



After coffee in Ivanhoe, Mustaf invites me for lunch at the Bell Street Mall at Heidelberg West, the centre of Melbourne's small but tight-knit Somali community. By chance we bump into Hussein Nur Haraco, president of the Somali Australian Council of Victoria, who had helped me arrange the meeting. He had been reluctant to talk initially; when I rang it happened to be the week of the Kenyan mall massacres and he thought I was writing a story about Somali Australians going to Somalia to fight for al-Shabab. He was surprised when I told him I wanted to talk to him about someone going back to Somalia to work in architecture.

As the three of us chat, Nur Haraco says he could not understand why Zahra was going back to Somalia to start a

business. "I am a businessman and I like to take risks but not that kind of risk," he says.

Mustaf's story is indeed a complicated one. She was eight years old in 1991 when the regime of leftist strongman Siad Barre collapsed and Somalia's troubles began. Her father was a lawyer who worked for education NGOs, her mother an English teacher. Mustaf remembers the gunfire and being smuggled away to her grandmother's house in a safer part of Mogadishu. Her mother was almost kidnapped by a clan militia. But after a 10-day escape across numerous front lines, camping under the stars with hyenas cackling and lions roaring in the distance, she found relative sanctuary at her middle-class parent's country house in an inland town.

The 30-year-old's clearest memories are of swimming in a river, exploring an orchard and the time that armed militia came to the house looking for some young men from another clan; their mother had allowed them to take shelter. She remembers her mother telling the militia there was no need to search the house. Luckily, they didn't.

The battle between family and region-based clans and warlords still haunts Mustaf. She will not divulge which clan she comes from because she says it would make it impossible to run a business if the wrong people found out.

The violence ebbed and flowed and in 2001 she met a Somali Australian visiting Mogadishu; she married him and moved to Cairo. She had a child and applied to the Australian consulate for a visa, arriving in Melbourne in 2004. She had a second child, studied English and completed an advanced diploma in design and construction at North Melbourne Institute of Technology. She became Australian. Her kids became fanatical AFL fans. She has photos of a proud moment when her son's youth club Ivanhoe Juniors played the half-time game at the MCG.

Meanwhile this was the darkest time for Somalia. Neighbouring Ethiopia invaded to seize territory and fight the Union of Islamic Courts, a group that ran much of the country. The resulting war destroyed any vestige of organised government and left the door open for al-Shabab ("the youth"). They swept across Somalia and seized much of Mogadishu, where Mustaf's parents were still living.

"There were times when I gave up hope of going back and things [getting] better," says Mustaf. She urged her parents to leave but they refused because they wanted to stay with her grandparents. Later she heard the harrowing details of how they managed to survive. Her brother, for instance, had been injured in an al-Shabab bomb in 2011 that blew apart the education ministry and killed 100 people.

Then last year, from the depths of despair, things started getting better. A Ugandan-led peacekeeping force sponsored by the African Union helped the central government turn the tide. Al-Shabab had lost credibility because of its violent attacks and its refusal to allow aid workers onto its territory to help victims of a famine. After two decades of trying not to get involved, the US and Europe finally decided they could not allow Somalia to fester as a breeding ground for piracy and al-Qaeda.

The number of Somalis applying for refugee status in Australia peaked at 7525 in 2010-11 but has since fallen dramatically. Elections were held in September last year for a government under a new Somali constitution; a moderate diplomat won, edging out an old clan leader. It was a message that was heard among the Somali community here.

As an outspoken, educated woman who had done work translating and counselling, Mustaf was asked to give a speech at a community dinner shortly after the election to celebrate the new government. She was happy to speak because she knew some of the new ministers who had worked with her father. "I said to myself 'they are going to take the country in the right direction'."

At this stage she had not seen her Somali relatives for 11 years. Her marriage had broken up and she decided that it was

