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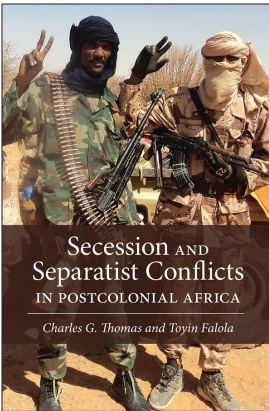
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## SECESSION AND SEPARATIST CONFLICTS IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

By Charles G. Thomas and Toyin Falola

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## Map of Somalia and Somaliland



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# De Facto Secession and the New Borders of Africa: Somaliland, 1991–Present

Of all the case studies presented in this book, none is more indicative of both the legacies of past secessionist attempts and the present global political dynamics than the unrecognized state of Somaliland. The legacies of the past have imposed a continued insistence that the boundaries of all African states remain sacrosanct absent the express permission of the mother state; this has left Somaliland without international recognition despite having existed as a separate and autonomous territory for over twenty years. However, the end of the Cold War and the increasingly tenuous questions of sovereignty and the nation-state have meant that despite this lack of official recognition of its sovereignty, Somaliland has found pragmatic partners in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea region, and across the globe to sustain itself and the increasingly capable state structures that define it. This chapter will explore the role of Somaliland in the current secessionist and separatist dynamics in Africa and how the denial of *de jure* sovereignty has, in the current age, not prevented its *de facto* existence.

## THE CONFLICT

It would be a misnomer to discuss the conflict that resulted in Somaliland as a secessionist insurgency from the outset. The separation of Somaliland from Somalia proper was not expected by the combatants, nor was

it originally desired.<sup>1</sup> It was only the collapse of the rest of the state into a deadly civil war and its inability to effectively reintegrate that convinced the people of Somaliland that they not only could but should remain a separate political body. However, the previous reform conflict and the insurgency that drove it remain an essential component of the eventual separation of Somaliland and as such deserve discussion to contextualize the current state of Somaliland and its relations with its neighbours.

The seeds of the reform movement that would eventually coalesce into the Somali National Movement and the separation of Somaliland from Somalia were planted in 1969. In that year, the elected government of the United Republic of Somalia was overthrown by the military regime of Mohamed Siad Barre and his Supreme Revolutionary Council.<sup>2</sup> General Siad Barre's regime was both stridently Marxist and strongly nationalist. The former led to the state following "Scientific Socialism" as an economic path and receiving significant military and economic aid from the Soviet Union. The latter led to a call for the reintegration of a "Greater Somalia," wherein all territories that were home to Somalis would be gathered into the nation-state of Somalia.<sup>3</sup> It was this Pan-Somali ideology that drove the foreign policy of the Siad Barre regime throughout the next decade. While the Shifta War in Kenya, waged during 1963–1967 by ethnic Somalis with an irredentist goal, was ultimately unsuccessful, the territories there were not necessarily a high priority for the Somalis. However, not only was the Ogaden region of Ethiopia home to a large Somali population, the grazing lands of the Haud<sup>4</sup> had been critical to the lives of the pastoralists who made up the bulk of the Somali population.<sup>5</sup> This made the reclamation of the Ogaden a central pillar of Siad Barre's Pan-Somali ideology, which was increasingly buttressing the social transformation of his country.

However, at least initially the direct annexation of the Ogaden was out of reach for Siad Barre's regime. Instead, significant efforts were made to support the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), a dissident insurgency in the Ogaden that had irredentist goals and its own Pan-Somali ideology.<sup>6</sup> Throughout 1973, the WSLF searched for a way to seize a majority of the Ogaden, and with the downfall of Haile Selassie's regime, they seized the chance. However, by 1977 Mengistu's new Derg government had begun to push the Somali insurgents back and reassert Ethiopian control over the Ogaden. It was precisely at this time that Siad Barre's Somali

National Army invaded the Ogaden in support of the WSLF and with the goal of finally annexing the region.<sup>7</sup> Within the first three months of the conflict, the Somalis managed to seize approximately 60 percent of the region, but at that point the tide turned against them. Their Soviet patrons had switched their backing to Mengistu's Derg, creating a critical shift in power. A series of military failures put Siad Barre's army on the defensive by late 1977, and in February 1978, a joint Ethiopian-Cuban offensive drove the allied Somali forces back. By March 1978, the last of Siad Barre's soldiers had been driven out of Ethiopia and the WSLF was on its own.<sup>8</sup>

While this effectively ended the hopes for a Greater Somalia for the time being, hostilities would continue back and forth between the now U.S.-aligned Somalia and the Soviet and Cuban-backed Ethiopia. However, as the formal war ended, the informal war between the two increased in intensity. Without the success of Pan-Somalism and with the loss of the economic support of the Soviet Union, Siad Barre's regime began to lose support amongst the rival power blocs within Somalia. The acceptance of structural reforms in return for aid from the IMF was a tipping point, crushing the ability of local peasant agriculturalists to compete economically and creating broad opposition to the regime.<sup>9</sup> Dissident fronts emerged in attempts to force alterations in the governance of Somalia. These included Mohamed Farah Aideed's United Somali Congress (USC), Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed's Somali Salvation Democratic Front, and the primarily Isaaq clan-backed Somali National Movement (SNM). Each of these fronts was dedicated to the concept of Somalia as a whole, but wished to overthrow Siad Barre. Given Siad Barre's continued support for the WSLF in the Ogaden and his continued ambitions on the Ogaden, Ethiopia proved to be a silent haven for these fronts as they found their footing in the early 1980s.

