

# Disclaiming the Diaspora: Somali Forced Migrants in Cairo and “the Other Abroad”

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“Of course I am not [among the diaspora]! Look at me, I am still in Africa!” (Hassan, refugee in Cairo, interview 09.02.2013)

## I. Introduction

The concept of diaspora has attracted much attention in the scholarly debate on migration, and has also entered into public discourse, even being appropriated by migrants themselves.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the term *diasborada* is now part of the Somali vocabulary, referring not only to a named phenomenon integral to Somali realities but to a particular group of people. It refers specifically to Somali migrants who have mobilized themselves as a political formation under the label “diaspora” to negotiate their role as agents of social change.<sup>3</sup> Further, claims of Somali migrants have gained recognition in Somalia, where people apply this social category to them.<sup>4</sup> This process of claimmaking and recognition of the diaspora is pervaded with a seemingly universalist discourse which addresses all migrants outside a “homeland.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, naming and claimmaking processes are situated within power relations, which involve ways of silencing some migrants and making them invisible and which, therefore, require careful attention.<sup>6</sup> The statement quoted above, made by Hassan, a Somali refugee who has been living in Cairo for the last few years, is an example of voice who resist the discourse of “diaspora.” Although Hassan lives outside of Somalia, he denies being a member of the so-called diaspora, a term that he associates more specifically with Somali migrants living in the global North, that is, in “the other abroad.” Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork among Somali forced migrants in Cairo in 2013, this paper illustrates one way in which the term of diaspora is

used by forced migrants and analyzes the meaning it takes in a particular setting.

The next section presents briefly ways in which the concept of diaspora has been framed in scholarly discussions, emphasizing the recent trend of conceptualizing the diaspora as a political project. In line with Kleist's (2008a) suggestion that diaspora is a "concept of a political nature that might be at once *claimed by* and *attributed to* different groups and subjects" (2008a:307, emphasis in original), this paper explores the construction of the category of diaspora from the perspective of forced migrants. Following that, a brief history of Somali migration to Egypt is provided as a backdrop for presenting varying profiles of Somali migrants living in Cairo today. In this old and densely populated city, the figure of the forced migrant is constructed as the opposite of the "Somali Westerner"<sup>7</sup>—that is, the Somali who has acquired citizenship in a western country. The third section of the paper shows how Somali forced migrants in Cairo earns a living and which solidarity networks they are part of. This will help to explain why Somali forced migrants contrast the precarious conditions of their lives with those of Somali Westerners. The last section explores the ways in which my informants in Cairo, in their everyday practices and encounters with Somali Westerners, refuse to apply the term "diaspora" to themselves. Indeed, the informants established a distinction between them as Somali forced migrants and the diaspora, that are Somali Westerners who are associated with mobility, economic, and social agency. Disavowing any connection to the category of diaspora allows them to exclude themselves from public discourse mobilizing the "diaspora" as part of the country's economic development. Moreover, this distinction allows them to address the Somali state and present themselves as particular group of citizens who have particular needs, for example the improvement of life conditions in Egypt and the negotiation of the conditions for return.

## II. The Diaspora: From Sociological Fact to Political Project

This section provides a brief overview of the ways in which the concept of diaspora has been conceptualized. While it is used to describe broadening groups of migrants, more recently, it has often been used to refer to a particular project.

Historically, the term diaspora referred to classic cases of the "victim diaspora," as in the cases of the Jews, Armenians, and Greeks among

others.<sup>8</sup> Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the term has been extended to national, ethnic, and religious groups which dispersed spatially over long periods of time and which engage in particular relationships linking their host country and homeland. The Somali setting provides a compelling example of the use of diaspora as a descriptive frame. Somalia has a long history of migration which was intensified due to recurring drought and the conflict of the late 1980s, which, taken together, led over two million people to emigrate. Studies on Somali migrants situate the latter in ambiguous relationships between host and homeland. On the one hand, Somali migrants are addressed within debates over local integration in the host society.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Somali migrants are described as a group bounded to strong ideas and practices of an (imagined) homeland to which they profess their loyalties through remittance practices,<sup>10</sup> marriage practices and transnational family structures,<sup>11</sup> healing practices,<sup>12</sup> and political engagement.<sup>13</sup> As such, because of the significant number of Somali people living outside of Somalia over a long period of time with these particular relationship to the host and home countries, it has been commonplace to refer to them as the “Somali diaspora.”

As a response to the hybrid and heterogeneous character of diasporas, the meaning of the term diaspora has expanded since its early conception in scholarly discussions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the concept has been appropriated in public and popular discourse, and refers to any group of spatially displaced migrants, that include ethnic and/or religious minorities, immigrants, or expatriates to name only a few. Efforts to understand refugees’ lived realities in contemporary migration suggest the use the theoretical frame of “diaspora.”<sup>15</sup> In this context, refugees are increasingly described as agents of social change, especially with regard to their impact in terms of remittances,<sup>16</sup> leaving space to discuss whether there is “refugee diaspora” or there are “refugees in diaspora.”<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the “dispersal” of the diaspora, which is without a clear definition, core constituting elements are identified. Vertovec (1997) sums up the conceptualization of diaspora in three forms: namely the “diaspora as social form,” “diaspora as a type of consciousness,” and “diaspora as a model of cultural production.” The first refers to a distinct group with various social, political, and economic relationships across national boundaries;<sup>18</sup> the second indicates a kind of awareness of belonging and connectedness;<sup>19</sup> the third involves the production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena.<sup>20</sup>

These three forms correspond to what Brubaker (2005) has identified more generally as three core elements: a spatial *dispersion* generally across state border, the orientation towards a (imaginary) *homeland*, and lastly *boundary maintenance*, a process that involves the mobilization of group solidarity over time.<sup>21</sup> Despite the worries about the loss of analytical and descriptive potential of the concept of diaspora, it remains a tool which provides some analytical value to understand the ways in which overseas identities are constructed.<sup>22</sup>

