

Somalia's Last Foreign Minister Warns Somaliland on Secession

By Noakes, Greg

January 18, 2008

Ahmed Mohamed Adan (Qaybe), a career Somali diplomat and politician and the last Minister of Foreign Affairs of Barre's government, warns Somaliland on Secession. WardheerNews would like to share with its readers this old article from Washington Report on Middle East Affairs in May 31 1994. In that article Mr. Qaybe articulated explicit refutations to the rationale behind the secession quest of some segments of the population of the North of Somalia. Qaybe stoutly argues that there are neither legal nor moral justifications for the unilateral secession of Somaliland from the rest of the nation. WardheerNews would like to encourage and solicit reader's comments on both sides of the debate.

Somalia's Last Foreign Minister Warns Somaliland on Secession

In the wake of U.S. and other international troop withdrawals, Somalia faces even more problems than the absence of central government, endemic clan rivalries, civil strife and the lingering specter of food shortages. There is also the prospect of a formal breakup of Somalia into two separate nations based upon the former colonial boundaries between Italian-occupied Somalia and British Somaliland.

In May 1991, leaders of the Somali National Movement, a political party dominated by the Isaaq clan, unilaterally declared an independent Republic of Somaliland in northwestern Somalia. Its self-proclaimed borders correspond exactly with those of the former protectorate of British Somaliland before its incorporation into Somalia 34 years ago.

The self-styled Somaliland government of President Mohammed Ibrahim Egal has yet to be recognized by any foreign power, but the secessionists are taking advantage of Somalia's continuing instability to press their claim to independence. It raises perplexing questions of self-determination, territorial integrity, national sovereignty and the role of the international community in helping Somalia rise from the ashes of war and famine.

One of the most prominent opponents of secession is Ahmed Mohammed Adan, a Somali diplomat and statesman who himself hails from the former British Somaliland but is not a member of the Isaaq clan. During his career in the Somali diplomatic service, which began with independence in 1960, Adan served as ambassador to the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Nations. He was serving as Somalia's foreign minister when the 1991 overthrow of former President Mohammed Siad Barre plunged the country into its current state of chaos.

Now Adan is affiliated with the United Somali Party and serves on a popularly elected council which oversees regional affairs for the northern Sol and Sanaag areas, within the British Somaliland boundaries, pending the re-establishment of a government in

Mogadishu. Currently a resident of the United Arab Emirates, Adan spoke to the Washington Report during a recent U.S. visit to discuss the secession issue with American and U.N. officials.

Adan insists that a majority of the residents of the former Somaliland oppose secession, and that the independence movement is an attempt by the Isaaq clan to grab power. The Isaaq form a plurality in Somaliland since they live almost entirely within the former British Somaliland, while the disputed region's four other clans extend into the rest of Somalia.

"It's a one-tribe issue," Adan says. "The Isaaq want to secede and the other clans are saying no. The others are willing to manage their own affairs locally until such time as a central government is formed. They are willing to be patient."

Adan dismisses the view that ongoing violence in the former Somali capital of Mogadishu and the southern city of Kismayu has led many non-Isaaq northerners to favor an independent Somaliland. "Despite their other differences, all of the other clans are against secession," Adan says. He points out that a divided Somalia would cut across most clan lines, separating the majority of those in Somaliland from members of their clans in the south. "At least this is one issue that has brought the clans together," he adds.

Adan also disputes the notion that Somaliland enjoys tranquility, noting that Egal's government does not control large portions of the region, including the airport at the capital of Hargeisa and the main seaport of Berbera. Outside observers say the Isaaq themselves are split by rivalries among various sub-clans.

"Egal's writ does not run in the areas of the other clans, and his government, police, courts, etc. have no presence there," Adan says. "He is presiding over a very chaotic situation, despite the claims that there is stability. There is no such thing as a united Somaliland."

The breakaway region was known as the protectorate of British Somaliland between 1884 and 1960, when the colonial administration withdrew. Voters in a popular referendum in February of that year elected to join Somalia to the south. An act of union was negotiated by the Hargeisa and Mogadishu governments, ratified by both national assemblies and then approved by popular vote across Somalia in 1961.

"There is no such thing as a united Somaliland."