The Somali National Movement, as noted, was founded primarily by Isaaq intellectuals in 1981.<sup>10</sup> While the initial leadership of the movement was based in England, it wasn't long until they, like many of the dissident groups, transferred their headquarters to Ethiopia with an eye toward northern Somalia, where their clan relations were in the majority. While the SNM's initial incursions into northwest Somalia were not especially notable, the Isaaq-dominated group began to gain support from members of other clan families and slowly build its power base. The next seven years saw a series of increasingly complex raids into Somalia while the political

leadership of the SNM tried to form a more practical alliance with the other dissident fronts and also continue to grow its own popular support. However, despite its central clan identity and geographic focus on northern Somalia, there was not overwhelming support for the SNM in the region. While particular raids were spectacular, such as the 1982 attack on the Mandera Prison that freed hundreds of dissidents, the Siad Barre regime teetered but did not fall. It was not until 1988 that the equilibrium of the conflict was disrupted; both Somalia and Ethiopia, having exhausted their resources and facing numerous internal challenges, agreed to formally end their hostilities.<sup>11</sup> This announcement, seemingly innocent on its face, meant the loss of the SNM's safe haven in Ethiopia and the need to take drastic action.

The SNM responded to this loss of safe haven with a massive offensive against northern Somalia in May 1988. Attacks on the major cities of Burco on 27 May and Hargeisa on 31 May met with considerable success, with sections of both towns falling immediately and the SNM continuing to exploit these toeholds.<sup>12</sup> Siad Barre's government responded with a savage counteroffensive in the north. Heavy fighting erupted across the north in June and July 1988, with many of the original units of the SNM suffering losses to the continued air campaigns of the Somali Armed Forces. The struggle continued until March 1989, throughout which time the Somali Armed Forces made little effort to distinguish the SNM insurgents from the population at large. Over half a million refugees poured across the borders to Ethiopia, eventually settling in the Ogaden. These attacks saw Siad Barre's regime retake the major cities of the north as well, with Burco, Hargeisa, and Berbera falling completely to their forces. Meanwhile, the offensive had proven extremely costly to the SNM in terms of both trained personnel and material.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, it was this disastrous offensive that would transform the war for the SNM. While the intervening year of conflict saw the loss of much of their previous fighting strength and the urban centres they had struggled so mightily to take, the response of the Somali Armed Forces turned the sympathies of the north fully toward the SNM. While many veteran fighters were lost, recruitment spiked within both the north and the newly established refugee camps in the Ogaden. In addition, whereas the SNM had previously had little to no fundraising capability or outside support,<sup>14</sup>



now the support of the population of the north offered caches of funds both from the merchant networks that traded out of the strategic port of Berbera and the greater Isaaq diaspora. This surge in support rejuvenated the SNM, and the resulting increased military activity meant that despite the Somali Armed Forces' control of the cities, the countryside remained hostile territory, turning the counteroffensive into a quagmire. What had been an isolated and external armed group had been transformed into a popular reform insurgency.<sup>15</sup>

Over the next two years the SNM continued to wage its insurgency against Siad Barre's regime. While it maintained most of its activities solely in traditionally Isaaq areas, its leadership flirted with forming a united front with the other dissident groups waging war on the current Somali government. By 1990 the United Somali Congress, the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM, a group founded in the southwest of the country), and the Somali National Movement had managed to coordinate their political goals, and on 6 August the three fronts proclaimed a united movement to overthrow Siad Barre.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the year, with the central government already under immense pressure from internal struggles, a failing economy, and the withdrawal of US support with the ending of the Cold War, the Somali Armed Forces could no longer hold back the insurgents. In December, fighters from Mohamed Farah Aideed's USC forced their way into Mogadishu. Foreign diplomatic personnel removed themselves as fighting engulfed the capital, and on 27 January 1991, General Siad Barre fled the city after twenty-two years of rule.<sup>17</sup>

While the collapse of the long-standing regime was not necessarily a surprise to the leadership of the SNM, the declaration two days later of Ali Mahdi Mohamed, one of the leaders of the USC, as the new interim president of Somalia, was. The united front of the SNM, USC, and SPM had agreed to form a joint administration, and this action on the part of a faction of the USC precipitated the collapse of an ordered transition.<sup>18</sup> Mohamed Farah Aideed's faction of the USC denounced this move and aggressively moved to counter Ali Mahdi's claim. Without any agreement in terms of the formation of a government, the various remaining armed groups began to jockey for power and the country began to slide toward a civil war. By November 1991 Somalia had descended into a lengthy conflict that would see multiple would-be central governments rise and fall and

tens of thousands displaced or killed.<sup>19</sup> The following year would see the United Nations intervene to try to enforce a ceasefire between warlord factions and deliver humanitarian aid. When this mission encountered local resistance, the United Nations accepted an offer from the United States to lead a task force to complete the mission in November 1992. The US intervention would prove no more effective than the earlier UN efforts, with the American efforts to enforce peace through the capture of Mohamed Farah Aideed leading to a high-profile battle in Mogadishu in early October 1993. Domestic politics and the loss of American lives in the battle compelled President Bill Clinton to announce the withdrawal of American troops on 7 October, and the UN mission, now understood to be untenable, would be completely halted in March 1995. However, the Somali National Movement would not be a major participant in any of these conflicts; in the absence of a unified shared government, the SNM had declared the northern region politically separate from the rest of the country under the administration of the new SNM regime. Somalia was now shattered and the new Republic of Somaliland was declared.

## THE TRIALS OF GOVERNANCE

The declaration of a separate state did not imply that one was in evidence. While the old regime was no longer an active antagonist, the previous three years of war had left the northern region of Somali a smouldering ruin. The declaration of Ali Mahdi's faction had caught the SNM quite by surprise, and they had not intended to run a state on their own. While they had gained control of each of the urban centres and had dealt with the remaining Barre loyalists within what was recognized as Isaaq territory, the actual establishment of a government was still far from their minds. There remained questions about the surrounding territories of other clan families that had opposed the Isaaq or simply had not joined the SNM in their insurgency. How were these to be dealt with, especially with the continuing question of an eventual unified Somali again?

