Somaliland's Search for Recognition: The Historical and Political Questions Washington Cannot Resolve

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September 30, 2026

President Abdirahman Irro's American visit raised Somaliland's diplomatic profile. It also highlighted a deeper problem: international recognition cannot by itself resolve contested history, disputed territory and the absence of political unanimity within the borders Somaliland claims.

Introduction

President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro" travelled to the United States in September 2026 carrying the central foreign-policy objective pursued by successive Somaliland administrations for more than three decades: international recognition.

The journey gave Somaliland valuable diplomatic visibility. On 24 September, Irro appeared before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York to discuss Somaliland's campaign for recognition and the security environment in the Horn of Africa. That was a significant platform for an administration that has spent decades attempting to persuade influential governments that Somaliland should be treated as an independent state.

Yet the visit also raises a more fundamental question. The central difficulty facing Somaliland may no longer be simply persuading Washington, London or other foreign capitals to accept its interpretation of history. It is determining whether the political community contained within the borders Somaliland claims possesses sufficient internal agreement about its own future. That question begins not in Washington, but in the history of the Somali territories themselves.

Before the Colonial Map

Somali society did not begin with the British Protectorate, Italian Somaliland or the borders drawn by European powers in the late nineteenth century. Long before colonial partition, Somali communities across the Horn were linked by language, Islam, kinship, customary institutions, commerce and pastoral movement. Clan identities were—and remain—important, but they existed within a much wider Somali cultural and linguistic environment.

For pastoral communities in particular, political geography was historically determined less by fixed borders than by access to water and grazing.

Families and livestock moved according to ecological necessity. Colonial frontiers subsequently divided populations whose economic and social lives crossed the boundaries European governments had negotiated. This history matters because Somaliland's contemporary territorial claim relies heavily upon the boundaries of the former British Somaliland Protectorate. Those boundaries are historically real. But their existence does not mean that they represented an ancient frontier separating two historically distinct peoples.

Following the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from the northern Somali coast, Britain negotiated a series of agreements with Somali clan elders during the 1880s. British parliamentary records later described agreements made with elders of several tribes between 1884 and 1886. The territorial reach of these arrangements into the hinterland was itself not precisely defined. In a 1955 parliamentary debate, Britain's Minister of State for Colonial Affairs acknowledged that the exact area covered by the agreements had never been clearly delineated inland. This is important when colonial treaties are invoked today as evidence of immutable political geography.

The North East State Exception

There is an additional historical complication that deserves greater attention. The Dhulbahante, a member of the Northern Harti Alliance—the principal community inhabiting much of Sool and parts of the surrounding territories—did not conclude a formal treaty of protection with Britain. Historical scholarship and British colonial accounts distinguish their position from northern communities with which Britain entered formal protection agreements.

The Warsangeli case, also a member of the Northern Harti Alliance, was different and should not be confused with it. Warsangeli elders entered into a formal agreement with Britain on 27 January 1886. Historical precision matters precisely because contemporary territorial arguments frequently rely upon colonial history.

The Dhulbahante experience subsequently took a markedly different course. From 1899 until 1920, the Dervish movement led by Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan fought a prolonged struggle against colonial powers in the Somali territories. Scholarship describes the movement as drawing heavily—though by no means exclusively—from Dhulbahante and Ogaden communities, while also including participants from Isaaq and other clans. Its centres included places such as Taleh and Buuhoodle in what is now northern Somalia.

The Dervish struggle should not be retroactively converted into a twenty-first-century referendum on Somaliland or Somalia. The political vocabulary of contemporary statehood cannot simply be projected backward onto people living more than a century ago. But neither should this history be erased. There is an obvious historical difficulty in arguing that the colonial status of British Somaliland alone permanently determines the political allegiance of a community that did not itself conclude a protection treaty with Britain and whose territory subsequently became a principal centre of prolonged armed resistance to colonial authority. Colonial boundaries are historical facts. They are not necessarily historical verdicts.

Colonial Administration Did Not Create Two Unrelated Peoples

After defeating Italian forces during the Second World War, Britain administered former Italian Somaliland as well as British Somaliland for part of the 1940s, albeit under different legal arrangements. In 1950, Britain transferred administration of the former Italian territory to Italy under a United Nations trusteeship arrangement. This was not simply restoration of Italian colonial sovereignty. The territory was placed under an international trusteeship intended to lead to independence.

British Somaliland became independent on 26 June 1960. The former Italian-administered Trust Territory became independent days later, and the two united on 1 July to establish the Somali Republic. Somaliland's advocates can therefore reasonably point out that British Somaliland briefly possessed separate independence before union. But there is another side to that history.

The union occurred during an era in which Somali nationalism regarded colonial partition itself as something to be overcome. Somali populations had been divided among British, Italian, French, Ethiopian and Kenyan jurisdictions. Independence was consequently intertwined with a broader aspiration for Somali political unity. The fact that Britain administered one territory and Italy another undoubtedly produced different administrative experiences. It did not, however, establish that northern and southern Somalis had thereby become culturally unrelated peoples.

