

A Review of: “The Country That Does Not Exist: A History of Somaliland” by Gérard Prunier¹

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A renowned academic and historian specializing in the contemporary history of the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes region³, Gérard Prunier provides an overarching and comprehensive narrative of events that have paved the way to the ‘rebirth’ of Somaliland – which has been in fact independent from Somalia since 1991 – through its own achievements of sovereignty, democratic elections and peace. The country, however, remains plagued by economic and diplomatic problems, and most importantly “by the world’s legal standards, it does not exist” (p. vii).

It is a gripping and informative book that has been extensively researched and gives evidence of the author’s vast knowledge of not only the contemporary history, but also the pre-colonial and colonial period of the Horn of Africa region. While providing a unique account of Somaliland’s history, Prunier’s analysis is also complemented by personal experiences, which makes it an even more compelling read. The book is about the unrecognized solo effort of Somaliland in achieving peace yet to be rewarded by the international community.

The Country That Does Not Exist can be divided into eleven chapters. The lengthy notes and indexes at the end of the book provide a great source of information and may be especially useful for those who need additional material. Chapter 1 recounts the Somalis’ pre-colonial history with special emphasis to the clan system. Prunier stresses that “the Somali social model is clanic...[but] it is also highly conscious of...its cultural unity” (p. 6). Neglecting the basic differences, cultural homogeneity boosted the Somalis’ nationalism that led to the development of pan-Somalism⁴ and the embodiment of the Greater Somalia concept. It meant the bonding of previously not unified territories, including Côte Française des Somalis, British Somaliland, Somalia Italiana, Kenya’s Northern Frontier District (NFD) and the Ethiopian Ogaden province.

Chapter 2 details the process of national unification between British Somaliland and

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³ Some of his books include ‘The Rwanda Crisis, 1959-1994: History of a Genocide’, Hurst, 1998; ‘Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide’, Hurst, 2005; ‘From Genocide to Continental War: The ‘Congolese’ Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa’, Hurst, 2009; ‘Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi’ (Edited together with Éloi Ficquet), Hurst, 2015

⁴ Pan-Somalism has always been an act of faith for the Somalis. They believed that all different territories and clans need to be unified for the Somali state to possess enough power to be able to become more dominant than the prevailing clan system. They also hoped that trans-clanic connections and the sheer size of unified Somalia will solve all the problems kinship has created.



Somalia Italiana. The author is right to point out the lack of constitutional and international basis of the merger, arguing it had been “mostly an ideological and emotional thing, while the practicalities had been seen as secondary...” (p. 20). However, driven by pan-Somalism, Kenya’s NFD and the Ogaden region were attempted to be annexed, but the Shifta War (1963-1967) and the Ethio-Somali War (1977-1978) both ended in Somali failure. Pan-Somalism had also been what legitimized the coup of Siad Barre in 1969. Being half Marehan, half Ogaden/Darood his presence meant an increasing clanic weight, since “the Darood were the silent majority of post-colonial Somalia, and they had every intention of recovering what they considered to be their birthright” (p. 25).

The following chapters (Chapter 3 – Chapter 7) guide the readers through the history of the Somali National Movement (SNM) and its continuous struggles with the Siad Barre regime. After the unsuccessful outcome of the Ogaden War, a clanic nightmare (coupled with economic, financial and military problems) started to unfold, with the Issaq⁵ paying the price for the defeat. As Prunier states: “In all cases of social discrimination in ethnically (and religiously) homogeneous societies, the victims are perceived as separate, strange or unduly prosperous. This was the case with the Issaq, both because they had prospered in commerce...and because they had been a military enemy in the past” (pp. 41-42).

The goal of the SNM was the liberation of Somalia; however, in the beginning of the 1980s they did not have a ‘base’, medical centers, transportation, a central depot for guns, any central message and strong intelligence. Later in the decade, the SNM faced other challenges, including bad logistics, poor management and insufficient training. Besides, there were ideological clashes between SNM members promoting regime change versus the secession of the north.⁶ The 1988 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia was one of the most emblematic moments in the history of the SNM and it was what eventually paved the way to the liberation of the north.

On top of the arrests, looting and executions in the north, the government decided to use heavy artillery to flush out the SNM of Hargeisa. It has been “particularly brutal and without any regard to civilian casualties – in fact there is ample evidence that civilian casualties have been deliberately inflicted so as to destroy the support base of the SNM, which is mainly comprised of people from the Issaq clan” (p. 103). Not only did they cause the death of tens of thousands of people, but the government response also contributed to migration to neighboring Ethiopia. Although it has never been said, it was pure genocide and it put an end to Somali unification attempts.

The next three chapters (Chapter 8 – Chapter 10) offer an insight into the breakup of the North and South and the (re)proclamation of Somaliland’s independence, which was followed by chaos, disorganization, foreign intervention, humanitarian crises and later on peace- and

⁵ More than 80% of the current population in Somaliland is linked to the Issaq clan family.

⁶ Initially secession was not part of the constitution and the ideology of SNM, since the northerners were aware they would have problems with international recognition and the Issaq own the biggest lands in Mogadishu. Most importantly, however, Somaliland did not have adequate natural resources to cope on their own.

state-building efforts.⁷ By 1991, the Siad Barre regime had been on the verge of collapse with “each local clan or sub-clan attempting to position itself in the free-for-all to defend its own group interests” (p. 135). Since there were not enough resources and the Somali administrative system was far from being effective, competition over limited international aid led to civil strife. The lack of resources and the possession of guns spurred people to loot, rob and even kill.

