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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 120th meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today we're going to complete the testimony on our study on the situations in Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

With us here today by video conference we have, first of all, Professor Ken Menkhaus. He is a professor of political science at Davidson College, and he is joining us from North Carolina.

Thank you, Professor Menkhaus, for being here.

We also have, from the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, Jay Bahadur, who is joining us from Nairobi, Kenya. Thank you.

Gentlemen, beginning with Professor Menkhaus, can we have eight to 10 minutes of testimony? We will then open it up to questions from the members.

Please begin when you're ready.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus (Professor, Political Science, Davidson College, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Honourable members of the standing committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak on the question of improving our ability to address the issues of conflict, peace, gender-based violence, security, justice, respect for human rights and economic development in Somalia.

Somalia has seen improvements in some of these issue areas in recent years, at least in some pockets of the country. Many of those improvements can be attributed to the impressive efforts of local Somali civic and political leadership. Those Somalis work in extraordinarily difficult and dangerous environments and put their lives on the line; quite a few have been killed for their efforts. Any discussion of the state of peace-building, human rights and justice in Somalia should begin with an acknowledgement of the heroism of these individuals.

At the same time, we must be frank about the continued multi-dimensional nature of the Somalia crisis today. While large-scale armed conflict and civil war do not exist in Somalia today, the country continues to be plagued by chronic political violence in the form of assassinations, terrorism attacks, communal clashes and criminal violence, much of which is animated by unresolved political rivalries. Dangerous fault lines over issues such as federal state borders, control of security sector forces and elections have placed the country at heightened risk of backsliding. Somalia remains one of the most insecure places in the world.

Gender-based violence is especially acute among marginalized groups, such as internally displaced persons, returning refugees and minority groups. Lack of rule of law leaves them exceptionally vulnerable to predatory behaviour, sometimes by the very security sector that is supposed to be protecting them.

The formal justice system is dysfunctional and lacks legitimacy across most of the country. Somalis rely instead on either customary or sharia law. Some even turn to al Shabaab, which runs a parallel justice system in much of the country. Human rights are poorly protected, especially the rights of women, weak social groups and youth.

As for economic development, Somalia has generated a lot of publicity over its dynamic private sector and has seen hopeful increases in overall growth in the national economy, but it remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with exceptionally high urban unemployment and a distressed rural economy that is so vulnerable that the country nearly suffered a second famine in this decade in 2017. The high cost of security and collapsed infrastructure add to the challenges facing smallholders, pastoralists and business people. Were it not for the $1.5 billion in remittances sent back to the country by the large Somali diaspora every year, the country would be in even deeper economic trouble.

What can external actors do to help? The fact is that donor states have been pouring billions of dollars into Somalia since the 1970s, with very weak results. International relief and development, security sector reform and state-building efforts have seen a high failure rate, and in some cases, unintentionally make things worse. When we introduce resources into an environment of extreme scarcity, violence, corruption and lack of accountability, we can fuel the very dynamics causing the crisis in the first place.

The Somali crisis is, at root, a crisis of politics and governance, and can only be solved by changes in political structures, norms and culture that must come from the Somali people themselves. External actors can help support positive developments there but cannot engineer them. I look forward to talking about some of those positive developments we can support.

A few interesting opportunities to support Somalia include the following.

First, innovative learning donor initiatives offer the promise of smart aid. The multi-donor consortium known as the Somalia Stability Fund, for instance, is deeply committed to being an adaptive, effective learning organization. This is exactly the kind of approach to aid that is more likely to work in Somalia.

Second, donor flexibility is critical in working pragmatically with whatever local or national authorities are reliable partners in advancing policies and development programs. Sometimes working with municipal or federal authorities yields better results than working with the national level.

Third, brokering and helping to consolidate peace wherever possible is essential. The wider region of the Horn of Africa is witnessing an extraordinary set of political changes that could improve interstate co-operation and create a much better environment for regional economic integration. Whatever we can do to consolidate those gains will be of great help to Somalia.

● (1535)

Finally, insisting on accountability, especially from our large Somali diaspora, is essential. The diaspora dominates Somali politics and economics today. They generally play a very positive role, but a few are deeply complicit in both systemic corruption and in political violence in Somalia. They must be held accountable to the laws of their adopted countries, including Canada.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go straight to Jay Bahadur, please.

Mr. Jay Bahadur (Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, United Nations Security Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and honourable members of Parliament, for allowing me to address you here today.

I will start with saying a few words about what I do and what our group does.

The Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea is a collection of eight experts appointed by the UN Secretary-General but mandated by the Security Council to report on sanctions violations in Somalia.

