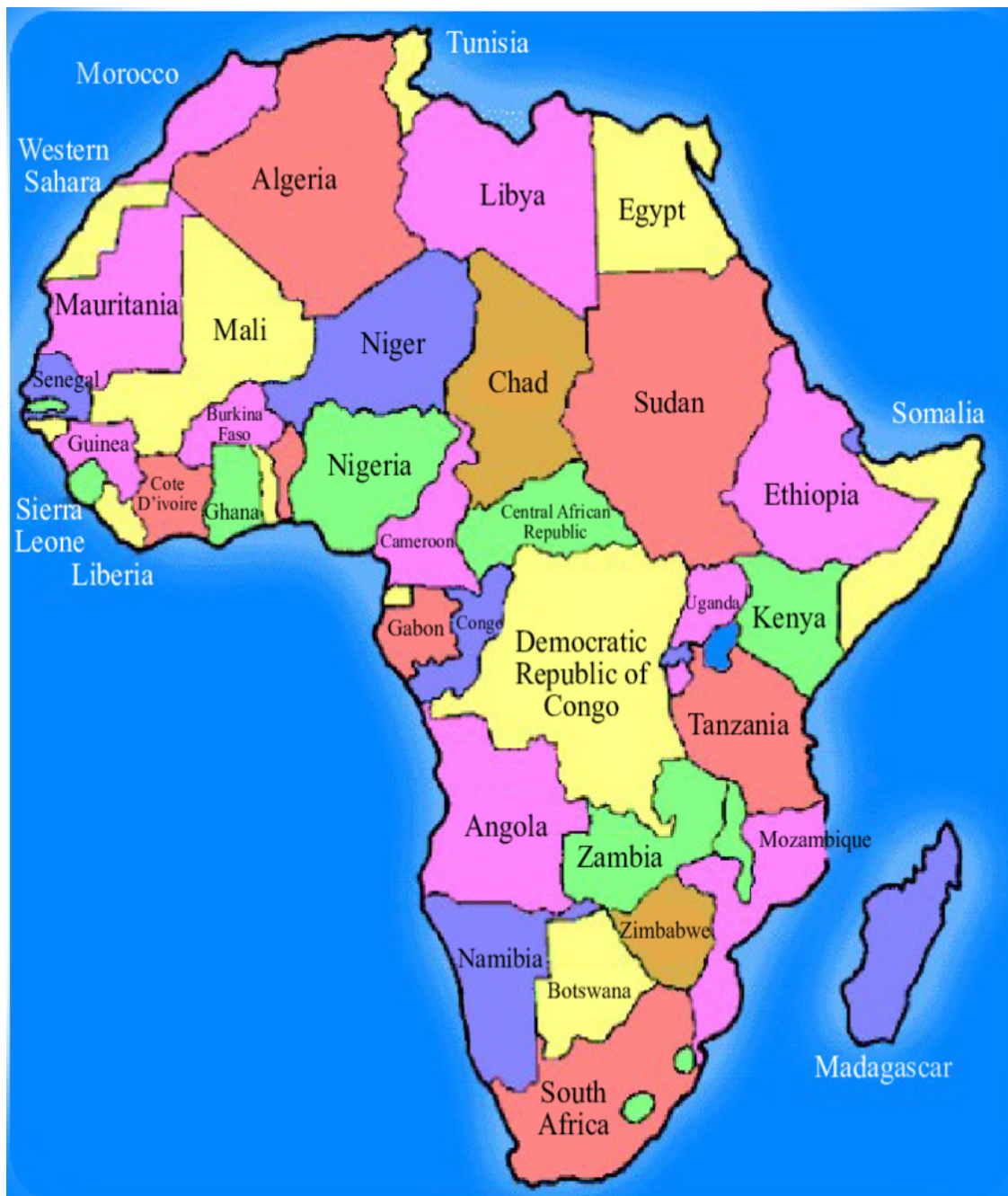


## How the Somalis saved Lewiston by Max Millard

How many of you are familiar with Somalia? It's a country of about 18 million people located on the Horn of Africa, so called because it resembles an rhinoceros horn. It's the easternmost point of Africa, and is shaped like an upside-down letter L.



Here's a close-up view. The north is called Somaliland, which claims to be independent. That's part of the problem.



