

# The U.S. Recognition of Somalia: Implications and the Way Forward

The U.S. recognition of the Somali government on 17 January 2013 is a great and timely opportunity that could contribute to Somalia's effort to retake its rightful place among community of nations. In the two decades Somalia took hiatus from the international scene, many opportunities that could have helped Somalia shed the 'failed state' designation appeared and vanished with the same speed. Thus, it's up to the Somali government (and citizens) to ensure the U.S. recognition does not turn out, yet again, another squandered opportunity. More importantly, the government must compliment the international diplomatic successes with tangible domestic achievements anchored in the president's six- pillar policy.

More broadly, Somalis need to properly understand what, exactly, the U.S. recognition entails, what opportunities it avails as well as what challenges are embedded with it. In doing so, they must be guided by the cardinal truth of international relations; that foreign policy decisions are always made to advance national interests. From the outset, therefore, the U.S. recognition should be seen as an outcome of strategic calculations, which reflect that it's in the best interest of the United States to recognize Somalia at this particular time. It should not be, under any circumstance, viewed as a favor to the war weary Somalis.

What Somali politicians and citizens should have been euphoric about is not the recognition itself - as the case has been - but the fact that in the eyes of United States, Somalia's fortunes have improved so well that the U.S. government wants to recognize it. Somalis should also be very conscious that interactions between states are entirely a give and take process. It is the responsibility of national leaders to defend nation's interests against those of partners, who at times have more leverages and negotiation powers, as clearly the case currently is between Somalia and the U.S. Moreover, one missing question that should have piqued the public's curiosity and at the same time generated serious media interest is what has the Somali government give in or give up in exchange for the official U.S. diplomatic recognition. The fact that the recognition coincided with the resignation of Somalia's Special Envoy to the U.S., Abukar Arman, raises more questions about the internal deliberations of the new government. The departure of the key Somali interlocutor amid the most important recognition in what he described as "misunderstanding" over policy issues is interesting.

That said, the price paid by the Somali government for the recognition was not too steep. However, the absence of any serious discussions about the reality of give-and-take based foreign policy was noticeable. Understandably, the Somali government was too jubilant about the recognition, but it seemed to have placed high premiums on the symbolisms of president Hassan Sheikh's brief encounter with President Barack Obama. A key challenge now is how to capitalize on the U.S. recognition. This requires putting the issue in context, outlining possible opportunities and drawing attention to potential blind spots.

## The Context

Contrary to the assertions of Somali government officials, the recognition was neither triggered by policies (such as the formation of small cabinet) nor personalities (the ascendancy of three civil society leaders). Instead, it was a logical conclusion and culmination of a decade-long international and U.S. efforts to bring stability and give legitimacy to Somalia's nascent national institutions. In strict legal terms, the United States has always recognized

the Somali state as a contiguous nation in the Horn of Africa. It's only now recognizing the legitimacy of the new government of that state. Having played a prominent role in the process that ended the dysfunctional transitional governance that ushered in fragile yet semi-permanent national institutions, the U.S. government would have recognized any post transition entity. For over a decade, the U.S. was looking into Somalia through the prisms of counter- terrorism and the need to contain and

combat al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab fighters. Similarly, the problems of piracy off the Somalia coast as well as the need for a constant international intervention on Somalia's recurring humanitarian crises made Somalia a constant fixture on U.S. foreign policy.

## Opportunities

By appearance and practice, United States' attitude and interactions with Somalia was antithesis to the accepted norms of state-to-state relations. The U.S. practiced what it termed as the "Dual Track Policy" which essentially meant dealing with sub-national entities notwithstanding the central government. Given the limited territorial control of the Mogadishu-based Federal Government, that policy will likely continue in one form or another. Still the official recognition has the appearance of a paradigm shift and the emergence of a partnership, however titled. On the other hand, the U.S. recognition boosts the prospect of national unity and deals a big blow to the biggest national security threat Somalia faced in the past twenty years – the breakup of the country. The significance of the U.S. recognition was not lost to the advocates of Somaliland separation as both the government and opposition groups noted it as a major setback to their aspirations.

The U.S. recognition enables the Somali government to reopen its diplomatic mission in Washington. This will facilitate the government's bid to make its case to array of power centers within the U.S. government, media and other opinion makers. Recognition also opens up direct U.S. government assistance and at the same time bestows further credibility in the eyes of other international donors. With U.S. recognition, prospects to tap into international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, improve markedly.

Crucially, President Hassan Sheikh's government can use the U.S. recognition as a leverage against the adventurist and scheming strategies of the neighboring countries who often misled the American policy towards Somalia. Many other states will no longer see Somalia as a source of terror, pirates and refugees but an untapped economic frontier and a country requiring major reconstruction. The more other countries establish relations, the more the manipulations of the regional actors decrease, giving Somalia leverages and tools to negotiate effectively and advance its strategic national interests.

There's no doubt that the Turkish model—where Ankara sees Somalia not as an irredeemable and failed state but as a friend in need with full potential—greatly affected many countries' calculations, including the timing of the U.S. recognition. Although it's the newest country to intervene in Somalia, Turkey is one of Somalia's

most influential partners and perhaps best strategically positioned to benefit any reconstruction boom as well as exploitation of the country's untapped natural resources. With a modest financial aid and an unprecedented diplomatic engagement, Turkey won the hearts and minds of the Somali people in an extraordinary and unrivalled manner. The U.S., which invested millions of dollars in the African Union's peacekeeping mission that essentially defeated al-Shabaab, had hoped to get even a fraction of the immense goodwill that Turkey has. Most probably, the U.S. government concluded that Turkey set the trend and the only way it could catch up or get parity is to follow suit the Turkish model and establish visible, bilateral and direct relations.