In 1992 this began with an arms embargo and has since expanded to a whole range of other measures, including humanitarian violations, a ban on illicit charcoal coming from Somalia, as well as general threats to peace and security, which al Shabaab and now the ISIL faction in Somalia certainly fall under.

My personal role in the group is that of armed groups expert, so with your permission I'll speak briefly about the work I've done. It has been published in our most recent report, which came out in early November.

We also cover Eritrea, as suggested by the title, but as I'm sure most of you are aware, incredibly fast regional developments have led to the lifting of Security Council sanctions on Eritrea as of approximately a month ago. In about 10 days we will henceforth be referred to as the panel of experts on Somalia, and there will be six of us instead of eight.

Briefly speaking about my area of work, which is mostly covering al Shabaab and ISIL as well as arms smuggling in northern Somalia, for the most part, I'll begin with a recap of our most recent reporting on al Shabaab.

In our most recent report, as we've said, for the last several years al Shabaab remains the most immediate threat to peace and security in Somalia. Despite continued air strikes by the United States and other neighbouring member states, al Shabaab remains in a position to carry out routine asymmetric attacks that over the past year have claimed the lives of well over 700 Somalis, including the deadly bombing on October 14, 2017, which killed almost 600 people.

Al Shabaab also remains capable of carrying out occasional conventional attacks on AMISOM forces, as well as the Somali National Army.

Since the cessation of AMISOM offensive operations in 2015, al Shabaab broadly remains in direct control of three separate swaths of territory in Somalia. The first and most important is along the Jubba River corridor, mainly the towns of Jilib, Jamaame and Bu'aale. Then there is a swath of central Somalia, incorporating Harardhere and El Dhere, and then finally a small mountainous area in northern Somalia in the Puntland region, where they maintain an insurgency.

However, despite the fact that most urban centres remain under the control of AMISOM and SNA forces, our investigations indicate that al Shabaab is still, in essence, in control of the hinterland, and it's in control of the main supply routes, which it uses to generate its significant revenues.

In this last report, we did an extensive amount of work on al Shabaab financing, specifically looking at checkpoint taxation as well as, as we do every year, the export of charcoal, which they also tax. We found essentially that most commercial drivers within Somalia prefer al Shabaab routes over federal government or regional forces' routes because of the predictability, the standardized taxation system and the fact that they'll be given receipts and will not be extorted at further checkpoints.

The fact that al Shabaab actually serves as a shadow government in most territory in Somalia and is able to collect taxes more efficiently than the federal government or regional forces is an area of serious concern.

There is also the ongoing issue of the AMISOM drawdown, which essentially has been forestalled because of the widespread acknowledgement among the international community that the Somali National Army, the SNA, is nowhere near ready to fill the void that will be left by AMISOM when they withdraw.

This, in our view, essentially has resulted in a stalemate, wherein al Shabaab is not able to supplant AMISOM through conventional tax, yet the will for AMISOM to push further, completely eliminating al Shabaab in terms of territorial control, is not there.

● (1540)

The will of member states, as well as funders such as the European Union, to maintain funding for AMISOM remains in doubt, and in that sense al Shabaab is winning the stalemate. Time is on their side.

I will say a few brief words about the ISIL faction in northern Somalia.

Our group did a lot of the initial work detailing the leadership, the financing and the organization of the faction that essentially exists in the northeast corner of Somalia, and again in the Puntland region.

While this group remains relatively few in number—not more than 200 fighters—in this last year, since November 2017, when the United States launched several air strikes against bases in the mountainous areas of Puntland where their fighters are concentrated, the group seems to have begun a phase of reorganization and retrenchment whereby they have sought to imitate al Shabaab's tactics in imposing taxation through extortion and intimidation. In the last few months we've seen a concerted effort to raise taxes in Puntland by targeting, through assassinations and IED attacks, members of major banks, telecommunications companies and other businesses operating in the Puntland area.

Perhaps more worryingly, in the last year they have expanded their operational scope as far south as Mogadishu and Afgooye, which lies directly to the west of Mogadishu, to the point where the ISIL group in Somalia has claimed 50 assassinations during our reported period from September to this past August.

In essence, we are worried that if they do successfully build a revenue base as al Shabaab has, ultimately they will be as hard to uproot from the society in which they serve as a major taxation agent, and as Dr. Menkhaus pointed out, a provider of alternative justice, in essence serving as a shadow government that can provide services and functions that are normally the province of a legitimate government.

I'm happy to discuss politics or issues regarding the federal government, regional governments, relations between them and the effect of the ongoing Gulf diplomatic crisis on Somalia. These are all issues on which I'm happy to take questions, but I will end my talk there and thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go straight into questions, and MP Aboultaif is going to be leading us off, please.

