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## Africa Summary

# Somaliland: Progress Towards a Regional and International Role

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## INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 31 October 2013. The meeting looked at Somaliland's efforts towards becoming an internationally recognized independent state.

Somaliland has been seeking recognition of its independence for over 20 years, in which time it has achieved advances in security, development and multiparty democracy. Foreign Minister Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis gave a briefing on developments in Somaliland and priorities for the government, including progress on the new voter registration system and ties between Somaliland and Somalia. He also discussed how Somaliland can engage more effectively with the international community.

The meeting consisted of a presentation followed by a discussion, both of which were held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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## HE DR MOHAMED BIHI YONIS

Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis discussed Somaliland's efforts to attain full recognition at the international level as a self-governing nation that is fully independent from Somalia. He spoke about the Somaliland government's priorities, the country's regional and international engagement and relations with Somalia.

Dr Yonis examined Somaliland's current status within the international community. He stated that, as it has achieved significant advances in security reform, democratization and capacity-building over 20 years, Somaliland should be recognized internationally as a country distinct from Somalia. It is relatively secure and has played an important role as a buffer zone against instability for neighbouring countries. The government of Somaliland has worked hard to expel piracy and terrorism from the region, with the last major terrorist incident in the country taking place in 2008.

The government has promoted democratization, with the most recent local elections in 2012 being conducted fairly and peacefully according to the accounts of electoral observers. Significant work has taken place on capacity-building within institutions, especially in the areas of respect for the rule of law and human rights. The government has also made progress in jobs-creation and in consolidating a sustainable national budget.

The establishment of the federal government of Somalia has opened up new opportunities for engagement between Somalia and Somaliland. International actors such as Turkey have facilitated potential routes of engagement through trust-building initiatives.

Dr Yonis stated that the United Kingdom and the international community needed to be more supportive of Somaliland and to recognize the efforts that have been made in the aforementioned areas. Negative views surrounding the country hamper opportunities for international investment. Currently, the British government advises against all travel to Somalia and Somaliland, citing reasons of terrorism and the threat of kidnapping. Dr Yonis noted that it was inaccurate to consider Somaliland's security status as equivalent to that of Somalia's.

Dr Yonis concluded that the international community has a lot to gain by recognizing Somaliland's independent status. Recognition will enable further progress to be made in securitization and democratization, and can open up opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagement at official levels. An independent Somaliland is the will of Somalilanders, and the country has fulfilled the requirements needed to obtain official status.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### Question

What efforts are being made by the Somaliland government to ensure that Somaliland's regional allies Kenya and Ethiopia accept the official status of the territory? Recognition of Somaliland by African countries may be the first step before international recognition.

### Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis

Dr Yonis stated that Ethiopia is one of Somaliland's closest allies. Somaliland has supported Ethiopia and Djibouti by working as a buffer zone against instability, and Ethiopia and Somaliland cooperate to tackle issues such as terrorism. Somaliland has a representative in Addis Ababa and the neighbours enjoy a significant amount of high-level bilateral engagement.

Dr Yonis said that the African Union (AU) should take the lead to promote recognition of Somaliland. Somaliland is currently engaged with the AU parliament and Ethiopia has been assisting with this process.

### Comment

It was stated that Ethiopia has taken many steps short of fully recognizing Somaliland as an independent state. Ethiopia was the first country in the region to open up an office in Hargeisa.

### Question

Does the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office have a position on what Somaliland can do to encourage international investment?

### Comments

It was noted that Somaliland and Somalia need to come to an agreement together that would facilitate investment in the region, and that such discussions should be guided by the AU. This should happen in a similar manner to the agreement reached by Sudan and South Sudan.

The British government recognizes Somaliland's achievements, but there is still a lack of capacity that deters investment. There needs to be development

of Somaliland's private sector, which will be essential to encourage investment. It was added that there are inherent problems for businesses to invest in an unrecognized state, such as securing insurance.

In a separate comment, it was noted that comparing the situation of Sudan and South Sudan with that of Somalia and Somaliland was a false parallel, as South Sudan had the support of the United States, which put pressure on Sudan to sign the peace deal. In the case of Somaliland, the country has no international supporter. The territory is being urged to accept status as a federal state of Somalia.

