



SOMALILAND

A Roadmap to Recognition

A Report by the All-Party
Parliamentary Group on Somaliland

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Somaliland

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Somaliland was formed with the goal of promoting an understanding of and support for Somaliland's achievements in building peace, democratic governance and a sovereign state in the Horn of Africa.

It is chaired by the Rt Hon Sir Gavin Williamson CBE MP, with Kim Johnson MP as co-chair, Abtisam Mohamed MP as vice chair and Lord Udny-Lister as an officer.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Martha Bevan for her research and work on this report. I would also like to extend my gratitude to others who have contributed and offered their thoughts and guidance, from the Group's officers – Kim Johnson, Abtisam Mohamed, Lord Udny-Lister – to Simon Harries, Hodan Elmi, Jason McCue, and of course, Yurub Farah and her colleagues at the Somaliland Mission. I hope the report makes for insightful reading.



Rt Hon Sir Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Somaliland

Table of Contents

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Somaliland	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	4
Background and History	6
Somaliland's Path to Independence	6
Somaliland and Somalia: Two Diverging Paths	8
The Ongoing Search for Recognition	9
The Economic Case for Recognition	11
Somaliland: A Gateway to East Africa	12
Somaliland's Untapped Natural Resources	13
Unleashing Somaliland's Economic Potential	15
The Strategic Case for Recognising Somaliland	16
Somaliland: A Vital Ally in the Fight Against Terrorism	17
Enhancing Maritime Security	19
Counter-balancing China and Russia	21
Somaliland: Too Strategic to Ignore	23
The Moral Case for Recognition.....	24
Acknowledging the Somaliland Genocide.....	24
Rewarding Good Governance.....	25
Promoting Regional Stability	27
Facilitating Humanitarian Work.....	28
The Right Thing to Do	29
Why should the United Kingdom show leadership in recognising Somaliland?	30
The UK as UN Penholder	30
Historical Ties between the UK and Somaliland.....	30
The Somaliland Diaspora	32
Economic Ties between the UK and Somaliland.....	33
The Challenges Facing Somaliland's Independence and Democracy – a New Approach.....	35
Conclusion	37

Executive Summary

Somaliland is not Somalia. Over the last 34 years, Somaliland has built a stable and democratic society against the odds. However, the world refuses to recognise Somaliland as an independent nation.

Recognising Somaliland is beneficial for the West, for Somalilanders, and for peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. Somaliland should be granted recognition for the following reasons:

1. Recognising Somaliland is beneficial on a commercial level.

Somaliland has great economic potential and could be a valuable commercial partner. Its strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb strait position it as the gateway to East Africa, while it also has vast untapped reserves of oil, gas and rare earths.

2. Recognising Somaliland is beneficial on a strategic level.

Somaliland is a willing and ready ally in a volatile yet geo-strategically significant region. Recognising Somaliland could help the West achieve security aims such as fighting terrorism, boosting maritime security, and counterbalancing Chinese and Russian influence.

3. Recognising Somaliland is beneficial on a moral level.

From 1987 to 1989, Somaliland experienced extreme violence at the hands of the Somali government. It is simply the right thing to do to allow Somaliland to exist as independent from the state that oppressed it, as well as recognising Somalilanders' right to external self-determination. Moreover, granting Somaliland recognition would reward it for its efforts to ensure stable governance and would set an example to other developing nations.

The United Kingdom is particularly well-placed to lead the way in recognising Somaliland due to its historical relationship with the country as well as its status as UN Penholder on Somalia.

Somaliland was recognised in 1960 and after failed attempts at unification with Somalia, deserved re-recognition when it re-established independence in 1991. The next best time to recognise Somaliland is now.

Introduction

The world is a more volatile place than it was yesterday. This phrase has become a staple of political speeches and op-eds, and for good reason: the world order, from its power players to the very way we conduct diplomacy, has irreversibly shifted. While the UK has met challenges such as the war in Ukraine with boldness and agility, many aspects of its foreign policy remain out of kilter with this rapidly changing world. One such area is its stance on Somaliland.

Somaliland is a former British protectorate of roughly 3.5 million people that became independent from Britain in 1960 and, following failed attempts at a union with Somalia to create what became an unwieldy “Greater Somalia” – resulting in 30 years of generally oppressive and unsatisfactory union – re-established its independence from Somalia in 1991. Since then, it has built good governance, held democratic elections, and become a bastion of stability in the region. It has all the trappings not only of a sovereign nation, but of a stable, democratic nation – and yet, like most of the world, the United Kingdom refuses to recognise Somaliland as an independent state.

This position has become increasingly harder to justify in light of the Horn of Africa’s growing geopolitical significance, and from a pragmatic view, recognising Somaliland simply makes sense. It is located on the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a chokepoint for maritime trade, and is home to the rapidly developing Port of Berbera. It also possesses vast untapped reserves of natural resources such as oil, both onshore and offshore.

From a strategic perspective, Somaliland is an ally in a region where friends are few and far between. It has fought hard against the odds to build stable, democratic governance; has withstood the lure of China’s debt diplomacy and has been a reliable partner in the fights against both terrorism and piracy. Within the current geopolitical realities of a multipolar world order, where consensus across the international community is difficult to obtain and diverse “coalitions of the willing” have become the essential norm, an independent Somaliland would be a strategic Global South coalition partner for the UK.

But recognising Somaliland also makes sense from a moral point of view. To recognise Somaliland is to reward its efforts to build a stable democracy – to stand up for western democratic values and what we believe is right. Similarly, recognising Somaliland entails recognising the atrocities committed during the Somaliland genocide, the right of Somalilanders to security and justice, and the right to self-determination. In this light, the recognition of Somaliland should not be a question of “if”, but a question of “when”.

This report will start by outlining Somaliland’s history and its search for recognition, from the days of British Somaliland to recent rumours that the United States will grant recognition. The following sections will examine the economic, strategic and moral arguments cases for recognition and will suggest that recognising Somaliland is the right thing for the United Kingdom to do from both a moral and a realpolitik standpoint. The penultimate section will demonstrate that the United Kingdom is particularly well-placed to show leadership on this issue due to its unique relationship with Somaliland. The final section observes some of

challenges facing the objective of independence recognition and posits a recommended new practical approach towards achieving such a goal.

The legal case for recognising Somaliland, while compelling, will not be addressed in detail by this report. A brief summary is as follows:

- Somaliland became independent on 26th June 1960 and - based on an initiative led by some politicians at the time – attempted to join Somalia in Union on 1st July 1960.
- The union was never ratified by treaty, while a plebiscite to gain popular support was largely boycotted in Somaliland, while a majority of the small numbers that did vote rejected the union.
- The Supreme Court of the Republic of Somalia specifically agreed that the Union was not legally valid in a case during 1961-62.
- The constitution was overthrown by a military coup in 1969, and this led to a military invasion of Ethiopia following the death of Hailie Selassie.

The Somaliland population decided to resist the military dictatorship and was eventually successful in freeing its territory in 1991, following in a military campaign that saw 90% of Hargeisa (the Somaliland capital) destroyed and an estimated 200,000 civilians killed in what has been categorised as a ‘genocide’. Nevertheless, Somaliland faces what appears an insurmountable challenge in accessing an international legal platform to enforce its right to independence (ironically because it is not a recognised state) despite its strong legal case that a union of any form is void ab initio (it was never formalised and the subsequent genocide was a fundamental breach of any such union), reverting Somaliland’s status back to that of an independent state immediately prior to any purported union.

Somaliland meets the criteria for statehood as outlined by the Montevideo Convention and yet, this fact has not proved effective in enacting change. In this way, Somaliland is an example of the complex relationship between the legal definition of statehood, the right to self-determination and the political process of achieving recognition; and of the gap between theoretical judgements and political realities.

And when it comes to political realities, the truth is that recognising Somaliland would be beneficial for both Somaliland and the United Kingdom. It would allow the UK to regain a foothold in a strategically important yet volatile region, while staving off the growing influence of autocracies such as China and Russia in Africa. Crucially, it would demonstrate that the UK is willing to put its weight behind countries pursuing democracy and that we are a reliable partner for other developing nations. Given the unequivocal friendship offered by Somaliland, together with its active desire for a good relationship with the UK, the logic for recognition is all the stronger.

The world may be a more volatile place than it was yesterday, and the approach that we should take to tackle these new challenges will not become clear overnight. However, recognising Somaliland is an obvious first step in this journey, and one that must be taken before it is too late.

Background and History

Somaliland's Path to Independence

Somaliland's history as a distinct nation can be traced back as far as the late nineteenth century, when the United Kingdom signed agreements with a number of local tribes to establish a protectorate called British Somaliland. British Somaliland was administered as part of British India until 1898, then by the Foreign Office until 1905, and then by the Colonial Office. The main purpose of this was to control both sides of the straits (Aden on the east, Berbera at the west) and thus protect the lifeline to India. It was also an attempt to prevent France from pushing its West African holdings across to the Red Sea – as shown in the notorious Fashoda incident. Somaliland was thus a vital military asset at this time.

Meanwhile, present-day Somalia was under Italian rule, and present-day Djibouti was colonised as a base by France. Italian Somalia was always conceived as the key to a major East African Empire for Italy. The Royal Italian forces attempted to conquer Ethiopia once before the fascist takeover and failed. It is very likely that the seeds of pan-Somali nationalism (the desire to unite all regions with a Somali speaking majority into a single state) derive from this point.

During the Second World War, British Somaliland was conquered by the Italians in August 1940 as part of the East African Campaign. However, it was recaptured by the British in the summer of 1941, when many Somalilanders fought side by side with British forces to liberate British Somaliland. Following the war, and as anti-colonial movements gained momentum across Africa, the British government declared its readiness to grant independence to British Somaliland in May 1960.

As such, on 26th June 1960, the protectorate of Somaliland gained independence and garnered recognition from thirty-five sovereign states. The following day, the newly-convened Somaliland Legislative Assembly approved a bill allowing for the union of the State of Somaliland with the Trust Territory of Somaliland on 1 July 1960, forming the Somali Republic.

However, Somaliland's union with Somalia faced difficulties from the start. In 1961, a majority of the Somali people within the Union territory voted to ratify a new constitution which was perceived to favour the south. As a result, many Somalilanders boycotted this vote, and of those who didn't, an estimated 52% voted against it.¹ There was also no treaty between Somalia and Somaliland, as in the case of Senegal and Gambia in 1982, which threw doubt on the legal status of the union from the very start.

In October 1969, the Somali military seized power in a coup following the assassination of President Abdirashid Shermake. General Maxamed Siad Barre was chosen as the new head of state, launching a regime that outlawed political dissent and, according to the United Nations Development Programme, had one of the worst human rights records in Africa.