Given the aggressive Chinese and European oil interests in the region, the activities by upstart oil firms in certain Somali regions such as Puntland and Turkey's strategic and strong presence on the ground, it's not surprising that the U.S. sought be in the right place at the right time.

Finally the U.S. recognition reinforces the already prevailing optimism among the Somali people and international partners. It was with the U.S. departure after the Black Hawk Down incident in October 1993 that made "stay away from Somalia" the standard international norm. Now, with the United States forging a new partnership, others have already begun rolling the red carpet for the Somali president. Many educated Somalis who hitherto were avoiding returning home are coming back in droves to be part of the recovery phase. There has also been an exodus of Somali refugees and businesspeople self-repatriating from Kenya. With a robust international diplomatic presence, what is happening inside Somalia becomes more transparent, forcing the government to be more accountable, more democratic and eventually more responsive to the needs of its citizens.

## Possible Complications

Whether the U.S. recognition yields any of the aforementioned benefits depends largely on how the Somali government and its people capitalize on this opportunity and how they manage (or mismanage) their internal affairs. In the past, Somali politicians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. While more credible politicians lead this government, the possibility of squandering this opportunity is still there. Frivolous intra-Somali disputes could render the jubilation surrounding the U.S. diplomatic recognition as unremarkable event with insignificant strategic value. The list of issues and actors that could act as a source of conflict are too long to list, but include: conflict within the institutions and leaders of the current fragile Federal

Government, flare-up between the center and the regions such as Puntland or Jubbaland, conflict between the Somali government and the neighboring countries.

More importantly, if the U.S. recognition leads to Somali institutional arrogance and intransigence that upsets the tribal, traditional and regional equilibrium, it could erode the diplomatic gains made. Disgruntled stakeholders could easily up the ante and force change of policy, perception or both. Similarly, if the Somali government misreads its substantive power vis-à-vis the regional countries, it could lead to deterioration of security and revival of al-Shabaab. It's the military muscle of the neighbors that is largely responsible for the impressive and ongoing security gains as well as the government's capacity to provide services and build institutions.

A telling example of how the U.S. recognition could produce unexpected complications could be seen in the relations between Somalia and Somaliland. Before the recognition, a promising rapprochement was in the making between the two sides. That's now hanging in the balance. Bargaining powers and perceptions changed dramatically and positivism and preference for compromise give way to blame game and pessimistic outlook. A situation as delicate as mending a fractured republic, a simple miscalculation, miscommunication or misreading of implications of the U.S. recognition or the intentions of counterpart may easily ruin the prospect for negotiated settlement.

## Conclusion

The U.S. recognition of the Somali government is a significant diplomatic success that gives the new administration much-needed leverage to engage other external actors. It could also open the door for major international investment in the reconstruction of Somalia. But the new government must capitalize on this opportunity by complimenting it with achievements at the domestic front. The new government should address legitimate grievances of regional administrations, local actors, and must move forward with institutional building, anchored in president Hassan Sheikh's six-pillar policy. For its part, the United States must translate its recognition into tangible bilateral support for Somali institutions and for the private sector.

## Recommendations

### To the Somali Federal Government:

- Compliment the international recognitions with domestic legitimacy by engaging local actors, accommodating all stakeholders, resolving outstanding grievances, working toward compromises and building state institutions that can dismantle corruption syndicates, terrorist groups and piracy outfits.
- Assemble and assign the international relations portfolio with a competent, credible and inclusive team that can sort out the competing interests of other countries and articulate the strategic Somali national interests.
- Share the benefits of the diplomatic achievements with domestic stakeholders, including regional administrations, and extend the domain of the government beyond Mogadishu.
- Encourage pluralism by engaging all sectors of the Somali elite by drawing on their experiences and tapping into their knowledge to chart a national vision forward.

### To citizens and regional authorities:

- Support the Federal Government's diplomatic success by paying taxes (particularly the business community) and cooperating with national institutions.
- Hold the Federal Government accountable to the letter of the Constitution and ensure that national resources are shared equally.
- Align your regional priorities with the vital national interests, and ensure that the Federal Government is informed of your external activities.

### To the U.S. and international partners:

- Compliment your recognition with tangible bilateral support for the Somali national institutions as well as the private sector by easing your restrictive regulatory regime on the business community, particularly the remittance companies.
- Reopen your embassy in Mogadishu as soon as feasible, and ensure that you engage the Somali government as an equal partner that has its own vital interests and strategic allies.
- Lobby for a gradual end to the arms embargo on Somalia, as suggested by the UN chief Ban Ki-Moon, so that the Federal Government can take a qualitative monopoly on the instruments of legitimate violence.
- Pressure your allies in the Horn of Africa region to support the Somali government.

The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit policy research and analysis institute based in Mogadishu, Somalia. As Somalia's first think tank, it aims to inform and influence public policy through empirically based, evidence-informed analytical research, and to promote a culture of learning and research.

[www.heritageinstitute.org](http://www.heritageinstitute.org) • [info@heritageinstitute.org](mailto:info@heritageinstitute.org)