With these questions in mind, instead of engaging in aggression against the surrounding groups, which represented significant segments of the Gadabursi, Iise, Harti, and Darod clans, the Isaaq attempted a regional reconciliation spearheaded by its clan elders. In February, the representatives

of the Isaaq, Iise, Gadabursi, Dhulbahante, and Warsengeli clans met in Berbera and cobbled together a formal ceasefire for the various clan militias in the region. This was simply the first step in bringing the north back under a pacific rule to rebuild it following the conflict. The next major step occurred three months later in Burco, where the “Grand Conference of the Northern Peoples” convened. This gathering brought together elders from the Harti, Dir, and Isaaq clans to discuss the future of the north, even as the south was caught between clan factions that were attempting to form a unity government. Hopes were initially high for the retention of the Somali Republic, but a long and often antagonistic relationship with the south, combined with improved relations with Ethiopia amongst the northern groups, brought questions about a separate Somaliland to the fore.<sup>20</sup> Public protests against a reunion with the Mogadishu regime finally confirmed the way the wind was blowing, and on 18 May 1991 the SNM chairman declared the creation of the independent Republic of Somaliland.<sup>21</sup> A National Charter was hastily drafted, with the SNM charged with the initial governance of the country under its chairman Abdirahman Ahmed Ali “Tuur.”

While it seemed logical at the time to place the new state under the SNM due to the military support it had as well as the organization that it represented, the SNM was not necessarily representative of Somaliland as a whole. Not only were the vast majority of its members from the Isaaq clan family, thus marginalizing the members of the smaller populations, but even the various clans under the Isaaq family were not evenly distributed. Gaining the general support of the population seemed to be an extremely difficult goal, and without this support, governance would be almost impossible. However, this new government was rescued by the intervention of one of the traditional forms of governance: the guurtis. These gatherings of traditional clan elders and other influential members had served for centuries as the decision-making bodies of Somali groups, debating critical issues and arbitrating conflicts between both individuals and clans.<sup>22</sup> Following the exhaustion of war and the collapse of Siad Barre’s regime, these traditional authorities were willing to place their influence behind that of the SNM in an attempt to bring at least temporary stability to the region. The clan guurtis created breathing space for the SNM and set a timeline for transition, offering two years for the creation and drafting of an actual government structure.

During the intervening years, the guurtis continued to serve a critical purpose within the new state. With the SNM still working to establish itself as a statewide political actor, these councils were institutionally revived throughout the region as an outgrowth of the new state. They dealt with issues of regional mistrust between the still divided clans under and beyond the Isaaq banner, normalizing relationships that had been frayed from years of war. Beyond this, they dealt with the issues of often mobilized but not directed clan militias that were a serious threat to the establishment of peace, as could be seen in the south. Finally, and perhaps most critically, they dealt with the issues of grazing rights and land disputes. With so much of the population displaced and the economy in ruins, the ability to return to semi-regular and regulated pastoral activity was a priority for getting the state running again.

These influential traditional authorities would be even more critical in the early months of 1992. Armed confrontation exploded in the region of Burco, where the Habr Jaalo and Garhaji clans were jockeying for political and economic authority. Burco sat along traditional clan fault lines, and when the government attempted to reclaim some heavy weapons from the clan militias in the region, a conflict was sparked. While elders of both groups managed to eventually broker a fragile peace, confidence in the SNM regime was damaged.<sup>23</sup>

These hostilities were followed almost immediately by another more serious conflict that flared up in Berbera in January 1992. While Burco was astride one of the major routes to the remaining territory of Somalia and thus offered lucrative trading prospects, Berbera was the major port of Somaliland and was responsible for the vast majority of customs duties paid to the nascent country. In addition, it was the source of almost the entirety of Somaliland's foreign exchange. Given its value, there was significant disagreement on how this port should be administered. While the SNM regime wanted to have significant nationalized control of what they saw as a vital economic resource, the Iise Muse clan claimed the port as their traditional territory and believed a significant portion of its revenues should go to the clan's interests and upkeep.<sup>24</sup> This disagreement manifested itself from January to March in a vicious struggle between SNM-backed forces that were drawn primarily from the Garhaji and Sa'ad Muse and the Iise Muse militias supported by a significant number of Habar Ja'lo.

These two struggles were particularly troubling for the nascent state. The closure, even temporarily, of Burco and Berbera crippled the economy of the state and sent shock waves throughout all the constituencies of the SNM regime. Beyond this, the warring factions exposed traditional fault lines within the Isaaq groups, threatening a splintering of the central governance of Somaliland and a possible slide into a general civil war like the south was experiencing. In fact, those groups in the eastern portion of Somaliland began looking to use the port of Bossasso, which also began to attract Ethiopian trade. Given the instability of the SNM regime, several of these groups even began to look for détente with the south and expressed federalist sympathies. With the SNM unable to assert its will over the dissident clan militias and leaders, it looked as if the Somaliland experiment was to end in failure.

The conclusion to these conflicts would come not through the government, but again through the informal traditional power structures of Somaliland. In October 1992 the elders of the Gadabursi, Isaaq, and Dhulbahante gathered at the town of Sheikh along with representatives from the religious authorities, the business community, and women's groups to broker a ceasefire and hopefully a lasting peace.<sup>25</sup> The Gadabursi were specifically useful within the discussion, as the Isaaq versus Isaaq dynamics of the conflict to this point allowed them the role of a third party mediator. The first order of business within the guurti was to settle the status of Berbera. It was agreed that the port should remain a public good for Somaliland, allowing the new state to have a central source of revenue for development.

However, the instability of the previous years and the danger of it re-occurring with the strictly SNM regime led this nationally representative gathering to look beyond simply settling the Berbera issue. Instead, the elders decided to settle additional questions involving state security, governance, and the political process in Somaliland. With the roles of titled and untitled traditional clan authorities having proven critical on numerous occasions already, clan structures re-emerged as at least a stopgap solution to the fragile framework of governance. Clan guurtis were given significant authority within a national legal framework, offering them both formal authority and significant responsibility. The clans and their leadership were now responsible for keeping the peace within the rural

areas, with the clans now financially liable for the actions of their militia members—particularly the immediate family members of those who transgressed the agreements.<sup>26</sup> This led to a significant clampdown on the activities of the impetuous youth who previously had proven problematic in contested areas. This arrangement also included agreements for all clan militias to remove any impediments to commerce, such as the roadblocks that had proliferated in the recent months. These armed forces would also stay within what was agreed to be the clan's territories and disarm upon entering towns, which would be secured by nationalized Somaliland forces. It was hoped that these initial steps would set the stage for a peaceful advancement of national goals, balancing the needs of the state with the traditional authorities of clans within their regions.<sup>27</sup>