What Germany Can—and Cannot—Teach Us

Post-war Germany offers a useful illustration, although not a legal precedent. Germany was divided after the Second World War into two states with radically different political systems, economies and international alliances. Four decades of separate administration did not permanently extinguish the concept of a shared German national identity. When circumstances changed, reunification followed in 1990.

Somalia is obviously different. Its divisions arose through colonial partition, failed state institutions, dictatorship, civil war, state collapse and competing claims of self-determination. German reunification therefore provides no legal formula for resolving Somaliland's status. It illustrates only a narrower principle: a period of separate administration does not necessarily determine the permanent national identity of a population.

The reverse is equally true. Sharing ethnicity, religion and language does not automatically require populations to inhabit one sovereign state. History alone therefore cannot resolve Somaliland's status. Contemporary consent matters. And that is precisely where Somaliland now faces its most difficult challenge.

Las Anod Changed the Argument

The 2023 conflict in Las Anod fundamentally altered the political landscape. After months of fighting, SSC-Khaatumo forces consolidated control of Las Anod following the withdrawal of Somaliland forces in August 2023. The political movement that emerged there did not seek recognition as another independent Somali state. It instead sought integration into Somalia's federal structure.

That process culminated in the establishment of North East State in July 2025, which Somalia's federal government recognised as a federal member state. Territorial control nevertheless remains complicated: NES claims Sool, Sanaag and the Buuhoodle/Cayn area, while its effective control has not extended uniformly across all those territories.

Nor should the Warsangeli position be oversimplified. Although NES's territorial conception encompasses Warsangeli areas, reporting and country-of-origin research in 2026 indicated that political alignment in Warsangeli areas was not uniform, with substantial continuing ties to Puntland. These distinctions matter. They demonstrate precisely why the northern political question cannot credibly be reduced to neat blocks on a colonial map.

The Prisoners and the Road

The human consequences of the Las Anod conflict remain unresolved. Following the decisive fighting of August 2023, the International Committee of the Red Cross visited more than 300 captured combatants in Las Anod. The ICRC also visited detainees from the opposing side held in Hargeisa. It would be inaccurate to claim that all of those original prisoners remain detained. A limited prisoner exchange occurred later. Nevertheless, reporting in 2026 indicated that prisoners connected with the conflict remained in detention across the two sides and that families continued pressing for their release.

There is also an economic frontier where there was once a commercial road. The Oog–Las Anod corridor, an important route linking eastern areas with Somaliland's commercial network and ultimately Berbera, has remained disrupted since the conflict. As recently as September 2026, North East State authorities publicly maintained that the road remained closed after intercepting commercial trucks attempting to travel through the corridor.

This is more than a transportation inconvenience. A political dispute has become an economic boundary. For Somaliland, the loss of normal east-west commerce potentially means lost markets for Berbera and businesses farther west. For communities on both sides, it means longer trading routes, additional costs and the fragmentation of commercial relationships that historically crossed what is now effectively a military frontier. A government seeking recognition of its claimed territory cannot easily ignore the fact that one of the roads supposedly connecting that territory instead marks its political division.

Somaliland's Democracy Is More Complicated Than Its International Image

Somaliland's supporters rightly point to its elections. The peaceful election of Irro and transfer of presidential power in 2024 were significant achievements in a region where peaceful political succession cannot be taken for granted. But describing Somaliland simply as a Western-style liberal democracy obscures an important part of its political architecture.

Academic literature has long described Somaliland as a hybrid political order, combining electoral institutions with traditional clan authority. The Guurti, or House of Elders, institutionalised traditional leadership within the state. Scholars have examined both the important role this hybrid arrangement played in early peace-building and the problems it subsequently created for democratic institutional development.

Clan is therefore not peripheral to Somaliland politics. It is embedded within the political system itself. This does not mean Somaliland has no democratic institutions. It plainly does. It means that electoral democracy operates alongside a system of negotiated clan representation and informal political balancing. That system can provide stability when the principal communities believe the political bargain is reasonably equitable. It can become dangerously fragile when they do not.

The Warning Before Irro

The period preceding Irro's election demonstrated that vulnerability. Election delays and extensions of political mandates generated serious tensions. The political crisis intersected with clan grievances and armed mobilisation. The Gacan Libaax episode demonstrated how rapidly a dispute ostensibly concerning electoral politics could acquire a communal and armed dimension.

Somaliland ultimately avoided a wider confrontation and proceeded to the 2024 election. That outcome demonstrated resilience. But the crisis preceding it should not be forgotten simply because the eventual election was peaceful.

Somaliland's political system depends heavily upon maintaining confidence among major clan constituencies. If one or more important communities conclude that access to political authority, resources or representation has become permanently unequal, electoral institutions alone may not contain the resulting dispute. Las Anod represents the most dramatic example of what can happen when political alienation becomes territorial alienation.

