

# The Somali Community in London

Presented by

JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF LONDON AND DISTRICT

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# SOMALIA: THE HORN OF AFRICA



# BACKGROUND

After years of colonial rule, Somalia gained its independence on July 1, 1960



# SOMALI CULTURE



# SOMALIAN CULTURE

- Historically, the Somali people were nomadic
- Poetry was an integral part and was used as a form of communication with regards to all aspects of life
- Family is extremely important in Somali culture, far more than the individual in all aspects of life
- Community is also another important factor in Somali culture; Somali people tend to be open and social
- Gatherings will usually be composed of dancing (dhaanto, burambur etc.) and food
- Younger individuals will refer to older family friends and neighbours as 'aunt or uncle' as a sign of respect, and refer to peers their own age as 'sister or brother'



# RELIGION

- The vast majority of Somalians are Sunni Muslims (more than 95%)
- Religion is an important aspect of daily life for Somalians
- Children attend 'Quran School' to learn how to read and write in Arabic (the language of the Quran) and are taught to memorize and recite chapters of the Quran (up to memorizing the entire Quran)
- During the five daily prayers, males and females worship separately as per the teachings of Islam



# MARRIAGE

- According to Islamic teachings, men and women do not date in conventional western ways; a man and a woman will get to know each other with a chaperone present
- If the man and woman both agree that a marriage is desirable, the man's family will go to the woman's family to ask for her hand in marriage
- Marriage celebrations are elaborate one (full day) day affairs and usually go late into the night



# FAMILY

- The Somali family is headed by the husband who is responsible for providing for his family financially
- The wife is responsible for raising the children and looking after the household
- Larger families (3 or more children) is the expectation among families; it is uncommon to find couples with only one child
- It is encouraged and expected that grandparents will often come to stay the family when they grow too old to live alone
- Distant family members will often visit so the house is always filled with people

# SPORTS

- Much like the rest of the world, soccer is the most popular sport in Somalia
- Track and field is another popular sport; Abdi Bile won the 1987 1500m World Championship



# FOOD

- Somali food is a mix of African, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Italian
- Popular dishes include injera, sabayad, sambuusa, baasto, suugo, bariis, muufo, hillib, fish (for those near the coast)
- Tea (shaah) is similar to Indian Chai and is commonly served to guests along with sweets like cookies and buur
- Food is an important part of bringing people together and Somalians commonly eat with their right hand



# STATUS OF WOMEN

- Women tend to be second to men when it comes to household/family decisions
- Somali culture is male dominated
- Unlike other cultures however women are entitled to their inheritance and property but their share is less than the men's share
- Depending on each family's values, women can be educated even though males always have the priority

# FESTIVALS/HOLIDAYS



- There are numerous holidays that are observed in Somalia
- One of the most popular holidays is Eid al-Fitr, the day of celebration that follows the holy month of Ramadan
- Families and friends will gather during Eid al-Fitr to eat, provide gifts to children, and celebrate the end of the holy month
- Another popular holiday is Eid al-Adha which is the celebration that follows the holy pilgrimage to Mecca
- Much like Canada, Somalians celebrate their independence day on July 1<sup>st</sup>



# POLITICS – COLONIAL ERA

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## Somalia Colonization

- 1884, Berlin conference caused European powers to scramble for Africa
- Inspired the Dervish leader, Muhammad Abdullah Hassan to rally support across the Horn of Africa
  - Began the longest colonial resistance
  - Received weapons from Ottomans, Sudan and other Islamic/Arabic countries
- 1920, Dervish state collapsed after considerable aerial bombardment by the English
- England, Italy and France seized territory respectively

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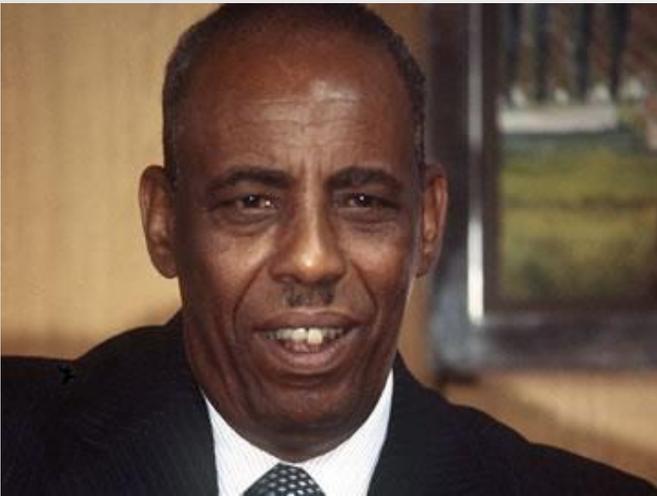


