

ISRAACA: A Struggle for Somalia's Collective Consciousness and Accountability

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Roonoow Rabbiyoow Rahmaanoow, Soomaalida u roonoow

(O, benevolent and gracious God, Extend your mercy to Somalis)

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I. Introduction

During the 2002 Annual Conference of the Pan Somali Council for Peace and Democracy, popularly known as ISRAACA (unity), held in Minnesota, U.S.A., a panel of experts in Somali society and its current crises answered a slew of questions posed by a representative of the Council's Board of Directors.² The main message that came out of the panel session and a keynote address³ that preceded it was an appreciation of the mighty problems facing the reunification of the Somali nation. The speakers were in agreement that the reestablishment of a viable Somali state would take decades, if not generations, unless some key ingredients in the Somali consciousness change. They all indicated that before a reconfiguration of the Somali state can take place, the current value system based on individualistic and/or clanistic and regional loyalties should be largely replaced by one based on principles, faith, and patriotism. The majority of those experts contended that education is the key to ingraining such new values in the Somali consciousness. However, some panelists, notably Professor Ahmed Ismail Samatar and former Premier Abdirazak H. Hussein, emphasized the critical role of leadership in making and sustaining a legitimate and effective state. Drawing on his recent volume on the state in Africa (co-edited with Abdi I. Samatar) and, more relevantly, on an article co-authored with the same collaborator on Hussein and former President Aden Abdulle Osman, Dr. Samatar elucidated that successful states are characterized by four robust and reinforcing frames: leader, regime, administrative apparatus, and collective conscious-

ness.⁴ Samatar argued that the only government in Somali history that approximated such a condition was the one headed by Abdirazak H. Hussein (1964–1967) and presided over, as its head of state, by Aden Abdulle Osman. He further suggested that unless a nucleus is created, through education, for the development of a leadership with the necessary self-confidence, moral code, vision, and competence, then collective consciousness will remain only a dream. Toward the conclusion of the discussion, the panelists wondered whether ISRAACA could serve as the spark that ignites the re-creation of the Somali society's collective consciousness and accountability.

At the end of the session, the then-Chairman of the Board of Directors, Said Salah, invited all the panelists to become honorary members of ISRAACA. However, some of the panelists later pointed out that Somalis and other individuals and organizations need to know more about ISRAACA's mission, accomplishments, and limitations. The authors of this article took that advice to heart. What follows is our attempt to give a picture of what ISRAACA is and its prospects in regenerating the Somali people's *mentalité*.

II. Historical Background

A. The Inception: An Idea becomes a Reality

In a social gathering in 1997, some young Somali professionals in Columbus, Ohio, discussed ways to improve the local conditions of Somali people in the West as well as those in Somalia. Interviews with some of those professionals revealed a willingness to get involved. However, they expressed that there were two major constraints that could negatively impact their agenda: the lack of manpower and economic resources needed for the realization of this idea, and the negative overt and covert influences that narrow self-interest and clanism have on most Somalis. Nonetheless, the professionals also realized that with almost 200,000 Somalis in North America alone, there should be ways to mitigate those liabilities.

In November 1997, the annual African Studies Association (ASA) conference was held in Columbus, Ohio. The local professionals learned that there were well-established Somali intellectuals who were going to lead sessions on Somalia. In addition to the distinguished Somali presenters, there was also an Inter-riverine Caucus in attendance, which was scheduled to have its own private meeting at the

end of the sessions. The Columbus group, represented by Dr. Abdinur Sheikh Mohamed, Dr. Abukar Yusuf, and Mr. Abukar Arman, took advantage of this rare opportunity and immediately extended an invitation to all the Somalis and any other conference attendees interested in Somali affairs.

Among those who came were Dr. Said Sheikh Samatar, Dr. Abdi Kusow, Dr. Hassan Mahadallah, Dr. Alinur Mohamed, Ambassador Mohamed Osman, and Dr. Jamil Mubarak. The encounter took place at a training center near the hotel of the conference. The Columbus group gave a picture of the local situation and conditions of the Somalis, and asked for guidance in the following areas:

- Strategies to realize their belief that once the general public learned about how united they were, there would be a better chance of acceptance and respect by their fellow Somalis.
- Advice on how members of the group as well as other Somalis could improve their dealings with each other as Somalis in order to change the current situation.
- Strategies to deal with the ridicule or challenges that they may face in bringing these wishes to reality.
- General guidance on practical ways of sharing their ideas of unity with their peers and the Somali society in general.

The level of commitment and self-assurance from the locals surprised the panel. Mohamed Osman, who spoke first, expressed his receptiveness to the idea and pledged his support. Said Samatar spoke second and said, "...your ideas are excellent. We Somali elders have been busy with bickering and quarreling amongst ourselves. However, you young folks have a new energy with this idea and I believe you can do something. Go ahead, take the leadership, and you have my support." Everyone participated in the discussion, and the meeting culminated in a dinner at a local restaurant. Tensions among the Somali groups attending the ASA conference were so reduced that the Inter-riverine Caucus invited all Somalis at the conference to participate in their meeting. There was dynamism and renewed energy among all attendees. Said Samatar asserted, "From this day on, I will be an advocate for the inter-riverine communities and their plight in Somalia." In addition, he pledged to subscribe to their quarterly newsletter.

Hassan Mahadallah and Alinur Mohamed decided to collaborate with the Columbus group to bring the idea to fruition. The newly enlarged group agreed to hold a meeting at the next ASA conference in Chicago to forge strategies for turning the idea of unity into a tangible reality.

B. The Chicago Meeting

During the 1998 African Studies conference, the group circulated an invitation to all Somalis in attendance to participate in the general Somali caucus. A total of nine people came. Present were Abukar Arman, Abdinur Sheikh Mohamed, Abdulkadir Abdi, Alinur Mohamed, Rashid Ahmed Gasle, Abdi Kusow, Hassan Mahadallah, Ahmed Qasim Ali, and Sheikh Yusuf. There was no official agenda for the meeting, although the unanimous agreement for the purpose of the meeting was: We want to help our people and our country. Everyone agreed to address any issue that was raised regardless of perceived relevance, as long as it concerned the Somali people and the country of Somalia, and to establish a listserv and use the Internet as a medium of communication.