However, as the Sheikh conference concluded, it was hard to deny that the past two years had brought little progress. While there was now a general agreement regarding the role of clan authorities within the state, there were still significant tensions and no complete National Charter for the state. The search for a more permanent solution was carried out the following January, when the Borama Peace Conference was convened with the expansive title of “The Grand Conference of the Communities in Somaliland.” This gathering dwarfed even the previous Sheikh meeting, bringing together 150 elders from all of the clans of Somaliland. While initially slated to last a month, it instead ran from January until May, allowing for a multitude of voices to be heard and to debate the central issue of the conference: a National Charter that could represent the state and its structures. In the end, a consensus was found, and for the first time, the new state had a legislative and executive framework.<sup>28</sup>

The agreement was a remarkable fusion of traditional Somali governance and modern parliamentary structures. The executive branch still existed in the person of the president, in this case labelled the *Golaha Xukuumadda*. The man elected to this position at the conference was Mohammed Ibrahim Egal, the politician who had been the last prime minister of Somalia before Siad Barre's coup. Despite his age and his connection with the former Republic of Somalia, he was an acceptable choice to all members of the guurti. His former service lent him some credibility as a national politician, and his position as an outsider to SNM politics meant he would not be seen as partial to the existing power structures. To

balance the power of the executive, a bicameral legislature was formed. The upper house was the *Golaha Guurtida*, or the Council of Elders. This was essentially a legal foundation for the incorporation of a national guurti, which was given powers to ensure the peace and demobilize militia on top of the power to select the president and vice president. It was this group that selected Egal for the presidency. The lower house was the *Golaha Wakiil-lada*, the Constituent Assembly, which was to become a popularly elected body of legislators. Finally, an independent judiciary was created, rounding out the national system.<sup>29</sup>

With the government agreed upon, the process of nation building could proceed. Following the Borama Conference was a series of peace agreements negotiated between the clans that culminated finally in a larger peace conference, called the Sanaag Grand Peace and Reconciliation Conference. By using traditional peace-making methods involving political and religious leaders, the Isaaq and Harti engaged in a series of negotiations to settle the political, economic, and social issues that were causing regional friction.<sup>30</sup> This led into a series of lower-level talks between regional and even local authorities, delineating what territories would be involved and what practices would take place through and between the clan groups and diya-paying groups.<sup>31</sup> While slow in pace, these processes were inclusive of almost all the stakeholders and thus had an extremely broad buy-in amongst the regional authorities.<sup>32</sup> By October 1993, these agreements had led directly to the acceptance of the Sanaag Regional Peace Charter. The charter finally laid out a general peace promulgated through the clan structures, including provisions for freedom of movement and trade for individuals and the restoration of reciprocal grazing rights for clan lands. In combination with the acceptance of a National Charter, Somaliland had apparently overcome the initial difficulties of statehood. It had formed a representative government that was accepted as legitimate, and it had come to agreements on private property, rights of trade and movement, and sanctions against those who would break the peace.

These structures worked well for a time and bought the government of Somaliland critical breathing space as it tried to organize itself following two years of simple survival. Trust in the government and Egal as president was raised as a civil service was established, wages for government employees were set, local militias were demobilized, and the various ministries

worked with internal and external authorities to aid in the continuing stabilization of the state. All of this was underpinned by two critical efforts: the removal of independent military actors and the placement of Berbera under the control of an autonomous authority answerable only to the national government. The former, which encompassed the demobilization of clan militias and local crackdowns on banditry and extortion, meant that commerce and free movement were again possible, allowing for the general administration of Somaliland's territories. These efforts were later supplemented by Egal's attempts to co-opt some of the clan militias into a formal national armed forces, something that had been avoided in the earlier years of Somaliland. Meanwhile, the creation of a Berbera Port Authority and its placement out of clan control provided a stable and direct source of revenue for the state free of local interference. The funds gained from this initiative buttressed the increasing capacity of the civil government and funded new projects such as the aforementioned national army.

Unfortunately, for all the steps being taken toward stability by Egal's government, traditional networks of power, authority, and inclusion were still critical to the formation of these state structures. While the establishment of Berbera as a public asset was a step forward, it was possible only because the clan who controlled the port was the Iise Muse, to which Egal belonged. While the representative cabinet and government often smoothed over these issues of power sharing, when exacerbated by political or economic competition this agreement was not always enough to avoid friction. Only eighteen months after Egal's government took power, a new conflict erupted. This time the epicentre was the Hargeisa airport, the primary entrance point for air traffic and trade into the country. Whereas the government had again assumed the airport as a public asset and thus under their control, the Idagelle clan asserted that per the National Charter, it was under their purview. Fractious relationships between the central government and the local militias that were providing security (and often disrupting those passing through) ended with the government seizing the airport in 1994, sparking a general conflagration between the Idagelle and the government within Hargeisa.<sup>33</sup> A subsequent attack at the Idagelle village of Toon brought the Idagelle further into the conflict and caused the Garhajis to take their side in the conflict. While Hargeisa was now secured,



a significant rift had opened up between the government and several of the clans within the country.

Following this initial struggle, Egal's government tried to assert itself in the east of Somaliland, particularly around Burco, a location of almost constant concern since the collapse of the Siad Barre government. While the National Charter had allowed for localized control of security, now Egal's forces tried to secure several critical checkpoints along the main routes to Hargeisa and the centre of the country. This reignited the conflicts that had already been simmering within the region between the Habar Yunis and Habar Ja'lo in the region. Over the next year these fresh conflicts solved few of the questions involved in their genesis but cost the nascent country \$4.5 million simply in military outlays while crippling the incoming and outgoing trade that the previous year had so methodically set into place. Given the ever-present worry about fragmentation or even the opposition choosing to join a federalist solution for Somalia, these conflicts again had drawn Somaliland into a crisis only two years after what had been hoped was a lasting solution. With internal forces so far unable to either force a military solution or engage in a peace dialogue, a solution seemed unlikely.

