Ali Mazrui in his foreword rightly characterizes this compact book as a significant contribution to understanding Somaliland and the predicament of the Somali people more generally. Although the international community still fails to recognize it officially, the Somaliland Republic (the former British Somaliland) has existed de facto as a lively small state since it split off from Somalia in 1991. Iqbal Jhazbhay, a South African political scientist, examines the Somalilanders’ quest for recognition, presenting their case with clarity and sympathy, analysing the factors which have so far militated against the achievement of this aim. The book’s particular strengths reflect the author’s academic background in International Relations, work with the ANC, and the South African Institute of International Affairs. These provide a fresh approach to the problem and one which highlights Africanist and African Union interpretations of the issues it raises. On these, in terms both of theory and practice, Jhazbhay speaks with authority.

The book opens with a brief and somewhat selective historical sketch of the formation of the Somaliland state, very appropriately stressing the bottom-up decentralized agreements which have brought its constituent clans together. The resulting bicameral government (elected party representatives and clan elders) is closely based on the uncentralized traditional political system which is highly democratic, at least in terms of male representation and decision-making. The next section deals with reconstruction, although, as the author aptly remarks, ‘there is no neat cut-off point between reconciliation and reconstruction’. In the formative history of what is today the Somaliland Republic, these two activities can be viewed as ‘mutually reinforcing imperatives’. In the construction of the new Somaliland state, as Jhazbhay emphasizes, the clan elders throughout the land have played a crucial role, and are now a similarly significant force in contemporary government, jointly with elected politicians. The highly significant part played by the country’s over a million expatriate nationals, especially through the remittances they send home (worth an estimated US$500 million annually), is fully acknowledged.

Islam naturally receives due attention in the picture Jhazbhay paints, which claims, somewhat misleadingly, that Somali xenophobia does not extend to fellow Muslims. It does, and there is certainly a growing opposition to the militarily dominant al-Shabaab fundamentalists.
who are currently trying to establish Saudi theological control throughout the whole Somali region and, in the process, are violating the graves of local Sufi saints, to the consternation of many Somalis. ‘Meanwhile, a second generation of Islamism emerges from a class of politically conscious and entrepreneurially aggressive wadaads (religious functionaries) in Somaliland who compete for leadership within the country’s democratic system’. The future impact of this remains to be seen.

Finally, in a valuable assessment of the recognition issue, the author justly points out that Somalia ‘no longer exists … despite the fiction dreamt up by African, Arab, and international diplomacy to serve their vested political interests’. Those who seek a realistic solution to the Horn of Africa’s threateningly active Islamist fundamentalism must grasp this, and accurately evaluate Somaliland’s potential contribution to moderation and stability in the region.

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