At the end of the conference it was decided that each member of the group would recruit like-minded Somali individuals. This selective recruitment process was particularly geared toward Somalis who appeared to have transcended tribal mentality and were genuine in their deeds. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for the Spring break of 1999 in Columbus, Ohio. In addition, a listserv was set up to facilitate communications among members.

C. The Columbus Conference

There were approximately 30–40 participants at the Columbus conference. People traveled from all parts of the United States and Canada, and agreed on the following organizational rules:

- To adhere to some basic rules of conduct and conference etiquette
- To value every participant's input and to extend respect to all
- To encourage every participant to voice his/her opinion on issues under discussion

In addition, objectives and the pillars of the organization were established. Priority was given to the deinstitutionalization of clanism, justice for all, and upholding a clean and democratic process.

There was unanimity to form an advocacy organization that represented all Somalis. Furthermore, the participants agreed that the organization should be registered as *ISRAACA Ummadda Soomaaliyeed* (IUS). A temporary mission statement was adopted and two committees were established. The first, the Central Coordinating Committee, was to coordinate all events for the organization. The elected members were to manage and coordinate all discussions on the listserv, send out communiqués about upcoming conferences, and set the agenda for the next meeting. The second, the Constitution Committee, was assigned to write a charter for the organization and ensure that all members would receive a basic education on the charter.

D. The Toronto Conference, July 1, 1999

This meeting could be referred to as the first official conference of the organization. The final communiqué of the meeting included the following:

- The organization's name was changed from *ISRAACA Ummadda Soomaaliyeed* (IUS) to *Ururka ISRAACA Ummadda Soomaaliyeed* (UIUS)
- A basic code of conduct was established, using Robert's Rules of Order
- A new Ethics Committee was established to uphold the code of conduct
- A new Central Coordinating Committee (CCC) was elected: Mr. Ali Fatah, Dr. Saido Ali, Dr. Hussein Ahmed Warsame, Mr. Said Salah, and Mr. Abukar Arman
- The Constitution and Charter were ratified and adopted
- A Mission Statement and a Vision Statement were also finalized
- Membership dues were established at \$100.00 for each U.S. resident, with a differentiated geographical fee
- The organization would accept as members all individuals who were genuinely interested in improving the conditions of the Somali people and who were willing to abide by the established code of conduct

E. The Washington, D.C. Conference, May 29, 2000

The Washington, D. C. conference built on the achievements of the Toronto conference. The following represent the main decisions made in that conference:

- The name of the organization was changed from *Ururka ISRAACA Ummadda Soomaliyeed* (UIUS) to Pan-Somali Council for Peace and Democracy. However, ISRAACA was adopted as the Somali acronym.
- The tradition of establishing a Central Coordinating Committee (CCC) was discontinued and the first nine-member Board of Directors was elected. The elected officials were Ali Fatah, Abukar Arman, Said Salah, Mumin Abdi Barre, Dr. Dr. Abdullahi Hassan Mahdi, Shamsa Bashir Ali, Dr.Hassan Mahadallh, and Dr. Alinur Mohamed.
- Special interest groups were established to concentrate on specific issues.
- Position statements written under the auspices of the outgoing CCC were ratified, with minor adjustments. The position statements concerned such topics as tribalism, federalism, Islam, gender issues, and the plight of the minority communities.
- Members of the local Washington, D. C., Somali community were invited as observers.
- A technological committee was established, with Ahmed Timacadde at the helm.
- A Forum management team was elected from the Board of Directors, with Said Salah elected as its first manager.
- The participants acknowledged the generosity of Mr. Mostafa Abdillahi Jama, who donated \$2,000 to cover the costs of the conference.

F. The Erie, Pennsylvania Conference, June 28, 2001

As others before it, the Erie conference built on the achievements of the organization during the past years. Its final communique included the following:

- ISRAACA's first peace award was conferred. General Mohamed Abshir Muse, a long-time Somali police commander and peace

activist who was jailed by dictator Siyaad Barre for many years, became the first recipient.

- The logo of the organization was finalized and adopted.
- The name of the Ethics Committee (EC) was changed to Ethics and Conflict Resolution Committee (ECRC).
- The existing Mission Statement was revised to the current one. See Appendix.
- The nine-person Board of Directors was increased to thirteen members. The increase was made as a gesture of respect for a motion made by General Abshir in memory of the number of people who started the Somali Youth League (SYL). The motion passed, and the following members of the Board of Directors were elected: Shamsa Bashir Ali, Said Awad Muse, Ladan Affi, Abukar Arman, Abdalla Hirad, Abdiwahab Tarey, Abukar Baale, Dr. Abdinur Sheikh Mohamed, Dr. Alinur Mohamed, Ahmed Hamud, Dr. Hassan Mahaddalh, Said Salah, and Dr. Hussein Ahmed Warsame.
- A report about the Arta events and its by-product, the TNG, was given and the participants discussed if ISRAACA should be involved. ISRAACA pledged commitment and conditional support to work with the TNG on three important issues: Education, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights.
- The first Political Action Committee (PAC) was formed, converting ISRAACA from a mere advocacy-oriented body to a more progressive and politically involved organization that could someday become a political party.

G. The Minnesota Conference, June 29, 2002

Held in the Twin Cities of St. Paul/Minneapolis, this conference received the most attention yet from the Somali communities in the U.S. The conference influenced and was influenced by members of the large Somali community in the Twin Cities. ISRAACA initiated the granting of a Humanitarian Award to a personality who spent copious amounts of time and effort to improve the conditions of Diaspora Somalis. This was in addition to the Peace Award. The conference's final communiqué included the following:

- The thirteen-member Board of Directors was trimmed down to the usual nine. The elected members were Said Salah, Dr. Alinur

Mohamed, Dr. Hussein Ahmed Warsame, Khadar Bashir-Ali, Abdi Goud, Shariffa Sabrie, Abukar Arman, Ali Bahar, and Dr. Ali Faqi.

