia border to ensure al-Shabab elements do not cross over. The govern-

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Mwaura Samora is a Nairobi-based journalist and media consultant. He writes for the Kenyan weekly, The Nairobiian.

ment also needs to tighten its monitoring systems around Kakuma and Dadaab refugee centers to ensure Somali asylum seekers remain in the camps, while those absorbed into the population are carefully screened. There is no single cure-all for terrorism, but taken together, this set of reforms will curb terror attacks while improving the lives of Somalis in Kenya, who currently face constant harassment from the state.

CRACKING DOWN

When the heavily armed special police units land in Eastleigh, every young or youthful-looking Somali is a target. Often, Somalis are beaten, arrested, and bundled into police cars for detention where they languish for days or weeks with no charges ever leveled against them. Abdi Dhahir is a 27-year-old Somali trader who sells clothes on 12th Street, a busy section of Eastleigh. He came to Kenya from Somalia with his parents at the age of five. After staying in the Dadaab refugee camp for five years, his family found their way to Eastleigh, and he became a Kenyan citizen. Since al-Shabab started carrying out attacks in Kenya, Abdi has been on the lookout—not for terrorists, but for the Kenyan police.

“We Somalis are now living in fear not knowing when we will be arrested. It can happen any time—during the day or at night,” Abdi says. “When they arrest you, the detention is indefinite. You can be locked in as long as they want.” Abdi says he has been arrested numerous times, spending days at Pangani and Central police stations, where it took the intervention of his family members to secure his release.

“The threat is now not only from the police but also from the native population who view Somalis with a lot of suspicion since the terror attacks started in the capital,” Abdi says. “Sometimes when I board

a *matatu* people look at me suspiciously. The conductor can even refuse to grant me entry on suspicion that I might be a suicide bomber.” It is traumatic, he adds, for innocent people to be labeled as terrorists. Abdi admits that there are al-Shabaab cells in Eastleigh, most of them abetted by local Islamic clergy. “Even Somalis like me are not safe from these terror operatives since they can eliminate you if they suspect that you might expose them to the police,” the second-hand clothes trader explains. “Therefore it’s a very delicate situation, because sometimes we feel trapped between a rock (the national security system) and a hard place (the bad guys).”

With the porous Kenya-Somalia border and corrupt Kenyan immigration officials and security personnel, Somali refugees have been flowing freely into Kenya to escape fighting between African Union troops and al-Shabab, and a 2011 famine. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as of August 2012, Kenya hosted the world’s largest single group of refugees and asylum seekers—more than 630,000 Somalis.

“An in-depth television documentary showed how a Somali refugee buys his way from the Dadaab refugee center, through corrupt Kenyan security personnel manning road blocks up to the point where they disappear into the populous Eastleigh,” says Hudson Gumbihi, a Kenyan crime journalist for the weekly newspaper *The Nairobiian*. Gumbihi suggests that one way to stem the infiltration of terrorists is caring for security personnel and dissuading them from the temptation of bribes. “The Kenyan government should also give Kenyan Somalis incentives like easy access to personal documents, like identification cards in order for them to feel patriotic,” he continues. “This will ensure they report terror suspects since



taken a huge beating. “Most of the businesses in Eastleigh were getting their supplies from towns in Somalia like Kismayo where there was no taxation. Hence, they attracted a lot of customers since they were cheaper,” observes the Maseno University scholar who is researching Kenyan Somalis. “But since the invasion of Somalia by the Kenya Defense Forces, supplies from these towns have been cut.”

Although the current suspicion of Somalis by other Kenyans has been attributed to the rise in terror incidents, some have used the situation to express their long running anti-Somali sentiments. The fact that many Somalis are successful business people, a few with connections to Red Sea pirates, means they have millions of shillings to spend, which have enabled them to acquire property in the Nairobi central business district at very high prices.

Moreover, in a bid to rid the area around Jamia Mosque, the major prayer center in the city, of bars and nightclubs, Somalis campaigned to buy out entertainment establishments. Several have been bought, closed, and reopened as Somali-owned restaurants and cafes. As for Kenyan landlords, many rent or sell their houses to Somalis at inflated prices, leading some locals to blame wealthy Somalis for rising property rates, further fueling xenophobic tendencies.

NO-GO ZONE

In June 2012, two police officers died when a hand grenade was thrown at them while they were on routine patrol duty in Eastleigh, prompting a massive security operation that saw residents without identity cards rounded up and detained. Last November and December, Eastleigh became a no-go zone for many Nairobi-ans after a series of bomb attacks claimed more than 15 lives and left dozens injured.

they will have a sense of patriotic duty.”

The situation of Kenyan Somalis is not unlike that of Japanese Americans in the United States after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. There is state and public distrust, detention, prejudice, and general harassment. Just like the wartime Japanese-Americans, Kenyan Somalis are described as “hardworking and intelligent,” but also as “treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike,” Gumbihi says.