¹ "The 1961 Referendum on the 1960 Somali Republic Constitution", Somaliland Law, June 2012, http://www.somalilandlaw.com/The_1961_Referendum_Table_1.pdf.

It should be noted that, in the traditionally clan-based society of the Somali speaking territories, all such changes must be seen in the context of their clan leadership. Siad Barre was from the northern Darod grouping, while the capital area (Mogadishu) is dominated by the Hawiye group. Around 85% of the Somaliland population is from the large Isaaq clan, so the Siad Barre coup was very much a process to assert dominance inside the union for a specific group, against the interests and support of the others.

Resistance began to grow to the Barre regime, and in 1981, the Somali National Movement (SNM), an anti-government organisation, was founded with the aim of overthrowing Barre's dictatorial regime. The ensuing crackdowns on the SNM and other resistance groups simply added to the perception that the north was a region under occupation.

Over the following years, the SNM made various clandestine military incursions into northwest Somalia. Then, on 2nd January 1983, they launched their first military operation against the Somali government by attacking Mandera Prison near Berbera and freeing more than 700 political prisoners from the north.² This offensive was significant in producing a more coherent and better organised opposition force, and offensives would continue throughout the 1980s in order to liberate the Somali people from the dictatorial clutches of the Barre regime.

These attacks culminated in the 1988 campaign to liberate Hargeisa, the second-largest city in the country. The SNM launched its attack on the city on May 31st, which was quickly followed by a counter-attack by government forces. On the third day of fighting, the Somali Air Force launched large-scale aerial bombing, leading to the destruction of 90% of the city and tens of thousands of deaths.³ Such was the scale of the violence, that it has been termed the "Hargeisa Holocaust". Ultimately, the Somali army succeeded in retaking Hargeisa by the end of July 1988.

By June 1989, the SNM was mounting attacks on a number of major hubs across the northwest, blockading transport routes and interfering with regime supplies to military garrisons. The Barre regime had gradually lost control of the area by December 1989, with the exception of major towns.

In early 1990, the Barre regime renewed contact with the SNM. The following year saw the SNM and its allies take control of north-western Somalia (including Hargeisa) as well as most towns and villages surrounding Mogadishu.

Finally, in January 1991, the Barre regime collapsed. While civil war broke out in the southern part of Somalia, the political situation in Somaliland stabilised and the region began to pursue its independence.

Between 27 April and 18 May 1991, a conference of Northern clan leaders was called in Burao, which aimed at bringing peace to Northern Somalia. Following extensive consultations between SNM leadership figures and clan representatives, it was agreed that Somaliland would revoke its voluntary union with the rest of Somalia.

² Gérard Prunier, *The Country That Does Not Exist: A History of Somaliland*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2021, pp. 57–58.

³ "Somaliland: The Forgotten US-Sponsored Genocide", Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (originally published by The Nation), 17 December 2018, <https://old.unpo.org/article/21295>.

On 18th May 1991, the SNM proclaimed the restoration of Somaliland's independence. Hargeisa was reaffirmed as the capital of this re-established country, and Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur was elected to govern for a period of two years as part of an interim administration.

Somaliland and Somalia: Two Diverging Paths

Since Somaliland's declaration of independence in 1991, Somalia and Somaliland have gone down very different paths.

In the decade following independence, Somaliland transformed itself into a stable democratic state. The government set about designing a new constitution, which was implemented following a referendum in 2001. The constitution made provisions for the separation of powers, the enshrinement of human rights and the institution of a multiparty system, and it marked the transformation of de facto independence into a more structured settlement.

Crucially, this settlement has allowed Somaliland to establish robust, effective and democratic institutions. A focus on community inclusion as well as an intense political will to maintain peace have played a key role in Somaliland's journey towards stability. For instance, Somaliland's legislative structure consists of an elected House of Representatives and a House of Elders – combining modern democratic practices with more traditional clan-based governance.

Meanwhile, executive power is held by the President, who is elected through a direct popular vote and can hold a maximum of two five-year terms. Somaliland has held a number of free and fair presidential elections, including as recently as November 2024. This election was one of only five held in Africa in 2024 in which power was transferred from an incumbent to the opposition.⁴

Furthermore, Somaliland has established its own security forces, which have successfully curbed internal conflicts and prevented the incursion of Islamist groups such as Al-Shabaab, who are prominent in neighbouring Somalia. The government has also made significant strides in building key infrastructure such as roads and ports, and participates in regional trade. Overall, Somaliland has all the trappings of a sovereign state, from a system of governance to its own currency and passports.

In contrast, following the downfall of the Barre regime, Somalia descended into disorder, corruption and conflict. With the central government unable to exert its control beyond Mogadishu, various warlords, militias and extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab have taken advantage of the power vacuum and laid claim to different regions of the country. As a result, Somalia is politically fragmented, beset with security issues and reliant on external intervention and aid.

⁴ George M. Bob-Milliar, "Five incumbents tumbled and one was humbled", The Nordic Africa Institute, 6 February 2025, <https://nai.uu.se/stories-and-events/news/2025-02-06-five-incumbents-tumbled-and-one-was-humbled.html>.

Clan militias have kept the northern (Darod) region of Puntland semi-independent, while Al-Shabaab poses a constant threat to northern Kenya. Whatever peace exists is kept by foreign troops from Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, Djibouti, and Uganda in the ATMIS mission (formerly AMISOM), which takes heavy subsidies each year from the UN to protect the appearance of an independent Somalia.

The Ongoing Search for Recognition

On paper, Somaliland meets all the legal criteria for statehood as outlined by the Montevideo convention on Rights and Duties of States.⁵ According to this framework, the state as an international person should possess the following qualifications:

- a) A permanent population;
- b) A defined territory;
- c) Government;
- d) The capacity to enter into relations with other states.

Numerous organisations, including the African Union,⁶ have found that Somaliland meets all the above criteria. It has a permanent population, a defined territory, a stable government, and, as demonstrated by its signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with Ethiopia and various foreign missions, a capacity to enter into relations with other states.

Indeed, addressing the above criteria, a 2005 African Union fact-finding mission found that “Somaliland’s search for recognition [was] historically unique and self-justified” and that “the case should not be linked to the opening of a “Pandora’s box””.⁷ It also attributed Somaliland’s problems to the “legacy of a political union with Somalia” and the lack of recognition of Somaliland as an “independent sovereign state””.⁸

However, matters are very different in practice. Somaliland currently has representative offices in a mere handful of countries, such as the UK, Ethiopia, Taiwan and the US; has only been recognised by local bodies, such as Liverpool City Council;⁹ and takes part in some international forums, such as the African Union’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

Overall, Somaliland remains unrecognised by the international community and is shut out of organisations such as the Commonwealth. The African Union, which many nations look towards for guidance on this issue, has refused to support Somaliland’s claim due to fears that

⁵ “Convention on Rights and Duties of States, Article 1”, Organization of American States, 26 December 1993, retrieved at <https://www.jus.uio.no/english/services/library/treaties/01/1-02/rights-duties-states.html>.

⁶ “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005): Resume”, African Union, 4 May 2005, retrieved at [au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf](https://www.africanunion.org/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf), p.6.

⁷ Ibid, p.6.

⁸ Ibid, p.3.

⁹ David Maddox, “Former defence secretary urges Lammy to listen to cross party support for recognition of Somaliland”, The Independent, 26 July 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-lammy-somaliland-liverpool-recognition-b2586039.html>.

it could set off a domino effect of secessionism across the continent despite the conclusions of its 2005 fact-finding mission.

Meanwhile, Somalia considers Somaliland a part of its territory, and while it briefly showed more openness towards talks, the timeline for discussions remains unclear.¹⁰ In recent months, the intransigence of Somalia's government has been reasserted, with active support given to the small insurgency group in Las Anod as a way to destabilise, confuse and delegitimise the existence of Somaliland.

Nonetheless, all of this could soon change. Somaliland took a major step towards recognition in January 2024, when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Ethiopia. This agreement opened discussions about granting landlocked Ethiopia access to 19 kilometres of Somaliland's coastline as well as a naval base, in return for future recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign country, and made provisions for economic and military cooperation.¹¹

Moreover, the return of Donald Trump to the White House has renewed hopes for US recognition of Somaliland. According to J. Peter Pham, a former US special envoy to the Sahel region and a senior official in the last Trump administration, Somaliland's position "will be up for review" and there are rumours that Trump is warming to the idea of recognition.¹² This is corroborated by recent reports that the US has opened discussions with Somaliland to grant recognition in exchange for the establishment of a military base near Berbera.¹³

In contrast, the UK maintains that although it values Somaliland as a partner, it will not recognise it as an independent state until Somalia does so. It justifies its stance on the basis that it believes recognising Somaliland would undermine regional stability; that the neutrality of the UK as UN penholder should not be compromised; and that Somaliland is a secessionist state. Responding to rumours that Trump will recognise Somaliland, a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office source said:

"It would be wrong to speculate on any policy decisions that the incoming administration of President-elect Trump may make.

The UK, alongside others in the international community, does not recognise Somaliland's unilateral declaration of independence. It is for authorities in Mogadishu and Hargeisa to resolve Somaliland's status through dialogue and broad consultation."¹⁴

As such, despite support for the recognition of Somaliland within the British parliament and the country's large Somaliland diaspora, the British Government currently has no plans to change its stance.

¹⁰ Mariel Ferragamo and Claire Klobucista, "Somaliland: The Horn of Africa's Breakaway State", Council on Foreign Relations, 21 January 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/background/somaliland-horn-africas-breakaway-state>.

¹¹ Kalkidan Yibeltal and Damian Zane, "Ethiopia-Somaliland deal: Can the Horn of Africa rift be healed?", BBC News, 3 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-67911057>.

¹² David Maddox, "Donald Trump set to recognise African state as official country, says ex-Tory minister after holding talks", The Independent, 19 November 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/trump-somaliland-new-country-gavin-williamson-b2648376.html>.

¹³ Neri Zilber, Felicia Schwartz, David Pilling, William Wallis, "US and Israel approach African countries to resettle Gazans", Financial Times, 14 March 2025.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The Economic Case for Recognition

Despite its unrecognised status, Somaliland has shown great economic resilience. However, its economy remains fragile and vulnerable to external shocks. Currently, Somaliland is dependent on the export of livestock such as sheep, goats and camels to neighbouring Djibouti and Ethiopia, as well as to the Gulf countries. This sector accounts for almost 30% of the country's GDP, and is also a primary source of income for a significant part of the population.¹⁵

Another key source of income, but also dependency, is remittances. Diaspora Somalilanders send back money that supports individual families and stimulates local economies through consumption and small-scale investments. In fact, according to the founder of Zepz (formerly WorldRemit Group), Ismail Ahmed, "Hargeisa was [...] built with remittance money",¹⁶ and according to Somaliland's Central Bank, the value of remittances rose to more than \$1.3 billion in 2020.¹⁷

As of 2023, Somaliland has a GDP of \$3.97 billion, which equates to a GDP per capita of \$871.¹⁸ While this is almost triple Somalia's GDP per capita, it still places Somaliland in the poorest 30 countries in the world.¹⁹ Indeed, Somaliland faces severe economic challenges: as of 2022, it had a 52.7% poverty rate and a 70% unemployment rate, which is a leading source of crime and internal displacement.²⁰

However, Somaliland is not pre-destined to be poor – in fact, it has the potential to become a key regional player. Its long stretch of coastline onto key shipping routes, which is the envy of its neighbours, could transform the region into a hub for maritime trade. Further inland, Somaliland has untapped reserves of oil as well as other minerals such as Lithium and Uranium, which could boost its standing in global energy markets. A final sector that could be a source of prosperity is tourism.

