

Calls for Recognizing Somaliland and the Implications for Yemen



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By: Ahmed Al-Ahssab

Cover photo: Hargeisa, Somaliland, on April 20, 2021 // Photo by Michael Runkel.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

There have been growing signals of possible international recognition of the Republic of Somaliland. Former British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson **alluded** to the possibility of US President Donald Trump recognizing Somaliland's independence in November 2024. His remarks coincided with favorable positions expressed by US officials who had worked with Trump, such as **Peter Pham** and **Tibor Nagy**, as well as **moves by** American **lawmakers**. The president of Somaliland has also **predicted** that his country will soon secure its first formal recognition of independence, possibly within the coming year.

A former British colony, Somaliland united with what was known as Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic in 1960. Following the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somaliland declared its independence, but it has not been recognized by the United Nations or any of its member states.

Recognition of Somaliland by a global power like the United States could set a **precedent** for secessionist movements and influence how other nations deal with such projects, **shifting** the debate from their legal legitimacy to their **geopolitical** usefulness. On the other hand, it could **push** the international community to re-evaluate its criteria for self-determination to account for stability and regional integrity.

Any ramifications would be felt in Yemen, where active and latent secessionist agendas intersect with conflict dynamics and entrenched societal and identity-based divisions. Much depends on the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, key financial supporters of political and military actors in both Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

The UAE would likely **welcome** Washington's recognition. It has invested heavily in Somaliland, where it operates a military base, and manages major ports there and in neighboring Puntland. The President of Somaliland **visited** the UAE in February 2025 for his first foreign trip. Independence could offer an opportunity for Abu Dhabi to expand its economic projects and influence, and **maritime presence**. Somaliland could even become a strategic ally, supporting Emirati influence and interests in Yemeni territory.

In Yemen, the UAE is an explicit supporter of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), and US recognition of another secessionist project could inject substantial momentum into the group's aim to build an independent state in the former South Yemen. Domestically, the STC might ramp up its outreach, mobilization efforts, and propaganda, while moving to entrench symbols of separation and taking bolder steps toward building independent institutions.

STC leaders have **tracked** the progress of Somaliland's secessionist movement and followed its **lead** in international outreach. The STC **announced** its first mission in Washington last May, and its president, Aiderous al-Zubaidi, has promised to open similar offices in other countries. The group could pursue reciprocal **recognition with Somaliland**, emphasizing their shared history as formerly independent states. However, the UAE's enthusiasm for southern secession is complicated by its support for other political actors, namely, the pro-unity National Resistance led by Tareq Saleh.

US recognition of Somaliland, in turn, could also weaken the positions of those who support a single state in Yemen, most notably pro-unity factions within the internationally recognized Yemeni government. Empowering secessionist actors would likely deepen the government's internal rifts and reinforce perceptions of declining international support for its legitimacy. Pro-unity parties' dependence on Saudi Arabia, the government's main financial and political backer, would become more entrenched.

Saudi Arabia has no significant interests or investments in Somaliland and maintains better **relations** with the Somali federal government. Theoretically, it could benefit from development and infrastructure projects in an independent Somaliland, but Emirati influence would limit its opportunities and room to maneuver. And while Saudi Arabia rhetorically supports Yemeni unity, its policies and actions on the ground suggest a potential implicit acceptance of partition. In the years since its initial intervention, it has turned a blind eye to the formation of the STC and the establishment of forces outside government control, and it has not issued an explicit statement opposing the secession of the South. It also provided support for groups seeking greater autonomy in eastern Yemen. This support is strategic rather than public. During a large Hadrami tribal meeting held last April, Amr bin Habrish — Deputy Governor and head of the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance — stated that his recent visit to Saudi Arabia confirmed the Kingdom's "understanding and support» for Hadramawt's aspirations.

Recognition of Somaliland could embolden other secessionist sentiments in Yemen, such as in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra, and encourage local actors to press harder for autonomy or independence. Meanwhile, fears over the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's growing sway, and the emergence of affiliated entities along its borders, could prompt Oman to intensify its **backing** for allied groups in Al-Mahra, encouraging them to pursue their own secessionist aspirations as a form of strategic defense. Foremost among these groups is the Peaceful Sit-in Committee headed by tribal sheikh Ali Salem al-Harayzi, but Oman also has connections with the General Council for the People of Al-Mahra and Socotra, headed by Muhammad Abdullah al-Afrar, a descendant of the Mahri sultans. The council demands the establishment of a joint Al-Mahra and Socotra region within the framework of the Republic of Yemen. In neighboring Hadramawt, most political actors largely **oppose** broader southern secession, and their territorial and identity-based claims clash with supporters of both a new South Yemen and a unified state.

In the context of a weakened government and revitalized secessionist movements, the Houthis would likely portray themselves as the sole force capable of confronting externally-backed projects and defending national unity. The disarray among their opponents could also tempt them to expand their territorial control. But if Somaliland's independence leads to an **expansion** of US military influence in the region, this could enhance maritime security in the Red Sea, improving the Gulf states' position against the Houthis and their Iranian allies.

US recognition of Somaliland is unlikely to produce immediate, sweeping transformations in Yemen's political landscape, but could create the conditions for significant, longer-term transformations. Hasty action by Saudi Arabia or the UAE is unlikely, as it could undermine the current calm and threaten a return to broader conflict, an outcome both nations are keen to avoid. It is likely that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will combine a wait-and-see approach with cautious action to give allied partitionist projects more room to maneuver and express their aspirations. The UAE might want to de-escalate to consolidate its interests in the Horn of Africa, but it could still assist with diplomatic efforts for southern secession in Yemen, a role it has played on behalf of Somaliland itself. Saudi Arabia could move to strengthen its influence in Yemen's eastern governorates, allowing political movements and projects there to express their aspirations and form stronger political entities similar to the STC.

In sum, recognition of Somaliland could afford secessionist movements new momentum, and pro-unity parties could become more open to decentralization and regional autonomy. But the complexity of Yemen's political environment creates risks for domestic and regional actors pursuing these agendas. Although the de facto truce continues, the war has not ended. Yemen remains divided among authorities that do not share a vision for its future or unity, a situation that is likely to persist.

Ahmed Al-Ahssab is an expert on Yemeni and regional affairs. His notable works include *The Identity of Power in Yemen: The Dialectic of Politics and History* (2019) and *The Anxiety of Politics: Yemeni Phenomena and Approaches* (2025), in addition to his contributions to several co-authored books and strategic reports.

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