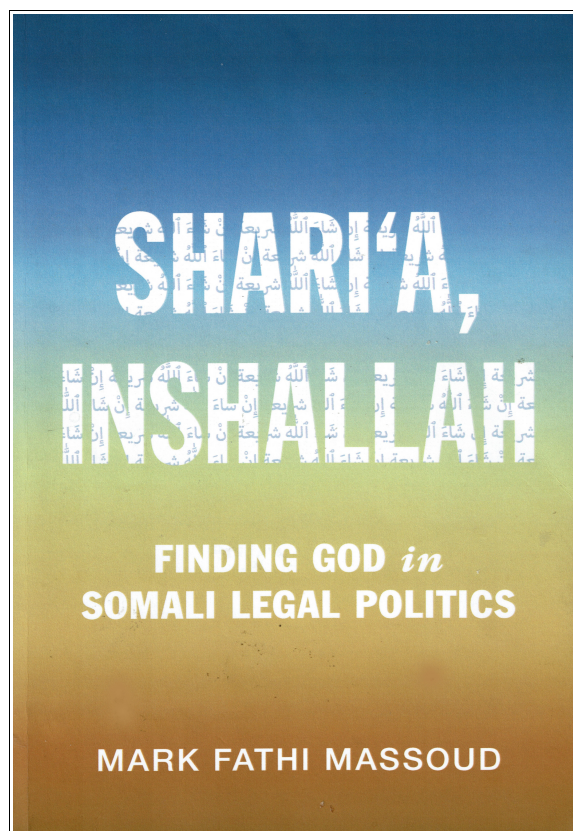
Somalia was once an important commercial center, but today it's one of the poorest and most dangerous countries in the world. Right now it's in the 16th year of its latest civil war. About one-fifth of the population lives abroad, including as many as 150,000 refugees and their children in the United States.

Somalia's current problems date back to 1884, when it was colonized by England, and in 1889 by Italy, which divided it into north and south regions of influence. Somaliland was British, and rest was Italian.

As a Muslim country, it was previously ruled by sheikhs -- religious leaders who use shari'a law to settle disputes such as injury, murder, theft, divorce and inheritance. The sheikhs established peace among rival tribes over their rights to natural resources such as land and water.

The most renowned sheikhs are experts in Islamic law, who have memorized the more than 6,000 verses of the Koran and thousands of pages of the Hadith, the teachings of the prophet Muhammad.

The word shari'a comes from three Arabic words that mean cleansing, clarity and purity. I learned that from the 2021 book "Shari'a, Inshallah: Finding God in Somali Legal Politics" by Mark Massoud. Inshallah means "God willing."



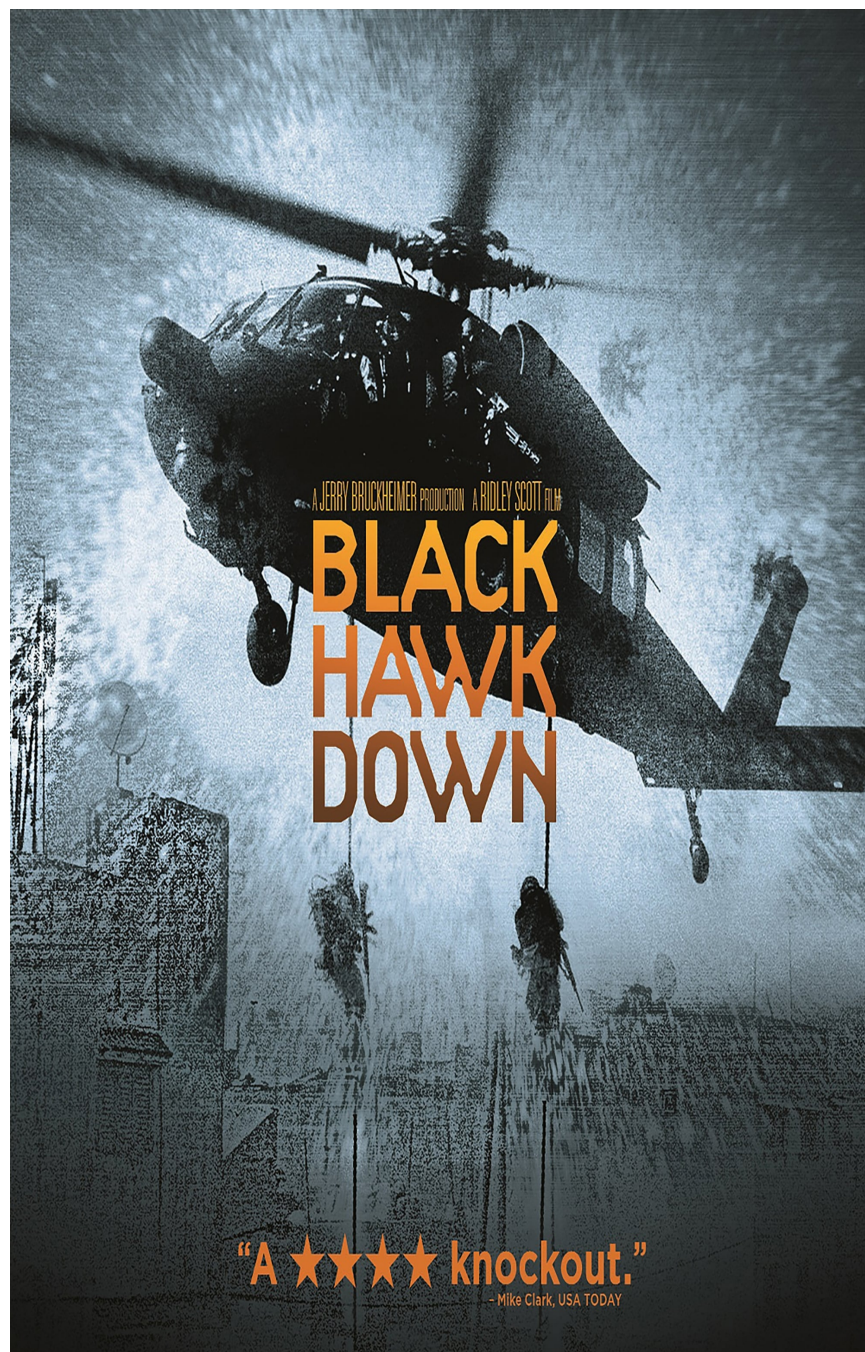
It's a very academic tome – not your light summer reading. But it explains in great detail how Somalia reached its present condition and how it got on the enemy's list of the U.S. government.