So, what is holding Somaliland back? The answer is simple – a lack of recognition. As long as Somaliland is unrecognised by the international community, it remains unable to secure loans from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, attract foreign direct investment and participate in international trade agreements. Recognising Somaliland would

¹⁵ Scott Pegg, "Somaliland: A partial, fragile, small yet significant de facto state victory" from Godfrey Baldacchino, "The Success of Small States in International Relations: Mice that Roar?", Taylor & Francis Group, 2023, p.179.

¹⁶ Andres Schipani, "Somalilanders' remittance businesses thrive worldwide", Financial Times, 17 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/0dbcc28b-aa6b-49fc-b386-f49c21dc0c3e>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Economic Indicators", *Somaliland in Figures*, Somaliland Ministry of Planning and National Development, <https://mopnd.govsomaliland.org/article/somaliland-figures-2024>.

¹⁹ Mariel Ferragamo and Claire Klobucista, "Somaliland: The Horn Of Africa's Breakaway State", Council on Foreign Relations, 21 January 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/somaliland-horn-africas-breakaway-state>.

²⁰ "Somaliland: Regional Brief", Unicef, <https://www.unicef.org/somalia/media/3766/file/Somaliland%20Brief%202022.pdf#:~:text=The%20unemployment%20rate%20averages%2070%20per%20cent10%20and,per%20cent%20of%20the%20population%20living%20in%20poverty>.

allow the country to unlock its economic potential, creating new opportunities for trade and development across the whole region.

Somaliland: A Gateway to East Africa

Writing in the late nineteenth century, the British explorer, Richard Burton, claimed that:

*“Berbera is the true key of Red Sea, the centre of East African traffic [...] circumstances have thrown it as it were into our arms, and if we refuse the chance, another and a rival nation will not be so blind”.*²¹

Time may have passed, but Burton’s words are as true today as they were back then, as Somaliland’s ports once again find themselves the subject of international interest and rivalry.

It is not hard to understand why. Located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and is a chokepoint for 12% of global trade flows,²² including an estimated 3.3 million barrels of oil per day,²³ Somaliland’s ports have the potential to become the gateway to East Africa.

The strategic significance of Somaliland’s ports is heightened by the fact that Ethiopia, a major regional economic player, is landlocked. Roughly 95% of Ethiopia’s trade currently passes through Djibouti,²⁴ however, as was demonstrated by the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding that made provisions for access to Somaliland’s coastline, Ethiopia is increasingly looking to Somaliland’s ports.

The deep-water Port of Berbera is particularly well-positioned to take advantage of international trade. Located on the Gulf of Aden, it has undergone significant development and modernisation in recent years with the help of a \$442 million investment from the Dubai-based DP World. Since the arrival of DP World in 2017, the port has seen an increase in cargo volumes by 35% and vessel productivity by 300%,²⁵ and has surpassed regional competitors such as Mombasa in the World Bank’s Container Port Performance Index.²⁶

²¹ Guled Ahmed, “Somaliland’s ports: The Horn of Africa’s most valuable real estate”, Middle East Institute, 22 July 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/somalilands-ports-horn-africas-most-valuable-real-estate>.

²² “These four chokepoints are threatening global trade”, Boston Consulting Group, 12 February 2024, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/these-four-chokepoints-are-threatening-global-trade>.

²³ Fouad Mussi’d, “Regional and International Powers in Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden: Between Competition and Conflict”, Abaad Studies, 31 August 2023, <https://abaadstudies.org/en/strategies/topic/59970>.

²⁴ Francisco Serrano, “The Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal Could Sink Djibouti’s Economy”, World Politics Review, 2 February 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/djibouti-ethiopia-economy-trade/#:~:text=With%20one%20of%20Africa%E2%80%99s%20fastest-growing%20economies%2C%20Ethiopia%20has,of%20its%20total%20trade%20going%20through%20Djibouti%E2%80%99s%20port>.

²⁵ “DP World Berbera”, DP World, <https://www.dpworld.com/somaliland>.

²⁶ “Global Container Port Performance Ranking”, World Bank, 4 June 2024, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/87d77e6d-6b7b-4bbe-b292-ac0f3b4827e8>.

In partnership with DP World, British International Investment has also made a significant investment in Berbera as part of a wider £232 million investment into three ports in Africa.²⁷ This funding is aimed at unlocking trade equivalent to approximately 27% of Somaliland's GDP and 75% of regional trade by 2035.²⁸

The economic potential of the port is bolstered by the Berbera Economic Zone (BEZ). Modelled after the highly successful Jebel Ali Free Zone in Dubai, the BEZ offers incentives such as tax exemptions and streamlined business registration processes in order to attract foreign investment.²⁹ The BEZ also has the potential to transform Berbera into a wider trade hub and open access to the region's vast hinterland, including Ethiopia.

Indeed, it is worth noting that British companies are already taking advantage of Berbera's strategic location and are using the port to develop trade routes into East Africa, in particular Ethiopia.³⁰

Meanwhile, further up the coastline towards Djibouti, lies the port of Zeila. In the 14th century, it served as a key trading port that connected the Horn of Africa to global markets, but has since become underutilised and overlooked.

However, this could soon change: Zeila is closer to Ethiopia than Berbera, and its modernisation has the potential to revive ancient trade routes between Somaliland and Ethiopia. With the right investment in infrastructure, Zeila could become another important outlet for regional trade – and another critical asset for Somaliland.

Somaliland's Untapped Natural Resources

A second area of great economic potential for Somaliland is in untapped natural resources, including oil and gas reserves as well as minerals such as lithium and uranium.

The UK's Genel Energy has held rights to explore in Somaliland since 2012. In December 2021, they signed a farm-out deal on the SL10-B/SL-13 block with OPIC Somaliland Corporation, which was backed by Taiwan's CPC Corporation. According to 2D seismic data, this block holds more than 5 billion barrels of prospective resources and is located roughly 150km from the Port of Berbera, offering an easy route into international markets.³¹

²⁷ "Port of Berbera: Charting a stronger course for African trade with the rest of the world", British International Investment, <https://www.bii.co.uk/en/story/port-of-berbera/>.

²⁸ "British International Investment supports inauguration of Berbera Economic Zone", British International Investment, 3 March 2023, <https://www.bii.co.uk/en/news-insight/news/british-international-investment-supports-inauguration-of-berbera-economic-zone/>.

²⁹ "DP World Berbera Economic Zone", DP World, <https://www.dpworld.com/bez>.

³⁰ Sophia Barnes, "ALS Worldwide Opens in Berbera", Saxafi Media, 10 August 2023, <https://saxafimedia.com/als-worldwide-opens-in-berbera/>

³¹ "Genel reaches East African farm-out with Taiwan's CPC", Energy Voice, 20 December 2021, <https://www.energyvoice.com/oilandgas/africa/ep-africa/373989/genel-somaliland-cpc-exploration/>.

Separately, Genel claims to have discovered reserves in Salaxley, which is located in the Maroodi Jeex region.³²

Meanwhile, in May 2024, Shell announced its fourth offshore oil discovery in Somaliland. This discovery is estimated to increase the country's overall production from 100,000 barrels per day to 180,000 – an increase worth \$2.9bn.³³ Separately, the Norwegian company TGS has estimated that the Somali basin as a whole likely holds offshore reserves of around 30bn barrels.³⁴

While these discoveries underline Somaliland's vast potential to be a major player in global energy markets, oil exploration does not come without challenges. It goes without saying that the lack of international recognition of Somaliland stymies investment in exploration and drilling. Moreover, the relationship between geographic territory and kinship means that the sharing of oil wealth would need to be handled with the utmost care and sensitivity.³⁵

Alongside oil and gas, Somaliland has vast deposits of uranium and lithium. The latter is a key component in the manufacturing of batteries and electric vehicles, and has seen its demand soar over recent years. In June 2024, it was announced that the Saudi company, Kilomass, had secured a license to explore lithium deposits in Somaliland, with interest shown by other companies.³⁶

Tourism

A final area of economic potential for Somaliland is tourism. There is clear demand for tourism in East Africa, as the record 2.4 million arrivals in Kenya in 2024 has shown.³⁷ Somaliland only welcomed 441 tourists in 2022³⁸, but with the benefits of recognition, this number could quickly grow.

Somaliland's natural diversity is one of its key selling points. Its habitats range from the semi-arid savannah inhabited by lions and antelopes to the mountain ranges of Cal Madow and Qar Golis and the coastal mangrove forest.

In addition to its scenic landscapes, Somaliland is home to a number of significant archaeological sites, including the 5,000-year-old cave art at Laas Geel and at Dhambalin

³² Michael Walls, "Somaliland's oil find could reset the regional balance: here's how", The Conversation, 27 January 2023, <https://theconversation.com/somalilands-oil-find-could-reset-the-regional-balance-heres-how-197995>.

³³ "Somaliland Oil Discovery Offshore, Marking Major Milestone", Warya TV, 24 May 2024, <https://www.waryatv.com/2024/05/24/somaliland-oil-discovery-offshore-marking-major-milestone/>.

³⁴ Walls, "Somaliland's oil find could reset the regional balance: here's how".

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Saudi Mining Company Kilomass Secures Lithium Exploration Deal in Somaliland", Somaliland Chronicle, 11 June 2024, <https://somalilandchronicle.com/2024/06/11/saudi-mining-company-kilomass-secures-lithium-exploration-deal-in-somaliland/>.

³⁷ "Kenya's Tourism Sector Shatters Records in 2024 with 2.4 Million International Arrivals", Business Radar, 19 February 2025, <https://www.businessradar.co.ke/blog/2025/02/19/kenyas-tourism-sector-shatters-records-in-2024-with-2-4-million-international-arrivals/>.

³⁸ "Tourism Analysis 2022", Somaliland Ministry of Trade and Tourism, <https://mott.govsomaliland.org/articles/somaliland-tourism-1>.

which are some of the finest examples of rock art in North Africa.³⁹ Other sites of historical interest include the ancient temples, tombs and other ruins at Haylan, Sheikh, Amud, Aw-Barkhadle, Aynabo, Maydh, El Ayo, Qa'ableh, and Qombo'ul.