● (1545)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Good afternoon, and thank you for being before the committee here today.

I'm very impressed with the statements from both of you. They're very straightforward, and I think a response to many of the questions and the wondering we have over how far we can go to be effective in that specific region, as well as in others with a unique situation and a unique social environment, but particularly in Somalia.

We call it a nurturing social environment for the al Shabaab movement, with the same social environment ISIS had in the rest of the Middle East and even beyond the Middle East borders, to be able to effective and be able to terrorize and do the damage that has been done in the last years.

The million-dollar question is always going to be how far we can go and what the secret method is, if there is one, for the western world to make sure that the time and the money we spend in trying to solve these problems are not going to waste, but are going to be effective.

I go back to the unfortunate success of the al Shabaab movement; it's due to their nurturing social environment.

I'll leave it to both of you to answer. I'll start with Ken, and then we can go to Jay.

Thank you.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: You have indeed asked the million-dollar question, and I wish I had a million-dollar answer in response.

One thing is for sure: our conventional approaches over the past couple of decades have not worked. We are chronically frustrated with our local partners, especially at the national level, but sometimes at the subnational level. In Somalia, as well, they are sometimes creating conditions that actually make it quite easy for al Shabaab to thrive.

There are a couple of aspects of the relationship between the government and al Shabaab and the people of Somalia that are worth reinforcing.

One is that while it might appear from the outside that this is a battle of a beleaguered government against a jihadi organization, the reality is a lot more complex. The reality is that the two coexist side by side. They are parallel governments. They collude as well as fight. It's a very complex relationship.

Al Shabaab is both a government and a terrorist organization, but it's also running what amounts to a very effective extortion mafia known as the Amniyat. That group, even if we're successful in diminishing the capacity of the rest of al Shabaab, is likely to live on and plague Somalia in some very troubling ways.

Our options are not particularly good, especially with the drawdown of the African Union forces, which is going to create opportunities for al Shabaab to just walk into areas that the African Union forces used to patrol. As I think Jay put very clearly, they believe that time is on their side.

What can we do? We can certainly try to change that equation. If time is not perceived to be on their side, if time is ultimately on the side of local and national governments that are supporting and advancing rule of law, I can assure you that the vast majority of Somalis will support them.

Al Shabaab is strong, often because it's the only team on the playing field. The government has been so corrupt and so weak and unreliable that it just doesn't inspire confidence among the Somali people. However, at the local level, at the municipal level, at the district level and, in some cases, at the federal level in some of the federal member states, we are seeing some really good governance, and Somalis are responding to that very positively.

To the extent that we can choose our dance partners wisely in Somalia and work with groups and authorities that are doing the right thing by providing basic rule of law, by providing an environment that is safe for people and for investment, we can shrink the space that al Shabaab currently exploits. However, that's going to be a very long process, and unfortunately we're on a fairly short clock right now with the AMISOM departure.

● (1550)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Would you like to comment on that too, please?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I'm sorry. Is that for me now?

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes.

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I'd say we're in a fortunate position in the Somalia and Eritrea monitoring group in that we often have to provide criticism and point out where things are going wrong, and often aren't asked for solutions.

I have a few personal thoughts. I think that in general, the change of tack over the last four or five years by the international community towards Somalia in terms of supporting regional administrations, or what used to be called the "building-block solution", instead of solely going through the federal government, has been a very positive step. I think the last few years have proved that regional forces, which have much more of a local buy-in—so that is either clan militias or the regional forces of now federal member states—are much more effective at fighting al Shabaab, and not just fighting al Shabaab necessarily, but also encouraging their own clan members and subclan members within al Shabaab to leave the group. It is a much more effective way of fighting al Shabaab than from the top down, from the federal level. I think the support for regional forces, regional governance, and to some degree local and regional fighting forces has been a positive step.

I think what remains a serious problem is that the federal government remains the only entity that consistently legally imports arms through the partial lifting of the arms embargo, which occurred in 2013. The problem is there's such fundamental mistrust between the federal government and the federal member states that the federal government has not been willing to arm or equip regional forces. In essence, regional forces continue to be equipped by regional member states, including Ethiopia and to some degree Kenya.

The concern is that with that fundamental mistrust between the federal government and federal member states, the overall security sector architecture remains completely unclear. It remains completely unclear how regional forces are to be supported, armed and equipped in the face of the realization that the Somali National Army has been a complete failure through the years. Millions of dollars have been poured into it by the United States, by the United Arab Emirates, by Turkey, and by other partners. They have put considerable resources into training and paying salaries and stipends to the army. It is nowhere near being in a position to take over for AMISOM. I think that remains the fundamental problem faced by donors.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to MP Saini, please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Ken and Jay, for being here this afternoon.