While an internal solution was not to be found, the diasporic Somali population took the opportunity to expand their own role in the establishment of peace in Somaliland. The Isaaq clan family had a significant network of overseas members, and as can be seen with the history of the SNM, these members often had played a critical role in the development of Somaliland proper. Their remittances had helped sustain the Somaliland economy, and now members took direct steps to halt the fighting in the country. Labelling themselves the Peace Committee for Somaliland, this group initiated discussions with the warring factions beginning in April 1995.<sup>34</sup> Critically, they framed the conflict not as "government versus opposition" but instead as mediation between two power blocs of clans each with its own legitimate grievances. Through the internal pressure for peace and the external initiatives of the PCS, some restructuring was carried out to increase the chances for peace: Egal reshuffled his cabinet to be more representative of the dissident factions while the Garhajis dismissed the more belligerent members of their military leadership. Perhaps most critically, despite some individuals in favour of splintering, the PCS initiatives managed to get all the stakeholders involved to agree on the common ground of

a separate and sovereign Somaliland. This set the stage for the resolution of the internal conflicts without the threat of a fracturing of the state that all the clans had a stake in.

The initial efforts were a series of local peace initiatives driven across two axes, dealing with the combatants in the west around Hargeisa and in the east around Burco. From June to September 1996, clan-level peace discussions were held, bringing local ceasefires to the fore and setting the stage for larger reconciliations.<sup>35</sup> Additional external factors, such as support from Ethiopia for reconciliation efforts and the death of Mohamed Farah Aideed<sup>36</sup> in Mogadishu, helped spur the reconciliation within the framework of an independent Somaliland. With the local conflicts for the most part tamped down, the stage was set for a larger gathering to address the still significant troubles facing the state as a whole.

The war was finally formally ended at the Hargeisa Conference, which lasted from October 1996 to February 1997.<sup>37</sup> The formal reason for the Hargeisa Conference was the Egal regime's inability to draft and approve a constitution for the state of Somaliland, a task that had been given to it upon his election in 1993. Even with an extension of his term of service, there was little to no chance of completing this objective, and without a constitution no elections could be held. As such, the Council of Elders declared it within their purview to call a general conference to resolve this issue and to produce a constitution. It was hoped that this would result in not only a permanent buy-in from the clan members but also a final peace among those members of the state.

The creation of the constitution was by no means a simple process. Even gathering representatives proved difficult; some prominent members of clans still preferred federalism, some felt that all conflict needed to be resolved before the constitutional gathering should take place, and some felt that Hargeisa was not an appropriate meeting place for all the clans. Despite the protests the Council of Elders insisted on the meeting, which evolved into a transformative event in the history of Somaliland. Over the next five months the issues of federal power, clan representation, minority rights, the reconstruction of the east, and even the still ongoing conflicts were dealt with by the 300 voting delegates. Those clans that felt marginalized in the government were given more seats in both houses of the parliament. Those minority populations that existed within the borders

were granted representation. The opposition of the east, which was centred around Burco, was granted funds specifically to rebuild the severely damaged city that would be underwritten by a national supplemental tax.<sup>38</sup> The end result was a general acceptance of a constitution at the end of 131 days that was slated to go into effect in February 1997. The framework would be tested for three years, after which it would be voted on through a popular referendum. In a surprise, Egal was elected for another term, this one to last five years and help continue the trajectory of his government. While this was not universally popular, his rivals accepted his election without violent protest.

With the final reconciliation between the clans taken care of and a constitution in place, Somaliland entered into a period of relative stability and prosperity. Given the continued inability of the south to coalesce around any political leadership, even with significant international support, the comparison between the two was stark. Even in light of the failing state in the south, there continued to be significant pressure on Somaliland from the Transitional National Government (TNG),<sup>39</sup> and even the nascent government of Puntland,<sup>40</sup> to rejoin a Federal Somalia. Despite two separate livestock embargoes preventing trade with the Middle East, the increased economic activity within Somaliland allowed the central government to pay off a loan that had been advanced to it by the business community in 1993, which in turn freed up more revenue for the continued development of social programs within the state.<sup>41</sup> By 2000, a draft of the constitution was placed before the populace for discussion and debate, with a plebiscite scheduled for the next year. On 31 May 2001, the constitution was voted on, with 97.9 percent of the 1.18 million Somaliland citizens voting in favour of the draft document.<sup>42</sup> This adoption did little to aid their relations with their fellow Somalis, with a large number of the eastern regions of Somaliland not voting and slowly aligning themselves with Puntland and with the Transitional National Government denouncing the constitution and refusing to recognize the Somaliland regime. However, while the other Somali populations refused to acknowledge Somaliland's success, Ethiopia remained a firm ally, with the Haud grasslands remaining accessible for the Somalilanders' use and with a significant amount of trade flowing through Berbera.

The peace and stability engendered through these firm regional relationships even allowed for the first steps toward a pluralistic democracy. With elections planned for the next year, political parties began to form. The first, *Ururka Dimuqraadiga Ummadda Bahawday* (UDUB), or the United Peoples' Democratic Party, was formed out of Egal's political group and allies. However, with the beginning of the formation of parties, the question began to be raised again about the role of the modern political system versus that of the traditional authorities within the government. Firm debates were underway about whether parliamentary seats should be apportioned by clans or a strict meritocracy enforced within them. Even as the parties began to coalesce and attempt to leverage their newfound strength, Egal passed away in a Pretoria hospital following complications from a surgery. There were immediate questions about the acceptance of the succession, but despite some tension, on 3 May 2001, his vice president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, was sworn in as president. Perhaps nothing was more indicative of the progress that Somaliland had made than the peaceful transition of power, assuring the continuance and legitimacy of the government that the citizens had made.

