

The Recognition Deadlock: Somaliland's Diplomatic and Political Stalemate

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Abstract

The prioritization of war over peace, along with the focus on efforts merely to stop war and the recognition of the actor adopting this approach as a state, only delayed the emergence of large-scale organized violence until the two World Wars. Sidelineing peacefulness and discussing war as a realpolitik necessity, attempting to prevent it “when needed,” and referring to “peace” in terms of the balance of power, appeared to have only changed the form of violence. In this article, the concept and scope of peace are questioned, and attempts are made to interpret them at a philosophical level. This study, which can be considered an effort to place peace at the center in a distinctive way, seeks to shed a light on the theoretical and historical development of the peace struggle. The study outlines the foundational elements of intellectual accumulation from the past to the present and offers critical evaluations based on prominent thinkers in this context.

Keywords: Somaliland, International Recognition, Diplomatic Deadlock, Great Powers, Somali Republic

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Tanınma Çıkmazı: Somaliland'ın Diplomatik ve Siyasi Açmazı

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Özet

Bu makale, Somali Cumhuriyeti'nin kuzeybatısında yer alan, kendi kendini ilan etmiş bir devlet olan Somaliland'ın uluslararası tanınma arayışını incelemektedir. Çalışma özellikle Somali Cumhuriyeti'nin toprak bütünlüğüne karşı olan ülkelerden tanınma talebine odaklanmaktadır. Makale, Somaliland'ın tanınma arayışının hâlihazırda diplomatik ve siyasi bir çıkmaz içinde olduğunu ve bu durumun kısa ve uzun vadede sürdürülemez olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, Somaliland'ın uluslararası tanınma arayışına ilişkin ısrarlı fakat sonuçsuz girişimlerini, uzun dönemli gözleme dayalı olarak dış bir analitik bakış açısından değerlendirmektedir. Çalışmada, Somaliland'ın bu hedefinin üç temel engel nedeniyle sekteye uğradığı savunulmaktadır: Büyük güçlerin destek eksikliği, Somali Cumhuriyeti'nin tutumu ve Somaliland'ın sürdürülebilirliğini tehdit eden iç dinamikler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Somaliland, Uluslararası Tanınma, Diplomatik Çıkmaz, Büyük Güçler, Somali Cumhuriyeti

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مأزق الاعتراف: الجمود الدبلوماسي والسياسي في أرض الصومال

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ملخص

أعلنت أرض الصومال عن نفسها بنفسها كدولة جديدة تقع شمال غرب جمهورية الصومال. ويتناول هذا المقال مساعي هذا البلد الجديد للحصول على الاعتراف الدولي. حيث تركز الدراسة تحديدا على طلب الحصول على اعتراف من الدول المعارضة لسلامة أراضي جمهورية الصومال. ويدافع المقال على أن مساعي أرض الصومال للحصول على الاعتراف دخل في مأزق دبلوماسي وسياسي في الفترة الحالية، ما يجعل هذا الوضع غير مستدام على المدى القريب والبعيد. وإضافة إلى ذلك، يتناول هذا المقال محاولات أرض الصومال المستمرة وإن كانت غير ناجحة من أجل الحصول على اعتراف دولي، وذلك من منظور تحليلي خارجي مستندا على دراسات ورصد طويل الأمد في هذا الصدد. وتدافع الدراسة على أن مساعي أرض الصومال لتحقيق هذا الهدف قد أعاقته ثلاث عقبات رئيسية هي: نقص الدعم من القوى العظمى، وموقف جمهورية الصومال، والديناميات الداخلية التي تهدد استدامة أرض الصومال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صوماليلاند، الاعتراف الدولي، المأزق الدبلوماسي، القوى الكبرى، جمهورية الصومال

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Introduction

The late Ibrahim Ismail Sugulle, popularly known as Sooraan, was a Somali poet, singer, and comedian. In his drama series, he was known to speak using satire, a form of communication known in Somalia as *Sarbeeb*. In one of his drama episodes, Sooraan takes a goat to the Hargeis livestock market.¹ To his utter consternation, every potential buyer asks about the price of the sheep. He insists that the animal he sells is not a sheep but a goat. After many hours of misunderstanding, Sooraan takes the goat to his homestead in disbelief. Many Somalis translated this episode to mean that Somaliland is not a state but one of Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS) masquerading as an independent entity, and that is a reality that no one can legally dispute. Under the UN and in international laws, Somalia remains a single unit.

Why is this drama episode relevant in examining Somaliland's long search for international recognition? The fundamental relevance is drawn from this paper's central argument that Somaliland's recognition has come to a diplomatic and political stalemate and hence remains unsustainable on both a short-term and a long-term basis. Somaliland authorities have long sought to succeed with recognition, but all those attempts have failed in the face of the reality on the ground and geopolitical considerations. In short, the leaders are selling a goat as a sheep, not because it is untenable from a diplomatic viewpoint. Still, it is also sellable in accordance with the minds of sane Somalis living in Somaliland.²

Many works have analyzed Somaliland's de facto statehood from diverse angles, starting from why Somaliland authorities' declaration of unilateral secessionism is still not feasible in the future and the legal viability of such recognition.³ Analysts have adequately presented various cases either in favor of the Somaliland secessionism or otherwise, and rarely has a critical point of view been offered.⁴ Analysts who wrote about Somaliland are mainly

1 Christina J. Woolner, "Poetry's Political Future(s): Deliberating Democracy and Justice in Somaliland," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 33, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v33i2.1222>.

2 Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Southern Somalia's 'Glorious Days Are Our Nightmare': The Performance of Political Memory and Contestations of Commemoration in Northern Somalia (Somaliland)," in *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa: Essays in Honour of Jan-Georg Deutsch*, ed. Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, Moritz A. Mihatsch, and Michelle M. Sikes (De Gruyter, 2022).