Awdal Should Be Read as a Warning, Not a Prediction

This is why Awdal deserves careful attention. It would be irresponsible to predict that Awdal will inevitably leave Somaliland. Borama and the principal towns of the region remain under Somaliland administration, and there is presently no equivalent there of the political and military transformation that occurred in Las Anod.

But neither should expressions of political dissatisfaction among sections of the Gadabursi community be dismissed merely because they have not produced armed territorial separation.

The lesson of Las Anod should be precisely the opposite: political grievances are easier to address before positions harden and competing sovereignties emerge. Awdal is therefore important not because its future can be predicted, but because its future cannot safely be assumed.

The Central Contradiction

All of this returns us to the most difficult intellectual problem in Somaliland's case for recognition. Somaliland argues, in essence, that the 1960 union was voluntary and that a political community cannot indefinitely be compelled to remain in a union that it believes has failed. That is an intelligible argument based upon political consent. But once consent becomes the principle, it cannot logically stop at Somaliland's claimed borders.

If Hargeisa may reconsider a voluntary union with Mogadishu, why may Las Anod not reconsider its political relationship with Hargeisa?

If the answer is that the colonial boundaries of British Somaliland are inviolable, then another difficulty immediately appears: why should colonial boundaries possess overriding authority in one case while the boundaries of the internationally recognised Somali Republic do not in another?

And in the Dhulbahante case, the historical question becomes sharper still: how much contemporary political legitimacy should be derived from a British protectorate arrangement when Britain itself had concluded no formal protection treaty with that community?

These questions do not automatically prove either Somaliland's or Somalia's position. They demonstrate why the issue is substantially more complicated than the proposition that British Somaliland became independent in June 1960 and therefore possesses an automatic right to recover precisely the same territorial boundaries today.

What Should Washington's Role Be?

The United States is a global power whose foreign policy is inevitably shaped by national interest. Somaliland's strategic position on the Gulf of Aden, the port of Berbera and its reported deposits of critical minerals may therefore offer Washington genuine economic and security opportunities. President Irro has openly presented access to facilities and mineral resources as part of the case for a closer American relationship.

There is nothing unusual about such diplomacy. The difficulty arises when strategic interests become entangled with an unresolved question of sovereignty. The United States can pursue security cooperation, investment and access to resources without necessarily deciding where Somalia's internal political boundaries should ultimately lie.

As a democratic superpower, Washington should be particularly cautious about allowing strategic convenience to substitute for political consent. Ports can be leased, minerals purchased and security agreements negotiated; political legitimacy cannot be acquired through a commercial or strategic transaction.

The late Somali/American historian Professor Said S. Samatar of Rutgers University once captured a related principle in the deliberately provocative title of a 2010 essay: "An Open Letter to Uncle Sam: America, Pray Leave Somalia to its Own Devices." Samatar was writing about American intervention in Somalia rather than Somaliland recognition, so his argument should not be taken out of context. Yet his broader warning remains relevant: outside powers should exercise caution before attempting to settle political questions that Somalis themselves have not resolved.

Washington can engage Hargeisa where American interests warrant it. But the ultimate constitutional relationship among Somaliland, the Federal Government and the communities inhabiting the territories within the old British colonial borders should emerge from political negotiation and genuine local consent—not from competition for ports, military facilities or mineral resources.

Recognition Abroad, Reconciliation at Home

President Irro's American journey should consequently be assessed neither as a diplomatic failure nor as evidence that recognition is imminent. It succeeded in bringing Somaliland's case before influential audiences. But Washington cannot resolve Somaliland's internal political geography.

Foreign governments cannot reopen the Oog–Las Anod road. They cannot reconcile communities separated by the 2023 war. They cannot settle the prisoner question, determine the political preferences of the people of Sool and Sanaag, resolve grievances in Awdal or maintain the delicate balance among Somaliland's principal clan constituencies. Nor can foreign recognition retrospectively transform every nineteenth-century colonial agreement into evidence of unanimous indigenous consent.

Somaliland has genuine achievements to its credit: decades of indigenous institution-building, periods of relative stability, competitive elections and peaceful transfers of political authority. Any serious analysis should acknowledge them. But those accomplishments coexist with another reality: the territory Somaliland claims today contains communities whose political preferences are demonstrably not uniform. That may ultimately be the most important lesson of Las Anod.

The question confronting Somaliland is therefore larger than whether the United States or another government will recognise it. It is whether a political project originally justified partly through self-determination can accommodate self-determination when the demand comes from within.

History provides arguments to both sides. Colonial maps provide boundaries. International law provides competing principles of territorial integrity and self-determination. None, by itself, can manufacture political consent. For President Irro, therefore, the most consequential journey may not be the one from Hargeisa to Washington. It may be the much more difficult journey toward a political settlement among the peoples whose territory he asks Washington to recognise.

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