I'm going to start with you, Ken. I have two specific questions for you. One is a military question and one is a political question.

As you know, in 2013 the Obama administration issued a presidential policy guidance with three main criteria: one, that any drone strikes that happen would have to have inter-agency vetting; two, that the threat or the target would pose a threat to Americans; three, that there would be no civilian casualties.

Because President Trump in 2017 declared that Somalia had areas of active hostilities, they changed that to a new policy called "Principles, Standards, and Procedures", which loosened some of that. Because of that loosening, the drone strikes have gone up.

Now that drone strikes have gone up, there is much more military engagement. Part of the reason was to buy some time and space to advance the governance that was happening in Somalia, but even with all this activity, the political stability or the institution-building has not occurred there, and you have publicly said that drone strikes may have a purpose, but they are no substitute for political strategy. What is the political strategy in Somalia?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: The political strategy in Somalia, which is really going to have to be owned by the Somali government or governments and not by external actors, is to address grievances.

Al Shabaab thrives off of grievances, both real and sometimes exaggerated, on the part of clans and other social groups. There are groups that have lost their land. There are groups that have been preyed on by security forces. There are groups that feel under-represented or excluded from political compacts.

Somalia is first and foremost a political problem, not a military problem. If those groups were brought into dialogue, if they were made reasonably satisfied with the political dispensation in the country, al Shabaab would be denied oxygen. It would have very few tactical partners, and mostly it relies on tactical partners, not groups that are deeply committed to it. That would make the residual military problem much easier to resolve.

As you quoted me, just relying on a military policy to harass and decapitate al Shabaab does weaken the group, but it's never going to solve the problem.

● (1555)

Mr. Raj Saini: In terms of the political policy, I'm confused about what the U.S. policy in Somalia is. I'll give you an example. You have a conflict between the military apparatus and the diplomatic apparatus. You have the State Department, which has been diminished to some extent and is not able to do its job effectively. You have the Pentagon now having more of a presence there, de facto being the sort of political arm of the U.S. there now.

What is the U.S. policy in Somalia? As you know, the U.S. has troops in only two countries in Africa, Somalia being one of them.

I'm unsure. The State Department should be taking the lead. USAID should be taking the lead. If there were truly going to be a political strategy, the State Department has to take that strategy, but it seems that the Pentagon is taking more of that strategy, and it's following the policy of “African problems, African solutions”.

Where does the political strategy of the United States fit in?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: As you've rightly put it, there's been a vacuum on the political side in U.S. policy toward Somalia. The result has been to substitute military strategy for political strategy.

The good news is that this is changing. The U.S. has confirmed and sent out a new ambassador, Ambassador Yamamoto. He and his team, I think, are going to be in a position now to have more voice in a coherent strategy towards Somalia within which a military action will be nested. I think that's very good news for Somalia and for all of us.

Mr. Raj Saini: My final question is about the status quo in Somalia.

Right now, you know there are people in positions in Somalia, especially some of the political elite, clans, and powerful cartels, who tend to benefit from perpetuating the status quo and not really coming to solve the problem. There's so much foreign money being poured into Somalia that they have the ability to control that flow of funds and enrich themselves.

How do we change that status quo? How do we make sure they're on board?

To some extent, China also has an impact. How much do we engage China also in that nation-building exercise?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: You're pointing at a fundamental problem in Somalia, which is that there are a lot of constituencies in Somalia that are benefiting from perpetuating the status quo. This is not an ideal situation for anyone, but it's a condition within which some very powerful elements in Somalia—cartels, businesses and others—have made millions of dollars.

One example is the commoditization of private security. You have security firms making lots of money selling security in the absence of an effective police force and judiciary. Those individuals are sometimes also members of Parliament or ministers. They have no interest in seeing the expansion of the rule of law, because that would hurt their business.

How do we get around that? The first thing we need to do is take very close stock of the foreign assistance that comes into the country and ask ourselves a hard question: Are we part of perpetuating this political economy? Smarter aid, tailored aid at the local level, is not going to attract the same attention from the small group of Somalis who are complicit in this political economy.

I've seen aid used very effectively. I've seen it work around, rather than through, these elements, but we're going to need to do a major rethink on that score.

Mr. Raj Saini: I have one last question. It regards the interior situation, the political situation, in Somalia. You have Puntland and Somaliland, two autonomous states within one greater Somalia.

How do you engage them also to bring them on board so that you create a federation that wouldn't have two blatant entities that were independent?

● (1600)

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Puntland is not a secessionist state. It is formally part of the federal government of Somalia, unlike Somaliland, which has declared secession since 1991.