Tiberius Barasa, a public policy and administration lecturer at Maseno University in Kenya, says Kenyan Somalis “are now viewed as suspects by other Kenyans and whenever there is a terror attack, they become the first victims of police arrests.” Barasa adds that Somalis’ businesses have

Among those seriously wounded were a member of parliament for the area—Yusuf Haji, himself a Kenyan Somali—and his bodyguard. These attacks triggered two days of inter-ethnic riots where Kenyans from other communities clashed with Somalis, leaving several people injured.

At the time, a government security operation swept up more than 600 suspects, mostly refugees without legal documentation. Intelligence reports linked the attacks that touched off the sweep to al-Shabab militants, who were protesting the presence of Kenya Defense Forces in Somalia.

Since the terror attacks began, Kenyan traders who buy wares in Eastleigh are frightened. “These explosions scared many of us who usually get our stocks from Eastleigh on a daily basis to an extent that when we go there, we do so hurriedly, like going into a war zone,” explains Wilfred Karang’e, who buys shoes and carpets from Eastleigh for resale in the nearby Thika town. “The ethnic skirmishes greatly affected my business since I couldn’t replenish my stocks for some days.”

Little Mogadishu is one of the most important landmarks, not only for Kenyan Somalis but for Somalis everywhere. Thousands of dollars are reportedly transferred daily through an informal but intricate social network called *hawala*. The Kenyan security apparatus and a host of other governments have singled out this global system as making it easy for terrorists to finance their global operations and engage in other illegal operations like drug trafficking.

Basically *hawala* works by transferring money through a network of brokers, called *hawaladars*, who transfer funds without moving them physically. A transaction starts by a customer giving a *hawala* broker money to transfer to a recipient. When the sender books the transfer, he also gives the

broker a special password. The *hawaladar* calls his counterpart at the destination and tells him the amount of money and password, details that the receiver of the transferred cash must provide before being paid. This system can be exploited by terrorists and other black market merchants because no documents are involved, which makes tracing those involved almost impossible.

This system can also boost trade in *curios*, *qat*, and other goods from the informal sector, but unfair and illegal business practices should be curbed to ensure that unscrupulous Somali business people cannot use the Kenyan economy to sanitize money originating in dark trades like piracy and smuggling in Somalia. Kenya could tap into this multimillion dollar transfer system by registering the *hawaladars* such that the government profits each transfer. Like the mobile money transfer system called M-Pesa, *hawala* could be harnessed to contribute legally to the economy while ensuring terror elements don’t use it for their own selfish ends.

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MONO-ETHNIC LIVING

During the colonial period, British officials allocated neighborhoods to Kenyans according to race and class, with Eastleigh being established in 1921 for Indians and African clerks and shoemakers. Many Somalis found themselves in Kenya in 1925, after the British hived off a chunk of the Jubaland region in modern day southern Somalia to form part of Kenya known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD). The rest of Somalia was ceded to Italy as a re-

ward for its support of the Allies during World War I. But despite recommendations by the British that all regions of East Africa inhabited by Somalis be joined into one country and the desire of NFD residents to join their countrymen in the newly created Somali Republic, the Kenyan nationalists who took over from Britain were unwilling to relinquish the region. NFD residents launched a vigorous campaign to join Somalia through the Northern Province People's Progressive Party.

The government of newly independent Kenya brutally crushed the Somali secession efforts during the Shifta War from 1963 to 1967—and it was not the last time Kenya would violently crack down on a Somali population. In 1984, a military operation to disarm members of the Somali Degodia clan led to the seizure of more than 5,000 men who were assembled at the Wagalla Airstrip in Wajir District in NFD. After brutal beatings and torture, more than 3,000 were murdered and many more maimed in what became known as the Wagalla Massacre. The United Nations later described the incident as the worst human rights abuse in Kenya's history.

Long before the Shifta War and Wagallah, however, Somalis had begun coming to Nairobi from NFD as railway builders and guards of such British Empire figures as Lord Delamere, one of the earliest settlers in Kenya, and Lord Frederick Lugard, who had served as governor of Hong Kong and governor-general of Nigeria. Colonial administrators must have held Somalis in high regard, because they were at first allowed to live in Kileleshwa, near the Europeans' neighborhood. They were later relocated to Eastleigh, which was known as Kambi ya Somali (Somali Camp) until the arrival of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the 1930s. The suburb

was named Eastleigh, because most of the RAF personnel came from the town of Eastleigh in Hampshire, England.

Police reports say a broad and vibrant illicit trade thrives beneath the bustle of normal business in this densely populated area. Apart from al-Shabab using Eastleigh as a hideout and launching pad for attacks across the city, police reports allege gun runners from Somalia also collude with their agents in Kenya to bring small arms to Eastleigh. From here, police sources say, the smugglers sell the weapons to Kenyan criminal elements, fueling crime across the city. "The presence of Kenyan Somalis makes it quite hard for the Kenyan security forces to fight terrorism effectively because it's impossible to differentiate between a Kenya Somali and Somalia Somali," explains George Musamali, a former police officer who now works as a security consultant. "These people share culture, religion, and language, and therefore they help each other."

