

## In Somalia, a window of opportunity

Written by Keith Ellison  
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It's a new day in Somalia. That's the message I took away from a trip to the capital city of Mogadishu earlier this year. We have our best opportunity in more than two decades to help stabilize Somalia and advance U.S. national security interests — but only if we act quickly.

The improved security situation has filled Mogadishu with new life. Somalis can once again play music and dance, activities banned by terrorist group Al-Shabab, which until recently controlled much of the country. Crowds of people fill the streets, socializing and shopping.

Somali-Americans from my district in Minnesota are starting businesses and buying real estate. And a new generation of Somalis from the global diaspora is returning. One of them started Somalia's first think tank, the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies. Another woman left her high-paying job on Wall Street to help build up Somalia's financial sector from scratch.

These positive developments are largely a result of Somalia's successful political transition last year. After many failed attempts, Somali leaders completed a process that produced the first representative, permanent government since the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991.

Somalia now has a new constitution, parliament and president. In a strong vote of confidence, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally recognized the new government when President Hassan Sheik Mohamud visited Washington in January. Mohamud also met with President Obama and more than 20 members of Congress.

Nonetheless, Somalia's new leaders face challenges that would be difficult even for an experienced, well-resourced government. Ministries are nonexistent or understaffed; there is no public education or established banking system; more than a million people are displaced, and security threats remain serious. However, even the pessimists can no longer say that Somalia is hopeless.

The new government is populated with public servants who want Somalia to succeed. President Mohamud made clear at his meeting on Capitol Hill that security is his top priority. His government must quickly move into areas liberated from Al-Shabab and prove that government can be a force for good, not just a source of corruption and oppression. It can do that by providing basic public services, including trash pickup, transportation, education and a

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functioning judicial system.

The United States has an opportunity to make an investment in Somalia that could pay huge dividends over time. U.S. recognition of the Somali government makes it eligible for certain types of foreign assistance, which should be used to stabilize the country. By supporting the development of the Somali National Army, the United States can help transform Somalia from a security threat to a security ally. By supporting basic infrastructure projects and commercial relationships, the U.S. can move Somalia from an aid recipient to a trading partner.

The late Donald Payne was the last member of Congress to visit Mogadishu, nearly four years ago. With Al-Shabab in control of much of Mogadishu, the State Department strongly discouraged him from going. But Payne, a consummate Africa expert and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee, thought it was worth risking life and limb to get a better understanding.

The State Department's warning was warranted. Though Payne escaped unharmed, Al-Shabab shelled his plane as it left the airport, injuring 19 people. "Let him go back with the message of our strength and enmity towards the U.S.," an Al-Shabab spokesman said.

I bring a very different message: The security situation has vastly improved, and democracy and prosperity are within reach for the Somali people. African Union and Somali National Army troops have forced Al-Shabab out of every major city, including its onetime stronghold of Kismayo. While still capable of asymmetrical guerrilla attacks, Al-Shabab is no longer able to contend for power or administer significant territory.

What we do now may determine whether we face another 22 years of terrorism, piracy and famine in Somalia, or whether we help Somalia write the first chapter of its comeback.

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