- The Humanitarian Award went to Dr. Abdurahman Dirie, a local physician who administers free health care to needy Somalis in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. The Peace Award went to Fartun Hassan, the longstanding Somali Chargé d’Affaires at the UN, who kept the UN Somali office open at her personal expense.
- The existing special interest groups were trimmed down to become ad hoc and permanent committees. The five standing committees are Human Rights, Education, Policy and Program Development, Environment, and Reconciliation.
- Experts in the Somali conflict were invited to address the participants. A panel discussed topics ranging from education to religion, community activism, and academic and political affairs. The panelists were Professor Ahmed Ismail Samatar, Former Somali Prime Minister Abdirazak Haji Hussein, Juris-Doctor Hassan Mohamoud (Jamici), Eng. Abdulqadir Aden Abdulle, and Ms. Raho Warsame.
- Former TNG Prime Minister Ali Khalif Galeyr also addressed the participants and spoke about his experience and what he learned in his time of service in Somalia.
- *Abwan* (Poet) Said Salah led an inspirational session on Somali culture and poetry in order to build unity.

III. Organizational Structure

An organization’s ability to realize its aims and goals is, to a large degree, determined by its structure. In other words, a fit needs to exist between the structural composition of the organization and its activities. This is all the more important and especially challenging when, as is the case with ISRAACA, the membership and the leadership are scattered across the globe. In this respect, ISRAACA is a unique organization and the way it is run, as well as the aspirations of its members, is a novelty in the Somali context.

Two primary factors have combined to engender the formation of ISRAACA and which explain its idiosyncratic characteristics. First, the protracted Somali civil war, which is still ongoing, has led to the massive displacement of hundreds of thousands of Somalis, many of whom migrated to Europe and North America. Second, at about the time the Somali conflict was intensifying, globalization and its primary

vehicle, the "Information Superhighway" (the Internet), emerged as a tool for instant communication, virtually eliminating distance and rendering temporal differences irrelevant. This last factor breathed life into the desire on the part of the educated classes in the Diaspora to vigorously search for an effective end to the stateless chaos in Somalia.

Despite its uniqueness, ISRAACA has a conventional structure. It is governed by a Board of Directors, with subcommittees that include an Executive Committee and a Forum Management Team (FMT). The Executive Committee, comprised of five members, namely, the Chair, the Vice-Chair, the Secretariat (two members), and the Treasurer, is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the organization. The FMT is responsible for ensuring the smooth operation of the Forum, which is the main venue where issues are discussed among ISRAACA members. However, for all practical purposes, the current nine members of Board function as one unit and discuss all short-term and long-term issues through a separate and Board-exclusive listserv.

The FMT is perhaps the only subcommittee whose job description is usually shouldered only by its own members. The two-member FMT conducts and oversees the business of the organization on a daily basis, and interacts with the general membership through the electronic forum. The Forum, the infrastructural linchpin of the organization, receives a large volume of messages daily, and it is necessary for the FMT to read every single message in order to provide ongoing support and facilitation. The work of the FMT takes on a more critical importance when there is a formal debate on the table. In such a case, the FMT ensures that all members stick to the issue at hand. They also enforce the rules of conduct, which many members are wont to violate.

The FMT is supported in their moderator role by a team of volunteers called "note-takers." Their services are needed only when a formal debate is taking place in the Forum. They compile and summarize the ideas, putting them in a format that the Board can use for policy-making purposes. Their summary notes are subsequently filed in the archives for record keeping.

General policy issues are debated and decided by the entire Board, most preferably by consensus. If an issue proves too controversial for a consensus, as many issues are likely to be, simple majority rule is applied by putting the matter to a vote. However, the most intractable challenge that the Board faces is to ensure the timely discussion of issues to be dealt with on an emergency basis. More often than not, some members are not available to express their views, and the Board

cannot make final decisions without hearing from each board member. The nature of Internet communication, which presupposes each member's access to the Net and the luxury of time to check e-mails, is not always conducive to making speedy decisions. The turnaround time for certain sensitive issues is, therefore, longer than desired, compromising the organization's ability to respond to important matters in an effective and prompt manner.

Similar problems are encountered when the Board shares its decisions with the general membership through the Forum. Many members tend to confuse the issues and dwell on highly marginal matters, while not touching on the crux of the issue at hand. Others choose to indulge in nitpicking and wanton negative criticism.

In addition to the subcommittees within the Board, there are standing committees that are responsible for formulating organizational policies on a number of important issues. These committees, which are referred to in the Charter as "Permanent Committees," include the following:

1. Standing Committee on Human Rights
2. Standing Committee on Education
3. Standing Committee on Reconciliation and Governance
4. Standing Committee on Policy and Structure
5. Standing Committee on the Environment
6. Standing Committee on Membership Development
7. Standing Committee on Ethics and Conflict Resolution

Board members usually chair at least four of these standing committees. Experienced members, who are either past Board members or members who work closely with the current Board, head the remaining committees. At times, and particularly before the standing committees were formed, ad hoc committees were convened to deal with an urgent issue. When that issue was dealt with, the committee was dissolved. Some of the past issues for which ad hoc committees were created include the following:

1. The demonstration against Ethiopia in 2001
2. The Arta National Reconciliation Conference in Djibouti in 2000

3. ISRAACA's Organizational Structure
4. ISRAACA's Constitution
5. Somalia's Environmental/Ecological crisis

The Technological Committee is a special organ that is not elected. Instead, individuals are chosen on the basis of their skills as well as their goodwill to serve the organization. The Tech Committee is comprised of about five members with specialized information technology (IT) training. They are responsible for providing the technical support and expertise needed for the smooth running of ISRAACA's day-to-day operations. Their domain covers a wide range of areas, which include keeping the archives, online communications, maintaining member lists, running and updating the organization's website, connecting new members and disconnecting suspended members, and keeping the list up-to-date.

IV. Structural Evolution

The structure of ISRAACA has evolved from simple horizontal beginnings to a somewhat complex hierarchical pyramid. Over the years, the number of directors serving the organization, for instance, has varied from five to over ten. At one point, that number stood at thirteen, which had a symbolic if somewhat anachronistic importance. In the annual general meeting in Erie, some members felt strongly that ISRAACA should seek not only to emulate but also to fulfill the role and reflect the aspirations of the Somali Youth League (SYL), whose founding members were thirteen. However, a number of pitfalls arose from having an overly large board of directors that also proved quite unwieldy. In any event, the merits of a lean team outweighed the symbolic appeal of the SYL romanticism.