3 Asteris Huliaras, "The Viability of Somaliland: Internal Constraints and Regional Geopolitics," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, no. 2 (2002). Rebecca Richards, *Understanding Statebuilding: Traditional Governance and the Modern State in Somaliland* (Routledge, 2016).

4 Oliver McPherson-Smith, "Better Off Alone: Somaliland, Institutional Legacy, and Prosperity," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 12, no. 2 (2021): 203-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2021.1915649>. Brad Poore, "Somaliland: Shackled to a Failed State," *Stanford Journal*

lobbyists who promoted the case of Somaliland.⁵ Recently, new analysts have emerged who can see beyond their noise to see the real Somaliland based on contradiction of itself, such as unilateral secessionism unacceptable to many people, except those elites who are concentrated in the main cities and towns like Hargeysa.⁶

This paper differs from the above analysis. By unpacking the three areas of relevance in the possibility of recognition, the paper offers viable and realistic alternatives to the administration and the people of Somaliland, striving for a better future. The recommendations are underpinned by the fact that the context and circumstances in which the Somali State came to unite have changed since January 1991, when the military regime of General Mohamed Siad Barre was ousted by rebel groups trying to seize power.⁷ The article investigates Somaliland's persistent yet elusive pursuit of international state recognition from the perspective of an observer who has been closely monitoring the context for a long time. The paper contends that Somaliland's quest for recognition remains stalled due to three primary obstacles: the absence of great power patronage, the stance of its parent state, and internal dynamics that undermine Somaliland's sustainability.

The article is structured as follows to elucidate this argument. First, it briefly traces Somaliland's history of de facto statehood. Second, it analyses the parent state's position, focusing on Somalia's persistent rejection of Somaliland's sovereignty. Third, it examines the role of great power patronage in state recognition, highlighting Somaliland's lack of influential allies. Fourth, it explores Somaliland's internal challenges, including political and economic vulnerabilities that weaken its case for recognition. By unpacking these interconnected factors, the paper offers a comprehensive understanding of Somaliland's diplomatic and political stalemate and its implications for the broader discourse on statehood and recognition.

of *International Law* 45 (2009): 117. Alison K. Eggers, "When Is a State a State? The Case for Recognition of Somaliland," *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review* 30 (2007): 211. Timothy A. Ridout, "Building Peace and the State in Somaliland: The Factors of Success," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no. 2 (2012).

5 Iqbal Jhazbhay, "Somaliland: Africa's Best Kept Secret, a Challenge to the International Community?" *African Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (2003): 77-82. Seth Kaplan, "The Remarkable Story of Somaliland," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 143-57.

6 Claire Elder, "Somaliland's Authoritarian Turn: Oligarchic-Corporate Power and the Political Economy of De Facto States," *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021). Markus Virgil Hoehne, "Limits of Hybrid Political Orders: The Case of Somaliland," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013).

7 Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia: The Rise and Fall of the Siad Barre Regime, 1969-1991* (University Press of America, 2016), 17.

The Unification of Somalia and Somaliland

Somaliland was among the five Somali territories divided by European colonialists, the other four being the Italian Somaliland, the French Somaliland, the Somalis in Kenya, and the Somalis in Ethiopia. In 1960, two of those territories, the former British Somaliland and the former Italian Somaliland, came to unite and form one state.⁸ The union formed the Somali Republic, with a joint government and a constitution ratified by a popular referendum in 1961. This unification was seen as a significant step towards Somali unification and self-determination, with a provisional government established and a constitution adopted via referendum in 1961. While the initial years of the Somali Republic offered hope for unity, underlying tensions related to power-sharing and regional representation began to fester, especially in the north.⁹

Despite the initial euphoria for independence from colonial rule, the union faced challenges. From 1960 to 1969, Somalia and Somaliland, united as the Somali Republic, experienced a period marked by optimism and growing political tensions and conflicts. While the initial union in 1960 was much celebrated in both the northern and southern regions, the subsequent decade saw increasing dissatisfaction, particularly in the north (former British Somaliland), with the perceived dominance of the south in political power and resource allocation.¹⁰ Northerners, particularly the Isaaq clan, felt marginalized in the new government, with key positions dominated by southerners.¹¹ This led to resentment and a sense of unequal power-sharing.

The initial period also saw a coup in 1969 that established a military dictatorship under Siad Barre.¹² Barre initially embarked on plans to foster inter-communal relations between the north and south and create a mutual atmosphere between the two, increasingly satisfying people of the north with positions of power and approval, liberalizing the economy with the Arab world. The period was also marked by political instability, including accusations of corruption and electoral malpractice. The military government put a lot of effort into balancing the power held by neighboring countries to unite all the Somalis into one state. There were concerns about the government's in-

8 Mustafa Mohamed Ali, "Colonial Legacy and the Complex Landscape of Identity Politics Among Ethnic Somalis," *Social Sciences Research Journal* 12, no. 12 (2023).

9 Suhaib Mahmoud, "Understanding the Secession of Somaliland: History of the Formation and Failure of the Somali State (1960-1991)," *Al-Muntaqa: New Perspective on Arab Studies* 6, no. 1 (2023).