# POLITICS – COLONIAL ERA

- Somalia was divided into 5 parts: One part was an Italian Colony, two parts were British Colonies, one part was an Ethiopian Colony, and one part was a French Colony
- In 1960, one of the British Colonies and the Italian Colony united upon gaining their independence; the other British Colony was left under Kenyan rule
- Soon after 1960, the two colonies that united formed a central government
- In 1969, there was a military coup, Siad Barre took over as President of Somalia
- Siad would continue to govern Somalia for 21 years

# POLITICS – PRE CIVIL WAR

- The period before the civil war was seen as a time of peace and prosperity for Somalia however corruption with the Siad Barre regime led to frustration and anger amongst the people
- Barre was seen as a dictator who ruled with an iron fist
- Groups of Somalians who grew fed up with the regime rose up to overthrow Barre in 1991



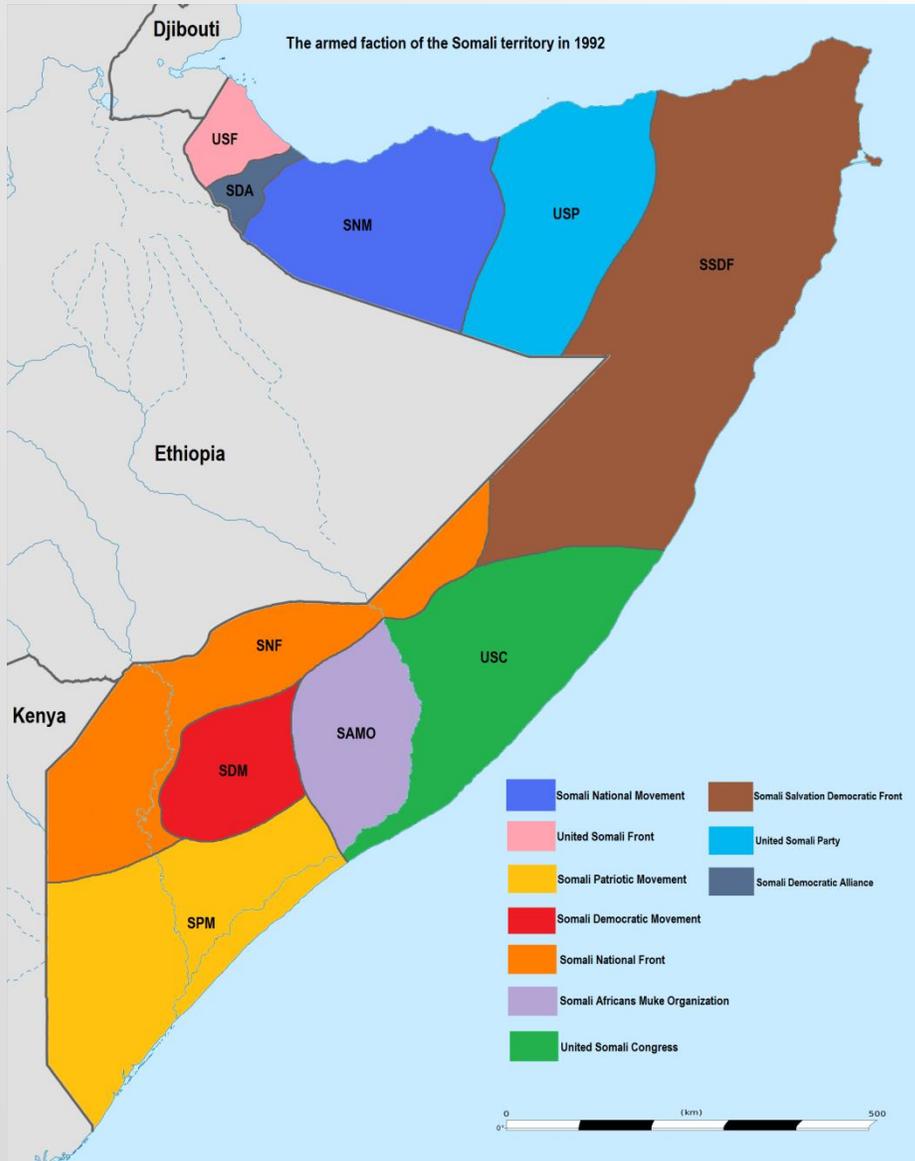
# CIVIL WAR

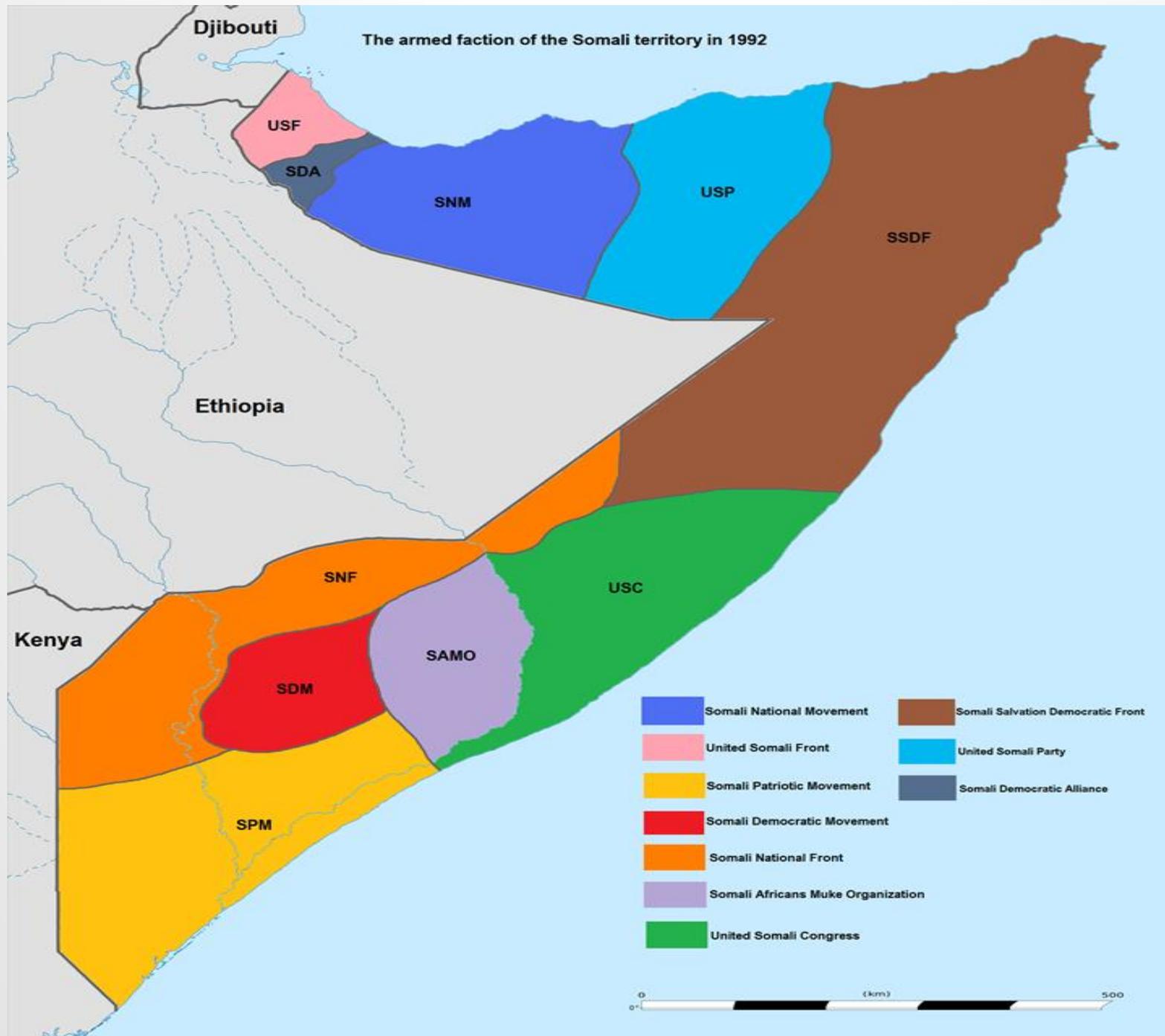
- Since 1991, chaos consumed Somalia
- Those who were lucky enough were able to flee to nearby countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, while others travelled internationally to Europe, Australia, and North America
- During this period, there was mass murder, rape, destruction, and famine
- UN, NATO, and US forces were brought in during the 90s to help stabilize the situation however those efforts were not successful