The challenge with Puntland is that it has the ability to exercise veto power over developments it doesn't like by threatening to pull out of the government—not to be secessionist, but simply pull out of the government. In terms of bringing them on board, I think there's going to be a different answer for the two.

For Puntland, it's going to be the same process that's going to gradually bring all of the other federal member states into a more coherent union. That is a federal system that is going to take time.

Right now it is a mediated state in which central government has limited leverage over at least some of the federal member states. If the federal government has a strategy in which it uses incentives to draw in these states, to provide benefits to them, as opposed to simply trying to manipulate them and undermine them—which has been the impulse lately on the part of Mogadishu— they could create an environment in which these states see it in their interest to gradually integrate more into a Somalia, whether federal or unitary.

The Chair: Thank you. I have to cut you off there. Hopefully we can get back to that question.

MP Duncan is next, please.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much.

You can continue on that line, because my question will be along the same one. Over two decades ago, the World Bank decided to take a different approach to Indonesia, where the central government was very corrupt. They decided to start trying to shift aid to the regional governments, to the provinces or states.

Dr. Menkhaus, you have called for innovative aid. Are any of the donors starting to go in that direction of giving direct assistance to the member states where they think they could improve their ability to govern more democratically and effectively, have them begin to work together, and in turn put pressure on the central government?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Lots of donors work with whatever authorities they find most reliable. There's no question that there are pockets of competence within the federal government; they work with them. There are areas of competence, even excellence, at the local and substate level, where we have seen lots of aid organizations working, usually pretty cautiously and without a huge amount of money. That's often key. Once you put too much money in the pot, you attract some of the worst elements and the worst habits in Somalia, but there is certainly engagement at that level.

I think there's one thing we have to acknowledge, though, about western donors. The World Bank is an interesting exception, because it's so large and potentially has so much funding that it can provide, mostly through the central government. However, we have to note that there are new aid actors involved in Somalia over which we have very little influence. That is to say, the rivalries between the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and UAE versus Qatar and Turkey are playing themselves out in a proxy war that unfortunately has implications for support to either the federal government or some of these subnational federal member states.

It's been very unhelpful to politicize that question, as opposed to approaching it pragmatically as to which agency, which political authority, will be most effective. That has been lost as a result.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I'd like to put a question to both of you on the partially lifted arms embargo.

Obviously there was pressure by Somalia to lift that embargo. How much of the arms that go into the countries actually get into the hands of al Shabaab and other members? Is that an issue? Is it kind of a pointless exercise?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Jay, do you want to take that?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: Sure.

As you pointed out, the arms embargo was partially lifted in 2013 to allow the federal government, and theoretically federal member states as well, to import arms up to a certain calibre—essentially, small arms up to 14.5 millimetres and mortars up to 82 millimetres, I think.

The problem, as you point out, is that this weaponry often quickly gets into the hands of al Shabaab. The logistics arm of the Somali National Army is notoriously corrupt, on both a large scale, in terms of the head of logistics diverting weapons directly, and on a smaller scale, whereby unpaid soldiers will simply go to the market to sell their weapons.

Since 2015, the federal government has been marking weapons, which has made it easier for us to determine diversion rates. In this past report, we noted that 60 weapons we found in markets in Mogadishu and in Baidoa had markings of the federal government. That's just a very small sample of what's going on.

Our view is that with al Shabaab, as Dr. Menkhaus pointed out, it's not really a military problem per se. Greater and higher-calibre weapons will not help them solve that problem, as the federal government insists. The problem is that even if the arms embargo were completely lifted and they were allowed to import whatever weaponry they wished, history suggests that the weaponry would quickly find its way into the hands of al Shabaab and there would be some sort of parity again. Our view as a group is very strongly that the federal government is not ready for a lifting of the arms embargo. In fact, as noted in this report, not one of the consignments they received legally over the course of our past mandate was properly notified to the Security Council as per the requirements set out in the Security Council resolution. That remains a significant concern for us.

● (1605)

Ms. Linda Duncan: I'm wondering if you're seeing any kind of an age divide in Somalia. Is there any greater hope with the younger generation coming forward and pushing more for engagement in civil society, or a more democratic regime, or more rule of law, or is it the other way around?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I think that's one for Dr. Menkhaus.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: All right. This is going to be a speculative answer. I wish we had better data. We do have some public opinion polls of youth, which give us some clues to this question, but I don't have a definitive answer.

I think the first thing to point out is that 75% of the Somali population is under the age of 30. That means that three-quarters of the population or more have no living memory of a functional state, and that's a really important point of departure. We are talking about people for whom good governance, rule of law—all the things we take for granted—is a pretty alien concept in their frame of reference.

