

Kenyan and Somali Circuits in and out of Nairobi: Eastleigh and Surrounding Neighbourhoods

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The institutions, infrastructure and human resources of Nairobi are key to development, security and transport in East Africa and in the African Indian Ocean region. People, ideas and goods circulate between Somalia, Northern Kenya, Nairobi and destinations in the Gulf, particularly Dubai.

The city attracts large numbers of migrants from within Kenya and from centres of crisis, poverty and conflict in the surrounding fragile states. The crisis in Somalia is the most pressing situation of political and social instability and it influences Somalis in Kenya and their interaction with other Kenyan communities and authorities

Somalis from Somalia constitute the largest immigrant community in Nairobi. Most live in Eastleigh, a neighbourhood of some half a million inhabitants. It is characterized by an intense mobility - the destination for Somali refugees from the huge camps in Northern Kenya who make their way into the area because of its informal character and the possibilities of generating livelihoods. They mingle with Kenyan Somalis who exploit economic opportunities away from the arid and insecure North Eastern Province and with immigrants from other conflicts. Many Somalis settle here and many plan migration to North America or Europe. Eastleigh is neglected by authorities, an area of miserable roads, sewage and trash disposal but also of dynamic economic, political and social enterprise. It is beyond official control and hardly figures on maps of the city.

The neighbourhood contains numerous business plazas, hotels, restaurants, mosques, madrasas, welfare organizations, hubs for telecommunication and transfer of money, travel agencies and language schools. Somali and Kenyan networks of trade, finance and remittances effectively facilitate the movement of goods between the shops, markets, hotels and restaurants in Eastleigh and the Middle East. Money from Somali piracy industry along the Indian Ocean coast is rumoured to boost these networks and make prices of real estate soar. The property market is profitable and irregular; housing is erected, subdivided and let without control. Religious and political associations are intertwined with business and welfare activities and engage young and old. Illegal networks transporting weapons and finance and enabling extremist ideas and activities lead their subterranean life, most often, but not always, without the meddling of the Kenyan authorities. In the late 1980s the government carried out screenings of Somalis, to 'verify national status', bundling Kenyan and Somali Somalis together and detaining, harassing and deporting large numbers of people (Africa Watch, 1991: 296, 304). In January 2010 a sweep was made in Eastleigh after protests over the deportation of the radical Imam Abdullah al-Faisal.

This paper will outline a research project on the Somali community in its interaction with other urban communities in Nairobi. The intention is to capture the dynamic interplay of different communities in their pursuit of livelihoods, cultural belonging and efforts to carve out spaces for themselves that rely more on transnational links and on informal, non.-state institutions than on relations with the local

state.