### **Question**

How is the Somaliland government structuring the steps it is taking to gain recognition from the international community, and is there a timeframe in place to achieve these steps by?

### **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that the current travel advice for Somaliland issued by the British government dissuades investment. Somaliland is assessed alongside Somalia in the travel advice, and equating the two regions is inaccurate as Somaliland is considerably safer than Somalia. Nevertheless, there are a number of British entrepreneurs working in Somaliland, so the travel advice does not reflect reality. The Somaliland government has been working with the British government to get the travel advice changed.

Promoting business in Somaliland will create jobs, giving Somaliland youth alternatives to becoming drawn towards jihadist movements, and will help stabilize the Horn region.

Dr Yonis noted that now is the time to re-engage with the international community on the issue of independence. Somalilanders held a referendum, and the outcome was for Somaliland to be accepted as a separate country from Somalia. The two regions already have distinct governments and separate administrations. It is difficult to give a time frame, as secession should have happened already. It is also in the interest of Somaliland's neighbours, as an independent Somaliland will enhance stability in the Horn region. Dr Yonis added that independence should happen soon.

## **Comment**

It was noted that the travel advice issued by the British government is not political but reflects its duty to ensure the safety and security of British citizens abroad.

The current travel advice for Somaliland has been decided on the basis of certain sources that the British government cannot disclose for reasons of security. Some of these sources have indicated potential threats to British citizens in Somaliland; therefore the advice is not to travel to Somalia or Somaliland. However, this advice is not static, and may well change.

## **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that this travel advice is limiting the Somaliland economy, despite advances made in security reforms. It also hinders humanitarian work in the region. He noted that the travel advice for Somaliland has remained the same for the past nine months. This does not work in the interest of Somaliland and other countries in the Horn.

## **Question**

What has been the impact in Somaliland regarding the debate over the potential closure of remittance channels, and what will happen if Somaliland diaspora can no longer send money home from the United Kingdom?

## **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that remittances are a lifeline for Somaliland, and any disruption to this channel of funds will directly affect Somaliland. As an unrecognized region, Somaliland is not eligible for development assistance from international organizations, and so remittances are essential. He stated that the international money transfer company Dahabshiil, which works through Barclays operates in a transparent manner, maintaining a system of checks and balances. The Somaliland government has been holding talks with the British government to try to resolve the situation with Barclays.

### **Question**

You noted that Somaliland has been engaging in talks with Somalia. What is being done to enhance and facilitate cross-border activity, particularly the issue of passports?

### **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that following the last talks with Mogadishu, some agreements were not honoured by Somalia. There are concerns, but Somaliland wants to move forward from the initial stages of cooperation that are being implemented.

### **Question**

Can you tell us more about the new voter registration system, and when will Somaliland hold presidential and parliamentary elections?

### **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that the next elections are due to be held in 2015. Somaliland is working with its donor partners on voter registration, which has been called for by the Somaliland people. This will help ensure that elections are free and fair. The interior minister is working on a two-part pilot project to implement voter registration. He noted that Somaliland is committed to holding elections in a timely manner, but will not rush the process.

### **Question**

What progress has been made regarding EU funding for Somaliland's five-year national development plan?

### **Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis**

Dr Yonis stated that the Somaliland government has had many discussions with the EU and the donor community, and made it clear that Somaliland's development plan is more advanced than that of Somalia's. The international community has accepted this and Brussels has agreed to split funding for Somaliland and Somalia. It is not known how much will be allocated for Somaliland.

## Questions

How will the government engage with those who live in the Somaliland region but who do not subscribe to an independent Somaliland? For example, there is a movement pushing for an independent Khatumo state.

## Dr Mohamed Bihi Yonis

Dr Yonis stated that the Somaliland government has been working hard to disarm militant groups in Khatumo who have been advocating for an independent Khatumo. The government is open to national debate and dialogue with all citizens wishing to express themselves in a democratic and peaceful manner. There is no legitimate separate government around Khatumo that would distinguish it from Somaliland.