At the founding conference (Columbus, Ohio, March 1999), a Constitutional Committee was formed on an ad hoc basis. This committee drafted a charter and brought it to the Toronto Conference in July 1999, where it was debated, amended, and adopted. At the same time, a Coordinating Committee of five people was set up, which had a mandate to run the organization until a permanent structure was put into place. In Toronto, an Ethics and Discipline Committee was also formed. This committee was charged with ensuring that members adhere to the organization's rules and bylaws, and to mete out penal-

ties and sanctions in the form of suspensions and fines to those who intentionally contravened the rules. However, it remained symbolic until the Washington annual general meeting in 2000, when it was transformed into a functioning committee.

In Washington, special interest groups numbering about fifteen were created as well. These groups eventually evolved into the current standing committees. Also in Washington, a Board of Directors consisting of nine members was inaugurated. The Board replaced the coordinating committee. The first outfit the Board created was the Forum Management Team (FMT).

During the early stages of building ISRAACA, the organizational structure was intentionally kept loose and the organization's leadership took a gradualist approach to keeping the group together. Rigidity in structure was thought to constitute a danger by undoing the limited and fragile unity of vision and purpose being cobbled together. As such, flexibility in structure was deemed necessary to put in place a solid foundation for the organization. In other words, at the beginning, the first priority was internal capacity building before broader national issues were tackled.

V. Institutional Challenges

In the initial phases of their formation, most organizations are weak and fragile and are faced with hurdles. ISRAACA is no exception. However, many believe that the fact that it held on to life up to this point is, in and of itself, a tremendous success. Nevertheless, there are more crucial challenges that have bedeviled the organization, some of which it has dealt with quite successfully, while others continue to come up every now and then. In this section, we examine the institutional difficulties that the organization has faced since its inception.

A. Cyber-Based Mode of Communication

One significant challenge that ISRAACA continues to face is illustrated by the communication method by which its members perform their respective roles. We have talked about the geographic fragmentation of the organization's members, who are scattered across the globe. Consequently, its natural choice of communication mechanism is the Internet, without which this organization might never have come into being. In fact, the Internet is the only economically feasible and, in

practice, viable communication mode for an organization whose membership is so widely dispersed. But the primary downside to this mode of communication, despite its other advantages including flexibility, is the removal of organizational control from the hands of the leadership. Not only does no one have any influence on what a particular member writes or contributes but, worse, it is virtually beyond anybody's control whether a member will participate in the first place.

As Nohria and Eccles put it: "you cannot build organizations on electronic networks alone. If so, we will probably need an entirely new sociology of organizations."⁵ Indeed, electronic organizational forms have successfully been used by the private sector in the West. Microsoft, for instance, supports major global corporate customer sales operations through virtual teams.⁶ Virtual organizations have a raft of positive qualities, the most salient of which is their fluid and malleable structure that enables them to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the marketplace and the vast array of skills its members possess. Thus, they offer flexibility, responsiveness, increased efficiency, and cost competitiveness. Similar successes in the use of virtual teams have been registered in the public sector with respect to service delivery and e-government, which many consider to be revolutionary in terms of their contribution to the effectiveness of democratic processes. However, the voluntary sector does not have the tools or the incentive structure available to the public and private sectors to effectively capture the benefits of this communication medium. On the contrary, there are systemically inherent weaknesses—such as absenteeism, role ambiguity, duplication of effort, and low individual commitment—that do not lend themselves to the easy use of virtual organizational forms by voluntary-based groups.⁷ In fact, some scholars question the long-term viability of virtual organizations without constant physical contact among members.⁸

This dysfunctional characteristic of virtual organizations manifests itself in ISRAACA quite frequently. On many occasions, one wonders whether the Forum is not a chatroom or a newsgroup. For instance, some members take the liberty of posting information (such as news items and articles written by outsiders) that at best has only remote links with the organization and its core issues. These lead to an overload of information that impedes the ability of other members to concentrate on the bigger issues. More often than not, these types of postings cause a great deal of commotion within the membership, as some disparage the judgment of those who post them while the propo-

nents fight back with equal ferocity. Even when the Forum Management Team succeeds in confining discussions to issues at the table, the quality of contributions is hardly first-rate or consistent across the active membership. However, once in a while an issue may actually receive extensive discussion leading to an important outcome in the form of a policy document or a course of action to be adopted. But even in these cases, there is no assurance that the membership will act on the outcome of the discussion.

B. Language Choice

An issue that received a lot of attention at the inception of the organization was the question of what language to use as the medium of communication. The majority of the forum membership are Western-educated Somalis who live in North America and Western Europe, and whose preferred language of written communication is English. But there was also a sizable minority that advocated Somali instead of English. Those who felt strongly that Somali should be used predicated their position on obvious cultural and symbolic reasons. They argued that to use a foreign language in an entirely Somali forum was not only detrimental to the promotion of the cultural and linguistic advancement of Somalis but was also shameful—shameful because it reflected an absence of confidence in their culture on the part of the “Somali intelligentsia,” who were supposed to be the vanguard of the cultural preservation of the disintegrated nation. This argument struck a chord, particularly with the Diaspora communities whose children were born outside of Somalia and have largely embraced the cultures and languages of their adopted countries.

However, there were other strategic reasons for choosing English over Somali. Many members, including some in the leadership, believe that if English had not been the medium of communication, the organization would not have survived to this point. In their opinion, English lessens the importance of culturally divisive concepts such as clanism, the eternal scourge of Somalis. It undermines the automatic attribution of ideas to groups rather than to the individual expressing them, which often translated into confrontation along clan lines. Put differently, writing in English eliminates differences in Somali dialects within the membership, differences that can lead to irrational stereotyping and prejudicial judgment of people’s writings.