10 Gérard Prunier, *The Country That Does Not Exist: A History of Somaliland* (Hurst, 2021), 17.

11 Ingiriis, "Southern Somalia's 'Glorious.'"

12 Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia*.

creasingly cordial relations with Kenya and Ethiopia, perceived as hindering Somali unification.¹³

The spirit of the Somaliland people was not bad until the aftermath of the 1977 war between Somalia and Ethiopia. In 1977, the Somali government under the leadership of General Siad Barre attacked Ethiopia ostensibly to annex the Somali-occupied region in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Powerful countries like Russia ganged up against Somalia, subsequently leading to the withdrawal of the Somali forces from Ethiopia's hinterland back to Somalia.¹⁵ The intervention of external actors in the conflict of the Horn of Africa assisted Ethiopia in weakening the government in Somalia and creating several rebel groups. Ethiopia, in particular, benefited from external support to counter the liberation struggles of the Eritrean and other Horn of African peoples who were trying to extricate themselves from the shackles of internal colonialism.

Other Somali scholars and the often-cited academics have captured the period aptly. Mohamed Haji Ingiriis posits that "a deliberate state-driven campaign known as *naasnuujin* (breastfeeding) was pursued, which led to the combination of what the public knew as the three Ms: the militarization, the monetization, and the Mareehaanization."¹⁶ Bare faced more resistance and sought refuge in some selected clans. By this time, the regime that had buried clannishness had become dependent on the support of three Darod clans with which Siad Barre had kinship ties—the Marehan, the Ogaden, and the Dulbahante, otherwise known as the MOD. In return, Barre divided the country's wealth among those clans. Said Samatar reported that "the lion's share to the Marehan, the leopard's to the Ogaden, and the hyena's share to the Dhulbahante."¹⁷

To counter Siad Barre's political clanization, the resistance to his abuses also adopted a clan-based structure. For example, the Somali National Movement (SNM) "was predominantly an Ishaq insurgent organization that launched raids in the north from bases in Ethiopia."¹⁸ However, in 1988, the beleaguered regimes in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu agreed to cease supporting each other's enemies, which forced the SNM to attack Hargeisa and Burao, Somaliland's two largest cities, so that they could get bases there. The regime's response

13 Ibrahim Farah, *Somali Foreign Policy, 1960-1990: An Analysis of Thirty Years of Diplomatic History* (Adonis & Abbey, 2020).

14 Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia*.

15 Farah, *Somali Foreign Policy*.

16 Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "We Swallowed the State as the State Swallowed Us," *African Security* 9, no. 3 (2016).

17 Said S. Samatar, "Somalia into the 1980s: Problems and Possibilities of Social Transformation," paper presented at the *Second International Congress of Somali Studies* (1983), 6.

18 Prunier, *The Country That Does Not Exist*, 17.

was disastrous; It hired white mercenary pilots to bomb and level Hargeisa to the ground, and its army carried out mass reprisals against Ishaaq civilians. The dice were cast.¹⁹ This conflict's nature was unprecedented compared to other regions where anti-insurgency efforts were conducted.

Barre continued to deal with the deteriorating northern situation with unaccounted violence. He appointed one harsher military officer after another, and General Mohamed Said Hersi "Morgan" used whatever weapons were at their disposal to counter the SNM fighters.²⁰ Military officers sought tactics of fighting the rebels with anti-insurgency military tactics of bombarding all civilian areas in Hargeysa, which the SNM captured as a shield from the military shelling. Seeing the weakening of his regime, Barre addressed the growing discontent in the country with an iron fist and ordered his military officers to accelerate their anti-insurgency activities against the SNM.²¹ While no region in Somalia was spared, Somaliland, Puntland, Galguduud, and Lower Juba regions bore the brunt of his dictatorship.

However, the military regime committed the most atrocities and massacres against the northern insurgency to counter the attacks from the SNM, which was carrying out its attacks from Ethiopia with the support of the Mengistu regime. Ingiriis, with discussions with Isaaq diaspora and in Somaliland, notes that 'as many as 100,000 people were thought to have been killed while a half million fled their homes as a result of the genocidal campaign'.²² Anger and despair were at an all-time high among people in the northern part of the country. Nostalgia and regret became the order of the day. Being part of a genocidal clan-led military regime was no longer an option for the people in the north, while the people in the south were afraid of going through the same scenario.²³ This fear went to the extreme when any door for negotiation was closed.

A state collapse was imminent when internal dissent was assisted by external pressures from the donor countries, who stopped financial aid to the military regime. The heavily armed uprising and insurgency backed by a determined public discontent led to the frustration of the military regime, which oversaw the collapse of the state in Somalia, as was known since the post-colonial peri-

19 John Markakis, "The Crisis of the State in the Horn of Africa," in *The Nation State: A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*, ed. John Markakis, Günther Schlee, and John Young (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.34663/9783945561577-04>.

20 Markus Virgil Hoehne, "Being a de facto State is not Enough: Somaliland's Innovative Regime," in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, ed. Kidane Mengisteab and Redie Bereketeab (Routledge, 2022).

21 Ingiriis, "We Swallowed the State."

22 Markakis, "The Crisis of the State."

23 Ingiriis, "We Swallowed the State."

od.²⁴ One result to the Somalia state was the near collapse and disintegration of the Somali National Army and the devastation of other state institutions, something that Somalia has not yet recovered to this day. The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 resulted in diverse ramifications for the state, whose army was once called the Lion of Africa. Catherine Besteman convincingly avers that phenomenon very well when she wrote that the Somali state's collapse was a result of 'freewheeling violence'.²⁵

The state's collapse led to the fragmentation of Somalia as a unified entity. When the state collapsed, it was open for non-state actors fighting to seize the state or use the state as an instrument to grab power and resources.²⁶ Numerous militias took up arms to seize regions, airports, and seaports and began to fight among themselves. People in the north were not spared from this wrath.²⁷ Both north and south went through years of upheaval and armed conflict in the early 1990s up to the mid-1990s due to the complete state collapse. However, the traditional leaders in the north became more assertive in peace-building mechanisms than their counterparts in the south, who were overwhelmed by warlords who did not respect conventional customs of the society.²⁸