They are also now much more accustomed to a degree of Islamism in their lives, in politics and in justice systems, which would have been relatively unknown for the older generation. I think that's going to mark them into the future. I think this is a generation that will look for Islamic solutions in some form to a much greater degree than their older counterparts did in Somalia.

As for whether they are more inclined to see a solution, I don't know. I suspect that over time, Somalis who grow up in this environment will learn how to manage it. Somalia is a gigantic, horrible experiment in risk management—10 million people who have figured out a way to live in a chronically insecure and poorly governed context—and risk aversion is one of the ways you stay alive. Risk aversion, in this context, usually means not taking chances on a proposed dramatic new system of political rule, but rather living with the devil you know.

That is discouraging in some ways to me. I think it's going to be harder to promote real political reform because its risks are just so high for Somalis.

Ms. Linda Duncan: You've called for innovative aid. Do you know of any brilliant, innovative ideas for how to address that?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: There is a huge danger in calling out aid agencies and their projects and saying, “Look how well they're doing”, because that immediately elicits counter-responses: “Oh, no; they messed up here and here and here.” I'm a little reluctant to give a shout-out to specific aid agencies.

When I'm in the field, there's no question that some are certainly looking harder than others at new ways of doing business in Somalia. To the extent that aid agencies can build and retain top-notch national teams, they stand to have a much greater rate of success. Somalia is very inaccessible to outsiders. It's almost impossible for outsiders to program effectively in Somalia without a national team that really knows what it's doing, and that's a lesson many have learned long ago.

Many have been innovative in the ways they have allowed their national staff to take global issues—such as human rights or women's rights—and repackage them so they don't appear to be our agenda being foisted on Somalis, because that's a great way for these programs and agendas to fail. National staff know how to nationalize these issues, to indigenize them—to draw on Islamic traditions, for instance, as a way of arguing for women's rights. That's very effective and innovative.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Thank you.

The Chair: MP Vandenbeld is next, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much to both of you.

I'd like to pursue a little bit more this idea of the transition to federalism and the way in which Canada, a country that has a long history of experience with federalism, might be able to help in that transition. I understand, of course, that it's a very difficult thing to do in a clan-based society, where you do have huge parts of the country that don't have national government control. Is there something specific that Canada can do?

Dr. Menkhaus, I know you talked about the donor flexibility in being able to target aid toward some of the regional governments.

Mr. Bahadur, you talked about the building-block solution, that we want to be focused on the regional governments.

Could each of you please talk specifically about what Canada might be able to do, given our experience and history with federalism?

Go ahead, Dr. Menkhaus.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: The question of federalism in other countries and what Somalis can learn from that has been around since the late 1990s. There was a publication called “A Menu of Options”, which was produced by the European community, I think. It looked at countries like Switzerland and elsewhere not so much to provide solutions to Somalis, but to provide them with a lesson in comparative politics so they can understand that there are a lot of other ways that other countries have managed decentralization and have managed identity politics in a federal context.

I think what Canada could do—and as long as you're extending these lessons to Somalia, you could certainly help us out here in the United States as well—is find a way to help Somalis understand the notion of cosmopolitanism.

One of the problems in Somalia is that federalism has been devolved into a very crude form of ethnofederalism—that is to say, each of these member states is viewed as the domain of one dominant clan, which replicates minority groups in those same areas, which in turn creates grievances that al Shabaab exploits in every single member state.

The question in Somalia of who has the right to live where—the Somalis talk about *u dhashey* and *ku dhashey*, or rights by birth, rights by blood, rights by citizenship—is entirely unresolved. In Somalia, no one is going to dispute that a particular clan has domain over a particular pasture; they know that. It's in the cities that they haven't figured this out. They haven't figured out which cities are cosmopolitan places where everyone has the right to live, to do business, to run for office or to be a policeman. If that discourse could be advanced....

You have wonderful cities, such as Montreal and Toronto. These are great lessons for many of the rest of us. I think Somalis would benefit from that. Of course, you have the advantage of having a very large Somali diaspora from those kinds of cities in Canada, who presumably can go back and help promote that idea in Somalia.

The solution in Somalia of federalism and identity tensions, ethnotensions, is going to be solved city by city, in my view.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Go ahead, Dr. Bahadur.

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I'm not a doctor yet, and probably not soon to be.

I don't think I have quite as comprehensive an answer on this, but I would say that in terms of federalism, one very significant issue is the provisional constitution, which is yet to be finalized after years and years of constitutional review. Within that, there's the issue of resource sharing and transfer payments with which I think Canada deals, given its lessons with richer and relatively less rich provinces. That sort of knowledge could be extremely helpful for the federal government to reach a final decision and a final framework for resource sharing that includes oil and gas and fisheries, which are things I think Canada has a great deal of experience with.