Elsewhere, there are opportunities for eco-tourism. Geed-Deeble, which is roughly one hour's drive from Hargeisa, is home to the Cheetah Rescue and Conservation Centre, which is run by the Cheetah Conservation Fund and the Somaliland Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. This facility is not yet developed enough to welcome tourists, however, with plans to increase the number of sanctuaries and establish national parks across the country, Somaliland could soon become an eco-tourism hub.⁴⁰

Recognising Somaliland would provide the boost that Somaliland's nascent tourism industry needs. No longer conflated with the more unstable Somalia, it would be easier to obtain insurance and negotiate visa agreements. Moreover, recognition would facilitate access to funding to help develop key tourist sites and infrastructure. In turn, the influx of foreign money would be beneficial to the local economy and communities.

Unleashing Somaliland's Economic Potential

Somaliland has shown great economic resilience despite its unrecognised status. However, to further unlock its economic potential and unleash growth in the region, formal recognition is a *sine qua non*.

With access to loans, investment and trade partnerships, Somaliland could further develop critical assets such as its ports and improve its infrastructure to allow for the increased flow of trade. Moreover, with the greater legal certainty brought by recognition, foreign companies would have the confidence to undertake further exploration of Somaliland's natural resources and invest in the country more broadly. Not only would this allow Somaliland to diversify its economy and better shield itself against external economic shocks; it would also boost growth in the wider region by creating new trade routes for goods coming from countries such as Ethiopia.

At the same, recognising Somaliland would help the UK position itself to take advantage of increased trade flows in and out of the region, as well as the exploration and exploitation of natural resources. In this way, recognising Somaliland and unlocking its economic potential would bring immense benefits for the UK, for Somaliland and for the wider region.

³⁹ Sada Mire, "Somaliland: Archaeology in a breakaway state", *World Archaeology*, Issue 43, 7 September 2010, <https://www.world-archaeology.com/features/somaliland-archaeology-in-a-break-away-state/>.

The Strategic Case for Recognising Somaliland

The Horn of Africa has long been a strategically significant region. Positioned at the crossroads between Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, it is the stage for geopolitical battles ranging from resource competition and maritime security to counter-terrorism and trade.

The region's growing importance has not gone unnoticed to global powers. Many western nations, including the United States have established an economic and military foothold in the region through the port of Djibouti. The Gulf States have long-established commercial relationships with the region, and are investing heavily in infrastructure, for example, in the Port of Berbera.

Meanwhile, China is becoming increasingly dominant, most notably through its Belt and Road Initiative, which allows it to promote its economic, security and ideological interests throughout the region. Its support of Somalia is also reflective of its own One-China policy. In April 2025, Somalia banned the entry or transit of people of Taiwan; a move which China expressed its appreciation for.⁴¹ While not as big of a player as China, Russia is also seeking to strengthen relations with countries in the Horn of Africa to push back against western attempts to diplomatically isolate it for its invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, while it is worth noting that Somaliland has established itself as a beacon of stability; overall, the Horn of Africa is intensely volatile. It is beset by a number of security issues, ranging from Islamist terrorism and piracy to political instability and famine, which often have knock-on effects on the wider world and cannot afford to be ignored. In the words of Judd Devermont, the Africa programme director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “what happens in Africa does not stop at the water's edge”.⁴²

Similarly, many analysts argue that western policy towards Africa is incoherent, outdated and “in need of a facelift”.⁴³ This contrasts with nations such as China, whose grand strategy approach is allowing it to outflank the West. In this context, there are a number of ways in which recognising Somaliland would help the UK achieve its strategic goals in the region, and exert its power – both soft and hard.

Firstly, Somaliland has established a cheap and effective model for fighting terrorism, which could be expanded and exported to the wider region, and in doing so, contribute to the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism efforts.

Secondly, Somaliland's success in combatting piracy and its strategic geographical location make it an ideal partner in promoting maritime security in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb strait.

⁴¹ Wycliffe Muia, “Taiwan condemns Somalia travel ban”, BBC News, 30 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyqr1wgz4eo>

⁴² Judd Devermont, “A New U.S. Policy Framework for the African Century,” Center of Strategic and International Studies, August 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-us-policy-framework-african-century>.

⁴³ Ibid.

Thirdly, in a region where the United Kingdom's rivals, in particular, China, are gaining a foothold, Somaliland could provide a counterbalance to their growing influence. Indeed, Somaliland is a beacon of democracy in a region that is increasingly falling under the sway of autocratic and statist political models.

Overall, Somaliland is a capable security partner, an outpost of western values in a volatile region and a ready-made ally in a part of the world where Britain's allies are few and far between. Recognising Somaliland would allow Britain to gain a foothold in a strategic and contested region, and would be the first step towards a more coherent foreign policy in East Africa.

Somaliland: A Vital Ally in the Fight Against Terrorism

For the past two decades, a major challenge to the Horn of Africa's security and stability has been the Islamist group al-Shabaab. The group is particularly powerful in Somalia, where a combination of the government's failure to control its territory and al-Shabaab's increasing organisational competence has allowed it to operate as a shadow government and commit a number of terrorist attacks. Moreover, during the famine of 2022-23, they stymied Government relief efforts by targeting food deliveries and water wells in addition to expanding the taxation and confiscation of livestock in territories under their control.⁴⁴

However, al-Shabaab's malign influence extends beyond the Horn of Africa. According to Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute, al-Shabaab also has intentions to carry out attacks in western nations and even pursued the capability to bring down commercial planes.⁴⁵

Moreover, there is evidence of "increased smuggling activities" between al-Shabaab and the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, with weapons being funnelled through the northern Majerteen state (which is widely known as the self-declared, semi-independent, Darod-led state of Puntland) towards Yemen.⁴⁶ Indeed, according to Michael Horton, "the Yemen-Somalia arms trade is highly lucrative" and "the Houthi leadership views enhanced influence in the Horn of Africa as both critical to maintaining the flow of needed materiel and to securing new revenue streams and increased political leverage".⁴⁷ Not only does this new nexus of hostile actors add an extra layer of volatility to an already unstable region; but the flow of weapons to the Houthis also poses a serious threat to maritime security and needs to be stopped.

⁴⁴ "Conflict with Al-Shabaab in Somalia", Center for Preventative Action, 15 October 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/al-shabab-somalia>.

⁴⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, "Biden should reverse Trump's decision on Somalia", Critical Threats, 28 January 2021, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/biden-should-reverse-trumps-decision-on-somalia>.

⁴⁶ Eleonora Ardemagni, "How Trump can deliver on disrupting Red Sea weapons smuggling by the Houthis", Atlantic Council, 21 February 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/trump-red-sea-weapons-smuggling-yemen-houthis/>.

⁴⁷ Michael Horton, "Looking West: The Houthis' Expanding Footprint in the Horn of Africa", CTC Sentinel, Volume 17, Issue 11, December 2024, <https://etc.westpoint.edu/looking-west-the-houthis-expanding-footprint-in-the-horn-of-africa/>.

As such, despite their geographical distance from al-Shabaab's territory, fighting the group must remain a priority for countries such as the United Kingdom.

Since 2003, the United States has conducted air strikes, including decapitation strikes against al-Shabaab's leaders. In 2008, they designated the group a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) and have provided more than half a billion dollars in training and equipment to Somali forces. In addition, the AMISOM (now replaced by ATMIS) project has taken at least \$2 billion a year in fees paid directly to the 5 contributing states for their participation in the stabilisation force in Somalia.

Similarly, the United Kingdom has recently provided a funding package worth \$60 million to support regional and Somali-led efforts to counter al-Shabaab.⁴⁸ However, despite the West's best efforts, al-Shabaab continues to launch attacks against government forces, peacekeepers and civilians.

On the other hand, despite receiving next to no military or financial aid, Somaliland has thwarted al-Shabaab's attempts to establish an enduring foothold in its territory. In fact, al-Shabaab has not launched a large-scale attack since 2008, when it struck the presidential palace, the Ethiopian consulate and the UNDP offices in Hargeisa. This is particularly remarkable in light of Somaliland's limited financial and military resources, owing to its unrecognised status: the country has no air force, no drones, and its army only has 8,000 soldiers.

Despite these constraints, Somaliland's counter-terrorism efforts are a model to be emulated. First and foremost, their success can be attributed to the Somaliland government's ability to assert control over its territory. Unlike in Somalia, the presence of effective, predictable and reliable governance has prevented the emergence of a power vacuum through which al-Shabaab can present itself as an alternative to the central government. Moreover, "good governance guarantees buy-in from communities whose members are on the frontlines of the war against extremists".⁴⁹

A second element to Somaliland's success in fighting al-Shabaab is the establishment of informal intelligence gathering networks and the ensuing flow of reliable human intelligence. Drawing upon the success of Somaliland's hybrid model of governance, which merges centralised authority with traditional clan-based structures of power, citizens are encouraged to report threats to community leaders or clan elders, who in turn report the threat to the authorities at the district or regional level.⁵⁰

A particularly illustrative example of this method is recounted by the former Portuguese Europe Minister and journalist Bruno Maçães:

⁴⁸ Ambassador James Kariuki, "The UK is committed to working with African partners to build resilience against threats from terrorism: UK statement at the UN Security Council", gov.uk, 21 January 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-is-committed-to-working-with-african-partners-to-build-resilience-against-threats-from-terrorism-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>.

⁴⁹ Michael Horton, "Somaliland: A Success Story Without the Billions and Bombs", The American Conservative, 20 March 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/somaliland-a-success-story-without-the-billions-and-bombs/>.

⁵⁰ Michael Horton, "How Somaliland Combats Al-Shabaab", CTC Sentinel, November 2019, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/somaliland-combats-al-shabaab/>.

“Once, two old ladies near the Ethiopian border spotted a group of young men carrying weapons; they immediately reported them to the police. Even mothers are not above reporting their sons if they see a call from Mogadishu registered on their cell phones.”⁵¹

This method creates a virtuous circle, as locally-derived and effective governance creates consent and community buy-in, thereby strengthening intelligence networks and further contributing to security. Moreover, it comes at a significantly lower financial, material human cost than the approach used in neighbouring Somalia.

Nonetheless, it is not without its challenges: uneven governance, clan tensions and a lack of economic development in borderland regions such as the Cal Madaw mountain range make these communities a target for al-Shabaab; while Somaliland’s unrecognised status continues to put strain on the national budget.