When the colonizers took over, it destabilized the country and later led to Herculean struggles for power, as happens to many former colonies. Since 1884, Somalis have been ruled by several European masters, have seen their governments unite and separate, and have fought multiple regional and civil wars.

Somalia didn't get its independence until 1960, and first had a brief burst of democracy. But then, with a military coup and a 22-year dictatorship, it descended into long periods of turbulence.

Among the intruders in its internal politics was the United States, which in the 1980s gave dictator Siad Barre 200 million dollars aid after he agreed to break his ties with the Soviet Union.

In 1993 the U.S. led a task force of 35,000 foreign soldiers into Somalia to distribute aid, ensure stability, and protect supplies from warlords, but also to kill a prominent Somali general. If you've seen the movie "Black Hawk Down," you might remember what happened: U.S. special forces were roundly defeated, and we pulled out all our troops.



But that wasn't the end of our involvement. In 2006 Ethiopia invaded Somalia with 15,000 soldiers, with support from U.S. air, ground and naval forces. Ethiopia occupied the country for three years, which you might call collateral damage from our war on terror. So when people ask, "Why do WE have to take in those refugees?", it's good to remember the history.

Now, to segue to my main topic.

If you've ever heard of Lewiston, Maine, it's probably because of what happened there on October 25, 2023. On that day, a local

man named Robert Card entered a bowling alley and a nearby restaurant with a semiautomatic rifle, murdering 18 people and injured 13. He later committed suicide.

It was by far the worst mass killing in Maine history, but the city should not be remembered mainly for this tragedy, because it was also the site of a much more important development that happened two decades earlier.

In the year 2000, Maine was the whitest state in the Union, with 97% of its population identifying as white. I don't doubt that because I grew up in a small town in Maine where every one of my classmates and teachers was white, and the only language you heard was English.

In 2000, Lewiston was dying. At one time it had been a prosperous mill town, Maine's richest city, known for its abundant jobs in the textile and shoe industries. But as cheap imports came in, the mills closed, one by one. The population began shrinking, young people left, and the decaying center of town became known as "the combat zone."

Then something amazing happened. In 2001, a family of Somali refugees moved to Lewiston, liked what they found, and spread the word to friends and relatives who had been settled elsewhere in the U.S. They said: "Come to Lewiston. Housing is cheap, the schools are good, and the crime rate is low. It's where you can build new lives and raise your children in peace."

Lewiston was totally unlike the large cities where the federal government had first resettled the refugees. Thus began a great secondary migration.

At first, the locals couldn't believe what was happening. After all, Somalia is on the equator, and Maine gets months of snow every year. Why in the world would they want to live there? But the

Mainers underestimated the determination of people who had been traumatized by decades of civil war, their families broken apart and forced into refugee camps. A little cold weather was nothing to them.

So they kept coming. At first there was a lot of resistance. People complained that the refugees were overloading the city's social services and public schools. In 2002, the mayor of Lewiston wrote an open letter to leaders of the Somali community, discouraging further relocation to Lewiston. He wrote: "Our city is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally." The letter attracted national attention, and sparked a large demonstration in favor of the refugees, and a much smaller one against them.

Within a few years, the refugees settled in and Somali entrepreneurs helped reinvigorate downtown Lewiston by opening dozens of shops in storefronts that had been boarded up. They launched restaurants and small businesses providing translation services, in-home care for the elderly and other social services. Retailers sold clothes and spices imported from Africa.

In 2006, Lewiston was ranked by one of the Big Four accounting firms as the best place to do business in New England. The per capita income soared. By 2011, there were an estimated 5,000 Somali immigrants in Lewiston, out of a population of 37,000.

And then, Donald Trump stepped into the picture. In August 2016, while at a campaign rally in Portland, Maine, Trump said, "We've just seen many, many crimes getting worse all the time, and as Maine knows—a major destination for Somali refugees—right, am I right?"

The Lewiston police chief responded that the Somalis had integrated into the city, and that crime had gone down, not up. But Trump continued his rants against immigrants from what he called "shit-hole countries," and when he entered the White House, he

instituted a Muslim ban, which included people from Somalia.

Since he left office, the Somali community of Lewiston has recovered. Don't get me wrong: Lewiston is no model city. It still has a lot of problems. But the Somali story is the prototype of a large-scale social experiment that worked. It proves that in the right environment, refugees are not liabilities, but bringers of prosperity and culture that enriches everyone.

Today Maine is just 92% white, placing it second after Vermont. But that 5% makes a big difference. I can tell you that whenever I go back to visit, it's a much more interesting place.