Thus, in line with the wishes of the majority, the organization resolved that English would be its language of communication. Nevertheless, Somali is still permitted for those who prefer it to English. In other words, both languages are considered acceptable as means of communication within the organization. Yet for the strategic reasons mentioned above, English is encouraged.

C. Creating Trust

Another challenge was how to establish trust and an environment in which people could collaborate and work together toward common goals, some of which were ill defined or not commonly shared. Differences in goals reflected the general context within which individual members were trying to act and the overall condition of a Somali society marked by societal fragmentation and national bifurcation. This forced the leadership to be too transparent—and hence slow in taking action—at the expense of efficiency in developing and executing organizational policies.

Trust is a function of social relationships and past or future membership in social groups that share common norms of obligation and collective responsibilities.⁹ Even though some groups had known each other for a long time, the majority of members have had no formal relationships with the rest of the team. Neither is it certain that there will be a future membership of a common club. So, new members make up their minds as to whether they want to stay on and become active members based on their initial experience and the perceived compatibility of their ideals and goals with that of the organization. A “negative experience” in the first few days of joining may reinforce an *a priori* prejudice that ISRAACA is dominated by a particular clan, leading to low trust or leaving the organization altogether. Low trust leads to high membership turnover and a poor quality of work by the remaining members, two defects that ISRAACA seems to display.

Indeed, this is a challenge that is not unique to ISRAACA. Rather, it is shared with other web-based “virtual” organizations, for it is a daunting task to create and maintain a lasting trust among members who are divided by time, space, and in some cases ideology.¹⁰ However, if these factors work to impede the organization’s effectiveness in achieving its objectives, there are others that counterbalance them, namely, culture and a common vision (however nebulous) to spearhead positive changes in Somali society.

The sheer time and effort required to manage the logistics of communication, as well as the continuously volatile situation in Somalia, can pose serious problems. Perhaps because of this, the development of trust, a shared team culture, and agreed-upon procedures for effective communication and the implementation of organizational programs remain elusive goals.

D. Lack of an Enforcement Mechanism

Volunteers run ISRAACA. Therefore, ISRAACA grapples with the malaise that other volunteer-run organizations suffer from; namely, limited individual commitment and being at the mercy of its membership's generosity with their time and resources. An important aspect of this challenge is the limited participation of the majority of members. Rough estimates of the percentage of active members in forum discussions put it below 50 percent, hence the popular term "silent majority," referring to those who read messages and postings but never participate in discussions. It is ironic that some able members attend and participate effectively in annual general meetings but do not contribute anything electronically. Perhaps this is due to the language barrier and/or annual membership dues. The language issue, the background of which was discussed earlier, is an obvious possibility. There are many members whose proficiency in English is weak. Even if they know enough to express themselves, they may not feel confident enough to try it. They can, of course, write in Somali (which some members do), but they tend to opt for silence over being the odd one out.

With respect to the fees, until recently there was a policy of tiered membership, in which paid (effective) members and non-paid (non-effective) members were allowed to co-exist. Payment of the membership fee was irrelevant when it came to enjoying organizational amenities. Both categories of membership had unfettered access. However, only effective members were eligible to join special committees and task forces or vote on motions. This created a perverted incentive system in which many prospective members naturally opt for a free ride, effectively dispossessing the organization from an opportunity to raise funds and enlist the services of volunteer members. Non-paying members also deliberately lie low, lest they are seen to be taking advantage of something to which they do not contribute financially.

The organization relies entirely on the goodwill of its members, which in many cases proves to be quite whimsical. Committees are formed and asked to draw up their terms of reference as well as their action plan. So, essentially there is no mechanism to ensure that members participate in debates and discussions or for committee members to pitch in on the committee's tasks. The result is that the burden, both financial and physical (in terms of doing actual work), falls upon a small number of members.

E. Scarce Resources

Since its inception, ISRAACA has completely relied upon membership dues for its financial needs. A graded fee structure is used in which residents in the U.S. pay the highest annual membership fees, followed by those in Canada, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and Africa, respectively. Students also pay relatively low dues. The revenue generated through membership collections hardly covers the organization's overhead costs. In the past, it was not uncommon for board members to pay for some costs from their own pockets without ever getting reimbursed. Obviously, then, the lack of resources has been one of the main reasons ISRAACA has accomplished little in the way of concrete projects to fulfill its mandate.

One area the organization is yet to seriously explore is external funding sources. According to Abukar Arman, the current Chairman, seeking funding from external sources has been deliberately avoided, at least thus far. In his opinion, that policy served the organization well by instilling a certain level of discipline and self-reliance into its ethos. However, Arman acknowledges that external funding cannot be postponed any longer. Up until now, the focus of the organization's efforts was on internal growth and consolidating the organizational foundation of ISRAACA. But now that the organization is entering into the phase of action, it is essential to translate ISRAACA's vision—so far a mere dream—into a tangible set of projects leading to concrete results. For this to happen, there must be a push to procure more resources, both human and financial.

As a result, some in the organization feel that ISRAACA must inevitably find ways to raise funds from outside sources because annual membership contributions can no longer sustain it. The importance of fundraising is not lost on the organization's leadership. At Erie, a Fundraising Committee, composed of four members, was

appointed and charged with exploring fundraising options. The Committee delivered a preliminary report at the Minneapolis meeting and suggested a number of ways to raise funds. Unfortunately, all of the measures were aimed at internal sources, such as increasing membership dues and instituting other types of charges like a registration fee. None of the suggestions touched on external possibilities of accessing resources. The Committee's mandate was extended until the next general meeting, scheduled to take place in Columbus, Ohio, in the summer of 2003. In a nutshell, the challenge of obtaining sufficient resources for its activities and operations remains one of the most intractable issues facing ISRAACA in the immediate future. A solution to this problem is a necessary prerequisite for concrete action.

F. Elitist Image

In the eyes of some, ISRAACA has become an elitist organization. To be sure, many of the members have certain attributes in common. For instance, the vast majority of members are Western-educated individuals who share a general outlook, albeit not a coherent one, of the Somali question and its possible solutions. While this semi-homogenous membership composition resulted from a natural process of self-selection, it may also have resulted from some equivocal policies in ISRAACA.

