Somalia's Disappearing State: The Political Placebo Effect and the Corruption That Hollowed a Nation

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Somalia is not merely fragile. It is quietly vanishing — and the cause is not drought, militancy or foreign meddling, but a political class that has learned to look like a government without acting like one.

Somalia's crises are usually told as a list. There is the war against al-Shabaab, the recurring droughts, the cash shortages, the breakaway regions, the young people drowning in the Mediterranean. Each gets its own conference, its own donor appeal and its own headline.

That way of telling the story hides the truth. These are not separate disasters that happen to share a country. They are symptoms of one disease: bad leadership. A political elite that treats the state as a source of private income, rather than a duty to the public, has left every other problem to grow unchecked.

The stakes could not be higher. If the present trajectory holds, Somalia as we know it today — one country, one flag, one people from Ras Kamboni to Lawyoado — may not exist in twenty years. This article traces how each symptom feeds the others, and why only a change in leadership can reverse the decline.

The Political Placebo Effect

In medicine, a placebo is a sugar pill. It contains nothing that can cure the patient, yet it can make the patient feel treated. For a while, the symptoms seem to ease. The disease, untouched, carries on.

Somalia's federal government works in much the same way. It has a president, a parliament, ministries, ambassadors and a seat at the United Nations. It hosts summits, signs communiqués and announces reform plans. To donors, neighbours and many citizens, these are the outward signs of a functioning state, and they produce the comforting feeling that Somalia is being governed.

But the active ingredient is missing. The institutions exist on paper while the work they are meant to do — collecting revenue fairly, paying soldiers, protecting borders, delivering services, enforcing the law — is done badly, partially or not at all.

The international community keeps prescribing the same pill: more budget support, more capacity-building workshops, more election timetables. Each dose buys another few years of appearances.

The placebo is dangerous precisely because it works on the observer. As long as Somalia *looks* like a state, the hard questions are postponed. Who controls the money? Who answers to the voters? Why does each new government inherit the same failures as the last? The sections that follow show what is happening behind the appearance.

A Sovereign Republic on Paper

On paper, Somalia is a sovereign federal republic. In practice, the authority of the government in Mogadishu often ends at the edge of the capital, and in places at the edge of the airport. Its budget leans heavily on foreign money, its security on foreign troops, and its legitimacy on foreign recognition. Ordinary Somalis now ask the question openly: are we truly a country, or a name on a map kept alive by international aid? Imagine a compound in Mogadishu, the capital, called Xalane, where not even a minister—let alone the President—can enter.

The federal system was meant to be the answer to the collapse of the central state in 1991. After two decades of war, the 2012 Provisional Constitution promised a shared state, with member states and the federal centre each carrying part of the load. More than a decade later, that bargain is fraying. Relations between Mogadishu and several member states have broken down over elections, revenue and security. Instead of a federation, Somalia risks becoming a quasi-government confined to the capital, surrounded by regions that negotiate with it as equals — or ignore it altogether.

Security without sovereignty

A state that cannot secure its territory cannot claim it for long. Somalia still depends on African Union forces and foreign partners to hold ground against al-Shabaab. The national army, despite years of training programmes, remains divided along clan lines, irregularly paid and uneven in quality. Soldiers who go unpaid for months are easy targets for desertion, extortion and recruitment by the very groups they are meant to fight.

The result is a security sector that absorbs enormous sums without producing lasting control. Towns are liberated with great publicity and lost again quietly. Each cycle erodes public trust in the idea that the government can protect anyone.

Open borders, unanswered questions

Somalia's borders, especially with Ethiopia, are largely unpoliced. Since the 1990s, large numbers of people have crossed into the country — some fleeing conflict and hunger, others seeking work. Many have settled in Somali towns and raised families there. Somalia has no reliable civil registry, no national census in decades, and no functioning system for recording who is a citizen, who is a refugee and who is a migrant.

This is not an argument against compassion. Somalis, of all people, know what it is to flee. It is an argument for a state that knows who lives within its borders. Without registration, land records and citizenship law that is actually enforced, questions of belonging will eventually be settled by force or by political bargaining rather than by law. History offers many examples of territories whose status was reopened once demographics, local loyalties and outside interests aligned against a weak centre.

The paradox of the exodus

The irony is bitter. While people stream into Somalia, Somalia's own young people stream out. Every year, thousands of young Somalis take the *tahriib* route through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, risking kidnapping, ransom and drowning in the hope of reaching Europe. Others leave for the Gulf, Turkey or South Africa. They do not leave because they lack patriotism. They leave because there are no jobs, no credible institutions and no sense that hard work at home will be rewarded.

A country that loses its educated youth while failing to manage who arrives is a country whose future is being decided by default.