To expand on Dr. Menkhaus' point, given the number of Somalis in Toronto and the cosmopolitan knowledge of how different competing interests can live together, those young people can be encouraged to go back, even, and enter politics in Somalia or at least enter the political discourse, but it's a very difficult sell.

Coming back to the point earlier on the older and younger generations, one of the fears I have in Somalia is that the older generation, which knows the culture, which grew up before the civil war, which knows how to interact with the diaspora, with donors and with locals, is in their 60s and 70s and is dying out. You need to encourage young, educated Somalis to go back and have a stake in the system. Frankly, there are some, but you don't see that widespread interest in going back into that environment if you're an educated doctor or lawyer. As I said, it's obviously not an easy sell, because as a politician there, you face the extreme risk of assassination, of other bodily harm, and certainly a lower living standard.

However, if Canada could find some way to encourage its educated youth to take an interest and a stake in Somalia's future, I think that's one way you could have a very positive impact.

● (1615)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to have two last questions. We'll have MP Baylis, followed by MP Alleslev, please.

Please proceed, Mr. Baylis.

Mr. Frank Baylis (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you.

I'd like to follow up a bit on some of the questions my colleague Anita was asking.

It seems that you both said that a top-down federalist approach didn't work because, from a political perspective, the Somali national government isn't very good at doing things and the national army wasn't very good. Is that correct? Have these two attempts been tried, and they failed?

I'll start with you, Ken, if you would like.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Top-down approaches in Somalia have not succeeded. There's no question. That's where the vast majority of external support has gone and that's where the vast majority of foreign aid dollars have been lost.

The federal government has a number of built-in problems. One is that it's essentially a constituency-free government. It resides in Mogadishu. It answers only to itself. It is the main catchment point for foreign aid, and as a result it attracts.... It does attract some really good people. There are some wonderful Somalis working in the government and trying very hard. They do have pockets of competence there, but generally it hasn't added up to anything more than chronic political paralysis and some of the worst corruption in the world.

The Somali National Army is not a true army; it is a set of divisions or brigades that answer to a clan commander. They are essentially clan paramilitaries that are not answering up a civilian chain of command. As a result, they are not trusted. In some cases, they are advancing clan interests at the expense of local populations, who turn to al Shabaab for protection.

Ironically, we provide support to an armed force that is driving people into al Shabaab's arms. That is about as frustrating a thing as you can tell a taxpayer.

Mr. Frank Baylis: Do you have something to add there, Jay?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I would agree with that completely.

We did a lot of work on taxation this year, as I mentioned. The universal response from local inhabitants who had to conduct trade, such as truck drivers and businessmen, was that they prefer to deal with al Shabaab rather than take routes that would take them through government checkpoints. That could be either SNA—whatever the SNA is, which is often, as Dr. Menkhaus said, just militia that answer to their clan chain of command—or regional forces, which will set up checkpoints haphazardly on an ad hoc basis and essentially serve as extortion rackets.

Al Shabaab is an extortion racket as well, but it's a predictable one and one that honours its own system. That is extremely worrying.

In essence, I agree completely that the top-down approach has led to the greatest waste of donor money in Somalia.

● (1620)

Mr. Frank Baylis: We take that approach because we think of Somalia—even as we're talking about it—as a country, but it's not actually a country in a real sense. We try to deal with it as a country, but it's really just a group of people in Mogadishu. The money goes in there, and there's too much money for them to even effectively use it, so it gets stolen, and people show up.... It doesn't work. We've been at this for decades, not for years.

It then means that we have to go the other way around: bottom up. You're saying that these are clan groups and we should try to turn them into cosmopolitan people. There's a value that young people are far more cosmopolitan than older people and the world is going that way, if we look at it in general. Are Somalis also outward-looking, or is their situation so unique that these young people don't know...or they're not exposed to it like western youth, who I would say see national borders a lot less firmly than their parents would?

How do they see the world?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Do you want me to go first, Jay?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: Yes.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: That's a great question, and a really challenging question.

Somali political culture is fascinating in that you can simultaneously have a really enduring, extreme level of parochialism around clan; a very powerful undercurrent of Somali nationalism, despite everything that has happened there in the past 30 years; and a pretty impressive level of cosmopolitanism.

Somalis travel extensively. The diaspora are vectors of all kinds of ideas from east and west and everywhere else. Somalis are, on average, extremely avid consumers of news and anything from the media, so they can simultaneously be all three. The key for them is finding a way to tap into the best of all three of those things and not to demonize clanism, for instance, because clan has had some really valuable functions as a social security net in a country with very little security. That has been one of the sources of resilience.