The Road To De Facto Statehood

Somaliland's history of de facto statehood is rooted in its declaration of independence from Somalia in 1991, following years of conflict and repression under the Barre regime. Somaliland activists contend three reasons for their secessionism: first, they highlight how the post-colonial government neglected to balance the political power and economic resources between the north and the south; second, they point out how the Siad Barre dictatorship waged a war against the north; and finally the third, they mention how the unilateral announcement of a government by Manifesto group clearly revealed to them that they were no place for them in the future government in Mogadishu, which meant a new recreation of a kind of post-colonial government. Another contention is that they needed to escape the instability and violence that

24 Mala Mustapha and Haruna Yerima, "Somalia: State Collapse and the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Small Arms and Conflicts in Africa*, ed. Usman A. Tar and Charles P. Onwurah (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

25 Catherine Besteman, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: The Dissolution of the Somali Nation-State," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 3 (1996).

26 Mustapha and Yerima, "Somalia: State Collapse."

27 Patrick Gilkes, *Two Wasted Years: The Republic of Somaliland* (Save the Children Fund, 1993).

28 Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "State Violence and Clan Violence in Somalia," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 8, no. 1 (2018).

engulfed much of southern Somalia in the 1990s, something that similarly engulfed the north as well.²⁹

The Bur'o conference, known as the "Grand Conference of the Northern Clans," in which Somaliland was declared in 1991, brought together clan representatives and the SNM leaders to address the aftermath of the Somali civil war and the collapse of the Somali state. The conference did not salvage Somaliland from plunging into armed conflict. However, it resulted in the decision to revoke the voluntary union with the rest of Somalia and to declare Somaliland, within the boundaries of the former British Somaliland protectorate.³⁰ Those with borders with Somaliland do not recognize such an arrangement, including Djibouti, the Somali region in Somaliland, and Puntland. Many delegations from Somaliland were dispatched to Djibouti and other neighboring countries, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as faraway countries, to persuade them to recognize Somaliland.

However, the Bur'o conference was a one-sided project owned by one clan (Isaaq) at the expense of other clans. The agenda and outcome of the conference were dictated by the Isaaq politicians who were under the cover of the SNM. Unlike other northern communities, there was an intense desire among the Isaaq clan to separate from the rest of Somalia. This desire was fueled by the Isaaq clan elites who craved for a state of their own to control and lead other clans living with them in the northern regions.³¹ The partial political objective of the Isaaq clan elites was unacceptable to other clans, who refused to recognize Somaliland as a state. The Burco conference and Somaliland's declaration of independence are viewed differently by various clans, with some seeing it as a legitimate path to self-determination and others viewing it as a continuation of past injustices or a betrayal of Somali unity.

While the Bur'o conference of 1991 is a foundational event for Somaliland's self-declared independence, some clans outside the dominant Isaaq clans do not fully recognize its legitimacy or the subsequent declaration of independence. This is due to historical grievances, political marginalization, and differing visions for the region's future.³² Not all clans were equally represented or participated in the Bur'o conference. This lack of inclusivity is a point of contention for some, who feel their voices were not heard in the

29 Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State: The Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Conversations in Southern Somalia and Somaliland," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021).

30 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State."

31 Ingiriis, "Southern Somalia's 'Glorious.'"

32 Hoehne, "Being a de facto State."

decision-making process. While the conference established reconciliation as a shared goal, fighting continued between different militias, opposing or supporting the previous SNM front, which was now implicated in a civil war.³³

Some clans, particularly those from the Darod clan-family in Sool and Sanaag regions, claim that the Isaaq dominated the Bur'oo conference and the subsequent Somaliland state and did not adequately address their concerns or clan interests. The lack of consensus among clans has led to ongoing tensions and armed conflict in some areas, particularly in the Sool and Sanaag regions.³⁴ These conflicts often involve clashes between Somaliland forces and militias representing local clans who oppose Somaliland's authority. They perceive a history of political and economic marginalization within Somaliland. In addition, those non-Isaaq clans supported the military regime, unlike the Isaaq clans, who opposed the military regime.³⁵

The Role of the Parent State's Position

Somalia is the parent state, while Somaliland is a self-declared independent republic formerly part of Somalia. As noted, Somaliland only declared its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Somali government, but has not gained international recognition.³⁶ Officially, the Federal Republic of Somalia is recognized internationally as a sovereign state with a federal government. Successive leaders of Somalia, as the parent state of Somaliland, do not accept whatsoever to entertain any pretensions of secessionism.³⁷ For them, Somalia's unity and territorial integrity are sacrosanct, and no one can alter whatever happens. The persistent rejection suggests a deep commitment to preserving state sovereignty. Legal scholars always point out that Somaliland is subject to the rule of Somalia, since the parent state does not recognize it.³⁸ So Somalia remains its de jure parent state.

In a legal or governmental context, a parent state typically refers to the control or original state within a larger political entity, like a federation, that has authority over constituent states or territories. It is the entity that establishes laws, policies, and regulations for the entire system, while also granting some

33 Jonathan Siborutorop, "The State, Development, Democracy, and Peace in Unrecognised Somaliland," *NUANSA: Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Sosial dan Keagamaan Islam* 21, no. 2 (2024).

34 Hoehne, "Being a de facto State."

35 Ingiriis, "Southern Somalia's 'Glorious Days.'"

36 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State." Hoehne, "Being a de facto State."