In the latest stage of diaspora thinking, a discursive approach emerges as critical to the essentialist notion of identity and ethnicity on which it is based.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, this approach suggests to use the category of “diaspora” as an emic notion, in order to identify who talks about the diaspora and illustrates what it means to talk about it in the way it is done. Indeed, Brubaker (2005) suggests considering the diaspora “not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim. We should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis.”<sup>24</sup> As such, the diaspora becomes a claim and “complex of practices,” a particular project with political connotation instead of an objective reality. In this sense, the diaspora does not refer to a “fixed identity,” but remains useful as a concept of identity formation, struggle for recognition and claims-making process.<sup>25</sup>

In this article, in line with Kleist (2008a,b, 2013) and Horst (2013), I explore one effect of diaspora labeling, rather than assessing what constitutes diaspora as a sociological entity. This enables us to shed new light on the growing debate about the use of the notion of diaspora to explain and describe groups of refugees.<sup>26</sup> Kleist (2008a) illustrates the mobilizing potential of the term diaspora and the advantage of mobilizing “in the name of the diaspora,” which has a powerful universalist claim—that is speaking for all Somalis outside Somalia, for instance. In relation to Somali migrants, she illustrates the ways in which particular Somali migrants (i.e., Somali migrants in the “West”) formulate particular claims “in the name of the diaspora,” thereby appropriating the category of diaspora.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Horst (2013) illustrates well the depoliticizing effect of “diaspora” when applied to refugee communities, who have to comply with donor expectations. Horst (2013) notes that, in fact, not all individuals claim to be of the diaspora, rather: “[t]he individuals that are included in the seemingly all-encompassing ‘diaspora’ concept are generally those who have the resources and

willingness to engage transnationally. The concept occludes obvious class differences and is in practice attributed to and claimed by a certain, by and large elite, segment of Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Europe.”<sup>28</sup> This paper illustrates the ways in which forced migrants resist the all-encompassing character of diaspora, by disclaiming it, and thereby creating a space to formulate their demands and political claims.

### **III. Somali Forced Migrants in Egypt**

Egypt has traditionally been perceived as a crossroad to the global North because of its strategic geographic position and its official open migration policy.<sup>29</sup> The inflow of migrants into Egypt has increased since the 1990s, following the outbreak of conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and elsewhere. Waves of asylum seekers and refugees have steadily increased into Cairo especially, which in 2012 hosted one of the largest urban refugee populations with more than 100,000 refugees registered at UNHCR-Egypt. This section focuses on the Somali migrants to Cairo, with a particular emphasis on the reason why they arrive in Cairo, and their characteristics. This will allow us to understand the distinction between the categories of the forced migrant and that of the Somali Westerner.

Somali migration to Cairo has evolved since 1970, when it involved mostly educated Somali such as diplomat families, students on government scholarship, and workers in the Persian Gulf attracted by the country because of its prestige as a cultural and religious center in the Arab world, and particularly because of its educational system. Since the outbreak of the Somali Civil War and the collapse of Siyad Barre’s regime in the early 1990s, the inflow of Somali forced migrants has evolved on par with the development of the conflict over the last decades. This latest wave of forced migrants comprised a population with a generally lower educational background and fewer social and economic resources,<sup>30</sup> and to whom Egypt is considered as a “transit” country, namely a pivotal space at the crossroad to the so-called West. This conception has been facilitated by the Egyptian government’s official open policy, and by the establishment of UNHCR in 1954, which contributed to Cairo gaining the reputation of having the world’s largest administration for resettling refugees in third countries.<sup>31</sup> In particular, the geographical proximity, the relative security

and the establishment of the UNHCR are the main reasons why Somali migrants decide to move to Cairo.

In this analysis, the “refugee” or the “forced migrant” is used as an emic notion that is from the localized point of view of Somali forced migrants living in Cairo. The notion of refugee, and the legal status associated with it, is commonly defined in the different Conventions regulating displacement in the context of a discourse of human rights as a person fleeing a country because of state persecution. From an individual perspective, however, it is meaningless to distinguish the causes that undermined fundamental human dignity and necessitated leaving, be they comprised of one or of many sources producing insecurity and socio-economic or environmental concerns. And often, these reasons overlap.

Consider the case of Maryan Saalix who is around twenty-five years old. Maryan left Somalia with her family at an early age to emigrate illegally to Saudi Arabia where she stayed a little less than ten years. There, despite the extreme vulnerability in which they lived—including lack of legal status; basic social services; access to education or employment; and constant insecurity—she and her family earned a little money by cooking Somali food and selling it during birthdays and weddings. She rarely went outside her house because of fear of being deported. Nonetheless, she, her four sisters, three brothers and her mother were deported to Somalia after a “neighborhood cleaning” action, which is a hunt for migrants without legal status in a particular neighborhood. They stayed in Somalia for two months, where she did not leave her house out of fear for her personal security. After one of her brothers was killed by warring Al-Shabaab group in Somalia in 2011, she and her family decided to sell their house and go to Cairo where they have since been waiting to be resettled.

The story of Maryan illustrates how migrants engage in decision-making processes which are nonetheless dependent on security concerns and institutional responses.<sup>32</sup> Displacement to Egypt is neither linear nor direct, rather forced migrants have multiple experiences abroad, in this case Saudi Arabia, but Cairo emigrants arrive also via Libya, Tanzania, or Ethiopia. The relative safety of Cairo and the low risk of deportation compared to other countries such as Saudi Arabia are of central relevance, as is UNHCR-Egypt’s reputation as a resettling institution. Although the inflow of Somali migration in Cairo has been steady, it has been intensified after the Ethiopian intervention beginning in 2006, reaching a peak of 7,400 registered refugees in 2012 which kept on increasing.<sup>33</sup> These numbers should be revised

upwards, considering cases not included in UNHCR records, because people have been rejected, or have not registered, or are counted as students.