In the 1999 Toronto annual general meeting, a suggestion was made that the attainment of higher education (a minimum of a Bachelor's degree) should be a prerequisite for membership in ISRAACA. This was rejected but the requirement of a high school diploma was adopted. Another issue in this regard is that the fees are quite exorbitant for many prospective members.

The cumulative result of these factors is that ISRAACA is, by and large, disconnected from the people whom it was created to serve, both in Somalia and within the Diaspora. One way to fill this gap was seen to be the establishment of local chapters in major cities, both in Somalia and in the countries where there are significant Somali communities. This has been implemented in a few cases, mainly in Columbus, Washington, and Minneapolis/St. Paul. Other Somali strongholds, such as Toronto, London, San Diego, and Scandinavia, are yet to form effective chapters that serve as a bridge between the organization and the Somali masses, including those back in Somalia.

The current Chair, Abukar Arman, believes that the elitism problem is a fleeting one that the organization will outgrow as it sets out to implement its objectives and goals.

VI. Ideological Differences

As defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, ideology is “a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture.” Alternatively, it can be defined as “the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.” In this article, we take a broad definition of ideology. We lump into the rubric of ideology all issues and matters that lead to or hinder the agreement of opinion about the causes of the current Somali conundrum and the approaches to solving it. As a result, some of what we discuss in this section may not qualify as ideology in the strict sense of the term.

Although ideological differences among members in ISRAACA may weaken the organization’s ability to act, on many occasions they do not constitute such an inherent contradiction in its philosophy that they could ultimately lead to its final demise, at least from the experience thus far. The positive aspect of this, however, is that the organization represents a cross-section of the Somali society’s spectrum of thought and perspective.

A. ISRAACA’s Identity and Role

In many ways, ISRAACA seems to be in confusion about its primary *raison d’etre*. This confusion crops up every now and then, in particular whenever a sensitive political issue requires a course of action to be adopted. The point of contention in this regard is whether ISRAACA should continue to be an advocacy organization or whether it should play the role of a political movement.

Indeed, this ambiguous understanding of the organization’s role in political matters dates back to its early days. Some members contended then that ISRAACA should be an advocacy body that concentrates on human rights and environmental, developmental, and other social justice issues, serving as a watchdog on the policies and actions of any future government. They argued that working in any manner with the powers-that-be would compromise the organization’s independence, thereby making it vulnerable to cooptation. The opposing view was that before it scrutinizes the behavior of established author-

ity, ISRAACA should participate in the re-creation of state institutions, which at the present are nonexistent, meaning that there is currently nothing to watch over. This would make it inevitable that ISRAACA must play a direct political role in the peace-building process and during the transitional period. The argument went that as an organization whose membership comprises some of the best and the brightest of the country, ISRAACA does not have the luxury of waiting in the wings in these times of dire need. In fact, some members went so far as to suggest that ISRAACA be a political party and tackle head-on the real issues facing the country.

The compromise, after a lengthy and sometimes heated debate, was to start out as an advocacy group but to transform in the long run into a movement or a political party. To this end, the Political Action Committee (PAC) was created at the Erie annual general meeting in 2001 to start the process of transformation. The problem, however, is that there is no well-defined timeframe for the change, and so it is not clear when and in what manner that transformation should occur. This is, apparently, a source of the confusion.

There is another dimension to the debate about ISRAACA's proper role and long-term goals. Here the issue is whether ISRAACA's advocacy or political activities (whichever is adopted) should focus on the community in the Diaspora or the problems in the homeland. It is interesting to note that the majority of female members were in favor of the organization devoting itself to programs addressing the vast sociocultural needs of the Diaspora community. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, argued that Diaspora issues were, by and large, being dealt with by existing local community-based groups and therefore ISRAACA should focus on the multifaceted problems of the homeland.

This gender-based dichotomy can be partly explained by two things: the traditional domination of political matters by men; and the burden of Diaspora problems, such as increased family break-ups, juvenile delinquency and intergenerational cultural clashes, predominantly borne by women. The chief reason for this is that there are increasingly female-headed households, and even when males are the heads of the family, they tend to leave household matters to the discretion of the mothers, occupying themselves with breadwinning concerns.

B. Islamism versus Secularism

One of the first ideological clashes was over the role of Islam in the life and affairs of ISRAACA. During the initial constitutional debates, it was suggested that ISRAACA's governing code of conduct should be guided by and reflect the tenets of Islam. This camp stressed the importance Islam has had in the social and historical development of the Somali nation. In particular, they pointed to the fact that Islam is a source of strength in times of hardship and a way of transcending myopic and clanistic divisions. This was a powerful argument and a good reason to rally people around the single most resilient common denominator, which could be used as a tool to unify the disintegrated society.

However, not everybody saw the importance of Islam in rebuilding Somalia in the same light. Some members took issue with the suggestion that Islam is the single most salutary unifying factor, proposing instead that ISRAACA be purely secular. This group espoused the adoption of the Western practice that State and Religion should be kept separate. The same division of opinion on this issue came up in a number of occasions involving questions of gender, Somalia's international relations and political alignments (e.g., Arab versus African), and the creation of a strong and legitimate basis for a future undivided Somalia. As a result, two diametrically opposed texts were brought forward in the Toronto meeting in 1999, where most constitutional issues were thrashed out. In fact, some members tried to translate this divergence in perspective into one between Islamism and Democracy, an interpretation others regarded as a false dichotomy. There appeared, therefore, the need for a middle ground, one that was achieved through a vote after a long debate and a series of compromises and concessions on both sides.

The compromise text adopted after a great deal of wheeling and dealing (Paragraph 3 of Article 3 in the Charter) states that one of ISRAACA's objectives is to "foster and promote Islamic and constructive Somali cultural values."

C. The Arta Peace Process and the TNG

Many analysts consider the Arta Conference, which was organized and hosted by the Djibouti Government in the year 2000, as a watershed in post-civil war Somali politics. For the first time since the col-

lapse of the Somali state, an inclusive reconciliation conference convened, participated in by most of the stakeholders in the conflict — including for the first time unarmed civil society groups. For the most part, the ISRAACA membership, like other Somali groups, greeted the Arta Conference with cautious optimism. But support for and opposition to Arta and the resulting institutions (primarily the Transitional National Government, the TNG) was quite fluid in the beginning. It was not until the Conference drew to a close that debates and positions started to take shape.