He says that from his experience on the police force, Kenyan Somalis help their countrymen from Somalia acquire Kenyan passports and live in the country illegally, making it difficult for security personnel to track criminal elements. "This is made worse by human rights groups who instantly come to the defense of the Somalis whenever there is an operation in Eastleigh or other places, claiming the Somalis are being harassed by the government."

Instead of mass sweeps, Musamali says the police should instead focus on unmasking al-Shabab operatives, who find it easy to fade into the native Somali population. "We need to use Israeli methods to identify friendly Kenyan Somalis and train them in undercover intelligence gathering techniques, then release them into the population," the security expert explains. "This

will help our forces beat the cover and be able to identify the terrorist elements from the general Somali population.”

Currently, the Kenyan government uses grass-roots administrators, known as chiefs, to gather information on the ground. This method is ineffective since few Somalis open up to government officials.

IDENTITY CRISES

Besides being considered a security threat, Kenyan Somalis have also suffered from an identity crisis. The line between citizens and refugees is sometimes as thin as the identification papers on which they base their legitimacy. The 2009 national census figures from nine Somali-dominated districts in the nation's northeastern region were cancelled after it emerged that Somalis had become the sixth most populous groups in Kenya. Many government officials and non-governmental organizations claimed the data was doctored since it indicated the Somali population had risen by 140 percent in barely 10 years. The figures from 1999 census showed 800,000 citizens of Somali origin while the number in 2009 soared to 2,385,572.

The then Minister of Planning Wycliffe Oparanya explained that the decision to cancel the results was taken after inconsistencies emerged. “The rate of increase is higher than the population dynamics. If you look at birth and death rates, they cannot support those figures,” he said. “Age and sex profiles also deviate from the norm.” There were triple the number of men than women, and population growth did not reflect an increase in the number of households, which was among the lowest in the country.

This Kenyan Somali population explosion was likely fueled by illegal Somali immigration and facilitated by corrupt Ke-

nyan officials. The ease of receiving Kenyan citizenship papers increases the ability of al-Shabab members to operate in Kenya. Part of the solution lies in streamlining the naturalization process and eradicating corruption among immigration officials. A more transparent, legal path to citizenship would make it easier for Somalis without ties to terrorism to become productive Kenyan citizens and make it harder for corruption to enter the process. Streamlining the naturalization process will also ensure suspicious elements find it hard to acquire personal documents. Through better pay and stricter punishment, like dismissal and jail terms for those found registering people illegally, the Kenyan government could also deter its officials from accepting bribes and looking the other way when Somalis, some of whom have connections to criminal groups, enter the country.

After the Kenyans invaded Somalia and brought some semblance of order following the defeat of al-Shabab, the two countries established a joint task force to begin repatriating refugees. Repatriation, however, has become a thorny issue with many Somali refugees saying they have settled and established businesses in Kenya and do not want to return. Still, repatriating refugees will reduce the congestion in refugee camps and cut the major route the al-Shabab have been using to enter the country. Most criminal elements from Somalia hide in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps. While there, they deal ruthlessly with any who dare report them to the police, which helps explain the abductions and killings

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in these refugee centers in the last few months. With Somalia's relative stability, the Kenyan government should halt the entry of refugees and continue to plan the repatriation of those living in Kenya.

The government of Kenya should also increase its patrols along the Somalia-Kenya border to control the infiltration of terrorists and illegal small arms into the country's North Eastern region. The Kenyan government, says Tiberius Barasa, a public policy and administration lecturer at Maseno University in Kenya, should increase its military's border presence, ensuring that terrorists cannot enter the country so easily.

ROOTS OF EVIL

The Kenyan government's effort to fight crime and terror should not be perceived as a systematic anti-Somali campaign but rather a means of removing the bad elements from its Somali population. "The Kenyan government should also take the security operations in the Somali-dominated northern Kenya seriously," says Barasa. "They should deploy the military there just like they did in the Operation Linda Nchi"—code name for the Kenyan invasion of Somalia in 2011 that led to the removal of al-Shabab from its strongholds in cities like Kismayo and Afmadow

near the Kenyan border. In its war against terror and ethnic violence among Somali clans in North Eastern province, which borders Somalia, the Kenyan government sent elite police divisions to expel or kill al-Shabab fighters.

For now, Kenyan Somalis remain embedded in a climate of festering hostility. The takeover of the Somalia operation by a joint pan-African force is certainly a step in the right direction since al-Shabab will no longer have Kenya alone as a target for revenge. They will have to attack Uganda, Burundi, and a host of other countries who have contributed to the African Union's military mission.

Kenya should consider rewarding Kenyan Somalis who provide vital information leading to the arrest of terror suspects or smugglers. Rewards should range from government scholarships to job placements and citizenship for those who have lived here for more than 10 years. Though not an absolute remedy to the perpetual threat of terrorism, these measures will create a sense of patriotism and belonging among Somalis living in Kenya. It will also restore the status of Eastleigh as a shoppers paradise, where buyers can stroll without the fear and worry of grenade attacks. And business will boom again. ●