For instance, Maxamed earned a living in Mogadishu by teaching there when his professor left for the Persian Gulf. At the age of eighteen, he applied for a scholarship to study in Cairo after his brother was killed by members of the Islamic Courts in Somalia in 2005:

“We went to them, the boy who killed him was arrested, he said ‘it [the bullet] slipped that’s all. We didn’t want to kill him; we were joking around and *bab!* He died.’ So he [the brother] died because of jokes. It is difficult for me to understand Somalia. I should study; here [in Somalia] there is only [the rule of] gun and clan.” [Maxamed, interview on 01.04.2013]

Studying abroad has been a strategy to get away from Mogadishu and the insanity of the conflict. It also offers alternative access to education. In Mogadishu, studying is expensive (approximately \$120 per month), and being student may even be exposing as someone with economic resources. In comparison, education in Cairo is free at the university Al-Azhar, and there is the possibility for a Muslim student to receive a scholarship.

Indeed, besides seeking protection in Cairo, the educational opportunities available to Somali students, same as other Muslim students, is an additional advantage. The old prestigious Islamic university Al-Azhar has attracted a number of African Muslim students.<sup>34</sup> Originally an instrument of Nasser policy to enforce a pan-Islamic ideology, the institution diffuses secular knowledge in the Muslim worlds.<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s, being a student at Al-Azhar used to be prestigious and used to provide students with a career as an Arabic and/or Koranic teacher in the country of origin. Nowadays, however, these students tend to look like economic migrants due to the limited opportunities the degrees now provide. Rather, the status of students at Al-Azhar and the associated meager scholarship (between \$14 and \$25 per month) enable students to stay in Cairo for a long time on the condition of having a valid registration.<sup>36</sup> There is only a thin line between Somali students and Somali refugees, because the student visa is a safe way to come to Cairo, is used as a legal means to live there, and the stay is maintained through the renewal of the registration at the university, while register-

ing at the UNHCR after completing the undergraduate program is an option.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the heterogeneous character of this wave of Somali forced migrants in Cairo, they all define themselves as *qaxooti*, which literally means refugee but is used more specifically for forced migrants.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, they can be distinguished due to their legal status in Cairo as refugees or students among others, on the basis of their being displaced, the time-span they have been living outside Somalia, or their previous experiences in other settings. In fact, the category of “forced migrant” is increasingly used as the antithesis of the emerging figure of the “Somali Westerners.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, Al-Sharmani (2006) has written on what she has called the Somali “émigrés” in reference to people of Somali origins who have acquired a citizenship in the “West,” and who began to settle in Cairo in about 2000. This includes approximately 200 families, which have moved to Cairo because they felt socially and economically marginalized in the global North.<sup>40</sup> For those seeking security and access to education, Cairo is perceived as an appropriate alternative, in addition to the perception that moral and religious values are similar to Somali ones.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, in contrast to the country of nationality in the global North, establishing oneself in Cairo is experienced as social and economic empowerment. Life in Cairo is cheaper in many regards, which allows them, for instance, to send their children to a private school, which would not have been possible in their country of nationality.

Therefore, the category of the “forced migrant” is defined in a process that *others* the Somali Westerner (i.e., the “diaspora”). As such, the informants defined themselves as a group bounded to similar vulnerable life conditions that differ from those of Somali westerners in Cairo, as this will be elaborated in the next section.

### **A. Forced Migrants’ Livelihood and Networks in Cairo**

This section illustrates the ways in which the livelihood of forced migrants leads to a specific subjectivity, that of the *qaxooti*. As mentioned earlier, Cairo is a place in which different types of Somali migrants live together. This section describes various facets of the livelihood of Somali refugees living in Cairo and the networks they establish to cope with their social and economic vulnerability. It illustrates the ways in which both types of Somali migrants share particular rela-



tionship by considering themselves Somalis, and are part of similar social networks. This will explain reasons how forced migrants construct the figure of the Somali Westerner as the *other*, based on their unequal access to political, economic, and social resources.

The government policy towards migrants and refugees remains of central importance to understanding the livelihood of forced migrants in the capital. Egypt is a signatory of the Geneva Convention of 1951 relating to refugees' status, the Protocol of 1967 and the African Union Convention of Addis-Abeba of 1969. These sets of agreements illustrate why Egypt has traditionally been seen as having an open migration policy.<sup>42</sup> The UNHCR-Egypt has been delegated the task of overseeing refugee status since 1954, and provides refugees with basic social services and legal protection. Somali forced migrants, who have been granted the status of refugees, receive little protection from the UNHCR-Egypt. However, the growing number of refugees, the tension with the Egyptian government and restrictions in third countries' policies contributed to undermine the capacity of the UNHCR-Egypt to provide these basic social services. For instance, informants stress the limited impact of the institution, and its slow response to their basic needs. They thus claim that it is maintaining a *status quo* in which one "neither dies, nor lives."<sup>43</sup>

In spite of Egypt's official open policy, the legal framework in fact increases refugees' vulnerabilities in Cairo, presenting them with numerous challenges in meeting their basic needs. Indeed, because of reservations in several key articles in access to education, employment among others and the poor implementation of international conventions, the Egyptian government explicitly considers refugees and asylum seekers as a temporary presence.<sup>44</sup> For example, housing and rent are central challenge, particularly in densely populated urban settings like Cairo. The rent burden is of particular concern for forced migrants, because rent protection laws do not apply to foreigners, including refugees.<sup>45</sup> They face steady escalation of rents since the Egyptian reform of the rent system in 2005, which allows landlords to increase the rent by 10% every year.<sup>46</sup> For forced migrants, this constitutes a steady increase in rent burden and involves ongoing changes of housing. Faadumo Xuseen, in her late sixties, has lived in one apartment with her daughter and her son's two sons since last year. Her daughter is the main one responsible for the family, while her son who lives in the UK is their provider. While the children go to a school organized by a Somali association in the area, the family's main problem remains the

increase in rent burden-which has been increased by 20% although she lives in a peripheral popular neighborhood:

“Life in Cairo used to be good, but now it’s getting expensive, the rent is out of reach and houses are expensive. First of all, since we came here, we didn’t experience insecurity, thank God. But rent is always getting more expensive. You are always being asked for more money. Every month, if you stay a year, you have to pay more. It used to be 1000 [ap. \$140] Egyptian pounds when we came, now it’s 1200 [ap. \$170].” [Faadumo Xusseen, interview 07. 03. 2013]

Besides the increase in rent, Somali forced migrants have voiced their fear of the landlord and the consequent precariousness in housing. Similar accounts can be found among other groups of forced migrants in Cairo.<sup>47</sup>

The economic and social vulnerability of forced migrants has increased with regard to the growing security concerns following the uprisings of 2011. The youth-driven Egyptian revolution contributed to rising insecurity, exposing forced migrants to various attacks, theft, abduction and rape.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, refugees are excluded from the labor market. The informal sector, especially domestic work which is not considered labor, remains the main sector of employment. Although even a majority of Egyptians work in the informal sector, employment opportunities for forced migrants remain even scarcer because of the legal interdiction to access the employment market and the lack of protection against exploitation.<sup>49</sup> Forced migrants, including graduate students, are paid a third or less of what Egyptians earn for the same job, if they are paid at all. A case in point is the story of Mustafa who is twenty-five years old. He used to be a student who was sent to Egypt by his parents. Shortly after he arrived in Cairo, his family fled Somalia after the Ethiopian intervention in late 2006. No longer funded by his father, Mustafa then had to partly support his family who had fled to Ethiopia. At the end of his studies at Al-Azhar, he started working for an Egyptian agency that was targeting Somali Westerners as clients. The pressure to have a job is strong in order to contribute to sending money to his family, and any employment opportunity is good, even if it is much less than the standards for Egyptians.

“This man [his employer] may God reward him, he is doing me a favor. If I get 30% of the salary of an Egyptian doing exactly the same job as me, he is doing me a favor. There are some people you work for and after

six months they tell you “Go away! You are not getting anything!” What can you do? I mean to whom are you going to complain? If you say I am going to go to report them to the [Egyptian] state, you are going to be arrested!” [Mustafa, interview 26.03.2013, Cairo.]

While Cairo is expected to be a temporary crossroad, it turns into a dead-end where migrants remain for an indeterminate time-span. More and more refugees under the UNHCR-Egypt’s protection are increasingly ineligible to be resettled in spite of their refugee status. One especially important reason is that their number exceeds the quotas specified in the migration policy of receiving countries. The numerous vulnerabilities listed above are characteristic and widespread among urban forced migrants in general.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, while Somali forced migrants are registered at the UNHCR, with or without protection, they need to get by in Cairo. As a result, they develop strategies to cope with their living conditions. One is the creation of solidarity practices among forced migrants. The shared vulnerable social condition creates a feeling of belonging. Sharing the rent burden is a common practice: students share apartments, but also more generally single Somalis share flats. For example, Warda no longer has close relatives in Cairo nor in Somalia. She lives with close friends whom she met in Cairo at the community school she now goes to ‘Aashir, one of the two largest Somali populated neighborhoods. She considers them to be *qaraabo*—that is, distant relatives as well as people who become close friends.

The clan-based networks are reinvented in an insecure environment in order to remake solidarity networks. The role of “clan” and kinship affiliation has been widely debated in Somali society, especially in relation to Somali political history.<sup>51</sup> In relation to migration, they appear as local and transnational networks reproduced as powerful structures of identification. In Cairo, clan relations pervade networks in which Somali migrants are embedded, thus influencing for example the decision to move to Cairo, but also providing better access to Somali Westerners living in Cairo.<sup>52</sup> Another mechanism requires each member of a particular sub-clan to contribute a certain amount of money at the end of the month. This provides a powerful means to deal with sudden events that require large sums of money, necessary in case of severe health problems or death for instance. Yet, the reproduction of clan-based structures and related institutions is attenuated while living abroad. In other words, Somali migrants rework these structures to gain certain advantages while rejecting more compelling aspects:

“The other day in Cairo, they said in the “community” [association, organization]: “we want 4.5.”<sup>53</sup> Why do I want 4.5 when I have left it? Then comes clan Right and clan Wrong in those places. I choose Fartuun.<sup>54</sup> If we can talk to each other, if we understand each other, if you can talk for us, Fartuun then I work with you. But I don’t want clan Right and clan Wrong. I am here in Egypt, region here and there and clan here and there, I left it back there.” [Axmed, interview on 22.03.13, Cairo]

What Axmed evokes here is a discussion he had with other members of an association active in Cairo. The issue is about establishing the 4.5 formula in the management of the association, that is, a representation of different sub-clan in relation to their respective numerical strength, as it has been done in the former Somali Transitional Federal government. Axmed voiced strong opposition to it—as he claims he left political representation of belonging to particular regions (such as Somaliland and Puntland, among other) or to particular clan in Somalia. In Cairo, he chooses someone on individual basis, someone with whom he can communicate and can relate to. What this illustrates is that being abroad enables them to renegotiate the role “clan” plays in organizing themselves. Although Axmed showed clear opposition to “clanism” in general, he remains attached to what he called Somali culture, particularly to the deliberative institutions, the *xeer*, as he himself is an “elder” in his neighborhood. As he explained the cases he deals with, it seems that his role is not so much mediator between members of different clans but rather limited to an esteemed elder who tries to find compromises in minor conflicts emerging from poverty in Cairo (e.g., between two young boys who fought over a mobile phone). His priority is that Somalis deal with their own problems and are not seen as troublemakers by their Egyptian neighbors.