Two camps emerged, one for and the other against the outcome of Arta. The first group asserted that Arta, for all its deficiencies and shortcomings, constituted the best hope for the Somali nation. The warlords, they argued, had failed to agree on anything beneficial for the country and were in tacit (if not explicit) agreement to maintain the status quo. According to this perspective, therefore, Arta was the only option. This was all the more so given the continued indifference of the international community to the plight of the Somali people, as well as the increased interference of Somalia's hostile neighbor, Ethiopia, in its internal affairs. These were, in their opinion, a clear recipe for the balkanization and subsequent wiping off of the whole Somali state from the international map.

The other group, while not disputing the failure of the warlords to make peace, felt that Arta was discredited by the domination of Siyaad Barre era politicians. The process itself was also seen as fundamentally flawed. More specifically, the clanistic power-sharing mechanism devised in Arta was not only wrong but was dangerous to the future of the nation, as it would feed the institutional conflicts that engendered the violent chaos in the first place. As such, they reasoned, its outcome could not lead to a legitimate and acceptable system of governance.

A controversial conditional support for the TNG was grudgingly passed in Erie in 2001. Some prominent figures in the TNG, including ISRAACA members, campaigned hard to convince ISRAACA to support the TNG in at least ten areas. The conditional support was mired by controversy and deep-seated divergence of opinion, creating two rival camps: one vehemently opposing the TNG and the other an ardent supporter of it. The ultimate impact of the controversy was to nullify the idea of lending the TNG a helping hand, with the exception of some cantankerous letters critical of the TNG's failure to address ecological and land ownership crises.

Later, some in the organization's leadership tried without much success to reconcile Dr. Ali Khalif Galaydh, then the prime minister of the TNG, and former prime minister Abdirazak Haji Hussein regarding a row over the Reconciliation and Property Restitution Committee created in Arta, which Abdirazak was initially appointed to head.

VII. Concluding Remarks: Potential of ISRAACA

Apart from the multiple challenges it is facing, ISRAACA has good potential to help forge a national vision and a lasting imprint on Somalia's future. For one thing, it is the only truly multi-kin Somali organization that transcends clan divisions and is devoted to the struggle for a collective consciousness leading to a unified and democratic Somali state. Members are predominantly educated and are very much experienced in cross-cultural perspectives — many have been trained and currently live in the Diaspora. It is a movement that seeks to crystallize habits and institutions that Somalia needs to prosper in the long run, a way of being that goes beyond the limited traditional Somali realm. However, despite the mission, the vision, and the objectives outlined in the charter and by-laws, some former members of the organization believe that ISRAACA cannot go forward until it comes up with tighter principles beyond just the wish for Somali unity.

Dr. Abdishakur Sh. Ali Jowhar was a prominent member of the organization until he quit in 2000. Abdishakur was one of a small group of Internet-savvy ISRAACA members (others included Said-Sugaan and Musa Nasir) who moved the membership to a new listserv after an internal struggle caused the collapse of its initial listserv. To all appearances, Jowhar was comfortable with the ideals of ISRAACA until the Arta process ended up installing the TNG in Mogadishu. As it turned out, Jowhar and a few other members became upset with what they thought was blanket support for the TNG, even though the organization's only official reaction to the Arta process was a press release of advice. In a comment solicited by the authors of this article, Jowhar explained his position this way:

ISRAACA is the only current political organization of Somalis that is based on the concept of Somali nationalism. It is unique in this sense. It is the legitimate heir of the SYL. ISRAACA sees itself as the spark that may ignite the dormant fire of Somali nationalism. On my part, I have come to the conclusion that Somali nationalism is and has been dead for

some time. To me, ISRAACA is the ghost of a nation roaming around the world in a permanent exile. This is the basis of divergence and the cause of separation. It was a mutually beneficial parting of ways. There is one major weakness of this organization. Like the SYL before it, ISRAACA as an organization is bereft of any principles beyond the concept of a united Somalia. Its members may find the rule of a warlord, a corrupt leadership, tribal governance or foreign occupation distasteful. They may even opt for a modern democratic state if given the chance. But they will accept any of the above if it brings about the unity of the Somali nation under one government. ISRAACA should exorcise itself of this absence of principles or cease to exist.

As is apparent, Jowhar believes that the nationalism and unity orientation that the organization prides itself on is its main weakness. In fairness, ISRAACA does believe in certain principles. As its name (Pan-Somali Council for Peace and Democracy) connotes, it struggles for unity; but only through a process characterized by “peace, justice, and democracy.” Given this public assertion, it is unlikely that many of the current members of the organization will show much sympathy for Abdishakur’s critique. However, perceptions are sometimes stronger than reality; and he is not alone in expressing that the members of ISRAACA, like the larger Somali society, have a lot of contradictions to deal with before they can build a structure with a collective and robust consciousness.

Ali Fatah, former Chairman of ISRAACA’s Board of Directors, resigned from his position as well as membership in 2000. In an e-mail message that the authors solicited, he wrote the following:

When I first joined the Association in early spring, 1999, I was a ‘card carrying skeptic’ on Somali national issues. I was pleasantly surprised, however, when a few of the original members welcomed me warmly. I also found the initial burst(s) of debate both lively and (for the most part) civil. I participated in the debates, as time permitted, with some degree of enthusiasm. For the next several months, I remained hopeful enough to have traveled to Toronto, Canada, in July of that year to participate in the inaugural meeting of the infant organization. It was at that meeting that we fashioned the organization’s vision, mission, goals and objectives: to advance the sociopolitical and economic interests of the Somali nation, in an environment that is free of the destructive impulse attendant to neo-clanism. I was elected chair of a temporary board. We had a fairly good year mainly as UN-style peacekeepers. We also registered the organization and established it in Washington, D.C. By all

accounts the 2000 conference in Washington, D.C. was successful. Against my better judgment, I allowed myself to be elected chair once again. Shortly thereafter, Arta happened. With it all the rotten contradictions that we Somalis were hitherto willing to sweep under the rug were suddenly in the open air, 'stinking to high heaven,' so to speak. The resultant discord taught me, and I think many others, that the Somali personality consists of two irreconcilable strands: 1) undying loyalty to the clan system that nurtured us through thin and thick, and 2) instinctive rebellion against foisted authority (from whatever quarter). The upshot is that Somali intellectuals can neither solve this quandary nor can they wish it away. And, therein lies ISRAACA's problems!

