

The political role of the Somali diaspora in a war-torn country

MAPM began by pointing to the parallels and differences between the Afghan and Somali diasporas. His focus, he said, would be on the development of the political role of the Somali diaspora in the war-torn country. He emphasized that this was not a new diaspora and that it was made up of different 'circles':

- Circle of proximity – neighbouring countries
- The Arabic world – with a different pattern of emigration and communities
- Overseas

Like Khalid Koser, he is wary of the celebration of diasporas and wished to provide a balanced view of the diaspora in terms of both positive and negative aspects:

Positives

- Peacebuilding
 - Somaliland: the diaspora funded two major peace conferences (involving both the grassroots movement in Somaliland and Somali migrants) which contributed to the independence of Somaliland
 - Southern Somalia: the diaspora has contributed to the peace process here too, with a peace conference in 2000 in Djibouti and peace talks in 2003/4 in Nairobi.
- Provision of expertise – returnees as professional human resources (doctors, for example) – however, there aren't large numbers of returnees
- Critical mass of the diaspora – this provides economic power through remittances and trade
- Humanitarian assistance – particularly in urban areas – through the social dynamics of remittances ('hawala' as 'protection'): at least \$120 million per annum in family remittances (which represents more than twice the humanitarian aid at the end of the 1990s).

Negatives

- Arms-buying and conflict-backing (parallel with Irish/Jewish/Tamil diasporas)
- The informal/illegal nature of remittances – potential for money laundering and interference of criminal element (the attacks on the US embassy in Nairobi in 1998 were financed through the Hawala system); also the 'dirtying of clean money'
- Khat trading
- An unhealthy dependence on remittances (akin to dependence on international aid); remittances are not always used for development or investment activities
- Weak capacity of the Somali diaspora in nation-building – the differences between ethnic groupings (e.g. minorities) are exacerbated outside Somalia and micro-identities formed

- this exacerbation is assisted by the humanitarian aid system: in UNHCR refugee camps, for example, groups are segregated according to ethnicity/area of origin, which reduces the 'cosmopolitan aspects' of the camp
- little is known about whether the second generation of migrants is following the same pattern of segregation
- there is no Somali 'central union' because of the difference between groups; no common platform or organization

The above points remind us of the need to keep a balanced view of the role of the diaspora. The political (and economic) capacity of a diaspora depends very much on the state of organization in the homeland – the critical mass of the diaspora is not enough.

(Report written by Nina Allen, GCIM)