Furthermore, Axmed and other Somali forced migrants are organized in several organizations, mainly called “communities.” The organization Somali Association For Women and Children (SAFWAC) is partly funded by the UNHCR and by money collected from the émigrés, and to a lesser extent other forced migrants. The association provides English, Arabic, and Koranic classes for women and children in Cairo, but also training in hair dressing, make-up, mathematics, and computer science among other activities. Moreover, SAFWAC is a space for Somali women and children to gather, regardless of their age or their social status. It provides students with employment opportunities, and space in which they can meet each other. Such organizations,

mosques, but also houses and bars, are common places where Somalis from different sub-clans, of different legal status, and generation spend time playing cards and discussing everyday life experiences. Some forced migrants have oft noted in this regard that “if Somalis in Somalia behaved the same as Somalis treat each other in Cairo, there wouldn’t be a war.” This speaks more generally to a social link and feeling of belonging which is marked by everyday experiences in the city and a shared legal and social exclusion from Egyptian society.

The Somali “diaspora,” which refers to the Somali émigrés from Somali forced migrants point of view, form strong social ties within the solidarity networks, distinguishing them from other forced migrants—who are considered “uncovered,”<sup>55</sup> meaning vulnerable. Somali émigrés, and more generally Somali migrants worldwide, represent a social capital for Somali forced migrants in Cairo. In this vein, the role of remittances has been widely explored as an important transnational practice.<sup>56</sup> Most forced migrants have relatives or friends who live in western countries and who give either incidental or regular financial support—varying from fifty to one-hundred dollars a month.

Moreover, Somali Westerners living in Cairo provide employment opportunities, which sometimes represent the only income for Somali forced migrants. Indeed, all of the informants had a job in the informal market, principally providing services to Somalis “émigrés” as nannies, teachers, or petty trade activities among others. The economic conditions of many forced migrants have changed after the revolution, because they are dependent on émigrés. Axmed’s situation changed after the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Before the revolution, he earned a modest income by doing the shopping and bringing the children to school for an émigrés family, who had left England and the USA to settle in Cairo.

“When the revolution happened [in Egypt in 2011], people from the diaspora returned because the security of the country decreased. Before, they used to have some money, they could walk [in the city] as they pleased, they would go to their home and take care of their children. But since the revolution started, they were beaten up, they were attacked, and they lost what they had. I was depending on them. I used to provide them with some services, work for them. I would earn a little from that. But since they left, I became jobless. Because the people I was working for left.” [Axmed, interview on 22.03.13, Cairo]

Moreover, another dimension of relationships can be found in marriage arrangement. In Cairo, the politics of marriage brings together converging interests. Those in the global South seek partners in the global North primarily for economic protection, while men in the global North seek women in the global South because they are considered to be more family-oriented.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Aliya became the second wife of a Somali man living in England and is now mother to a little boy. Her husband lives with his first wife in England and visits her and their child regularly. Aliya chose her marriage as an economic strategy. She does not live in economic insecurity because she has an apartment where she can live with her son. She is not worried about his future and she experiences the absence of the husband as freedom because she does not have to cook for him, for instance, and can spend time with her friends. Of course, transnational marriage is not only based on converging material interests,<sup>58</sup> but here it illustrates another network in which both émigré and forced migrants partake.

### **III. Other But The Same: The Passport and Disclaiming The Category of Diaspora**

The previous section has emphasized the relationships and worldwide networks in which Somali forced migrants in Cairo are embedded, and in which the relations with the Somali émigrés are important social capital. They share a common sense of belonging through the idea of Somalia as a common homeland. This facilitates relationships based on converging material interests: forced migrants provide émigrés with their services, be they domestic work or teaching, while the émigrés provide financial resources in return. In the following, I illustrate the ways in which forced migrants, by contrasting their lives to the émigré population, distance themselves from the “diaspora” and its associated political, economic, and social resources. Mainly, the distancing revolves around the notion of the passport, which is associated as much with political relevance, as with economic resources or social status. Further, forced migrants reject the use of “diaspora” as a relevant category for themselves in order to exclude themselves from public discourse mobilizing the “diaspora.”

The greatest difference centers on the acquisition of a citizenship other than the Somali one. It is surely not astonishing that the passport, as the materialization of citizenship, comes out so strongly in forced migrants’ accounts. States efforts to regulate people’s movements have

historically been explained through the invention and elaboration of the passport as part of the nation-state building project, which is ultimately an instrument to distinguish citizens from non-citizens.<sup>59</sup> Even Somalia, which is considered a typical case study of a failed state, issues passports. Yet, despite the document, Somali forced migrants consider themselves stateless:

“Now you come to Egypt as a refugee, who knows about you? Do you know? No. So you don’t have rights. But everyone has rights in their home, among their people, with their state. There you are someone. But if you come outside and you are a refugee, and that you do not have a state, no one can tell if you are living or dead.” [Axmed, interview on 22.03.13, Cairo]

So while informants have a Somali passport, they consider themselves “without state” as Axmed revealed. In fact, the passport they are seeking is one that has political relevance. Different passports are associated with different values: the “honorable” or the “big” passport (*baasaboorka sharaf leh* or *wey-weyn*) refers to those issued by Western countries, while the Somali one is a weak one.

Although it has been widely acknowledged over the last two decades that Somalia is a failed state, the state remains the main referent and legitimate authority ratifying conventions regulating migration issues.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Somali forced migrants are not stateless on paper, rather, they are forcibly bounded to the Somali political community—and have an ambiguous status. Somali forced migrants expressed a strong feeling of having no safety net and no backing. Maxamud’s example illustrates this status of falling outside the conventional citizen characteristic that is common for forced migrants. In their situation, deportation itself tragically becomes a luxury.

“I was among those who were caught. [silence] During these ten months I was in jail, we were at first twenty-five, and then up to 500 Somalis. Other people were from Pakistan, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt; people like this. People like this joined us, but they were deported. They were sent back to their countries. We were told: ‘you are Somali, there is no plane going to Somalia because of insecurity.’ So we stayed there [in prison] for ten months. We couldn’t be deported, neither could we be released. ‘There is no state in Somalia, we can’t bring you there and if we release you, you are going to go back into the sea and die there. So, you stay in jail, that’s better’” [Maxamud, interview 14.03.2013, Cairo]

For forced migrants, acquiring a passport represents the final step of leaving “refugeehood” and it remains central in distinguishing forced migrants from Somali Westerners.