As such, recognising Somaliland is key to the United Kingdom’s counter-terrorism efforts in the wider region. Recognising Somaliland would unlock further investment, allowing the nation to expand its already-successful efforts against al-Shabaab and secure parts of its territory that are at risk. Moreover, it would provide an opportunity for Somaliland to export its counter-terrorism strategy to neighbouring countries, and in doing so, promote stability and security across the region. In short, Somaliland is an example of how to use good governance to wage war on terror and win, and is a regional security partner that Britain cannot afford to ignore.

Enhancing Maritime Security

A second benefit to recognising Somaliland is the role it could play in guaranteeing maritime security by both fighting piracy and providing an outpost for naval operations in the region.

The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, vital arteries for world trade, have long been plagued by the threat of piracy. In 2013, at the time piracy peaked in the Horn of Africa, the World Bank estimated that \$18 billion was lost each year to attacks and ransoms.⁵² The threat was thought to have died down until early 2024, when it was reported that at least 14 vessels had been hijacked off the coast of Somalia in the previous three months.⁵³

Around the same time, in response to the outbreak of war in Gaza, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebel group began to launch missile and drone attacks on commercial vessels and even hijacked a ship. The intensity of violence in this region has grown considerably in the recent past and is likely to become worse in the near future. As a result, many major shipping

⁵¹ Bruno Maçães, “How to Fight Terror, the Somaliland Way”, Politico, 11 April 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/blogs/the-coming-wars/2018/04/how-to-fight-terror-the-somaliland-way/>.

⁵² Teo Kermeliotis, “Somali pirates cost global economy ‘\$18 billion a year’”, CNN, 12 April 2013, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/12/business/piracy-economy-world-bank/index.html#:~:text=A%20World%20Bank%20study%20says%20pirates%20off%20Somalia,near%20Hobyo%20town%2C%20northeastern%20Somalia%2C%20in%20January%202010.>

⁵³ Wedaeli Chibelushi, “Somalia piracy: Are we witnessing its return off the country's coast?”, BBC News, 3 February 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-68155471>.

companies ceased to use the Red Sea, instead taking a much longer route around southern Africa. In fact, according to the IMF, the percentage of global maritime trade volume passing through the Suez Canal dropped from 15% to 7.5% during this period.⁵⁴ This figure is indicative of the direct correlation between the Horn of Africa's stability and the success of global commerce.

As with the fight against Islamist terrorism, Somaliland has been largely successful in its anti-piracy efforts – indeed, Somaliland's counter-terrorism strategy is modelled on its anti-piracy strategy.⁵⁵ With the coast guard unable to monitor its 528 miles of coastline due to limited resources, the country has relied on training and deputising local residents to act as shoreline monitors and report any suspicious activity. As a result, there have to date been no recorded acts of piracy originating from Somaliland's coast.

Notably, like with its counter-terrorism strategy, Somaliland has achieved success at a very low cost. In 2010, during the peak of attacks, the overall cost of Somaliland's anti-piracy programme came to less than \$500,000, while western nations were spending exorbitant amounts to lesser effect off the coast of Somalia.⁵⁶

Somaliland's model is one to be expanded, emulated and exported to other countries in the Horn of Africa. Moreover, a Somaliland that is emboldened and strengthened through recognition would be able to fully utilise its long coastline and strategic location for anti-piracy operations.

A second way in which Somaliland could contribute towards maritime security is the role that the Port of Berbera could play in naval operations. Currently, Djibouti is the location of choice in the region for naval bases, and hosts more foreign military bases than any other country in the world, including America's Camp Lemonnier. While there is a British military presence at Camp Lemonnier, the United Kingdom has no base of its own in the region. However, Berbera could soon become a rival to Djibouti as a key base for foreign militaries.

In addition to its strategic location, the Port of Berbera is a deepwater port, which allows it to accommodate larger ships and more traffic. Moreover, the port is situated one mile away from the airport, which is home to one of Africa's longest runways and an emergency landing strip formerly used by NASA.⁵⁷

The United Arab Emirates has wasted no time in capitalising on Berbera's potential. As part of their strategy to counterbalance Iranian influence and deter further Houthi aggression, they have established military bases nearby which allows them to monitor and rapidly respond to any threats.

⁵⁴ Louisa Brooke-Holland, "The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea", House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 18 April 2024, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10000/CBP-10000.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Horton, "How Somaliland Combats Al-Shabaab".

⁵⁶ Horton, "Somaliland: A Success Story Without the Billions and Bombs".

⁵⁷ Eric Navarro, "The Somaliland Alternative: Securing Future Global Shipping Amid the Houthi Threat", Middle East Forum Observer, 20 January 2025, <https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/the-somaliland-alternative-securing-future-global-shipping-amid-the-houthi-threat>.

Notably, as demonstrated by the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Ethiopia and statements made by Somaliland's representative to the United States,⁵⁸ Somaliland is willing to host foreign militaries in Berbera in exchange for potential recognition. It goes without saying that this presents a colossal opportunity for the United Kingdom to establish a military presence in the Horn of Africa.

As such, recognising Somaliland provides an opportunity to enhance maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden not only by allowing Somaliland to expand its anti-piracy efforts, but also by facilitating further development of key assets such as the Port of Berbera.

Counter-balancing China and Russia

Thirdly, an independent Somaliland would allow Britain to compete with other powers in the region and counterbalance the growing influence of hostile states.

Many analysts argue that the West, unlike rivals such as China, lacks a “grand strategy of engagement” and instead “seems to be in a permanent state of re-evaluating its place in the region”.⁵⁹ Recognising Somaliland would mark the first step towards a more decisive and coherent long-term strategy for East Africa, and would allow Britain to re-establish influence in the region.

Under the premiership of Xi Jinping, China has sought to expand its economic and thereby political and ideological power in the Horn of Africa. In 2022, China made a statement of intent by announcing its first special political envoy to the region and in doing so, rendering explicit its more proactive approach to the region.⁶⁰

China's involvement in the Horn of Africa is widespread. In August 2017, China officially opened a naval base in Djibouti, just a few miles from America's Camp Lemonnier. Similarly, China has loaned Djibouti \$1 billion for investment projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative,⁶¹ and in 2023, Djibouti signed a preliminary agreement with a Chinese Space firm to build a launch site for satellites and rockets in the country.⁶²

Nonetheless, the poster child for the Belt and Road Initiative in the Horn of Africa is undoubtedly Ethiopia. Ethiopia joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018, and since then, China has provided loans and investments for projects including a railway from Addis Ababa

⁵⁸ David Joseph, “Somaliland Ready to Offer U.S. Military Base in Strategic Coast of Berbera”, Horn Observer, 22 December 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/3081/Somaliland-Ready-to-Offer-US-Military-Base-in-Strategic-Coast-of-Berbera>.

⁵⁹ Ryan Hess, “Counterbalancing Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa: A Strategy for Security and Stability”, Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Air University, 18 November 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2847035/counterbalancing-chinese-influence-in-the-horn-of-africa-a-strategy-for-security/>.

⁶⁰ Andres Schipani, “China envoy appointment signals deeper ties with Horn of Africa”, Financial Times, 24 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/71535e80-b862-4946-b1b2-d15bbe51f3f5>.

⁶¹ [Counterbalancing Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa: A Strategy for Security and Stability > Air University \(AU\) > Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs Article Display](#)

⁶² Chinedu Okafor, “Djibouti signs a \$1 billion deal with Hong Kong to build a spaceport in the horn of Africa”, Business Insider Africa, 10 January 2023, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/djibouti-signs-a-dollar1-billion-deal-with-honk-kong-to-build-a-spaceport-in-the-horn/4x6wwd9>.

to Djibouti, the expansion of Addis Ababa's airport, and even the headquarters of the African Union.⁶³

However, China's interests are more than just economic and commercial. As Michael Mazarr argues:

*"[China's] willingness to provide Ethiopia, Djibouti, and even Somalia with economic and political support typifies their strategy of utilising influence and soft power to bring about political objectives. The goal is not military supremacy or even economic advantage, but rather 'the power to exercise predominant influence over the defining ideas, rules, and institutions of world [or, in this case, regional] politics.'"*⁶⁴

By investing in nations such as Ethiopia, China creates political alliances that have been vital in securing China's United Nations Security Council seat. In particular, Ethiopia's political clout in institutions such as the African Union helped China garner support in times of crisis, for example, during disputes over the South China Sea.⁶⁵

Moreover, by flexing its economic muscles, China aims to export its model of autocratic, statist development as an alternative to the western, democratic model.⁶⁶ For instance, activists have claimed that China has enabled political repression within Ethiopia by providing the government with technologies such as surveillance cameras and satellite jamming equipment, or, as was reported in 2018, by bugging the African Union Headquarters.⁶⁷

Elsewhere, while Russia has been largely absent from the region, there are signs that it is looking to recapture its influence and build new partnerships. In December 2024, it was announced that the Russian government had agreed to write off \$48.1 million in debt owed by Somalia in a move that was widely viewed by analysts as an attempt to bolster relations with African nations and hedge against western efforts to isolate Russia.⁶⁸

Furthermore, Russia is well-positioned to replicate the strategy of exploiting regional instability for strategic gains that it has employed to great effect across Africa. For instance, the many internal conflicts in countries such as Sudan or Somalia offer Russia an opportunity to provide arms, military support or simply diplomatic backing in exchange for other strategic concessions.

The third main actor in the Horn of Africa is the Gulf States. Particularly proactive are the United Arab Emirates, who have established a military base near Berbera and train

⁶³ Brooke-Holland, "The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea".

⁶⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, "The Essence of the Strategic Competition with China," National Defense University Press, 21 October 2020, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

⁶⁵ Daniel Kibsgaard, "Sino-Ethiopian Relations from Meles Zenawi to Abiy Ahmed: The Political Economy of a Strategic Partnership", China Research Center, 2020, <https://www.chinacenter.net/2020/china-currents/19-2/sino-ethiopian-relations-from-meles-zenawi-to-abi-ahmed-the-political-economy-of-a-strategic-partnership/>.

⁶⁶ Anca-Elena Ursu and Willem van den Berg, "China and the EU in the Horn of Africa: competition and cooperation?", Clingendael Institute, April 2018, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/PB_China_and_the_EU_in_the_Horn_of_Africa.pdf.

⁶⁷ Ghalia Kadiri, "A Addis-Abeba, le siège de l'Union africaine espionné par Pékin", Le Monde Afrique, 26 January 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/01/26/a-addis-abeba-le-siege-de-l-union-africaine-espionne-par-les-chinois_5247521_3212.html.

⁶⁸ "Russia forgives Somalia's Soviet-era debt", TASS News Agency, 20 December 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1890961>.