# CIVIL WAR

- The map shown here shows the different armed factions within Somalia in 1992





# POLITICS - CURRENTLY

- Currently there is a weak federal government
- There continues to be UN Peacekeeper soldiers in addition to armed forces from Ethiopia and Kenya to maintain an atmosphere of peace
- One remnant of the civil war is a right-wing extremist group referred to as Al-Shabab which is said to have ties to Al-Qaeda
- This group has been responsible for mass murders, fear, and instability within Somalia

# REFUGEES

- For many Somali families, their entrance to other countries was primarily on refugee status
- Others were placed in refugee camps in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda
- Families were often times separated from one another
- Some individuals lived through famine and disease within these refugee camps
- Individuals that went overseas had to cope with rebuilding their lives in new surroundings

# SOMALIS IN CANADA

- Canada is home to an estimated 150,000 Somali residents\*, which is the largest population of Somalians in North America
- The majority of these Somalians live in Southern Ontario, primarily in Toronto and Ottawa
- Somali-Canadians tend to live in close-knit communities within both cities
- Somali residents within Canada either immigrated when the civil war first broke out or they endured years in refugee camps before making their way over

# SOMALIS IN CANADA

- The first mass exodus of Somalians to Canada in the 1980s were largely educated professionals that were fleeing the growing unsesttlement within Somalia
- This is not surprising as it often takes financial means and knowledge to relocate your family to a new country as immigrants
- The next wave of Somalians followed in the 1990s once the civil war had erupted

# SOMALIS IN CANADA

- Many Somalians arrived in Canada to a different world than they left: it was colder, the language, food, and dress were different
- Another troubling matter was that numerous Somalians also had to deal with racism for the first time in their lives
- For the first time, Somalians had to explain and sometimes defend their values and beliefs to others
- Throughout this turmoil, many parents sought comfort in their faith as a way to connect with their roots and help heal the pain of being torn from their home country



# SOMALIS IN LONDON

- While the majority of Somalians settled in large cities such as Toronto and Ottawa, small pockets of families settled in cities such as Kitchener/Waterloo, Hamilton, and London among others
- Much like their fellow countrymen in other cities, London's Somali community expressed the lack of stable employment as their primary concern
- Lack of employment has caused families to move to larger cities in Ontario or out west for employment opportunities

# ISSUES WITHIN THE SOMALI COMMUNITY

- One of the main issues facing the Somali community is living in poverty
- Many families are on government assistance and thus usually live in social housing complexes
- Other issues include: lack of awareness of the resources available, lack of mentorship programs for youth, lack of programming to address the trauma experienced by youth and other adults alike (many families may be experiencing symptoms of PTSD and not know about it)

# ISSUES WITHIN THE SOMALI COMMUNITY

- Somali youth who grew up in Canada were often faced with discrimination and found themselves defending their culture
- As a result, Somali youth are often disengaged from their culture and religion
- This disengagement has led to an increase in the criminal activity of young people
- Lack of employment in Ontario has also led numerous young Somali men to head out west in the hopes of earning a living in the oil fields
- Upon arriving there however, many find themselves unable to attain employment due to lack of skills and thus find easy money through the drug trade



# ISSUES WITHIN THE SOMALI COMMUNITY

- Many of the young Somali youth are also facing the issue of 'oreo culture' meaning that while they appear as Somalis on the outside, they have embraced and often think of themselves as Canadians first
- This often leads to conflict with parents who want their children to acknowledge that they are Somalis first and hold on to the culture from back home



# POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO ISSUES

- The absenteeism of positive male role models within the Somali community is a serious issue that needs to be addressed through mentorship programs with older professionals
- Programs that teach Somali youth who grew up or were born in Somalia about their language and culture would support young people to take pride in the history and traditions of their people
- Somali parents also need support and programming to help them understand the value of integration and how to support their children to be successful in Canadian society without compromising their culture. Parenting classes (in Somali) would help parents understand the differences in parenting between Canada and Somalia

# POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO ISSUES

- To help individuals dealing with mental health issues as a result of the trauma and culture shock they experienced, it would be beneficial to offer counselling (in Somali)

THANK YOU!

MAHAD SANID!