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Dustin Dehéz

## Obstacles on the way to international recognition for Somaliland

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Düsseldorfer Institut für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik e.V.  
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität  
Universitätsstr. 1 D-40225 Düsseldorf

Herausgeber  
Düsseldorfer Institut für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik e.V.  
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität  
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## **Obstacles on the way to international recognition for Somaliland**

New School New York: What is to you the most valid argument for international recognition of Somaliland?

Dustin Dehéz: In my view there is only one important argument and that is the right of self-determination. Somalilanders clearly made use of that right, as numerous democratic elections in the recent past have shown. The progress being made should now translate into international recognition.

New School: What is the most important point from the perspective of the international community?

Dehez: I see two major concerns: firstly international recognition could be quoted as a precedent for state secession by other independence-movements throughout the continent. Secondly, but with less impact: Recognition could spark violence between the South and Somaliland and thus creating regional instability.

Talking to Western foreign policy makers there is one clear question nearly every diplomat puts forward: Who would have an interest in recognition? Clearly most of them do not think that recognition is a necessity for the country's development in the first place. Secondly, the benefit/impact that recognition would have: a strong signal to Muslim states in the Middle East that democratic transition would be appreciated by the West – is not yet in all minds. Furthermore the reluctance to recognise Somaliland in order to avoid a precedent might change within the next five years, when the Sudanese in Southern Sudan will vote on their independence. If they vote in support of independence international politicians might recognise Somaliland in what they see as a shortly open window for change in the Horn of Africa.

New School: What are the dangers of recognition? Is it right to say that the dangers are bigger if recognition does not happen?

Dehez: Contrary to many observers I do not see the danger that international recognition would be quoted as a precedent by other secessionist movements. The case of Somaliland is in a sense unique, even in Africa. First it is hard to secede from a state that does not exist. This distinguishes the case of Somaliland from secessionist movements in Nigeria or Sudan. Secondly, no other movement has been that successful in establishing a working state structure. What should matter most is the question if a state is capable of providing basic services such as health care and education to its people. Somaliland is better positioned than many international recognised states in these practical issues. While in most cases of secession we speak of movements such as the SPLM/A, in the case of Somaliland we are talking about a de facto state. Independent political structures like every other political entity evolve over time, in doing so they develop an internal dynamic that cannot simply be turned back, especially when this dynamic had been sparked without foreign assistance or help. Somaliland in this sense is politically more mature.

But although it cannot be viewed as a precedent by other movements, at least not credibly, international recognition could nonetheless lead to violence. We have indications that a newly formed Al-Ittihad cell formed in Mogadishu is seeking to destabilise the country. And the TFG of Somalia which is still trying to enhance its legitimation could be tempted to exploit recognition by declaring war or trying to intervene with militias from Puntland. On the other

hand, the international diplomatic community seems to be convinced that the current situation could continue without much damage: While welcoming Somaliland's progress nobody wants to tell the TFG and Southern Somalis that Somaliland's independence in the medium run is inevitable.

This stance towards Hargeysa is not without difficulties: Somaliland has made progress and although I believe that much of this progress is of sustainable nature Somaliland is nonetheless vulnerable. It is now in a position where it needs international recognition to proceed with the development of its economy – in a country with a high level of unemployment a necessity. Making contracts with international companies over port facilities or exploration rights will become a lot easier if Somaliland would achieve international recognition. With a weak economy the country could eventually become attractive for terrorists or organised crime that both benefit from weak states and less developed states. All in all, dangers are indeed bigger if Somaliland would not be internationally recognised.

New School: Have there been any recent changes in Somaliland's relations with neighbouring/regional countries, in particular Ethiopia after the Foreign Minister of the usually supportive neighbour claimed that his country would be "the last country to recognise Somaliland"?

Dehez: I am convinced that Ethiopia's Foreign Minister's recent statement is merely rhetoric. Ethiopia's primary concern is the fragile security in its Ogaden region which is mainly inhabited by Somalis. Therefore Ethiopia is not only maintaining friendly relations with Somaliland but also with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Abdullahi Yusuf. But the TFG is still lacking legitimacy and many Somalis regard the TFG not mistakenly as an Ethiopian puppet regime. In a move to strengthen the TFG, Ethiopia is officially committed to the territorial integrity of Somalia and is downplaying its relations with Hargeysa. As many Somalis in the South still seek a "Greater Somalia" (including the Ogaden, parts of northern Kenya, Somaliland and Djibouti), supporting the TFG in its nationalist rhetoric is only a tactical move. However, as soon as the first countries will to recognise Somalia, Addis Ababa will follow suit.

New School: We are also interested to get a better understanding of the relations to South Africa as a major African player. How close is South Africa to the current Somaliland government?

Dehez: Officially South Africa would certainly deny that any such links to Hargeysa exist. However, I am convinced that there are diplomatic channels between the two countries. My understanding is that South Africa is the only country on the African continent that could potentially lead the continent into a new era, due to its better infrastructure, its record of good governance, its influence in international peacekeeping, its relative ethnic homogeneity, and finally because its political structures are more stable than those of its only potential rival in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria. Therefore South Africa is going to play a leading role in reshaping the continent. This includes a new and relative flexible stance towards boundary issues, as new ideas on statehood in Africa are generally endorsed. The African Union is mirroring this new approach and its charter already allows for interference in national sovereignty. This new stance is accompanied with a new approach to security in general: in the past sovereignty and territorial integrity were the major focus of security questions while the focus has now shifted to issues such as terrorism, small-arms trade, organised crime or narco-trafficking, this shift could benefit Somaliland. South African delegations have been to Somaliland and are said to be heavily impressed by the progress being made. The question is what Pretoria would gain from international recognition. Somaliland is geographically located on the periphery of Africa and many Somalis regard themselves as Arabs. Egypt is interested to enhance its influence

in Somalia and the Horn in general. As soon as the government of South Africa is convinced that recognition would balance Cairo's influence and would furthermore enhance its image of being an active supporter of the African people and Africa in general, it will recognise the country.

New School: Do you see advantages for Somalia if Somaliland would be internationally recognised (for example the influx of more aid into Somaliland that would also benefit the stability and development of Somalia)?

Dehez: Basically yes, in a sense international recognition is a prerequisite for success of any peace process in overall Somalia. Only when it is clear that Somaliland's independence is inevitable can a valid peace agreement be reached. Additionally the border conflict between Somaliland and Puntland (or Somalia) could be solved by peaceful means through international independent ruling. The current TFG is still internally split and I do not believe that it will survive 2007 and I even doubt the TFG will manage to stay intact during the course of 2006. A new peace process for Somalia will subsequently be needed.

Somalia and Somaliland likewise are dependent on cattle export. International recognition of Somaliland would turn the country's economy from a non-official/not-unofficial economy into an official one, creating more revenues from its exports. That would strengthen the economy of the entire region including Somalia.

New School: How important is it in your view to have Somalia's consent to international recognition for Somaliland? Can you imagine a compromise that Somalia would accept?

Dehez: I do not see any chance to get such consent. Basically no one will achieve the consent of a country that virtually does not exist. My impression is that an overwhelming majority of the more political active southern Somalis are strongly opposed to Somaliland being independent. The core point is that Somalilanders made use of their right of self-determination, and given the current state of Somalia I do not think that Somaliland needs Somalia's consent or that Somalia can effectively stop Hargeysa on its course.

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