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***International Recognition of Somaliland***

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**Introduction**

Somaliland is a major region in the north of the country of Somalia. Since the collapse of the Somalia state in 1990-91, Somaliland—which has few ethnic or historical connections to rest of the country—established itself as a model of self-governance, winning the support of much of the international aid donor community. Since 1991 it has established a functional government, economy complete with their own currency and declared their own independence however are limited by their lack of international recognition. Somaliland is an island of stability and good governance in the otherwise turbulent sea of the former Somalia state, widely praised internationally.

Officially still part of Somalia, the region is functionally independent, and treated that way by most of the international community. But its independence is not recognized internationally. To some of its supporters, recognition means accepting the functional reality. To others, recognizing Somaliland independence would further erode the declining strength of states everywhere and threaten more with the risk of separatism, secessionism, and even outright collapse.

The issues at stake in Somaliland go the heart of the entire international system, based on the sovereignty of states. Is the international community free to change rules of sovereignty as it thinks best, to change borders? Or must it be paralyzed by decisions made hundreds of years ago, often by colonial powers with little comprehension of the local situation?

**Figure 1: Somalia and Somaliland**



*Source: The Economist*

## **Background**

The colonial background of Somalia has the state separated from its very beginnings as the British had control over the northern territory which is recognized today as Somaliland, while the Italian's had control of the South. The difference in governance of each territory has become the underpinning of the turmoil and conflict within the State itself. The British sought a more hands off approach to rule leaving local leaders in charge, while the Italians maintained a majority of the control over their territory. Once Somaliland had gained complete independence from Britain in 1960, Somaliland was recognized as a sovereign territory, however on July 1<sup>st</sup> of 1960 voluntarily joined with Southern Somalia creating the Republic of Somalia. From the beginning of the Union, both parts acted as independent countries. During the 1980's the country fell into civil war and the union proved disastrous for the people of Somaliland as they were oppressed by their southern counterparts. By 1991 Somalia had collapsed from the civil war and Somaliland chose to restore its independence.

Today the region has a population of some 3.5 million spread across a territory roughly equal to the American states of Arizona or New Mexico.

**Figure 2. Somaliland's national capital, Hargeisa**



**Current Situation:** Somaliland has declared independence, established trade, an economy complete with their own currency and a government. This however does not equate the legal definition of self-determination. While Somaliland does benefit from autonomy, it does not have the legal recognition of an independent State and therefore is not afforded the privileges of

Sovereignty. In theory, it is subject to decisions made 700 miles to the south in the Somali capital of Mogadishu.

Support for international recognition appears favorable however seems to fall short on the follow through. Non-governmental organizations and businesses have been treating Somaliland as if it was an independent entity.<sup>1</sup> With independent companies and corporations investing in Somaliland, it is clear that there is an interest in the resources offered by the northern territory that could either benefit the country of Somalia as a whole or could benefit the independent economic stability of Somaliland.

**Figure 3. Somaliland**



**International Actors:**

United Nations: So far, the UN has taken up interest in the cause for Somaliland, however has decided to leave the issue of their recognition in the hands of the African Union. Recently the UN has expressed concern about Somaliland’s business ventures, more specifically in oil. A recent article reports on the concern, “U.N. experts warn that plans by Somalia’s breakaway enclave Somaliland to deploy Special Forces to protect foreign oil companies could worsen conflicts in the long unstable Horn of Africa”<sup>2</sup>. Somaliland has expressed interest in funding a private army to protect its oil production. This presents a concern for more conflict within the already unstable Horn of Africa region. According to an August article in the Somaliland press, the UN intervention in the region is actually hindering their sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. Of course, the UN cannot view Somaliland as Sovereign as long as it is not internationally recognized and otherwise still considered to be a part of Somalia. In Fact, the UN is only able to recognize the legal sovereignty of Somalia whose interests will trump those of the Autonomous territory. If however, Somaliland can convince the African Union to support their desire, the UN as well as the US will likely support the recognition of the State.

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<sup>1</sup> (Keating 2012)

<sup>2</sup> (Charbonneau 2014)

<sup>3</sup> (Mohamed 2014)

*African Union:* Currently, there have been attempts by the African Union to provide stability within the State of Somalia without fully giving complete independent recognition to Somaliland. The policy of the AU to hold to colonial boards has been a common policy. Furthermore, the instability that could continue in the region if Somaliland would be allowed to succeed from Somaliland completely concerns the AU greatly. Instead, the AU established the AMISOM or the African Mission to Somalia to broker peace.

### **Country Positions**

*Ethiopia:* Would benefit greatly by the trade routes that can be offered through Somaliland and would support the recognition of Somaliland, however the African Union's insistence on maintaining the colonial borders has presented a challenge to Somaliland garnering the support they need. As of 2007, both the European Union and the African Union has sent delegations to discuss the international recognition of Somaliland. So far, Ethiopia is the first State to officially recognize Somaliland as a Sovereign State.<sup>4</sup>

*China:* Could present the biggest external challenge to the recognition of Somaliland. China will always respect the sovereignty of a State over all other factors. Therefore, if Somalia is not in support of the separation, it is unlikely the Somaliland will get any support from China. With its eyes toward its own secessionist provinces, China tends to support existing governments and existing borders. However, if the government of Somalia in Mogadishu favors division of the country, China might be willing to accept a legally achieved and legally accepted decision.

*European Union:* Home to many of the non-governmental aid organizations most active in Somaliland, European countries have strong connections there and effective relationships with decision-makers in Hargeisa. While many Europeans are supportive, others are skeptical, seeing Somaliland as a precedent for their own separatist movements. Countries like Spain and Serbia, for example, cannot be expected to see Somaliland as anything but a precedent for their provinces of Castile and Kosovo. The issue is a tricky one for the European Union, which may be hard pressed to maintain unity on tis.

*Russia:* Somaliland independence represent the kind of separatism Russia normally opposes, as when it fought two wars to prevent secession of its province of Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s. Could be a wild card in the recognition of Somaliland. Traditionally, Russia will side with China on issues regarding Sovereignty, however they will not hesitate to break up a country when it suits their own national interests. As in the case of the Ukraine, the sovereignty of the Ukrainian borders mean nothing to Russia when there is an interest in the Crimea to break away that would also align with Russia's national interest.

*United States:* Along with much of the rest of the European Union would promote and support the separation and recognition of an independent Somaliland. Historically, these countries have supported and even encouraged, when it fits their national interests, the shifting of power down

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<sup>4</sup> (Hargeisa 2013)

to the people. Examples that can be drawn would be Kosovo, Czechoslovakia, and the Scotland referendum.

### **Conclusion**

Somaliland could provide a beneficial bridge between both European and African trade. The downside presents a problem of more instability in the Republic of Somalia and the horn of Africa if Somaliland successfully breaks away. The southern clans of Somalia are not eager to lose the north as that would leave a very unstable Somalia which cannot sustain itself and would fall into further economic crisis and violence. Furthermore, the international community views the separation more as an internal argument within the State of Somalia. While, the UN and even the AU may like to see an independent Somaliland, they prefer to stay out of the civil war and leave the conflict to the people of Somalia to decide. The issue of State Sovereignty is a key issue when attempting to convince any international body of a State's legitimacy and legal authority.

Resolution of the Somaliland issue will not be easy for the UN, since it reflects above all the interests and inclinations of its member states. Secession of regions is not something most governments welcome. Precedents are of great importance for related disputes elsewhere. But if the parties can be made to accept an amicable separation, and their benefits to all, a path to the avoidance of international conflict could be an even stronger precedent.

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