A Nation Without Money

A currency is one of the plainest signs of sovereignty. Somalia, in practice, does not have one that works. The Somali shilling survives mostly as worn small notes, many of them printed decades ago or counterfeited since. Real value moves in US dollars, and most of those dollars move as digital balances on mobile-money platforms owned by private telecom companies.

Mobile money has been a genuine lifeline. It lets a herder in Somalia receive money from a cousin in Minneapolis within minutes. But a payment system run by private firms is not a monetary system. The Central Bank cannot set interest rates, manage inflation or act as a lender of last resort. There is little deposit protection, little consumer recourse and little oversight of how the platforms use the money they hold.

Cash for the few, balances for the many

Ordinary Somalis often cannot get physical cash when they need it, and the formal banking sector remains thin. Sending money into the country through formal channels is a constant headache: international banks, fearful of money-laundering rules, have repeatedly cut ties with Somali remittance companies. Each time, families who depend on relatives abroad are left exposed.

The politically connected face no such problems. Money that enters the country as aid, contracts or customs revenue finds its way out again with remarkable ease — converted into dollars, moved across borders and parked in foreign property and bank accounts.

The Nairobi property boom

The evidence is visible in the skylines of neighbouring capitals. In Nairobi, estate agents speak openly of Somali buyers as a major force in the market. Villas, apartment blocks and office towers are bought in cash. Some of this wealth is honest: the earnings of traders, diaspora professionals and hard-working families. But much of it, Somalis widely believe, is money diverted from public coffers and donor programmes in a country where ordinary citizens struggle to withdraw their own savings.

The pattern is the same in Kampala, Dubai and Istanbul. Somalia's wealth is being exported and invested in other nations' futures, leaving behind a hollow economy that survives on remittances and aid.

An Environment Left Undefended

Climate shocks without a plan

Climate change is merciless to a country of herders and farmers. Somalia has lived through repeated droughts, including five failed rainy seasons in a row between 2020 and 2023, followed by devastating floods. Livestock die in their millions, harvests fail, and families walk for days to camps on the edges of towns. International agencies warn that Somalia could become the epicentre of climate-driven displacement in East Africa.

Yet the country has no credible national strategy for water storage, rangeland management, early warning or resettlement. When disaster strikes, the response is largely outsourced to aid agencies. Citizens are left to fend for themselves while those in power secure their own futures abroad.

A land of plastic

Travel through almost any Somali town and the litter is impossible to miss. Plastic bags cling to acacia and thorn trees in such numbers that, from a distance, one might think the trees were decorated for a festival. Rubbish accumulates in dry riverbeds and is burned in the open. Livestock graze among the waste and often swallow it.

This is not a problem of money but of governance. Waste collection, bans on single-use plastics and basic municipal services need nothing more exotic than functioning local government and enforced by-laws.

The sea as a dumping ground

Somalia has the longest coastline in mainland Africa, and one of the least protected. For decades, foreign actors have treated it as a free resource. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, broken containers of hazardous waste washed up on Somali beaches, giving visible proof of what coastal communities had long alleged: that toxic material was being dumped offshore.

At the same time, foreign fishing fleets have plundered Somali waters, often without licences and sometimes with the connivance of local officials. Fish stocks that should feed Somali families and support a national industry are taken away, while what remains near polluted shores may be unsafe to eat. A nation that cannot police its own sea cannot benefit from it.

Khat: The Drug of Decline

Every morning, light aircraft and trucks carry fresh bundles of khat from Kenya and Ethiopia into Somali towns. By afternoon, in homes, shops and roadside shelters across the country, men sit chewing the leaves for hours. The stimulant must be fresh to be potent, so the trade runs every single day — and so does the outflow of hard currency to pay for it.

The cost to the nation is enormous. Large sums leave the country daily for a product that creates nothing. Household budgets that should pay for food, school fees and medicine are spent on leaves. Productive afternoons are lost, nights are sleepless, and working days start late. Doctors link heavy, long-term use to mental illness, heart problems and poor nutrition. Women carry much of the burden, managing homes and businesses while husbands' incomes are consumed.

For young people, khat is often the first step into a cycle of dependency and idleness that feeds unemployment, family breakdown and, at worst, recruitment by armed groups.

And yet successive governments have done almost nothing. There is no serious public-health campaign, no plan to regulate the trade, and no effort to redirect the money into domestic production. Many Somalis believe the reason is simple: the trade is too profitable for the politically connected, and some of those who should be regulating it are said to be profiting from it. Whether or not that is true in every case, the inaction speaks for itself. A leadership serious about the nation's health and wealth would treat khat as the economic and social emergency it is.

The NGO State Within the State

No honest account of modern Somalia can ignore the thousands of non-governmental organisations operating across the country. Many have saved lives. During famine and flood, they have delivered food, water, and medicine when no Somali authority could. Their staff, many of them Somali, often work under dangerous conditions to keep communities alive.