“People living in Africa or in Arab countries, and those in Europe, to be honest there is a great difference. People living abroad, in Europe, or in the United States of America, Australia, or Canada, they are different. They have good lives. They have passports. The reason why people run, the most important thing is the passport. People staying in Africa, they came because they want to go to those places. People here [in Cairo], when you closely look at it, 70% or 80% want, be they students or refugees or whatever, they all want to go to those places.” [IC, interview 9.02.2013, Cairo]

The above illustrates that the passport is not only a document but is associated with economic resources. The good life IC refers to is a situation in which one can make a living. For instance, in Cairo, the “big” passport gives access to particular privileges such as employment, while Somali refugees are legally neither allowed to work<sup>61</sup> nor to create their own business as it would be possible in South Africa for example.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, the émigré population by carrying foreign passports, enjoys such economic privileges.

“With a Somali passport, you can’t work. So he [the youth] can’t work, particularly if he is Somali. But for example people from the diaspora who come from abroad, they have shops in the middle of the city. What do they have? A passport from another country. They hold an American, Swedish, German, or French passport. They hold big passports.” [Axmed, interview on 22.03.13, Cairo.]

For students, the “big” passport is also associated with the access to prestigious universities. Students coming from “the other abroad” have been trained in a way that student with a Somali passport cannot compete with.

Thus, acquiring a “big” passport means to stop being a refugee and start turning into a migrant or a person leading a “normal life.” Economic and political vulnerability coupled with social exclusion contribute to framing Cairo as a crossroad, a place where one leads a life as refugee. The presence of the UNHCR continues to create hopes for resettlement and helps refugees to cope with their vulnerable situation. Yet, it contrasts tragically with the protracted character of their



stay and the associated self-helplessness if that objective cannot be achieved—a process known as *buufis*.<sup>63</sup> *Buufis* characterizes a hope for resettlement, and is associated with tragic consequences if it cannot be achieved.

The case of Maxamud illustrates that seeking resettlement or a citizenship means escaping the status of being a refugee as well as the phenomenon of *buufis*. He spent most of his life as a refugee. He left Somalia as he was almost eight years old, spent ten years as a refugee in Libya, and then ten years in Cairo. Maxamud works now as a translator for a charity organization and compared to the vulnerable life of other refugees in Cairo, he has a stable situation and enjoys a good social status among Somali refugees to whom he is helpful, because he understands the “system” just as well as the lives of the refugees in Cairo. He speaks fluent Arabic and the Egyptian dialect, and has lived the last twenty years of his life abroad. He fulfills the criteria of “integration” commonly referred to in Western societies. He has a job, and has most of his family in Europe, and thus he is not living within the same economic and social vulnerabilities as many other refugees. Despite this, he still feels like a refugee, disconnected from the society in which he lives, due to the necessity of renewing the refugee visa frequently and the anonymity in which he lives in the Egyptian metropolis. Maxamud is resigned and exhausted about living with the status of a refugee, and failed in his own term to reach his objectives. Most of his opportunities for a “better life” are blocked: the “big” passport, for instance, seems out of reach. Local integration is not an option, because staying in Egypt means remaining a refugee. And the “return” is frustrating after such a long period of refugeehood. Life in Somalia offers him only a very limited perspective—because he considers himself too old/too mature to join any of the warring camp—and security seems very fragile.

Similarly, students see their conditions worsening over the years with only limited available options. For them, the limited opportunities, after reaching a bachelor degree, is of weighty concern. Neither advancing academically nor working legally is real options. Thus, it has become common practice to remain in Cairo, with neither social protection nor resources, to move somewhere else or register at the UNHCR.<sup>64</sup> *Buufis* in this case does not only refer to the longing for resettlement and the frustration of failure, but more generally it refers to a condition and a feeling of being locked physically in a particular

geographical setting (Cairo) and at the same time, into a particular social and economic condition.

The ultimate goal is not only to move geographically or to acquire another citizenship *per se*; rather, it is to achieve a “settled” set of mind. Indeed, with the growing connection to Somalis worldwide, the forced migrants hear stories and experiences of Somalis in *dibadda kale*, which is in “the other abroad.” Social media and other sources of communication contribute to the knowledge of, sometimes very detailed, experiences of Somali refugees in the “West.” For instance, Mustaf could describe very well the visa application procedures one goes through in the U.S., the lives of Somali refugees living in the global North, and the difficult situations some may live in. His account showed that forced migrants are to some extent aware that reaching the ultimate objective of being closer to acquiring a “big” passport is not necessarily a situation of empowerment.

“You know, some young people I know, their minds are not settled, I mean, they were hurt in their minds. They didn’t get what they wanted, and they have left their education [in Cairo]. Here [in Cairo], they were sitting, and now there [in the global North], and until now they are illegal, so in fact they don’t have anything. So when he is there, his family is calling, so he switches off his mobile, and he becomes all *busy*. Some even became crazy. I see them on Facebook you know, and on YouTube, some videos they have done, really it makes your heart burn. You are shocked. You know, a young person your age, with whom you used to study and lead the same life. You see him croon, and talk to himself.”  
[Mustaafa, interview 26.03.2013, Cairo.]

Mustafa, who is employed by an Egyptian company sees his situation as more desirable than that of his friends, who have been resettled or found “a way” to reach western countries, because he works, can remit to his family, accomplish his five prayers and has the perspective of getting married. Yet, Mustafa is not considered diaspora, because his options—in terms of mobility—are circumscribed and he is at the mercy of his employers.

