

# The Republic of Somaliland



## *Somaliland: Advancing Security in a Fragile Region*

### Remarks by

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#### I. Introduction

I would like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Peter Pham and the Atlantic Council for inviting me to give this address today.

The Atlantic Council—thanks in part to Peter Pham’s diligent leadership at the Michael S. Ansari Africa Center—has stood out among America’s leading public policy institutions for promoting a truly interdisciplinary approach to understanding the politics and economics of East Africa. It is therefore a great pleasure and an honor for me to exchange views today on Somaliland and the future of our region with such distinguished participants.

#### II. Somaliland’s Journey Toward Independence

Ladies and Gentlemen: I have traveled to Washington today from Somaliland, a nation that defends its borders, protects its citizens, and mints its own currency; a nation that your former Secretary of Defense called, simply, “an entity that works,” but a nation that has not yet been recognized by the United States or the international community.

Somaliland became an independent, sovereign state on 26 June 1960. Five days after independence, Somaliland chose to unite with Somalia with the aim of creating a “Greater Somalia” comprised of several former European colonies with citizens of ethnic Somali origin. Almost immediately, the people of Somaliland were excluded from decision making and representative governance in the new Somali Republic. In turn, our people rejected the Somali Republic’s constitution by referendum, and their disenchantment continued throughout the early years of the union as political and economic isolation grew.

After assuming power in a military coup in October 1969, Mohamed Siad Barre led a brutal military dictatorship that in the 1980s embarked on a violent campaign against the people of Somaliland, killing more than 50,000 civilians and displacing ten times as many people. Despite the atrocities committed, Somaliland rose from the ashes to rebuild and emerge stronger than ever before. We were determined not to allow such a massacre of men, women and children happen again. The people of Somaliland would no longer be victims in our own land.

Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, the people of Somaliland decided to withdraw from the union and re-assert Somaliland's sovereignty and independence – in full compliance with international law.

As Somalia's disintegration unfolded, Somaliland built a functioning, stable and democratic state. While the international community spent millions of dollars trying to save Somalia from itself, we focused on maintaining peace within our borders, building strong state institutions, and creating a sustainable economy. And I am pleased to say that Somaliland will be celebrating 22 years of independence on May 18<sup>th</sup> this year.

Despite enormous challenges, Somaliland has held four peaceful elections and has preserved a culture of democracy. Our security forces have ensured that terrorist groups like al Shabab have no safe haven in Somaliland. And we have tackled piracy off our coast with determined and comprehensive actions.

Over 100 individuals involved in acts of piracy have been jailed by the Somaliland government. We have forged agreements with other governments on the transfer of these criminals. Our legislature has institutionalized Somaliland's anti-piracy laws. And we have partnered with friends in Europe and America to thwart these and other violent extremists, both on land and at sea. But we also recognize that there is more work to be done.

We have also made great strides with regard to education, development and public health. While others in our region have struggled with famine and relied on external food aid, we have invested in food security and avoided the afflictions of chronic hunger and disease. In fact, during the last drought in the region, our government donated nearly \$700,000 in humanitarian assistance to Somalia.

We accomplished all this independently, with limited assistance from the international community. This spirit of self-reliance continues to guide our nation to this day.

### **III. The Situation on the Ground in Somaliland**

My presence in Washington today is a testament to our success. I recently stood in front of my parliament and described the state of our union to the people of Somaliland, one of the methods that we employ to ensure accountability and good governance. I spoke of my administration's challenges, especially in the diplomatic arena where recognition remains our overarching goal, and our accomplishments, which include:

- strengthening the independence of the Election Commission,
- facilitating the de-centralization of the state and empowering local communities,
- increasing government revenue and streamlining the tax system,
- presenting, for the first time in our history, a balanced national budget that currently stands at \$180 million per annum,
- Institutionalizing public finance reform – with our first report due for publication at the end of this month,

- further expanding and professionalizing the armed forces and police,
- improving relationships with international aid agencies, and
- investing in education, which has allowed us to build dozens of new schools, hire thousands of new teachers, and make primary schooling free for all students.

I am also proud of our most recent democratic achievement. Just a few months ago, we held our first Municipal elections in over ten years. In this process, over 4,000 candidates competed for 400 seats on local councils in cities and towns across Somaliland. As the political debates that framed those elections subside and these municipalities settle into the task of governing, we look forward to holding parliamentary elections as soon as feasible following completion of our voter registration process.

Somaliland continues to secure its borders to advance peace and stability in the region. Earlier last year, clashes occurred in the Buhoodle area of the Sool region between government forces and certain militia groups – groups that were seeking to destabilise and sow discord amongst the Somaliland population living in that region.

It is important to stress that all conflict is regrettable and only a measure of last resort. During these operations, the government took every measure to safeguard the well-being of civilians, including full access to water and other basic services. To advance wider peace, my Government also conducted civilian reconciliation initiatives in key towns throughout the area. Following successful dialogue with the militia groups, the government released more than 200 prisoners and welcomed a number of the militia's key leaders into Somaliland's cabinet. To reinforce the peace, our government has also earmarked more than \$1.2 million for development projects for the benefit of the communities in that region.

