

BOOK REVIEW

Muuse Yuusuf. *The Genesis of the Civil War in Somalia: The Impact of Foreign Military Intervention on the Conflict*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ix + 255 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$52.65. Paper. ISBN: 9780755642410.

On January 26, 1991, General Mohamed Siad Barre fled Mogadishu in a tank as insurgents closed in and defeated the last of his government's defences. The fall of Somalia's dictator marked the beginning of a descent into the civil war it has yet to recover from. *The Genesis of the Civil War in Somalia: The Impact of Foreign Military Intervention on the Conflict* by Muuse Yuusuf is a welcome contribution to a growing literature that examines the Somali civil war from a historical perspective. Yuusuf argues that the Ogaden War (1977–1978), a conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia over Somali-inhabited eastern Ethiopia, was the watershed moment that destabilized the Somali state and unleashed the forces that would lead to its undoing. Yuusuf looks at Somalia as a site of foreign competition and intervention, an analysis that goes beyond accounts of the civil war as an inevitable product of the Somali clan system.

The Genesis of the Civil War in Somalia is organized into seven chapters. The first three chapters explore various dimensions of the Ogaden War. Chapter One takes a longer-term approach by exploring early confrontations between medieval Abyssinia and the Islamic states in present-day Somalia, Djibouti, and eastern Ethiopia, such as the Ifat and Adal Sultanates. This was, as Yuusuf also notes, a pivotal moment where European allies would come to the rescue of a besieged Ethiopian state. Foreign collaboration also characterized the nineteenth-century colonial scramble for the Horn, which saw Somalis partitioned into British, Italian, French, and Ethiopian territories. Yuusuf concludes the chapter with a discussion of Somali anticolonial agitation in the Ethiopian Ogaden, including a brief war between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1964.

The second chapter centers the Ogaden War itself, one of the “hot” wars of the Cold War. As the conflict escalated and guerrillas in eastern Ethiopia were joined by Somali forces, the Eastern Bloc's decision to support Ethiopia proved decisive, leading to Somalia's withdrawal in March 1978. Chapter Three looks at the consequences of Somalia's defeat, which included an influx of refugees, coup attempts against the Barre regime by disgruntled military generals, and what the author describes as “entrenched dictatorship” as Barre's rule became more authoritarian in response to political unrest. This chapter is most explicit in establishing a link between the war and state collapse, tracing a direct line from Somalia's military defeat to the rise of the armed insurgencies that would overthrow the dictatorship before turning on one another.

Chapter Four examines the events of the Somali civil war, including communal violence in Mogadishu, the rise of armed militias, and the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Chapter Five looks at the emergence of two states in the wake of the central government's collapse, the Republic of Somaliland and the Puntland State of Somalia. The author treats both as grassroots state-building efforts in contrast to the attempts by the international community to reconstitute the nation-state. Chapter Six looks at the history of political Islam in Somalia, the rise and fall of the Islamic Courts Union, and the US-backed Ethiopian invasion in 2006. The chapter is an important one as it brings us to the present-day landscape, explaining the rise of groups such as Al-Shabaab and the impact of the global War on Terror. Finally, the book ends with a seventh chapter describing positive developments, such as the billion-dollar remittance industry that has allowed Somalia's economy to survive.

The Genesis of the Civil War in Somalia is not a typical scholarly monograph. Its author is not an academic, but a former United Nations employee from Somalia who felt inspired to write a book following Ethiopia's 2006 invasion. The text occasionally offers glimpses of Yuusuf's experiences growing up in Somalia during the years of the Barre regime. One senses the author's frustration with the events that led to Somalia's disintegration, with descriptions such as the "small-minded, visionless bigots, and power-hungry traitors" (69) responsible for the war and analyses of "missed opportunities" at various points in history that could have offered Somalia an alternate path.

While the book is well-researched, it is primarily based on secondary sources. The strengths of the text lie in its analysis. Yuusuf emphasizes the impact of foreign intervention in producing and intensifying Somalia's challenges, referring to Somalia as an "experimental testing ground" (89) for global processes and dynamics such as the Cold War and War on Terror. He is particularly critical of Ethiopia's persisting role in Somali political life, from its nineteenth-century conquests to political meddling and military invasions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is a critical departure from much of the literature on Somalia's civil war, which focuses on clan division as a primordial feature of Somali society. This argument suggests that Somalia was destined to fail because Somalis are somehow inherently ungovernable, an argument with roots in colonial racism. For Yuusuf, clan alone is inadequate as an analytic.

The Genesis of the Civil War in Somalia is an important contribution to our understanding of Somalia's civil war, expanding our purview to consider both historical context and global dynamics that shaped the Somali state and its demise.

Safia Aidid 
 University of Toronto, Canada
safia.aidid@utoronto.ca
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