37 Siborutorop, "The State, Development, Democracy."

38 Dimitrios Lalos, "Between Statehood and Somalia: Reflections of Somaliland Statehood," *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 10, no. 4 (2011).

degree of autonomy to its subdivisions.³⁹ In a federal system, the parent state (sometimes called a compound state) is the overarching entity encompassing smaller, constituent states. The parent state typically holds the primary sovereignty within the system, meaning it represents the entire entity in international affairs and has ultimate authority. Please think of the relationship between Somalia as a parent state and its secessionist entity of Somaliland.⁴⁰ This means Somaliland can have its own governments and laws, but it should still operate within the legal framework established by the parent state.

As the “parent state,” Somalia is the internationally recognized sovereign power that claims authority over Somaliland. However, Somalia’s capacity to exert effective control over Somaliland is limited due to Somaliland’s self-governance and the ongoing political instability in Somalia. This situation highlights the complexities of statehood, recognition, and secession in the context of state failure and conflict.⁴¹ Somalia, on the other hand, continues to grapple with issues of leadership failure, state fragility, political instability, insecurity, and limited central government authority and control over its territories.⁴² The claim of Somaliland partly sustains the weak state in Somalia as a secessionist entity because Somaliland is not willing to work with the federal government of Somalia.⁴³

This situation creates a complex dynamic where Somaliland operates as a de facto independent state with its own government and institutions. At the same time, Somalia continues to assert its claim over the region. The lack of recognition does not hinder Somaliland’s attempts to act as a more secure place than its parent state of Somalia.⁴⁴ This relative stability did not attract investment from Somali investors who fear for their safety inside Somaliland, because security authorities regularly arrest and detain anyone who criticizes Somaliland secessionism. A special targeting from the security agencies has been made for “Somalilanders” who either reject the secessionist project or support the unity of Somalia.⁴⁵ It is pretty surprising that the international community, as well as those who romanticize the state of Somaliland, do not condemn such crimes against individual liberty.

39 Ingiriis, “Being and Becoming a State.”

40 Sarah McGibbon, “Seceding from Failed States: Reconsidering the Case of Somaliland,” in *Research Handbook on Secession*, ed. Peter Radan and Aleksandar Pavković (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

41 McGibbon, “Seceding from Failed States.”

42 Colin D. Robinson and Jahara Matisek, “Military Advising and Assistance in Somalia: Fragmented Interveners, Fragmented Somali Military Forces,” *Defence Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021).

43 Ingiriis, “Being and Becoming a State.”

44 Ingiriis, “Being and Becoming a State.”

45 “Three Journalists Held Incommunicado and Tortured in Somaliland,” *Reporters Without Borders*, January 11 2024, <https://www.rsf.org/en/three-journalists-held-incommunicado-and-tortured-somaliland>.

In a way, Somaliland, since 1991, has been led by radicals who openly express hatred for things Somali. The previous Somaliland authorities, before the current administration of President Abdirahman Irro of Wadani Party, constantly and regularly compared their secessionist state to the struggling parent state of Somalia, which the African Union backed up to shield itself from the attacks by militant extremists like Al-Shabaab.⁴⁶ Although Somaliland, in contrast with Somalia, has initially achieved a significant degree of stability and has focused on developing its own governance structures and institutions, it later went into war and violence between people living in Somaliland.⁴⁷ Most of the conflict happened through clan on clan, but the political one on the border between Puntland has become permanent.

The Great Power Patronage of Geopolitical Maneuvers

Since 1991, Somaliland has proclaimed unilateral secessionism, and excellent power patronage has played a complex and evolving role in Somaliland's quest for international recognition. While Somaliland maintained autonomous authority and insisted on its existence without significant external patronage, its pursuit of recognition has increasingly intertwined with the strategic interests of larger nations, particularly in the context of regional dynamics and great-power competition.⁴⁸ Somaliland, unlike many other de facto states, did not initially rely on a single external patron for its survival or recognition. No foreign government recognizes Somaliland as an independent state, although many deal with it as a separate state from Somalia in practice without ignoring the parental role of Somalia.⁴⁹

As regional dynamics shift and great-power competition intensifies, Somaliland's strategic location and potential become more relevant to larger nations. Somaliland activists always suggest that Somaliland might benefit from developing strategic alliances with powerful nations, potentially leading to a patron-client relationship.⁵⁰ This could involve providing military basing rights or other strategic advantages for diplomatic support or formal recognition. Great powers may have competing interests in the region, and their support for Somaliland could be conditional or limited. Developing a

46 European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Somalia: Defection, Desertion and Disengagement from Al-Shabaab* (EUAA, February 2023), https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-02/2023_02_COI_Report_Somalia_Defection_Desertion_Disengagement_Al_Shabaab_EN_0.pdf.

47 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State."

48 Sarah G. Phillips, "When Less was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May 2016).

49 Hoehne, "Being a de facto State."

50 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State,"

strong patron-client relationship is not guaranteed, and Somaliland faces challenges in aligning its interests with those of larger powers.⁵¹

The United States has recently expressed a renewed interest in using Berbera airport in case a conflict may erupt, affecting the whole region. The U.S. has directly engaged with Somaliland officials regarding the potential establishment of a U.S. military base in Berbera, which could increase U.S. recognition.⁵² This potential arrangement highlights the interplay between Somaliland's strategic value and broader global regional interests. The desire of the U.S. relates to a fear of emerging regional powers like Iran. Still, there is ongoing speculation that Israel is also interested in looking for a base.⁵³ The extent and nature of the U.S. recognition and the potential implications for regional stability remain to be seen.

Other regional powers negatively impact geopolitical dynamics – the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and, to some extent, the United Kingdom. The UAE, for instance, has been identified as a potential patron, but the extent of its commitment and the nature of its relationship with Somaliland remain uncertain. The UAE negatively affects Somaliland, primarily through economic and security partnerships.⁵⁴ The UAE has provided security assistance, including training for Somaliland's maritime police and counter-piracy forces. The UAE's DP World has a 30-year concession to manage and develop the port of Berbera, investing nearly half a billion dollars.⁵⁵ This includes the development of a free zone and the Berbera corridor, a trade route connecting Somaliland with Ethiopia.