Yet this abundance of aid has carried unintended consequences. Over time, the NGO presence has grown into a parallel state. It runs clinics, schools, and water points, decides which districts receive assistance, and controls budgets that dwarf those of government ministries. In doing so, it has created a culture of dependency: countless Somalis now look first to NGOs for survival rather than seeking employment, building local enterprise, or investing in their own skills. Aid has become not just a lifeline, but the default way of life.

Additionally, many Somalis suspect that some NGOs pursue hidden agendas, a concern that recalls an older history. In the nineteenth century, missionaries and charitable societies arrived in Africa with promises of help, but often paved the way for colonial rule. Today’s organisations are not colonial armies.

Yet when foreign agencies map the country, fund regions separately, shape policies, and answer to donors rather than Somali citizens, the effect is to weaken the very idea of a unified nation and discourage self-reliance.

The fault does not lie solely with the NGOs. They fill a vacuum that Somali leaders themselves created. A government that delivered basic services, fostered job creation, and managed aid transparently through national systems would not need to be bypassed. Until such leadership emerges, Somalia risks remaining trapped in a cycle where foreign aid sustains life but also stifles initiative—leaving too many citizens dependent on handouts instead of building their own livelihoods and future.

A Map Coming Apart

Somaliland's long march

In 1991, after the collapse of Somalia's central government, a secessionist clan in the north declared independence and laid claim to the entire territory of the former British Somaliland protectorate. For more than three decades, no country recognised this self-proclaimed state, largely because the justifications for secession were weak and its advocates often distorted the historical foundations of Somalia's unity. That changed on 26 December 2025, when Israel became the first country to formally recognise Somaliland and establish diplomatic relations. Ethiopia has since signaled sympathy, while voices in Washington have also urged recognition.

Somaliland's separatist project rests heavily on the backing of a single clan family and remains contested by many within the territory it claims. A determined federal government would have mobilized every diplomatic, economic, and political instrument to defend Somalia's unity and support northern communities opposed to secession. Instead, Mogadishu's response has been slow, reactive, and frequently incoherent. Critics argue that federal leaders have, at times, undermined unionists more than they have challenged secessionists—treating the issue as a bargaining chip in domestic politics rather than elevating it as a national priority.

The North Eastern State

The clearest test is in Sool, Sanaag and Cayn. In 2023, communities in and around Las Anod rose against Somaliland's administration and declared their loyalty to a united Somalia. After years as SSC-Khaatumo, they were reconstituted in July 2025 as the North Eastern State, with Las Anod as its capital, and joined the federal system after elections that August.

These are people who chose Somalia at great cost, in blood and displacement. They deserve full political, financial and security backing from the federal government. Instead, they have received far too little meaningful engagement, and the new state is still being threatened by the secessionists. If Somalia cannot stand by those who fight to remain part of it, it sends a clear message to every region weighing its own options.

Fragmentation by default

Somaliland is not the only fault line in Somalia's fragile federal experiment. Puntland and Jubaland have repeatedly suspended cooperation with Mogadishu, and disputes over elections and revenue sharing have only deepened mistrust. While no region has formally followed Somaliland's path of outright secession, the conduct of the federal government has pushed others toward de facto autonomy. By violating the constitution, making unilateral decisions, and abandoning the federal compact, Mogadishu has effectively driven these regions to act like separate states.

The current leadership has failed to reconcile differences, to share power equitably, or to articulate a vision of Somali unity worth belonging to. The political map is already splintering, and the central government lacks both the legitimacy and the capacity to halt the fragmentation.

Twenty Years from Now

If these trends continue unchecked, Somalia will not exist in twenty years — not as we know it today. There may still be a flag at the United Nations and a government in Mogadishu. But the country behind it could be a loose patchwork of clan enclaves, foreign-backed statelets and aid-run territories, its wealth invested abroad and its young people scattered across the world. It would become a cautionary tale: a nation undone not by its enemies, but by its own leaders.

Somalia Needs a Good Leadership

Somalia's survival depends above all on genuine leadership—not the placebo of summits, communiqués, and hollow titles, but leadership that acts. Real leadership would confront corruption through independent audits, transparent budgets, and prosecutions that reach even the powerful. It would restore monetary sovereignty by establishing a credible national currency, a regulated banking sector, and a functioning central bank. It would secure the nation with a professional army that is regularly paid, while ensuring effective control of borders and civil registration. It would protect land and sea through a national climate strategy, municipal waste management, and a coastguard capable of patrolling Somali waters. It would treat khat as both a public-health and economic emergency, and it would take ownership of aid by channeling assistance through accountable national systems.

Above all, it would defend unity by supporting communities that choose Somalia and by offering every region a fair share in a common future. None of this lies beyond reach. Somalis have rebuilt businesses, cities, and lives with little help from any state. What they lack is a government equal to their resilience. Without such leadership, Somalia is not merely at risk—it is already disappearing.

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