Somaliland forces. As previously noted, this outpost will be instrumental in deterring aggression from the Houthis and in monitoring Iran. In terms of soft power, Dubai-based DP has been central in the development of the Port of Berbera, which is set to expand trade flows between Somaliland and the Gulf.⁶⁹

In this context, it is vital that Britain establishes a strong presence in the Horn of Africa by recognising and thus aligning itself with Somaliland. Somaliland is a natural ally to the United Kingdom and could provide an important counterbalance to the influence of rivals like China. For example, in 2020, Somaliland officially recognised Taiwan and in doing so, contradicted the One China policy adhered to by most other African nations. Similarly, Somaliland has received less investment than its neighbours, and as such, is not beholden to the same economic and political dependencies.

Crucially, as a nation that has chosen a democratic path of development, Somaliland has withstood the allure of the state-driven, autocratic approach endorsed by Russia and China. As such, it could function as a bastion of western soft power in a region where western influence is otherwise waning.

Overall, when it comes to the Horn of Africa, it is clear that Britain is falling behind other powers. Recognising Somaliland and establishing strong diplomatic relations with the country would be the first step towards remedying this.

Somaliland: Too Strategic to Ignore

In summary, Somaliland is a ready-made ally in a region where Britain needs more allies. Not only would partnering with Somaliland allow Britain to pursue its hard power goals, such as its counter-terrorism efforts and naval operations, but it would also translate into significant soft power by bolstering the UK's economic presence in the region and showcasing the power of democratic governance.

Based on all these factors, the recognition of Somaliland is a crucial step that Britain must take towards regaining a strategic foothold in East Africa and being competitive in this increasingly significant part of the world.

⁶⁹ Hassan Hassan and Rana Mamdouh, "How the Gulf States Are Exerting Their Influence in Africa", New Lines Magazine, 11 September 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/how-the-gulf-states-are-exerting-their-influence-in-africa/>.

The Moral Case for Recognition

The final argument for recognising Somaliland is simple: recognising Somaliland is the right thing to do. While there are many strong realist and pragmatic arguments in favour of recognition, there is also a strong moral case for supporting Somaliland's independence.

First and foremost, recognition would entail acknowledgement of the historical fact that is the Somaliland genocide, and thus the inherent injustice of asking Somalilanders to place their faith in Somalia.

Secondly, recognition would validate Somaliland's success in establishing democracy against the odds. Thirdly, the recognition of Somaliland would be beneficial for the wider region in that it could catalyse other democratic transitions and export its successful approach to security matters. Finally, recognition would allow for the direct flow of humanitarian aid into Somaliland, preventing disasters and facilitating long-term development.

Acknowledging the Somaliland Genocide

In the first place, the United Kingdom has a moral imperative to recognise Somaliland in light of the genocide conducted by the Somali regime against Somalilanders between 1987 and 1989. It goes without saying that it is deeply unjust to expect Somalilanders to form a nation with those who oppressed them, and that independence is the only manner in which they can ensure their rights and safety are protected. Moreover, recognition would open avenues towards ensuring the perpetrators of the genocide are brought to justice.

In two short years, from 1987 to 1989, approximately 200,000 members of the Isaaq tribe, the largest clan in Somaliland, were massacred by the brutal authoritarian regime of Maxamed Siad Barre. During this period, wells were poisoned, villages were burned to the ground, and civilians were rounded up and executed.⁷⁰

This genocidal campaign reached its brutal apex with the destruction of Hargeisa in May 1988. A lethal combination of fighter jets and ground troops reduced 90% of the city to rubble and killed more than 40,000 people. The journalist Mark Brabury recalled that in 1991, "Hargeisa from the air, resembled a city of dry swimming pools, which on closer inspection were shells of houses whose roofs had been systematically looted during the war".⁷¹

⁷⁰ Almami Cyallah and John Prendergast, "Genocide in the Horn of Africa", The Washington Post, 30 June 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/07/01/genocide-in-the-horn-of-africa/b6f59cf0-5061-4223-82fb-35e6a7109b46/>.

⁷¹ Sarah G. Phillips, "When there was no aid: War and Peace in Somaliland", Cornell University Press, 2020, p.5.

The destruction wrought resulted in 300,000 refugees fleeing to neighbouring Ethiopia. The small border town at which they arrived, Hart Sheikh, became the largest refugee camp from 1988 until it closed in 2004.⁷²

There is no doubt as to the intent behind this violence. A report commissioned by the US State Department in 1989 notes that “the appearance that victims were selected for...killings principally because of their ethnic identity is unmistakable”.⁷³ Moreover, according to a 2001 UN report, “the crime of genocide was conceived, planned and perpetrated by the Somalia Government against the Isaaq people of northern Somalia”.⁷⁴

The memory of this violence still permeates Somaliland society. A particularly poignant symbol of this the Malko-Durduro, a dry seasonal river just outside Hargeisa, which has been nicknamed “the Valley of Death” due to the human bones that were seen protruding from the ground when they were uncovered by heavy rains in May 1997. This river was the location for almost 200 mass graves, where opponents of the Barre regime were shot and buried.⁷⁵

Indeed, scholars such as Sarah Phillips have even argued that Somaliland’s ability and desire to maintain peace is motivated by the nation’s memory of war, and she emphasises the key role that the collective memory of violence plays in Somaliland’s national identity.⁷⁶

With the international community refusing to recognise Somaliland, the brutalities endured during this period also remain largely unrecognised. Most perpetrators have escaped justice and fled to countries such as the US and Canada. The Somaliland War Crimes Investigations Commission, founded by Somaliland’s first president, has attempted to find mass graves, offer proper burials to victims, and bring those responsible to justice, however, without international support and funding, its work is severely limited.

In short, the extent of the violence witnessed during the genocide is such that recognising Somaliland’s independence from Somalia, the very state that perpetrated this violence, is simply the correct thing to do. Indeed, in similar instances such as in Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, union has not been forced between victims and perpetrators of genocidal violence. Moreover, recognition would be a step towards securing justice for victims and ensuring those responsible are held accountable.

Rewarding Good Governance

Secondly, to recognise Somaliland would be to validate its efforts towards establishing a stable democracy and to make a stand for good governance. As previously argued, this would bolster British soft power in the region by promoting western values and democratic

⁷² Ismail Einashe and Matt Kennard, “In the Valley of Death: Somaliland’s Forgotten Genocide”, Pulitzer Center, 22 October 2018, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/valley-death-somalilands-forgotten-genocide>.

⁷³ As cited in “Somalia (Isaaq genocide)”, Genocide Studies Program, The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International & Area Studies at Yale, <https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/somalia-isaaq-genocide>.

⁷⁴ Einashe and Kennard, “In the Valley of Death”.

⁷⁵ James Reinl, “Investigating genocide in Somaliland”, Al Jazeera, 6 February 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/2/6/investigating-genocide-in-somaliland>.

⁷⁶ Phillips, “When there was no aid”, p.2.

development. However, this aspect to the case for recognition is more than just a pragmatic one; it is a moral one too: Somaliland has done what the developed world has asked of it, it has adhered to democratic principles, and it sets an example to its neighbours. As such, recognising Somaliland is not just good for British soft power, it is also good for promoting democracy and progress.

Indeed, against the odds, Somaliland has demonstrated a commitment to establishing democratic norms and has even been termed a “regional democratic superpower”⁷⁷ and “the most democratic country in the Horn of Africa”.⁷⁸ Somaliland held its most recent elections in November 2024, which saw a peaceful transfer of power from the incumbent Muse Bihi Abdi to Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi and made it only one of five African countries that year that saw an election won by an opposition party.

While Somaliland’s democracy is not perfect and has seen recent elections delayed, its progress towards democratic governance places it leaps and bounds ahead of its neighbours. Ethiopia has seen a mere two political transitions since 1990, one of which was the violent overthrowing of the Derg regime in 1991. Djibouti remains under the full control of Ismail Omar Guelleh and Eritrea does not hold elections at all. Meanwhile, Somalia is embroiled in a constitutional crisis and is in many regions governed by armed militias such as Al-Shabaab.

Similarly, Somaliland is significantly freer than many of its East African neighbours. In 2024, Freedom House’s rankings of political rights and civil liberties categorised Somaliland as “partly free” with a score of 42/100. This compares to Ethiopia’s score of 22, Djibouti’s score of 24, Somalia’s score of 7 and Eritrea’s score of 2, which render them “unfree”. The only other country in the region to come near to Somaliland’s ranking and also hold the status of “partly free” was Kenya, with a score of 48.⁷⁹

A further metric by which Somaliland outperforms its neighbours is peace. The Upsala Conflict Data Programme estimates that there were 25,793 conflict-related deaths in Somalia between 1997 and 2017, while there were just over 300 in Somaliland during roughly the same period.⁸⁰ In fact, from 1996 until 2020, Somaliland experienced 1% of the deaths related to conflict that were suffered in Somalia.⁸¹

Furthermore, Somaliland has embraced the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and made efforts to promote gender equality. Its politics feature female ministers and mayors, and it even has a female police force. Similarly, the recent presidential election saw an increased participation of women, with many casting their votes and overseeing the smooth running of polling stations.

This is not to downplay the progress that still needs to be made in the domain of human rights. Gender-based violence and female genital mutilation remains a widespread issue,

⁷⁷ Greg Mills, John Githongo, John Steenhuisen, Abbasali Haji, Chipokota Mwanawasa and Tendai Biti, “Somaliland: The Power of Democracy”, Royal United Services Institute (Commentary), 4 June 2021, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/somaliland-power-democracy>.

⁷⁸ Mikael Torstensson, “Somaliland: The Most Democratic Country in the Horn of Africa?”, Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 14 June 2017, <https://unpo.org/somaliland-the-most-democratic-country-in-the-horn-of-africa/>.

⁷⁹ Mills, Githongo, Steenhuisen, Haji, Mwanawasa and Biti, “Somaliland: The Power of Democracy”.

⁸⁰ Philips, “When there was no aid”, p.5

⁸¹ Ibid, p.6.

freedom of religion is restricted, and gay men still face long jail terms. These are all obstacles that Somaliland will need to confront as it develops further.

However, despite these challenges, Somaliland remains a regional outlier, and ought to be validated as such. This is particularly important considering the setbacks that democracy faces in Africa: 2024 saw the lowest number of sub-Saharan African countries categorised as “free” in Freedom House’s rankings since 1991.⁸² Indeed, to recognise Somaliland as an independent country is to recognise the importance of building democracy and good governance no matter how difficult the circumstances.

Promoting Regional Stability

Recognising Somaliland would demonstrate that progress and development is to be rewarded. In doing so, it would provide an incentive for other states to commit to democratisation and good governance and could potentially catalyse positive change across the region. This move would be particularly wise at a time when countries such as China are seeking to export autocratic modes of development and rewarding African nations for their political and ideological alignment with investments.