Since this smooth transition, Somaliland has continued along essentially the same path of stability and power sharing. The exportation of livestock continues to power the economy of the state, and there have been few civil disturbances since the 2001 constitution. The education sector has been expanding and new social roles are being explored within the state as it continues to develop. A series of elections took place from 2002 to 2005, with the district councils elected in 2002, the president and vice president in 2003, and the Parliament in 2005. While initially the district councils and the executive elections were slated to happen simultaneously, the logistics of the process proved too much, forcing them to be staggered. This was a blessing in disguise, as it allowed for both the election authorities and political parties to learn from their first election and improve upon their results. The district council elections were completed with little fanfare, but the results bore out that UDUB and its rivals *Kulmiye Nabad, Midnimo iyo horumar iyo* (Kulmiye, or the Peace, Unity, and Development Party) and the *Ururka Caddaalada iyo Daryeelka* (UCID, or the Justice and Welfare Party) had the representation to form as political parties and run candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections to come. The

presidential election in 2002 was fiercely contested. While Riyale Kahin was re-elected, it was by the slenderest of margins over his rival Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud “Silanyo,” the chairman of Kulmiye. While Silanyo and his party contested the results in court, they accepted their judicial loss and moved on to preparing for the parliamentary elections. Finally, in 2005 the Somaliland parliamentary elections took place, with UDUB gaining the largest number of seats but failing to gain a majority, while UCID and Kulmiye each gained enough to attain significant political leverage in the house. With the conclusion of these elections, Somaliland had moved itself into a new era of stable and representative government, one it inhabits to this day.

## WHY HAS SOMALILAND SUCCEEDED?

As noted early on, Somaliland has succeeded at separatism but remains in an anomalous position that is not quite secession. However, it cannot be said that Somaliland has not made the most of this situation. In the over twenty years of independent governance that Somaliland has experienced, it has established governing norms, a tax base, an education system, public services, and security within its borders, something that the remainder of the former Somalia has largely failed to do. Given the extreme difficulties so far demonstrated in secession and separatism as well as the regional circumstances involved, it is important to consider what factors underpin this success. Simply put, it must be explained how Somaliland has managed to be a success when the few other examples discussed in this volume prevailed only after decades-long conflicts.

As with many of the previous examples, the pre-independence history of Somaliland offers some significant clues as to why it has managed to succeed. In addition, the historical perspective also offers a fig leaf of justification for the separatism—much as it does for the majority of previously decided secessions. In the case of Somaliland, its separatism and success remain rooted in the intertwined histories of the Somalis, the Ethiopian Empire, and the European colonial powers. At the time of the nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa, the Somali people were spread across the majority of the Horn of Africa, which juts out eastward and results in a narrow strait connecting the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. While the

Somali people had interacted with the Red Sea trade since antiquity, the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 made the Horn of Africa a crucial region for the European empires, for both ready access to the Indian Ocean and stations to fuel the steamships that drove the global trade. Over the coming decades, the Somalis would be partitioned into four separate empires, none of which was under their control.

The dawn of the twentieth century saw the Horn divided among four powers: Britain, France, Italy, and Ethiopia. Britain and France remained heated rivals, with their competition fuelling their claims on Somali territory. The French claimed French Somaliland, a small enclave nestled between British territory and Italian Eritrea, with a functional port at Djibouti. The British meanwhile had claimed expansive territories east of there, encompassing most of the northern coast of the Horn itself. This gave them a significant amount of territory and, most importantly, a base from which to supply the port of Aden in Yemen, which was their primary coaling station on the Red Sea.<sup>43</sup> The Italians had lost their ambitions of conquering Ethiopia but still maintained a large swath of Somali territory stretching from the edges of British Somaliland and southward along the coast until it intersected with British East Africa. This territory, originally disparate colonies, was unified into Italian Somaliland in 1908. Finally, Menelik's Ethiopia had taken advantage of the multiple competing empires to secure its own expansion, often gaining agreements by playing rivals against one another. By the time the Scramble for Africa had ended, Menelik's state had not only beaten back the Italians at Adowa, they had seized the fertile Ogaden region, traditionally one of the major grazing areas for Somali pastoralists.

However, as quickly as this equilibrium was established it was upset. In 1935, fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia backed with thousands of Eritrean and Somali soldiers, toppling the government of Emperor Haile Selassie. Following the conquest, the Italian regime annexed all of Ethiopia to their holdings in Eritrea and Somalia, with Mussolini declaring a new Italian East African Empire. The rapid conquest of the region and the fascists' hostility toward British interests caused concern amongst the British colonies of Somaliland, the Sudan, and Kenya. These concerns proved to be well founded, as the start of the Second World War saw Italian forces attack and occupy British Somaliland in August 1940 following several air strikes and

limited offensives on the other British African possessions. However, this occupation of British Somaliland was the high point of the Italian East African Empire, as British counterattacks from Kenya and the Sudan rapidly drove the Italians back. Following the Battle of Keren in 1941, most of the Italian resistance was quashed, and by November of that same year the last of the Italian strongholds surrendered, leaving the region in the control of Britain and its Ethiopian allies.<sup>44</sup>

The aftermath of the war defined the next decades for the Somali people. While Haile Selassie was returned to his throne in Ethiopia, Britain now had to deal with the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. In addition, originally there was some question as to the Ogaden region, which seemed a natural extension of a unified Somali community. However, by 1948 the Ogaden and its rich Haud grazing regions had been returned to Ethiopia in accordance with an 1897 treaty signed between Ethiopia and Britain.<sup>45</sup> The next year the United Nations returned Italian Somaliland to Italian administration as a UN trust territory with an eye toward its eventual independence. Despite the disturbances caused by the war, its ending, at least on the surface, seemed to point to a return to the status quo antebellum.

However, the sweeping changes of the postwar world meant that the status quo was no longer tenable even at the time of the decisions made regarding the colonies of the Horn. Decolonization was a reality that was rapidly coming to the African continent; even if Britain wanted to hold onto its colonies, the transition of Italian Somaliland to a trust territory guaranteed its eventual independence.<sup>46</sup> The global realities of anti-colonial sentiment ran into the local political efforts to gain independence. The Somali Youth League (SYL) had formed in the 1940s and had played a pivotal role in securing the trust status of Italian Somaliland at the United Nations.<sup>47</sup> While the SYL didn't have as strong a presence in British Somaliland, the Somali National League, another nationalist movement, had established itself and was placing firm pressure on the British for independence as well. By the 1960s independence was inevitable; all that remained was the question of how the fractured Somali homeland would be disposed of following independence.