While Somaliland welcomes the UAE's investments, they have caused tensions with Somalia's central government in Mogadishu, which views the UAE's engagement with the semi-autonomous regions as challenging its sovereign-

51 Rafael Biermann, "Conceptualising Patron-Client Relations in Secessionist Conflict: A Research Agenda," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 13, no. 1 (2024).

52 EUAA, *Somalia: Defection, Desertion*

53 Abdifatah Hassan Mohamed, "Israel and Somaliland: Assessing Possible Cooperation in the Horn of Africa," *The Times of Israel*, February 5, 2025, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israel-and-somaliland-assessing-possible-cooperation-in-the-horn-of-africa/>. Horn Observer Contributor, "Analysis: Israel's Strategic Interest in Establishing a Base in Somaliland," *Horn Observer*, October 20, 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/3014/Analysis-Israels-Strategic-Interest-in-Establishing-a-Base-in-Somaliland>

54 Asad Cabdullahi Mataan, "UAE Refers Somaliland as Republic, Sparking Rift with Somalia," *Caasimada Online*, February 14 2025, <https://www.caasimada.net/uae-refers-somaliland-as-republic-sparking-rift-with-somalia/>

55 "Dubai's DP World Agrees to Manage Port in Somaliland for 30 Years," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dubais-dp-world-agrees-to-manage-port-in-somaliland-for-30-years-1464549937>.

ty.⁵⁶ The UAE's engagement in Somaliland aligns with its broader strategy to increase its influence and presence in the Horn of Africa, particularly in strategic maritime corridors.⁵⁷ While not formal recognition, the UAE has a representative office in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital, and Somaliland has a representative office in the UAE. The UAE also has a significant economic interest in Somaliland, managing the Port of Berbera.

Even though Somaliland's path to recognition has not solely depended on great power patronage, the evolving regional dynamics and the interests of larger nations are increasingly shaping its prospects. The potential for patron-client relationships exists, but the specific nature of these relationships and their impact on Somaliland's sovereignty remain uncertain. Somaliland's experience highlights the complexities of secessionism in the post-Cold War era, demonstrating that formal international recognition from outside actors is not the sole determinant of a state's viability or effectiveness. External actors like the U.S. and UAE each have their own interests, which often do not align with the intervening country's interests.⁵⁸

One of the key issues why the great powers failed to advance Somaliland recognition is that African Union will oppose any secessionist group who are seeking recognition will undermine African Union charter of 1963 therefor Africa has 33 active secessionist movements if Somaliland is being recognized that will open another Pandora Box in addition to that the secession from the main Sudan has caused a lot of civil war and the people of South Sudanese failed to achieve the aspirations of their independence. Similarly, if today the great powers recognized Somaliland as an independent state, I do not doubt it will go into the South Sudanese way, and civil war is imminent; therefore, the great power has no appetite for pushing the recognition of Somaliland.

The Internal Challenges Hindering the Stability

Despite not achieving formal international recognition, Somaliland has established functioning state institutions, held democratic elections, and maintained relative stability, making it a prominent example of a *de facto* state. However, it is essential to highlight that presidential and local council elections have been delayed, leading to political instability and clashes

56 "UAE to Train Somaliland Forces Under Military Base Deal," Africa News, August 13, 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2018/03/16/uae-to-train-somaliland-forces-under-military-base-deal/>

57 "Mapping Gulf State Actors' Expanding Engagements in East Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 8, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/gulf-state-actors-east-africa/>.

58 "UAE to Train Somaliland."

between government forces and protesters.⁵⁹ For the last twenty years, the Somaliland elections ended mainly peacefully. Still, they also had many incidents of violence and war to the point of the emergence of armed rebellion in the form of a clan uprising. It was difficult to ignore the roots of what caused such extreme danger of potential state collapse.⁶⁰

Somaliland's state institutions and regulatory frameworks have been historically weak, leading to governance and service delivery challenges. High youth unemployment rates, estimated at 75%, contribute to social problems and brain drain as skilled individuals seek opportunities elsewhere.⁶¹ Somaliland is also highly vulnerable to the growing climate change, with prolonged frequent droughts and other man-made disasters impacting food security and livelihoods.⁶² Another critical area of distress is the human rights concerns, which include restrictions on freedom of expression and potential abuses against children. Most recently, Somaliland authorities have also failed to resolve the issue of massive youth immigration to Europe. Based on the above factors, Somaliland is not even viable as an independent state.

Somaliland faces a complex web of internal challenges, including political instability, economic hardship, and social issues like clan-based tensions and gender-based violence. Somaliland continues to face challenges, including border disputes and internal conflicts among the center and the peripheries on one side and clan after another.⁶³ Some neighboring regions and countries, like Puntland, also have their own political agendas and may exploit these clan divisions to further their interests, complicating the situation. This makes any future co-existence within a recognized state too difficult to be feasible, given how wide their experiences and interests vary. Those foreigners who are not familiar with the clan politics try to overlook or minimize this point.⁶⁴ Sub-clan rivalries persist, with political parties often aligning with specific clans, potentially exacerbating political divisions.

The Las Anod conflict, in particular, has significantly impacted Somaliland's

59 "Somaliland Lawmakers Vote to Extend President's Term by Two Years," VOA News, October 1, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somaliland-lawmakers-vote-to-extend-president-s-term-by-two-years/6771878.html>

60 Ingiriis, "We Swallowed the State."

61 "Global Entrepreneurship Week in Somaliland." Shaqodoon Organization, December 30, 2024.