Moreover, Somaliland’s model of governance, which marries modern institutions with traditional structures, is one that could be emulated in other post-conflict states in the region. In their analysis of Somaliland’s politics, Michael Walls and Steve Kibble note that “many African states struggle to reconcile traditional social institutions within colonially defined borders” and that “the relationship between identity, nation and territory” remains a point of contention in countries that are divided along clan lines.⁸³

By integrating traditional social systems into a democratic framework, Somaliland’s “hybrid model” provides a solution to this problem. While the President and the House of Representatives are elected, the Upper House of Somaliland’s legislature, the Guurti, is comprised of clan elders and is “widely credited with helping establish and maintain peace in Somaliland’s first decade of existence”.⁸⁴ Similarly, clan elders still play an integral role in mediation and conflict resolution.

According to Walls and Kibble, “Somaliland illustrates the efficacy of internally-driven, culturally-rooted, bottom-up approaches to post-war nation-building [...] reconciling indigenous cultures and traditions with modernity”. It also undermines “the assumption that there needs to be a strong, centralised, post-colonial state”.⁸⁵ While Somaliland’s hybrid model undoubtedly faces challenges, its commitment to community buy-in, compromise and reconciliation sets an example to other states in the region.

⁸² Mills, Githongo, Steenhuisen, Haji, Mwanawasa and Biti, “Somaliland: The Power of Democracy”.

⁸³ Michael Walls and Steve Kibble, “Beyond Polarity: Negotiating a Hybrid State in Somaliland”, *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798905?seq=1>, p.52.

⁸⁴ Scott Pegg, “Somaliland: A partial, fragile, small yet significant de facto state victory” from Godfrey Baldacchino, “The Success of Small States in International Relations: Mice that Roar?”, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023, p.175.

⁸⁵ Walls and Kibble, “Beyond Polarity”, p.33.

In addition to promoting and exporting good governance, an independent Somaliland could also promote regional stability by expanding its successful anti-piracy and counter-terrorism strategies. As explored above, Somaliland has developed an efficient model for containing security threats such as Al-Shabaab, and in contrast to its neighbours, has seen few instances of piracy or terrorism in the last two decades. Recognition would enable Somaliland to expand its operations and export its successful approach to its neighbours, and in doing so, help the region resolve a longstanding security question that has been a barrier to economic development and political stability.

Facilitating Humanitarian Work

A third moral argument for recognising Somaliland is the importance of recognition in allowing humanitarian aid to flow directly into Somaliland rather than through the intermediary of Somalia.

While it has been convincingly argued by many academics that the absence of international aid and ensuing self-nurtured resilience has contributed to Somaliland's stability, Somalilanders are increasingly recognising that they need more help from outside in order to overcome the challenges they face.

One such challenge is Somaliland's vulnerability to drought, and therefore hunger and famine. The Horn of Africa saw periods of famine and hunger in 2011, 2017, and most recently in 2022/3, when it was estimated that 19.4 million people across the region were directly affected.⁸⁶ Not only does food insecurity have an immense impact on people's lives and livelihoods, but the accompanying internal displacements and migratory movements also have the potential to jeopardise Somaliland's stability.

In addition to natural and climatic threats, Somaliland is confronted by a range of social issues, such as youth unemployment. Over 70% of Somaliland's population is under the age of 30, however, with economic opportunities few and far between, many young people are left without work. There is no symbol of this brewing crisis that is more potent than the second-hand taxis, known colloquially as *hooyo ha tahriibin* (my son, do not tahriib), that flood the streets of Hargeisa. These taxis are bought for children by parents to dissuade them from *tahriib*, the local term for illegal and dangerous migration to Europe across the Mediterranean.⁸⁷

A final challenge is the poor status of women: it is estimated that 98% of women in Somaliland have undergone female genital mutilation, while 9% of women aged 15-49 were

⁸⁶ "Horn of Africa: CERF and the Ethiopia and Somalia Funds", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22 August 2022,

https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/Horn%20of%20Africa_CERF%20CBPFs_22%20August.pdf.

⁸⁷ Nimo-ilhan Ali, "Parents in Somaliland are going to great lengths to stop their children from migrating to Europe", London School of Economics Blog, 8 June 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2016/06/08/parents-in-somaliland-are-going-to-great-lengths-to-stop-their-children-from-migrating-to-europe/>.

married before their fifteenth birthday. Furthermore, the maternal mortality rate is 396 per 100,000 live births, which places it amongst the twenty-five worst countries in the world.⁸⁸

It is clear that despite Somaliland's stability, it still faces significant developmental hurdles. However, since Somaliland is not internationally recognised, it is hard for it to access aid directly as most funds are channelled through Somalia. For instance, as of September 2021, the UN's Somalia Humanitarian Fund only allocated 4% of its \$39 million annual fund to Somaliland, despite Somaliland's population equating to 36% of the overall population of Somalia and Somaliland combined.⁸⁹ It has been suggested that this is due to a lack of localisation rather than explicit preference, however, it does not take away from the fact that Somaliland's lack of recognition is a barrier to it receiving the localised aid it requires.

In April 2024, the Somaliland Government sought to overcome this issue by proposing a "Special Arrangement for Somaliland Development and Human Aid" that would facilitate the direct engagement of donors with Somaliland's institutions and bypass Somalia. The measures proposed by this plan included, among others, the establishment of a regular donor aid allocation and coordination forum and the reinstatement of the Somaliland Partnership Forum. The Somaliland Ministry of Planning justified this decision by claiming that:

Any intermediary involvement by other countries undermines Somaliland's development, investment, and humanitarian efforts, given the sensitivity surrounding Somaliland's self-determination issue.

*We firmly assert the need for international aid to remain untainted by political conflicts between nations and regions and not divert from its primary objective of uplifting the well-being of all individuals, including children, women, and marginalized groups, irrespective of their political affiliations or beliefs.*⁹⁰

However, this is no substitute for the formalised and structured direct aid that would come as a result of recognition. This would not only help prevent and mitigate future humanitarian disasters, but could also contribute to the long-term social and economic development of the country and would promote the soft power of donor countries.

The Right Thing to Do

The moral arguments in favour of recognising Somaliland explored above do not contradict the more pragmatic arguments; rather, as has been shown, they often overlap with them and compliment them. Indeed, they demonstrate that recognising Somaliland is a win-win and would be beneficial for the United Kingdom as well as for Somalilanders, as the next – and final chapter of this report – will show.

⁸⁸ Pegg, "Somaliland: A partial, fragile, small yet significant de facto state victory", p.180.

⁸⁹ Dustin Barter and Gun Mai Sumlut, "Humanitarian access, localisation, and (dis)empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland", Disasters, vol.47, no.4, October 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36484543/>, p. 860

⁹⁰ "Special Arrangement for Somaliland Development and Humanitarian Aid", Ministry of Planning and National Development of the Republic of Somaliland, 22 April 2024, <https://mopnd.govsomaliland.org/article/special-arrangement-somaliland-development-and-humanitarian>.

Why should the United Kingdom show leadership in recognising Somaliland?

There is currently much talk about whether US President Donald Trump will make the decision to recognise Somaliland. However, the door is still wide open for the United Kingdom to show leadership on this issue. First and foremost, the UK is the UN penholder on issues relating to Somalia. Moreover, the UK enjoys a privileged relationship with Somaliland owing to its shared history, economic ties, and large Somaliland diaspora. As such, the UK is uniquely positioned to take the initiative on the issue of Somaliland's recognition, and in doing so, strengthen its diplomatic relations with the country further.

The UK as UN Penholder

The first reason for the UK to take the lead in recognising Somaliland is straightforward: as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the United Kingdom is the penholder for Somalia. The penholder system is a working method within the Security Council that assigns a certain member "leadership" on a given issue.

In practice, this means that the UK is the member of the Council that leads the negotiation and drafting of resolutions on agenda items pertaining to Somalia; and that it takes the initiative on Council activities such as organising emergency meetings, open debates and visiting missions. In plainer terms, this means that when it comes to Somaliland, the UK has the authority to set the agenda and take leadership.

Historical Ties between the UK and Somaliland

Secondly, the United Kingdom has a historic relationship with Somaliland and a shared history that continues to shape both countries to this day. The relationship between the United Kingdom and Somaliland dates back to the late nineteenth century, when the UK signed treaties with a number of local tribes to establish the protectorate of British Somaliland. Due to the indirect nature of British rule, this period did not see a radical reconfiguring of Somaliland's politics, economy or society along British lines. However, as will be explored in greater depth below, this period laid the foundation for the development of the Somaliland diaspora in the UK, with sailors from Somaliland beginning to settle in British port cities such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff.

Moreover, it was during this period that Somalilanders fought alongside British soldiers in a number of military conflicts, including both World Wars. Testament to this shared historical memory is the presence of Commonwealth War Graves at the War Cemetery in Hargeisa, which contains 115 Commonwealth Burials from World War II, two burials from World War I

and eleven non-war burials.⁹¹ The cemetery is also home to the Berbera Memorial, moved there in 1962, which commemorates the over 100 men who died in operations in British Somaliland during World War I and whose graves are not known.⁹²

In particular, Somalilanders played a vital role during the East Africa Campaign from when Mussolini's Italy invaded British Somaliland in August 1940 until it was recaptured in March 1941. While, unfortunately, the contribution of Somalilanders to British efforts have not been adequately remembered, traces of their shared struggle remain and there is much anecdotal evidence of friendship between British and Somaliland troops, for example, in the Burma campaign, where East African troops, including Somalilanders, were present.

One such example is the friendship forged between Eric Wilson, a British Lieutenant who had attended Sandhurst, and Omar Kujoog, a Somalilander. Having originally met in the 1930s, they fought alongside one another during the fight against the invading Italian army in August 1940. It was as they stood side by side defending a hillside that Kujoog was struck and killed by an enemy shell. Following his return to Britain, Wilson was awarded the Victoria Cross, which he considered as shared with Kujoog and other Somaliland soldiers; and whenever he was interviewed about his experience during the war, he always recalled the contribution of Somalilanders. Later in life, he even met Kujoog's son, and his family have established a centre for Somali heritage and culture as a tribute to their father's and Kujoog's bond.⁹³

A final cornerstone of the historic relationship between the United Kingdom and Somaliland is the role that British education played in shaping the Somaliland political elite, and in particular, the prominence of Sheikh School.

Sheikh School was built by the British protectorate administration in 1958 in the town of Sheikh, located between Berbera and Burao. It was a privately-funded, merit-based boarding school that offered free tuition to the top male students in Somaliland, followed the British curriculum, and offered the British General Certificate of Education, or O-levels. The first headmaster of the school was Richard Darlington, who had served as the commander of the Somaliland Protectorate's contingent in Burma during World War II, and worked at the school until he was forced to leave Somaliland by Barre in 1971. During Darlington's time as headmaster, students had the opportunity to apply to attend university abroad, with the top ten students typically going to university in the UK.