However, you're right that working with the subnational units does run the risk of reinforcing parochialism, inasmuch as many of them are dominated by a single clan, but there are towns and cities where multiple clans coexist. It's a place where they do business and where good schools are available, so people from every clan are making use of those services. Those, I think, are the hot spots of a solution in the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the final question.

MP Alleslev, go ahead, please.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you very much.

I'd like to have a summary, if I could.

We've been putting billions of dollars in since the 1970s, but often with few results, and often unintentionally making things worse. We've heard that conventional approaches are not working and that there are parallel governments that are often both colluding and contrasting.

We've heard that ISIL is increasing. Al Shabaab is well established and therefore potentially increasing. I'm not exactly sure where the actual government is. Could you give me a feel of the trend since the 1970s, or at least in the last, say, five years? Overall, are we seeing it staying the same? Are we seeing it getting better, or are we seeing it getting worse?

● (1625)

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: Getting better and getting worse in Somalia varies by location and sector. When we talk about—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: But I'm asking you overall. I'm saying "on balance". The international community has contributed billions of dollars since the 1970s. On balance, are we making progress, by whatever criteria you want to use to define overall on-balance progress or betterness?

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: You're pressing an academic to give a blanket statement. We qualify everything, but—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Yes, I am, because I'm a politician, and I'll jump to the conclusion. I'm a politician who has heard wise advice and counsel say that we need a major rethink. Therefore, if I'm looking at a major rethink, I have to go to the Canadian taxpayer and say,"This is why your tax dollars are going to Somalia; it's because we are making a difference" or "No, we're not making a difference, and therefore we fundamentally need to do something differently."

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: I will try to answer your question as directly as I can.

The overall trend is that there are some pockets of good things happening, but the broad national trend is either stagnant or worrisome. We could be looking at a situation that could get actively worse in the next few years if the right politics aren't pursued.

It's a pessimistic assessment. It's not one that's shared by many of my colleagues in Nairobi, but I am worried.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: But it's pragmatic, and we cannot address a problem if we're not willing to define, evaluate and quantify it.

Jay, could I ask you for your perspective?

Mr. Jay Bahadur: I'll stick with the last five years. That's what I've been looking most intensely at on the ground, to some degree.

To answer, again equally bluntly, I think that politically there have been improvements. I think the overall trend towards creating and supporting federal member states to give some sort of a political arena for grievances on that level is a good thing.

I think you've seen an increasing maturity of the federal government in terms of its ability to, for example, create a budget, act like a government, engage with donors and act a little more maturely on the international stage. There have been institutional improvements and improvements in terms of the quality of individuals in the governments you see around Somalia. Politically, I think there have been steps forward, and certainly in the last five years.

In fact, I think it was in 2009 that the national budget was scribbled on the back of a napkin. Now you have the World Bank and a financial management system implemented by the World Bank. I think those are improvements.

I think the security situation has not improved. The fundamental problem in Somalia is al Shabaab's integration into society and the inability to uproot its mafia—it's been compared by many others to the Mafia—and eliminate it from the fabric of society. That hasn't changed.

In terms of the military situation on the ground, in the last few years it has gotten worse in terms of AMISOM retrenching, cutting budgets, not actively patrolling, not actively engaging in the society and essentially sitting in barracks mode. In that sense, as I said before, I think al Shabaab is winning the stalemate. I think that time is not on the side of those who are trying to stabilize Somalia.

Now, with the Gulf crisis, you see basically a proxy war being fought at a political level that threatens to divide and subsume the progress that has been made between the federal and regional levels.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I have very little time left, but I'm going to be a little bit inflammatory for the sake of impact or insight.

Why should we continue to invest, and who's doing the major rethink to ensure that those investments are successful?

The Chair: Gentlemen, I'll limit you to 30 seconds each on that, only because we have to move on.

Dr. Ken Menkhaus: I think we need to continue to engage, because if we were to see Somalia backslide into a real crisis, the spillover to the region would be enormous and the humanitarian impact would be unthinkable.

● (1630)

Mr. Jay Bahadur: Again, without knowing specifically what taxpayer commitments Canada has made, essentially I think there's no alternative. I agree with Ken completely that there's no alternative.

Without international support, without AMISOM, without western financial commitments to AMISOM, al Shabaab would be in control of the country in 24 hours. I don't think that's at all a tenable or acceptable solution for anyone, including for the Canadian government.

The Chair: Gentlemen, I want to thank you both for a very insightful and engaging hour of testimony.

This does conclude our hearings on the region. We're certainly going out with a lot of information.

The meeting is adjourned.