While President Egal started the stabilization of Somaliland both administratively⁸ and economically, international recognition would have been needed for the further strengthening of country. In 2001, a referendum on the independence of Somaliland was conducted in a fair and open manner; however, the international community – fearing it would encourage other secessionist movements – did not change its stance towards the country. The UN was striving to recreate the resemblance of a state in Somalia, so that it could operate in the nation-state system. As long as it did not fulfil the role of socio-economic management and public administration, Somali warlords could accept having a ‘state’ “provided they could control it and use it to plunder the rural areas by force while siphoning off large amounts of ‘foreign aid’” (p. 176).

Chapter 11 illustrates the history of Somaliland between 2007 and 2020. Prunier reasons that the country had to face two major challenges: “a centralist threat from whoever was in control of Mogadishu and internal Islamist subversion” (p. 195). Additionally, illegal migration to Europe rocketed and the economy was characterized by lack of foreign investment and stagnation. Somaliland’s problems continued through the 2010s, including reduced export volumes, food rationing, high unemployment, massive drought, the Khatumo secession and the large influx of refugees fleeing from al-Shabaab terrorism.

Having denied their right to officially exist, what kind of future can a ‘virtual’ Somaliland expect? The author speculates that Somaliland may be able to reap the benefits of becoming a satellite of the United Arab Emirates both commercially and economically. Besides – using the TAIPEI Act of 2019⁹ – Somaliland formally recognized the Republic of China (RoC, Taiwan) as ‘a representative of China’, intending to build stronger ties with the country diplomatically (p. 217). Angered by the political implications of the move as well as worrying about the future of the Djibouti port they control¹⁰, China agreed with Somalia to conduct joint naval patrols

⁷ For more information, see Sinkó, G. (2021). Different times, same methods: The impact of the National Security Service on the operations of the National Intelligence and Security Agency. *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies*, 1(1-2). DOI: 10.38146/BSZ.SPEC.2021.1.7 and Sinkó, G. and Besenyő, J. Comparison of the Secret Service of al-Shabaab, the Amniyat, and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (Somalia). *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. DOI: 10.1080/08850607.2021.1987143

⁸ For instance, at the 1995 ‘founding congress’ in Hargeisa plans were laid down for creating the basis of administration, cabinet members were appointed and peace agreements were signed in order to stop clan-based, internal fighting.

⁹ The Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019 aims to increase the scope of U.S. relations with the island nation and encourage other states and international organizations to build stronger ties with Taiwan.

¹⁰ Djibouti’s debt to China is 71% of the country’s GDP; however, the foreign affairs minister said Djibouti needed Chinese infrastructure. For more information, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-strategic-djibouti-a-microcosm-of-chinas-growing-foothold-in-africa/2019/12/29/a6e664ea-beab-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html (Accessed: 12 September 2022)



on the territorial waters of Somaliland. The port of Berbera is of strategic importance and it amounts to about 40 percent of Somaliland's budget (p. 181). Djibouti may rightfully be afraid of the devastating economic consequences of Berbera taking over parts of Ethiopia's cargo volume as it would mean additional stability for the impoverished Somaliland. However, terrorism in neighboring Somalia may endanger infrastructure and foreigners in the north. Furthermore, the Somali, Chinese and Djibouti propaganda efforts may put further obstacles in the way of the impoverished country's economic growth.¹¹

The Country That Does Not Exist is an exceptional book on the history and aspirations of Somaliland. It is a critical – albeit impartial – account of the inception, efforts to its realization and then collapse of the Dream, which was the unification of all Somali territories. Prunier does not make the mistake of analyzing Somalia only through the lens of the Cold War as he highlights that the military aid pact with the Soviet regime was not the result of ideological sympathy towards the U.S.S.R., but rather Somalia's opposition to Ethiopia and Kenya (both U.S. allies) and the pro-Soviet stance of the Arab countries (some of which provided help to Somalia). Also, he dispels any misconceptions about the basic cause of internal struggles in Somaliland, arguing that they were more related to material problems (shortage of food and money) as opposed to clan or political reasons.¹²

I, nonetheless, do not agree with the author that the past – or more precisely – colonial history is neglected by contemporary researchers (p. 80). I rather believe that many times it is beyond the scope of the study to cover the complete history of a particular location. The other small detail I wish to point out is the confusion of two different individuals, Mohamed Hashi Deria, better known as 'Lixle'¹³, commander of the SNM and Eng. Mohamed Hashi Elmi, Minister of Finance of Somaliland (2010-2012). As Prunier (incorrectly) states: "The man who brought all of them together was Engineer (later Colonel) Mohamed Hashi" (p. 44).

By all means it is a comprehensive, relevant and timely book I would recommend to anyone who would like to gain a better insight into the historical challenges of Somaliland. The book can be of great interest to readers who wish to extend their knowledge in topics related to the Horn of Africa region. *The Country That Does Not Exist* is not only a thought-provoking read to scholars, academics and experts, but anyone who would like to get a clearer picture of the future of Africa – U.S., Africa – China and African Union – United Nations relations.

¹¹ For example, in this article (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/analysis-somalilands-lingering-jihadi-threat.php>, Accessed: 12 September 2022) the following can be read "In Somaliland's major cities such as Hargeisa, Burco, and Berbera, Shabaab is also thought to maintain sleeper cells". Nevertheless, there has not been any terrorist attack in Somaliland since 2008.

¹² While clans cannot be blamed for the beginning of the fighting, they have certainly contributed to the fact they lasted and spread.

¹³ 'Lixle' has been consistently used throughout the book, although it is the Somali version. The English one is 'Lihle'.