While it only accepted 50 students per year between its establishment in 1958 and its destruction by the Barre regime in 1989, Sheikh School's impact on Somaliland cannot be understated. Many of the SNM leaders who participated in Somaliland's peace process had attended the school, and four out of six of Somaliland's presidents, including the incumbent Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, are alumni of the school. Indeed, out of a list of 57 major political and technocratic actors within Somaliland compiled by Sarah Phillips, out of the 50 for whom educational details could be found, 25 attended Sheikh School and followed a British educational model.⁹⁴

⁹¹ "Hargeisa War Cemetery", Commonwealth War Graves, <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/91622/hargeisa-war-cemetery/>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Adan Yusuf Abokor, "The Somaliland Camel Corps: The Forgotten Soldiers", Hargeysa Cultural Center, 18 February 2016, <http://www.hargeysaculturalcenter.org/the-somaliland-camel-corps-the-forgotten-soldiers/>

⁹⁴ Phillips, "When there was no aid", p.79.

Despite being closed by Barre in 1989 and subsequently falling into disrepair, the school's profound impact on Somaliland has not been forgotten. One graduate from the school recounts that "Sheikh School had a major influence on Somaliland...there was a democratic culture there with the rule of law.... Elite leadership was trained in us there".⁹⁵ Another claims that in order for Somaliland to be successful, "all we need is three Sheikh Schools". In this way, past British influence remains part of Somaliland's present and can perhaps even inspire future opportunities for collaboration.⁹⁶

Overall, the historical links between the United Kingdom and Somaliland are extensive, and their impact can be felt in both countries on both a national and a personal level. These ties have the potential to translate into a more tangible diplomatic relationship and give the United Kingdom authority and leadership on issues such as recognition.

The Somaliland Diaspora

In addition to and as a consequence of the historic relationship between the UK and Somaliland, there is a large Somaliland diaspora in the UK. The role of the diaspora in forging and strengthening diplomatic relationships between countries is well documented, indeed, many even term diasporas "diplomatic actors in their own right".⁹⁷

Somalilanders first began to settle in the UK during the late 19th century as a result of the UK's involvement in British Somaliland. The first arrivals were mainly merchants and lascars, who made their home in the docklands of port cities such as Liverpool, Cardiff and London. An 1894 Act of Parliament restricted Somalis to working in the shipping industry and living in centres of shipping until the 1950s.⁹⁸ To this day, the largest Somaliland communities can be found in places such as London's old docklands, Cardiff and Liverpool.

Further immigrants arrived as part of the Royal Navy during World War II, and in 1953, there were around 600 Somalis living in the UK.⁹⁹ In the decades that followed, students from British Somaliland came to the UK to study. The flux of Somalilanders to the UK increased exponentially with the onset of the civil war in Somaliland, and by 1999, 53% of Somali asylum applications in Europe were made in the United Kingdom.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.80.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.81.

⁹⁷ Elaine L. E Ho and Fiona McConnell, "Conceptualizing 'diaspora diplomacy': Territory and populations betwixt the domestic and foreign", *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(2), p.236, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517740217>

⁹⁸ "The Somali Community in the Port of London", Royal Museums Greenwich, retrieved 22 June 2015, <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.109/chapterId/2320/The-Somali-Community-in-the-Port-of-London.html>

⁹⁹ "Post-Conflict Identities: Practices and Affiliations of Somali Refugee Children – Briefing Notes", The University of Sheffield, August 2005, retrieved using <https://web.archive.org/web/20120308182913/http://www.identities.group.sheffield.ac.uk/pdfs/Briefing%20Somali%20Migration%20to%20the%20UK.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ David Griffiths, "FMO Country Guide: Somalia", Oxford: Forced Migration Online, July 2003, <http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo016/fmo016.pdf>, p.23.

In the 2021 census, roughly 27,000 people recorded themselves as a “Somalilander”.¹⁰¹ There are many active Somalilander diaspora organisations, and prominent UK Somalilanders include figures such as Maya Jama, Mo Farah, Rageh Omaar and Abdirashid Duale.

The Somaliland diaspora plays a key role in promoting better understanding of Somaliland and making the case for its recognition in the UK. However, it has also been instrumental in furthering development back home: for example, the Somaliland diaspora in the UK was the most important source of material, financial and organisational support during the early years of the University of Hargeisa, an important institution that has the potential to significantly enhance local human capital.¹⁰²

This is but one example of the positive role that the diaspora plays as an informal bridge between the two countries, and as a vector for development. It suggests that the diaspora has the potential to play a larger role in strengthening the formal partnership between Somaliland and the UK, and that if its influence was leveraged fully, it could position the UK as one of Somaliland’s key diplomatic partners.

Economic Ties between the UK and Somaliland

A fourth and final pillar of the United Kingdom’s unique relationship with Somaliland is trade and investment. The economic potential of Somaliland is clear, and the UK is particularly well placed to develop a strong commercial relationship with it. As previously noted, British International Investment have been a key player in the development of the Port of Berbera, and many British companies, such as Genel, have taken the lead in exploring Somaliland’s untapped natural resources.

Owing to the large Somaliland diaspora, the United Kingdom is also a key point of origin for remittances. In fact, the largest Somali money transfer operator, Dahabshiil, is headquartered in London and is led by a British Somalilander, Abdirashid Duale.

Similarly, when it comes to the little foreign aid that Somaliland receives, “the UK is one of the largest and most respected donors”.¹⁰³ Through the multi-donor Somaliland Development Fund, worth £25 million, the United Kingdom has helped finance projects such as road rehabilitation, improved access to safe drinking water and enhanced agricultural productivity.¹⁰⁴ While this programme also encompasses Denmark and the Netherlands, the UK has taken a leadership role and leveraged other countries’ funds by coupling them with the FCDO’s programme and advisory expertise. Indeed, the FCDO’s 2024 report on the

¹⁰¹ “Census 2021: Country of Birth (Extended)”, Office for National Statistics, 28 March 2023, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/create/filter-outputs/83825f2c-26fe-4220-869e-24b979100279#get-data>

¹⁰² Matthew MacGregor, Fawzia Yusuf H. Adam and Saad Ali Shire, “Diaspora and Development: Lessons from Somaliland”, *Int. J. Technology and Globalisation*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2008, p. 248.

¹⁰³ “Business Case for Somaliland Development Fund (SDF) Phase II Programme”, Gov.uk Development Tracker, August 2024, p.6, <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-GOV-1-300368/documents>

¹⁰⁴ “Annual Review (2024) of Somaliland Development Fund (SDF) Phase II Programme”, Gov.uk Development Tracker, August 2024, p.1, <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/programme/GB-GOV-1-300368/documents>

programme notes that “the UK is uniquely placed to play this [...] leadership role” by being one of a few countries to have permanent representation in Somaliland, and as such boasting strong relationships with Somaliland authorities, good local networks, and on-the-ground expertise.¹⁰⁵

This is but one programme, however, it points to the advantageous position that the UK has in its commercial dealings with Somaliland, and its broader ability to build a unique partnership with the country on the basis of trade and investment.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.2.

The Challenges Facing Somaliland's Independence and Democracy – a New Approach

Successive Somaliland governments have faced the same inherent challenges, both internal and external, on delivering recognition for their people. External challenges centre on the opportunity to develop international relations and for the geopolitical climate to foster independence. Internal challenges arise from a lack of capacity and capability building to pursue independence initiatives and promote the legal right to independence. Where external challenges are ostensibly beyond any government's control, internal challenges are more within their power to better control and surmount.

Tremendous efforts have been made by successive Somaliland governments to deliver their promised mandate of independence and recognition to their people. This entails an enormous amount of time and resources that naturally places capacity and capability demands and challenges on each government, particularly within a challenging region of the world. Nevertheless, it is democracy that places these demands on each Somaliland government; they have a duty to their electorate to apply appropriate resources towards independence recognition. Equally, international supporters of democracy have a duty to support an under-resourced government in achieving the same.

The cyclical nature of good democratic government means that successive governments - naturally constrained by electoral cycles - often run out of time to fully implement their policies towards independence and recognition. Many appropriate initiatives simply never get finished nor implemented as a result. This can only create despondency within democratic loving electorates. Likewise, this democratic phenomenon has the negative implication of not only creating unused product but also wasting product and effort towards independence and recognition, as each new government arrives with new ideas and approaches, who in turn are also led towards more short-term, opportunist decision-making. Progressive and resourced democracies are able to build institutions to mitigate against such problems. Doing so enables successive governments to use institutions to foster continuity, a shared library of materials, and build upon a shared accumulated product, experiences, and success. There is a lack of, and real need for, such an institution within Somaliland.

The government of Somaliland would be recommended to establish some form of *Independence Institution* specifically for these purposes. The current government might seek to establish this before the end of its tenure as a legacy project for the country. Practically, the creation of the institution might develop in stages.

However the institution develops, it should be constituted with appropriate ambit, capacity and capability, utilising local and international technical and political expertise, and drawing on the wealth of Somaliland's political/civil society 'elders' and 'entrepreneurs'. The institution should - across all aspects relevant to independence and recognition - provide the government with:

1. Independent, apolitical, and technical best practice advice.
2. Ideas for, and the development of, government policy and initiatives.

3. Overarching implementation management of government-agreed policy and initiatives.

In the event of Somaliland's government taking up this recommendation, HMG should then consider funding appropriately – with or without its international partners due to the UK 's special historic relationship and obligations thereby to Somaliland – the development towards, and of, the institution.

Conclusion

2025 will mark 34 years since Somaliland re-established its independence from Somalia, which is longer than it was united with Somalia for. Much has changed since 1991: Somaliland has risen from the ashes of civil war and genocide, transforming itself into one of the most stable and democratic nations in Africa. Meanwhile, the Horn of Africa has become more important than ever and Britain's rivals are gaining influence across the African continent.

As this report has demonstrated, Britain must adapt to this changing world and reposition itself by recognising Somaliland. The arguments for recognising Somaliland originate from many different schools of thought, ranging from the pragmatic acknowledgement of the region's strategic importance to a more idealistic belief in the defence of democracy. In other words, the case for recognising Somaliland makes sense whichever way you look at it – economically, strategically, or morally.

Moreover, in an age where the electorate is becoming increasingly critical of foreign spending and diplomacy is becoming more overtly transactional, recognising Somaliland is a policy that would provide a good return on investment. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Trump administration, with its ruthless cuts to government expenditure at home and abroad, is still considering greater engagement with Somaliland.

But the United Kingdom should not simply follow the United States on this issue; rather, it should lead the way. Britain has a historic relationship with Somaliland and unique authority to set the agenda as a result of its UN penholder status. The time to recognise Somaliland is now, and Britain is the right country to do it first.

In a world that is more volatile than it was yesterday, with challenges ranging from terrorism and autocracy to energy security and piracy, the United Kingdom needs all the partners it can get. An independent, recognised Somaliland would be more than a partner to the UK – it would be a friend.