Acquiring the passport was not associated with a specific geographic setting; rather, it enables particular social practices through mobility. And those are very similar to the transnational lifestyle of *émigrés*. Faadumo works as a nanny for a Somali “*émigré*” family, who used to live in Canada. The family she works for lives in a gated community outside of the city. It is composed of the woman/mother, Raxma and

her three children, who attend a private school. Her husband lives in Canada with two older daughters and other relatives. Raxma settled in Cairo to be physically closer to Somalia, where her parents live, but also because she plans to settle in Somalia. She was investing in the building of a school where she intends to teach. She has been trained as an English teacher in Canada, but could not find a job. She travels regularly between Cairo and Mogadishu. Faadumo lives with them, cleans and cooks for five to six days a week when Raxma is around, and for longer periods when she is away. Moreover, Raxma and her children go to Canada for summer vacations sometimes, the husband and other siblings also come to visit in Egypt, but Raxma returns to Canada for health services, especially when she was pregnant. In the end, she came back to Cairo with the younger children and the newborn. To explain the reason why she wants to acquire a passport in the global North, Faadumo explained:

“I want to go to the USA or Europe, get a passport, work there and go back to my mother. Even if I have children, I get married, I will take my children and stay with my mother [in Somalia]. I will go give birth there [in the USA or Europe], and go back to Somalia. Even if my husband doesn’t want to go to Somalia, it is fine. He will only support his children, that is also what they want Somali men. Supporting in Somalia doesn’t need much money. So I will go there.” [Faadumo, interview 15.02.2013, Cairo]

The phenomenon Faadumo describes is closely related to her own experience in the family she works for as a nanny. Moreover, she also describes the structure of families, who tend to live in different geographical settings, which involves frequent visits. As such, the passport with all the meaning it carries as described above, is in the end a guarantee that one can live what was termed as a “normal life,” that is a “settled” state condition in which one enjoys free mobility and the possibility to make a living associated with economic and social resources.

The distinction I have elaborated on so far is central in the politics of recognition of forced migrants. As noted earlier, the concept of diaspora should be situated in a process of recognition and claim making, which involves what Kleist called “flexible politics of belonging.”<sup>65</sup> The latter refers to strategies of actors such as government officials or migrants themselves mobilizing a particular “diasporic identity” in relation to particular political claims.<sup>66</sup> I suggest below illustrating that

disclaiming of the category of diaspora allows forced migrants to formulate particular claims to state officials.

The formation of the latest Somali government in 2012 has been seen as an important event for Somali forced migrants in Cairo. On his diplomatic rounds, the Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mahamud visited Somalis living in Cairo on the 8th of February 2013. The visit of delegation of Somali state officials in Cairo has evoked a strong feeling of hope, associated with the perspective of improving their life condition:

“The new government is now our biggest hope. You could even notice, the students who were sleeping would stand up and say ‘the country is doing better, I will find a job!’ You know the diplomas, there has to be a job associated to it!” [Maxamed, interview on 01.04.2013]

Moreover, groups of forced migrants have also gathered along the delegation route to formulate claims to address the Egyptian government through Somali officials. These included the re-negotiation of scholarships for student, the possibility to extend the academic education in including a master degree, or to work legally.

The Somali government and its officials are of vital importance to forced migrants because it means the establishment of a political authority, which they can address as citizens:

“I am part of the people [of Somalia], the right of my country is that I study, I mean that I invest the good things in my country. Be it my time, my knowledge, tell people around me about it, everything I can do, be good for my home, be a good mother, be good to my neighbors, and bring people to think my country is good. I also have rights in my country [Somalia], among these is that I can live in my country, be relaxed there, and find what I need there.” [Sacdiya, Interview 02.04. 2013, Cairo]

There is the idea that this relationship is based on reciprocity, where forced migrants as citizens do what is in their power (to study, to invest their time and their knowledge, to be a good mother etc.), while the state should create a peaceful environment (“be relaxed”) and enable the conditions for a decent living (“find what I need”), which include education and employment mainly.

The Somali president’s speech was pervaded by a mobilizing discourse: rebuilding Somalia is associated with shared efforts of “all

Somalis” including those who are abroad. It involved further a “return” with the promise that security measures would be enforced. The discourse of forced migrants, as a response to the diplomatic mission, was one which emphasized their precarious life conditions. In fact, as forced migrants, it has been emphasized that they need to “help themselves” first and then, “help the country.” The role of the Somali state remains to create a setting viable for return given their own limited mobility.

In forced migrants discourse as well, rebuilding Somalia is conceived as the task of “all Somalis” regardless of their citizenship, yet with differentiated obligations. The quote of Sacdiya above illustrates well the obligation of forced migrants: “doing what is in their power,” that is with their limited resources. In contrast, Somali Westerners are perceived as being the first who should return to Somalia, because they can leave again easily, in comparison to forced migrants. For instance, Faamo Xuseen is an elderly woman, and when I met her, we watched Somali TV channels which portray Mogadishu and Somalia as a vast field under construction. However, Faamo remained doubtful:

“They say Somalia is safe, there are hotels being built here and there. Everywhere construction is going on. But there is still fear. I mean people living in Europe and these other places, why didn’t they go back? Everyone wants to go back. But nobody is going. If there was security, there would have been people going back.” [Faamo Xuseen, interview 07. 03. 2013]

What the quote of Faamo illustrates is the role of Somali westerners, who are here seen as indicators of the degree of security in Somalia. As long as a degree of security and livelihood are not achieved in Somalia, the discourse of “everybody returns” is mainly directed towards Somalis in the global North. In contrast to forced migrants, the émigrés have acquired the “big” passport and the associated resources and mobility. Their return is also considered obvious, because “they are Somali,” and their role in Somalia is to some extent similar to their role in Cairo as described earlier: invest their economic capital to live their lives in Somalia and employ their fellow Somalis.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper identifies some of the ways in which forced migrants reject the universalist discourse of the 'diaspora.' The accounts of Somali forced migrants in Cairo illustrate how particular migrants come to position themselves towards the 'diaspora.' In this article, I have described how some Somali forced migrants live in Cairo. It is a situation marked by economic, social and political vulnerabilities, while the networks of which they are a part provide them with meager resources to survive. In this regard, the Somali émigrés living in Cairo are important social capital. They are seen as the antithesis of the Somali forced migrants: while both share a belonging to Somalia as a common 'homeland,' acquiring the passport of a country in the global North has been described as the symbol granting political protection, economic resources and social status. Moreover, disclaiming the category of diaspora enables forced migrants to distance themselves from dominant public uses of the concept of "diaspora" and expectations associated with it. Because of their vulnerable circumstances, they position themselves outside the diaspora—a self-identification that puts them in a different relationship with the Somali state. This allows them to create a space in which they can articulate their own demands and needs. These involved both the negotiation of a return to Somalia under the conditions of security and livelihood, as well as the improvement of their legal status in Egypt.