Somaliland will continue to promote reconciliation as part of our on-going efforts to strengthen unity within our borders.

If you have been to Somaliland, as a guest, a tourist, or an investor, you know that there is an oasis of calm in the troubled Horn of Africa. Dozens of international companies now recognize that Somaliland is a unique frontier market with real opportunities. Areas of Somaliland are anticipated to contain commercial quantities of oil, and energy companies are undertaking significant explorations. Coca Cola has opened a state-of-the-art bottling plant and other companies are beginning to recognize Somaliland's potential as a regional hub. Somaliland is very much open for business.

We are proud of what we have accomplished with only limited outside help. On all fronts, Somaliland is poised to continue advancing security and prosperity for all its citizens.

#### **IV. We Cannot Move Backwards, Only Forwards**

As we do this, my people and I are watching developments to our south very closely. We hope that Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud will succeed where past transitional governments have failed. We also hope that enhanced diplomatic support and foreign aid from the international community will impede the corruption, tribalism, and militancy that have afflicted the people of Somalia for too long.

A secure and peaceful Somalia that is able to build and preserve strong state institutions, fight terrorism and violent extremism, and stimulate a functioning economy is in Somaliland's national interest. To this

end, over the past year my government has undertaken good faith efforts to renew dialogue with Somalia, and held direct talks with the Transitional Federal Government in London, Istanbul and Dubai.

These talks laid the groundwork for my meeting just nine days ago in Turkey with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, where we affirmed our shared commitment to build trust and improved relations between our governments. Future meetings – the first of which we agreed to convene within 90 days – will aim to strengthen cooperation in the fight against terrorism, extremism, piracy, illegal fishing, toxic dumping, and other serious crimes.

Somalia and Somaliland can and should be equal partners. Yet as we proceed down this track, we hope and expect that those who are now reaching out to the new government in Mogadishu will do the same with our government in Hargeisa.

In this regard, we have already received assurances from the U.S. Government that its recognition of the government of Somalia will not negatively impact America's ongoing engagement in Somaliland. Our people were indeed encouraged by this gesture. However, as we move forward in dialogue and cooperation – and continue to serve as a model of security, stability and democratic governance in this fragile region – the people of Somaliland expect more. And that is why I have come to Washington, on the heels of the landmark agreement between Somaliland and Somalia.

The United States and the international community have recognized that the status quo in the Horn of Africa is not sustainable. Their engagement with Mogadishu seeks to stimulate and sustain the transition of Somalia to a viable sovereign entity. The same type of engagement is required for Somaliland. These two tracks are not mutually exclusive.

Our people believe that the time has now come for the international community to fully recognize the security and stability they have preserved in the midst of chaos, and to acknowledge the legitimate, sovereign and independent status of their nation. A new international paradigm for Somaliland is overdue.

Building on the Somaliland/Somalia dialogue that we have established, and the bilateral relations that we are working to expand with other governments, a critical next step will be Somaliland's attainment of observer status in our region's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and in the African Union. The United States can do much to engage its friends in the Horn of Africa and beyond to help us secure this role, which will facilitate further dialogue with key stakeholders in the region, including Somalia.

We are not asking others to take a chance on what Somaliland may one day become, but rather to simply recognize the current state of affairs. Somaliland is a fully functioning sovereign entity. From 1960 to 1991 we gave unity within a Greater Somalia a chance. It did not work, and we cannot turn back.

Today, only the people of Somaliland can and will decide their future – not the government in Mogadishu, not the international community.

With proper diplomatic recognition, Somaliland will be able to contribute more effectively to a sustainable and prosperous future for the Horn of Africa, building on our own experience in forging an oasis of stability in a long-troubled region.

This is the pragmatic option, and it is also the only option. Recognition of Somaliland's independence is long overdue and must be part of any sustainable peace in this region.

## **V. Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen: What Somaliland has accomplished in a short period has taken other countries decades, if not centuries. The progress that we have made is irreversible. Our friends in the U.S. understand this, and we are grateful for their continued engagement and support.

However, in the long-term, engagement alone – on terms that do not adapt with other changes in policy – will be insufficient.

The U.S. has led the international community in supporting the self-determination and sovereignty of many peoples throughout modern times. The people of South Sudan, East Timor, Kosovo and many others remember that the U.S. spoke up for them when others were silent. The people of Somaliland ask for no more, and no less.

America emerged from the ashes of the Revolutionary War and became a nation by believing in its own people's capacity to build something greater than themselves. In Somaliland, we also believe in self-reliance and staying the course. We have rebuilt our nation from the ashes of a brutal war. We are willing to protect our freedom at any cost because we know its true value. And it is this value—more than any other—that we share with the United States.

Thank you.