62 Jethro Norman, "Somaliland at the Centre of Rising Tensions in the Horn of Africa," *Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/somaliland-the-centre-of-rising-tensions-in-the-horn-of-africa>.

63 "International Concern as Conflict Grows in Breakaway Somaliland," Al Jazeera, March 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/1/international-concern-over-conflict-in-breakaway-somaliland>.

64 Poore, "Somaliland: Shackled to a Failed." Eggers, "When is a State a State." Ridout, "Building Peace and the State."

stability and reputation, leading to territorial loss, displacement, and damage to infrastructure. The Las Anod conflict involves clashes between Somaliland forces and local clan militias, particularly those associated with the local clan, who seek to align with Somalia rather than Somaliland. The local clan leaders have declared a separate administration, SSC-Khatumo, rejecting Somaliland's authority and seeking to rejoin Somalia. The conflict has resulted in significant casualties, displacement, and damage to infrastructure, including hospitals and homes, further straining Somaliland's stability.⁶⁵ This conflict is one of the permanent political problems left by Muuse Biihi Abdi, the former extremist president of Somaliland, to Abdirahman Irro, the current moderate president of Somaliland. Even the Awdal state, part of Somaliland, is forming its own Pro-Union State. Sooner or later, they will declare they are no longer part of the secessionist agenda. They seek recognition from the Federal Government of Somalia. President Hassan Sheikh and his administration are willing to consider and recognize the Awdal State as a part of the Somali Federal Members. If that happened, then it would literally kill the dreams of Somaliland to be an independent State.

Somaliland now faces a political stalemate, persistently seeking recognition from outside while ignoring any recognition from the inside. This contradiction highlights the complexities of statehood and recognition, where legal criteria may be met but political and strategic considerations often take precedence.⁶⁶ The Somaliland case demonstrates secessionist entities' challenges in gaining international acceptance, particularly when it involves a larger, albeit fragile, state like Somalia.⁶⁷ In a nutshell, Somaliland's case underscores the ongoing debate between the declaratory theory (statehood based on fulfilling criteria) and the constitutive theory (statehood based on recognition by other states).

65 "Conflict in Disputed Las Anod Dims Somaliland's Diplomatic Dreams," Al Jazeera, May 10, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/1/international-concern-over-conflict-in-breakaway-somaliland>. Oxford Analytica, "Somaliland's Las Anod Crisis Defies Easy Resolution," *Emerald Expert Briefings* (2023).

66 Ingiriis, "Southern Somalia's 'Glorious.'"

67 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State".

A glimpse of the factors is as follows:

Table 1: Factors Determining the Viability of Somaliland's De Facto State for International Recognition

Sphere	Factor	Description	Why It Matters
Internal	Effective Control of Territory	Actual exercise of authority and monopoly over the use of force within a defined area.	Demonstrates real territorial control and stability.
Internal	Permanent Population	A stable and identifiable population residing within the claimed territory.	Required for statehood under the Montevideo Convention.
Internal	Functional Government	Ability to administer, uphold law and order, and represent the entity domestically.	Shows capacity for self-governance.
Internal	Capacity to Engage in International Relations	Ability to conduct diplomacy, sign agreements, and engage with international actors.	Reflects readiness to operate as a sovereign state.
Internal	Popular Legitimacy	Support for independence among the local population, and civil society.	Internal unity and democratic processes increase legitimacy.
Internal	Economic Viability	Ability to fund services, trade, and sustain an economy.	Indicates long-term viability of the state.
Internal	Peace and Stability	Absence of civil war or ongoing violent conflict.	Reduces international interest to engage.
Internal	Legal and Historical Justification	Claims based on borders, self-determination, or historical sovereignty.	Provides a normative basis for recognition.
External	Support from Major Powers	Backing from influential states (e.g., the U.S., Russia, UK, Turkey).	Greatly influences recognition.
External	Existence of a Patron State	Presence of a state that provides military, financial, or diplomatic support.	Enhances survival and lobbying power.
External	Regional and International Norms	Alignment with international law, human rights, and regional policies.	Compliance can enhance legitimacy in global forums.
External	Parent State's Position	Whether the parent state recognizes sovereignty, opposes or accepts secession.	Strong opposition reduces the likelihood of recognition.

Conclusion

The promise of the union quickly faded as Somalilanders found themselves sidelined from key political posts in the union's new capital, Mogadishu, by their more numerous cousins who were, after all, on their home turf.⁶⁸ Just one year after its promulgation, Somalilanders voted against the Union Constitution and, in December 1961, military units revolted in Hargeisa in a failed bid to restore Somaliland's independence. The union's initial attempts at democracy, already seeing the first signs of rot by 1961, were binned in 1969 when the army's commander, Mohamed Siad Barre, led a successful coup d'état.⁶⁹ When Somalia became a "top-down developmental dictatorship" where Siad elevated his own Darod clan and consolidated his power, the northern tribes decided to fight back.⁷⁰

Due to this early dissatisfaction, in December 1961, Sandhurst-trained lieutenants of the former British Somaliland, resenting their Italian-trained commanding officers imposed by Mogadishu, attempted the first military coup in sub-Saharan Africa. This abortive coup clearly had secessionist objectives.⁷¹ Be that as it may, 'the violence was so overwhelming that it not only consolidated grassroots support for the northwestern (and predominantly Isaaq) insurgency, the SNM, but it also established the pervasive sense that the security of Isaaq clan members could be guaranteed only by a permanent separation from Somalia.'⁷²

To achieve this secessionist goal, a conference was held in Bur'ō in May 1991, during which guerrilla commanders, traditional authorities, and clan representatives participated. The SNM leadership wanted to propose some irredeemable alternatives to remain in the larger Somalia. They believed that the unitary system of Somalia was not favorable and wanted more autonomy for their region. They were overpowered by the larger sections of society whose memories were fresh from the atrocities. The Somaliland declaration of a De facto state in 1991 and its joining of the Union in 1960 is a study in paradox. In 1960, the region's political elite did not want a casual, hasty union with the south, but were compelled to do so by the larger society, which believed vehemently in *Somaliweyn* (larger Somalia).⁷³

68 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State".