According to the act of union, any effort to dissolve the united republic must be approved by a four-fifths majority of all Somali voters. The Isaaq claim that they are exercising their right to self-determination in the absence of a central government authority. However, Adan argues that both the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity have repeatedly upheld the principle that self-determination cannot be applied to an integral part of a sovereign state. In the past, he notes, Somalia's attempts to raise the

issue of self-determination in Ethiopia's Somali-populated Ogaden province were rebuffed repeatedly by the international community for just this reason.

Isaaq secessionist aspirations date back to the early years of Somali independence, Adan feels, and gradually evolved into the armed Somali National Movement (SNM). "The Isaaq felt they lost out in the union," according to Adan. He notes, however, that members of the Isaaq clan have served in every major post in the Somali government save that of president. Somaliland President Egal, for instance, was prime minister of Somalia from 1967 to 1969, and has also held the education and defense portfolios.

In the 1980s, the SNM came to rely on former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam for arms, training and logistical support for its guerrilla attacks. Following Mengistu's 1988 rapprochement with Siad Barre, however, the SNM commandos were evicted from Ethiopia and returned to northwest Somalia.

There they began a series of attacks against government forces, capturing parts of Hargeisa and the inland city of Burao. SNM leaders privately told their clan followers they were fighting for independence, while publicly claiming to support a united Somalia. Siad Barre's forces launched a brutal counter-insurgency campaign from Mogadishu to put down the rebels. In doing so, they were responsible for a number of atrocities against civilians and created lasting resentment among the Isaaq.

Somalia's disastrous descent into chaos after the 1991 fall of Siad Barre allowed the SNM and the Isaaq to realize their goal of Somaliland independence. The Egal government still faces two serious challenges, however: the economic weakness of Somaliland and the lack of formal international recognition.

The former British Somaliland "will have to be economically supported and subsidized by a foreign country," Ahmed Mohammed Adan believes, noting that "even with the whole of Somalia there has been the problem of economic viability." A parallel can be drawn with Djibouti-formerly French Somaliland-- which relies on French aid for its continued existence. The Hargeisa government has talked about exploiting the region's oil resources, but the only significant reserves lie outside the Egal government's zone of control.

Hargeisa's attempts to break out of its international isolation have led other Somalis to embark on a campaign to block any diplomatic recognition of Somaliland. During his American visit Adan met with a number of State Department officials, congressmen and congressional staffers, ambassadors to the United Nations and U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Adan's message was that "any attempt by secessionist elements to gain recognition should be rejected," he said.

"All of the people I have met agree that secession is not the solution to the problems of Somalia, and that other, more positive solutions should be found," Adan says.

Foreign diplomats, including U.N. Security Council members, told him secession is an internal Somali matter and their countries will not grant recognition to Somaliland without the approval of all Somalis.

"But we are somewhat suspicious," Adan says. "I think it is very dangerous to encourage these people. It could provoke civil war in the north, since the other clans will not accept this. They want to stay with the rest of the republic," he says. In addition, Adan notes, "it will create a dangerous precedent for other African countries."

As for Washington's approach, "I was told that the U. S. was neither for nor against this secession," Adan smiles. "What this means, I don't know."

Adan is adamant, though, that the world community should play a role in the future of Somalia. "It would be unwise to disengage from Somalia now, after so much has been invested in men and materiel," he believes. "If the international community walks away from the civil strife in Somalia it could continue and spread into neighboring countries.

"The countries of the Horn of Africa are not yet stable. With Somalia next door, there is a danger of its instability affecting neighboring states," Adan says. "There are borders, but there are no walls. . . It is Somalis who will find a solution, but we should be helped, not left to our own devices."

Despite his hard and fast opposition to secessionist Somaliland, Adan is hopeful that agreement can be reached with the Isaaq. "If they get nowhere with the international community," he says, "they might be willing to renegotiate the act of union. We are not against that. Certainly some decentralization would benefit all of the people.

"We can find a solution within the framework of Somalia rather than breaking up the country," Adan argues. "We are open to discussion of all these options, short of secession. We can try to find a constitutional system that will satisfy all the groups and parties in Somalia."

Listening to Somalia's last foreign minister argue so passionately against a clan-motivated secession of his own homeland from that troubled country, the observer can only conclude that such a peaceful solution will be difficult to find. Nevertheless, confronting the turmoil that has gripped Somalia over the last three years, most Somali political leaders finally may be more interested in compromise than conflict.

Source: Noakes, Greg. The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. Washington: May 31, 1994. Vol. XII, Iss. 7; pg. 53 - - Copyright American Educational Trust May 31, 1994