In this regard, the concept of diaspora provides a theoretical framework to understand the process of diaspora formation, as conflicting projects rather than a given fixed category. Moreover, it seems necessary to see it not as an autonomous category outside of a social setting; instead, these conflicting interests contribute to root 'diaspora' in a specific context.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, from the perspective of Somali forced migrants in Cairo, there is no 'diaspora' outside the Global North. This formulation can be of great relevance to recent efforts to assess the role of the diaspora as agents of social change, and more particularly in relation to the rise of what Van Hear has named the "refugee diaspora."<sup>68</sup> In fact, the accounts of Somali forced migrants living in Cairo illustrate the struggles of urban forced migrants to make a place for themselves in the world. The paper, then, contributes to the growing efforts of local integration as a meaningful solution to protracted displacement. This is especially noteworthy given the fact that contemporary migration is increasingly being characterized as also a South-South real-

ity.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, as Bradley suggests, the struggle can also be about *regaining* a place in the world, which involves a return on negotiated terms.<sup>70</sup> Returning, from the perspective of Somali forced migrants in Cairo, should be possible to a place where one can lead what many termed a “normal life.” Considering such accounts is of relevance in post-conflict settings, where the question of livelihood is of crucial importance.<sup>71</sup>

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## Notes

1. To Ibrahim Maclin Mursal.
2. Van Hear 2011.
3. Kleist 2008a.
4. Abdile and Pirkkalainen 2011.
5. Horst 2013, p. 233.
6. Polzer and Hammond 2008; Hammond 2008.
7. The Somali “émigrés” is a terminology suggested by Al-Sharmani (2006), but the informants used “the diaspora.” For the sake of clarity, the former will be used henceforth, along with “Somali Westerner” henceforth to refer to Somali who have acquired citizenship in a western country.
8. Cohen 2008.
9. McGown 1999; Griffith 2000; Fangen 2006; Hammond 2013.
10. Horst 2004; Lindley 2009, 2010; Gundel 2006.
11. Al-Sharmani 2006, 2010.
12. Tiilikainen 2012.
13. Hoehne *et al.* 2011; Laakso & Hautaniemi 2014.
14. Clifford 1994:311.
15. Wahlbeck 2002.
16. Gundel 2002; Lindley 2009; Van Hear 2009.
17. e.g. Van Hear 2004, 2009.
18. Vertovec 1997: 278–279.
19. *Ibid.*: 281–283.
20. *Ibid.*: 284–285.
21. Brubaker 2005:5–6.
22. Faist 2010:11; Walbeck 2002.
23. e.g. Anthias 1998, Brubaker 2005.
24. Brubaker, 2005, p. 12.
25. Turner 2008: 1054; Helly 2006.
26. e.g. Wahlbeck 2002.
27. Kleist 2008a, 2008b.
28. Horst 2013: 233.

29. Zohry 2003.
30. Al-Sharmani 2003.
31. Etienne and Picard 2012: 61.
32. See for exemple Lindley 2009.
33. UNHCR 2013.
34. Bava and Picard 2010.
35. Bava & Picard 2010: 62.
36. Ibid.:157.
37. Al-Sharmani 2004.
38. *Qaxooti* is the Somali word for refugee. It is used among the informants as much to refugee as to any forced migrants.
39. The informants have referred to the so-called Somali Westerners, or *émigrés*, as the diaspora. It is of central relevance for the article, yet for sake of clarity I will use Somali Westerners or *émigrés* throughout the paper.
40. Al-Sharmani 2006.
41. Al-Sharmani 2007.
42. Zohry 2003: 129.
43. From Somali as *ha na dhiman, ha na noolaan*.
44. Grabska 2006.
45. Briant and Kennedy 2004:456–457.
46. Gozdziaik and Walter 2012.
47. e.g. Grabska 2006; Jacobsen 2003.
48. IRIN report 2012, Gozdziaik and Walter 2012.
49. Gozdziaik and Walter 2012.
50. e.g. Grabska 2006, Jacobsen *et al.* 2014, Campbell 2006; Landau 2006.
51. e.g. Schlee 1989; Samatar, Abdi. 1992; Samatar, Ahmed, 1994; Lewis 1994; Prunier 1997.
52. Al-Sharmani 2003, 2004.
53. The number 4.5 refers to a formula attributing positions to different clans in the Somalia Transitional Federal Government (see for example Schlee 2006 p.120).
54. “Fartuun” refers to a Somali name for woman. The name does not have much importance here, rather it is to emphasize a person, independently of his/her kin affiliation.
55. *waan qaawannahay* in Somali can mean “I am naked” or “uncovered” used here metaphorically to refer to vulnerability or a lack of protection.
56. Lindley 2010; Gundel 2002; Hammond 2010.
57. Al-Sharmani 2007, 2010.
58. e.g. Shami 1996, Al-Sharmani 2006.
59. Torpey 2000.
60. Bradley 2014.
61. Gozdziaik and Walter 2012.
62. Landau 2006.



63. For *buufis* see Horst 2006.
64. Sharmani 2004.
65. Kleist 2013: 286.
66. Ibid.
67. Beciu 2012: 16.
68. Van Hear 2009, 2004.
69. Pelican and Saul 2014.
70. Bradley 2014.
71. e.g. Raeymaker 2011.

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