As explained earlier, one of the strengths of ISRAACA is that it tries to learn from its setbacks. Losing valuable members such as, among others, Dr. Jowhar, Mr. Fatah, Dr. Abdillahi Mahdi, Dr. Arush, Mr. Mostafa Abdillahi Jama, Mr. Mohamed Mukhtar Hussein, and Dr. Abdiaziz Haji Hussein, was no doubt a great setback. But the organization survived, mainly because it saw merit in the grievances that caused these good men to leave, and it tried and continues to work to correct the weaknesses and limitations.

ISRAACA cannot see itself as a success at this point in its history. But it is, no doubt, a survivor, like the Somali people. Throughout history, Somalis have faced disasters caused by nature, colonialism, dictatorship, clanism, and general chaos. Despite those disasters, they still exist as a *nation* (if not as a *state*). They are more educated than ever; there is more wealth in their hands; and they are accumulating new and instructive experiences in almost every zone of the world. The support of Diaspora Somalis would go far and be more organized if there was a state that could create a more stable and less risky environment for wealth creation, education, and technology transfer. As was stated by Samatar and Samatar, the Somalis were Africa's first democrats.¹¹ The potential is still there for contemporary Somalis to re-enter, as leaders, Africa's struggle for a peaceful and democratic political life. Consequently, there may be a silver lining in the protracted discussions taking place among Somalis. Debates without violence are critical ingredients in any democratization process. ISRAACA is a pivotal organization in this important orientation and conduct. The hope is that patience and endurance will sow the seeds for Somalia's collective consciousness and accountability. ISRAACA welcomes any Somali who aspires to think outside of the clanist box. The future belongs to those who step up to the obligations of the present.

Nota Bene

Just before the current issue of *Bildhaan* was sent for publication, the 2003 ISRAACA annual general meeting was concluded in Columbus, Ohio. It elected its first woman chair, Ladan Affi. The following members of the Board of Directors are: Ladan Affi, Current Chair; Zainab Hassan, Treasurer; Khadar Bashir-Ali, Secretary; Abdinur Aw-Ali, Forum Manager; Abukar Arman, Member; Hassan Mahadallah, member; Said Salah, Member.

Notes

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1. See Mohamed-Rashid Sheikh Hassan, "Interview with the Late Abdillahi Qarshe (1994) at the residence of Oblique Carton in Djibouti," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Volume 2 (2002): 65–83.

2. The panel of experts consisted of HE, Abdirazak H. Hussein (Former Prime Minister of Somalia, 1964–67), Dr. Ahmed Ismail Samatar (Dean, Macalester College, U.S.A.), Eng. Abdulqadir Adan Abdulle (Peace Activist), Mr. Hassan Mohamoud (Lawyer and Human Rights Advocate), and Ms. Raho Warsame (Property Manager and Human Rights Advocate).

3. The panel discussion was preceded by a keynote speech given by Dr. Ali Khalif Galaydh (TNG Prime Minister, 2000–2001).

4. Abdi Ismail Samatar and Ahmed Ismail Samatar, eds., *The African State: Reconsiderations* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002), pp. 1–64. Also, Abdi Ismail Samatar and Ahmed Ismail Samatar, "Somalis as Africa's First Democrats: Premier Abdirazak H. Hussein and President Aden A. Osman," *Bildaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Volume 2 (2002).

5. N. Nohria and R. G. Eccles, "Face-to-Face: Making Network Organizations Work," in *Networks and Organizations*, ed. N. Nohria and R. G. Eccles (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), pp. 304–305.

6. S. L. Jarvenpaa, B. Ives, and K. Pearlson, "Global Customer Service for the Computer and Communications Industry," in *Global Information Technology and Systems Management*, ed. P. C. Palvia, S. C. Palvia, and E. M. Roche (Harrisburg, Penn.: Ivy League Publishing, 1995).

7. M. O'Hara-Devereaux and R. Johansen, *Global Work: Bridging Distance, Culture and Time* (San Francisco, Cal.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994).

8. C. Handy, "Trust and the Virtual Organization," *Harvard Business Review* 73, no. 3 (1995): 40–50.

9. J. L. Bradach and R. G. Eccles, "Markets versus Hierarchies: From Ideal Types to Plural Forms," *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 97–118.

10. W. W. Powell, "Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 12 (1990): 295–336.

11. See endnote 4 for the full citation of Samatar and Samatar.

APPENDIX

ISRAACA'S VISION

To become a prominent advocacy organization that promotes Somali unity based on equality, justice and respect for the rights of (all) its citizenry.

ISRAACA'S MISSION

The Pan-Somali Council for Peace and Democracy (ISRAACA) is a non-profit organization that will strive for the realization of its dream of reconciled Somali people and the creation of good governance for Somalia, and will collaborate with and support all organizations, economic, political, and social, whose objectives are compatible with those of ISRAACA through its Political Action Committee (PAC).

ISRAACA AIMS TO:

- 1) Advocate for Somali unity, justice, equality, peace and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- 2) Advance and support freedom of expression, consistent with Islamic values, freedom of assembly, and of thought.
- 3) Foster and promote the evolution of progressive political, social and economic institutions.
- 4) Develop projects and programs designed to deinstitutionalize clanism in public and government operations.
- 5) Foster and promote effective participation of women in all aspects of public life.
- 6) ISRAACA endeavors to achieve its principles, goals, objectives and aspirations by:

- a) Carrying out public educational campaigns both in the Diaspora and inside Somalia
- b) Supporting and collaborating with organizations with compatible objectives
- c) Conducting organizational activities, conventions, and conferences in and outside Somali territory
- d) Promoting its platforms with peaceful and non-violent methods and techniques