69 Hoehne, "Being a de facto State."

70 Brendon J. Cannon, "Contextualizing Turkey's Actions in Somalia: Insights from Somaliland," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 21, no. 13 (2021). Rainer Tetzlaff, *Africa: An Introduction to History, Politics and Society* (Springer, 2022).

71 Mahmoud, "Understanding the Secession of Somaliland."

72 Ingiriis, "We Swallowed the State."

73 Ingiriis, "Being and Becoming a State."

But it must be stressed that Somalilanders felt aggrieved and cheated by their southern brethren immediately after the merger of 1960. In 1991, the reverse was true. On both occasions, the larger majority took the day. Therefore, Somaliland has remained a *de facto* state since 1991.⁷⁴ A caveat would suffice. The geography and the population of Somaliland in 1991 and today differ. The Sool region, mainly occupied by the Dhulbahante clan, has decided to be part of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Negotiations with the Warsengeli, who occupy parts of Sanaag, are underway to merge the areas occupied by the two clans to form the sixth Federal Member State.⁷⁵ The merger has already received tacit approval from the Somali government in Mogadishu.

In conclusion, this paper has critically examined Somaliland's decades-long pursuit of international recognition and unequivocally finds it an unattainable aspiration, a dream that will never come true. Drawing on the satirical episode by the late Ibrahim Ismail Sugulle (Sooraan), the analysis illustrates that Somaliland's self-proclaimed statehood is akin to selling a goat as a sheep: a claim that fundamentally contradicts legal, historical, and geopolitical realities. Despite ongoing internal narratives and substantial efforts to build a *de facto* state, Somaliland retains its legal and political status as part of Somalia. This position is firmly supported by international law and is acknowledged by the global community.

The study highlights three decisive obstacles that render Somaliland's quest futile: the absence of great power support, the unyielding opposition of the parent state, and deep-seated internal challenges that undermine its sustainability and legitimacy. Without overcoming these core impediments, it is a virtually impossible task. Somaliland's bid for recognition will continue to stagnate.

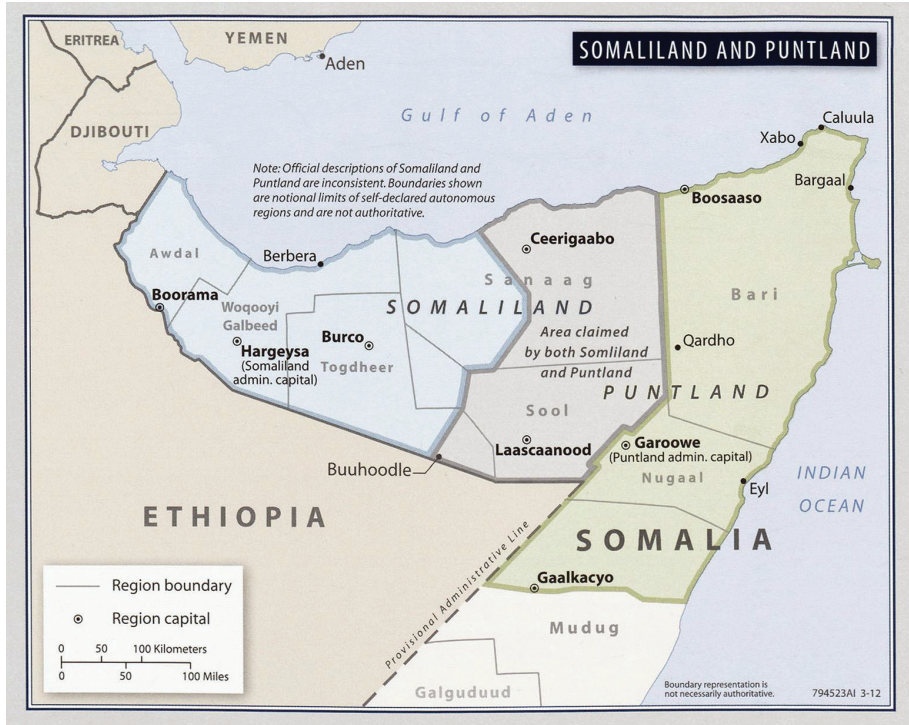
Moreover, the paper challenges the often sympathetic and promotional discourse surrounding Somaliland's case, offering instead a candid and realistic assessment. It emphasizes that the unilateral secessionist agenda appeals primarily to urban elites while failing to reflect the broader national and regional consensus.

Ultimately, Somaliland's pursuit of recognition does not represent a viable political trajectory but rather an enduring illusion that distracts from more practical and constructive regional development and stability avenues. Unless Somaliland redefines its aspirations within Somalia's unity and works

⁷⁴ Hoehne, "Being a *de facto* State."

⁷⁵ "Fursadaha iyo Caqabadaha Horyaalla Shirka Dhamaystirka SSC-Khaatumo ee Maanta Furmay." BBC News Somali, July 13, 2025.

collaboratively toward genuine federal solutions, it will remain trapped in a diplomatic and political dead end. Thus, the vision of an independent Somaliland must be understood for what it truly is: a dream that will never come true.



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