There was significant discussion about finally reuniting the Somalilands. However, this immediately began to go awry. A 1958 plebiscite held

in French Somaliland affirmed its populace's desire to remain affiliated with France, although the votes are widely held to have been rigged. Britain, now regretting its gifting of the Ogaden to Ethiopia, attempted to arrange its purchase in 1956 as a way to reintegrate it with the Somali community. However, Haile Selassie had no desire to release this fertile and valuable territory and so refused to sell it.<sup>48</sup> This left only British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, and the Northern Frontier region of Kenya of the Somali-majority territories able to be joined together for the creation of Somalia. Britain made it clear that Kenya would remain unified, removing one more region that could have joined. However, on 26 June 1960, Britain released Somaliland and the territory was transformed into the state of Somaliland, albeit with a resolution passed stating their intentions to join with the trust territory of Somalia.<sup>49</sup> When that region gained its independence five days later, the two were joined into the Somali Republic.

While the north would quickly find itself marginalized within the united state, laying the seeds for its eventual reform and separatist goals, at the time the new republic was proud of its unification.<sup>50</sup> Somalia fashioned itself as Africa's first nation-state, and Pan-Somalism helped drive the country forward, first under the Egal regime and then under Siad Barre. However, as with many of the other secessionist fronts discussed, the north would point to the separate administration of the territories and even their separate steps into independence as setting a precedent for their later declaration of secession. While it is true that the Somaliland Legislative Council had voted to unify with the former Italian Somaliland, this could be viewed as a voluntary agreement and one that would be terminated in 1991.<sup>51</sup> There was thus an argument to be made that Somaliland could and should be recognized based on its earlier recognized sovereignty.

However, this argument has carried little water with the international community. Despite its *de facto* existence for over twenty years, Somaliland remains officially unrecognized as a separate state. This lack of *de jure* sovereignty is a significant weakness on a larger scale, leaving Somaliland unable to take advantage of the official global support that might allow it to grow more rapidly.<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that Somaliland has no international presence, though. In fact, its pragmatic relations with its neighbouring states have actually been one of the central pillars of Somaliland's success,



as it trades on its traditional economic activities and regional dynamics to gain significant external support even as it is denied official recognition.

In terms of its traditional economic activities, as far back as the pre-colonial era the pastoralists of the Horn exported livestock to the Arabian Peninsula for their primary source of income. This has continued through the centuries to the present day, and Somaliland remains a huge net exporter of livestock to the Gulf States. While there have been occasional embargoes in the region due to health concerns or livestock diseases, this trade is the economic lifeline of the Somaliland merchant class.<sup>53</sup> It also forms a palpable connection between the customs and trade divisions of the Somali government and the formal and informal governing structures of its trading partners. These continuing economic ties help solidify the de facto existence of Somaliland within its regional context.

Beyond the Gulf States, there has been an even more potent and pragmatic ally for Somaliland since its separation from Somalia. Ethiopia has consistently and quietly supported Somaliland in a variety of ways since the formation of its government. With the fall of Mengistu in 1991 and the rise of the EPRDF government, cordial relations were restored with the Somali National Movement. Beyond the historic ties involved between Ethiopia and the SNM, there were still significant numbers of refugees from the Isaaq groups living within Ethiopia that formed part of a transnational community which bound these two states together. Any tensions this might have caused were mostly dissipated with the renewal of some rights to using the Haud grasslands in the Ogaden to the pastoralists in Somaliland, giving them access to an economically important and culturally significant region.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, Ethiopia has not granted all of these conditions solely due to their good relations with Somaliland. Having a healthy and stable Somaliland serves the government of Ethiopia's interest in a number of ways. The first is the obvious benefit of having at least part of the Somali population at peace with Ethiopia. With the descent of the southern part of the country into chaos and the rise of Islamist armed fronts among the populations that border Ethiopia, the regional power has enough on its hands simply securing the borders of one part of the Ogaden. A friendly Somaliland relieves them of that security burden and limits their need for regional

intervention beyond the already daunting Islamist threats in southern and central Somalia.

Even more essential to Ethiopia than regional security dynamics is access to the port at Berbera.<sup>55</sup> At the same time that Somaliland was stabilizing and bringing Berbera under centralized control, Ethiopia was releasing Eritrea from its forced union. While initially the ports of Eritrea were open for Ethiopian shipping, with the souring of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations in the mid-1990s, landlocked Ethiopia found itself without a secure route to the ocean. This problem was solved by the increasingly stable and robust Somaliland and its reintegrated port on the Gulf of Aden. By offering support and aid to Somaliland, Ethiopia assured itself a port from which to ship its goods and receive goods in turn. This pragmatic relationship has not extended to formal recognition,<sup>56</sup> but the support of Ethiopia, which has transformed itself into a general regional hegemon, has significantly aided the Somaliland national project in the years since it was formed.

In the end, though, these factors are relatively minor in terms of Somaliland's success. Two intertwined factors offer the central reasons for the endurance and resilience of the separatist state. The first of these is the strong social unity that sits at the heart of the Somaliland national project. As noted earlier, Somalia was proud of its status as Africa's first nation-state, having been formed as the political union of the Somali people, as imperfect as it was. This meant that naturally Somali cultural and social structures were held as central parts of the interaction within the new state. These social structures are extremely segmented, with the majority of the Somali people having been divided into six overarching "clan families," the Hawiye, the Darod, the Dir, the Rahanweyn, the Digil, and the Isaaq. These in turn are subdivided into numerous clans and sub-clans, with the smallest unit being the *diya*-paying group, which is usually anywhere between 100 and 1,000 individuals.<sup>57</sup> These relations permeate every interaction within the Somali world, with feuds and debts having been carried on between various segments for generations. The commonality of Somali heritage was not enough to ensure pacific relations; instead every interaction was a process of complex negotiation and competition between the interacting lineages. The complexity of these relations has perhaps been best summarized by Said Samatar, who repurposed an old Bedouin Arab saying to attempt to describe the layers involved within the Somali community:

Segmentation may be expressed in the Bedouin saying ‘my full brother against my half-brother, my brother and I against my father, my father’s household against my uncle’s household, our two households (my uncle’s and mine) against the rest of the immediate kin, the immediate kin against non-immediate members of the clan, my clan against the other clans, and finally, my nation against the world!’ In lineage segmentation one literally does not have a permanent enemy or a permanent friend, only a permanent context.<sup>58</sup>

Given the multi-dimensional nature of the relations between the clans and even sub-clans within the state, it was only natural that Somalia was often the location of political and economic competition between the clan families. Before the unification of the state, this competition would often lead to bloodshed. Siad Barre managed to repress this internal social fragmentation by means of his emphasis on internal scientific socialism<sup>59</sup> and external Pan-Somalism.<sup>60</sup> With the failure of both of these projects, the unifying force behind Somalia was removed, leading to a resurgence of clan-based dissent. Siad Barre did his best to suppress this dissent, but ultimately failed to stop the creation of new clan-based political organizations. These organizations included the United Somali Congress, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front, and the Somali National Movement, who were drawn primarily from the Hawiye, Darod, and Isaaq clan families respectively. The eventual collapse of Siad Barre’s government led to the competition amongst the various fronts for control of Mogadishu and other valuable territories. The fronts reignited the clan struggles within the country, which continue to complicate its unity and recovery.

As noted, the Somali National Movement was primarily from the Isaaq clan family. While the other clan groups struggled for control of the southern portion of Somalia, the SNM’s claimed territory was a region where the Isaaq were almost unchallenged in their regional authority. While the north had been marginalized in the 1960s and 1970s and then severely suppressed by Siad Barre’s forces in the 1980s, it was essentially unified at the time of its secession. Even those minority populations living within Somaliland, that is, those members of the Darod and Dir clans who live within its borders, have long-standing relations with their neighbours. Thus,

when the central government collapsed, the Isaaq were able to rally around their central identity and call upon the traditional authorities to help provide stability. Even the long, patient efforts at grassroots reconciliation were only possible due to the unitary clan-family structure of Somaliland. However, this has served as a double-edged sword, as the Isaaq clan family became firmly ensconced in power. Those Dir and Darod populations have often continued to serve as dissenting forces, with the Darod populations in the Sool administrative region near the Puntland border going so far as to at times seek greater alignment with their clan relations in Puntland.<sup>61</sup> However, Somaliland has generally dealt with this effectively in its most recent constitutional convention, with those minority populations being granted specific protections and representation within the government.

Even beyond the *de facto* recognition, the pragmatic relations, the historic precedent, or even the dominance of a single clan family, it must be said that the single most important factor in Somaliland's enduring statehood is the collapse of its previous host state. While Katanga and Biafra were brought to heel and reabsorbed by their host state, and Eritrea and South Sudan fought long and bruising wars against Ethiopia and Sudan respectively, Somaliland was born out of the failure of Somalia. Post-1991, Somalia effectively ceased to exist, with the north becoming Somaliland, the northeast splitting off to eventually become Puntland, and only a rump of a state remaining in the south. Since then, the south has experienced massive upheaval, with continued fierce fighting and little to show for it aside from increasingly radicalized Islamist elements and a *de jure* federal government that has yet to exercise a great deal of power on its own.

While Somaliland has had its shares of troubles since 1991, the remainder of Somalia has fared far worse. State structures essentially stopped working in the northeast, leading the local clan leadership to eventually form their own breakaway region of Puntland following a constitutional convention in 1998. Puntland remains committed to a federal solution to the issue of Somali governance, but remains separate to this day.<sup>62</sup> The remainder of the country, with its centre of gravity around Mogadishu, turned into a war zone as the factions of the USC and other armed groups fought over control of the city and its surroundings. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the United Nations and other international actors attempted to provide aid to the ailing population in 1991, but this simply fuelled the

conflict further as their food aid was used by the various armed groups to gain leverage in their struggle. A subsequent UN resolution deployed peacekeepers to the region in 1992, but even with the increased US intervention the conflict continued to spiral out of control. By 1995 the United Nations had completely removed their military presence in the country.

A new hope for stabilization was floated in 2000 with the formation of the Transitional National Government (TNG) and its transformation into the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2004. However, this was a government in name only, as by 2006 the Union of Islamic Courts (ICU), a militant Islamist group, had seized control of most of the territory in the south. It was only subsequent military support by Ethiopia, the African Union, and later Kenya that allowed the TFG to regain much of its territory. By 2010 the TFG was largely back in control of the southern region and Mogadishu through both pragmatic relations with various warring factions and the military might offered by its regional and OAU allies. In 2012, its mandate ran out and the official Federal Government of Somalia was formed; however, despite its relatively successful formation, the government still largely relies on the support of AMISOM (the African Union Mission in Somalia) and can't effectively project force into the Puntland or Somaliland regions. Beyond this, the more extreme remnants of the Islamic Courts Union have since reformed into an Islamist group called Al-Shabaab, who have proven even more resilient and militarily adept than the ICU. Even with its resurgent strength, the Somalia government simply does not have the time, funds, or structures to effectively coerce Somaliland back into the fold. Somaliland thus endures in large part because of the fact that its host state is still ill-defined and weak, an anomalous situation within the larger arc of secessionist conflicts in Africa.

As a final note, it must be mentioned that despite the weakness of the federal government in Mogadishu, it retains the status of the formally recognized government of a unified Somalia in the international community. While it currently has placed a consulate in Hargeisa to negotiate with Somaliland, this may be viewed as a simply pragmatic move on their part. It is impossible for them to deny that Somaliland is in existence at the moment and has a regime that is not part of a larger federal Somalia. However, given its continued insistence on a federal solution, Somaliland's sustained commitment to its own sovereignty, and the complex international legal

dynamics around the two territories, the future might hold additional conflict. So far no home state has countenanced the involuntary secession of any of its territory, and the international response has invariably defaulted to the pre-existing recognized state. If the federal government continues to gain strength and Somaliland cannot negotiate a solution, a struggle to maintain Somaliland's de facto secession might ensue in the future.