

Diaspora Diplomacy in Somaliland: Strategy, Agency, and Recognition Challenges

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Abstract

The Somaliland diaspora has played a crucial role in both internal governance and external relations, particularly in advocating for Somaliland's interests on the global stage and facilitating connections with other nations, despite the lack of international recognition. This article revisits and reframes diaspora diplomacy in Somaliland and develops it into a theoretical contribution to the public policy. It develops an analytical narrative that critically examines both the original study and recent movements (2013–2020) including formal establishment of diaspora engagement, strengthening of diaspora advocacy networks overseas, and the increasing utilizations of digital platform for political mobilization and global outreach. To understand the issue deeper, the article reviews the main debate on diaspora diplomacy and transnationalism and highlights multiple roles that diasporas can play as independent actors, state actors, or collaborating partners. It also puts Somaliland in its historical and political context, which is characterized by a long-standing claim to statehood, post-conflict peacebuilding, and a political economy heavily dependent on remittances from the diaspora. Drawing on qualitative data, including interviews and secondary sources, the analysis indicates that the Somaliland diaspora is integral to funding peacebuilding and governance initiatives and is also formally integrated into the state structure through specialized diaspora institution within the Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. These findings underline the inherently complex nature of the involvement of the diaspora. Diaspora acts as informal diplomatic agents, transitional lobbyists, and guardians of national identities, shaping international perceptions as well as domestic political processes. But this engagement remains uneven and contentious, reflecting internal divisions along clan-based, generational, and ideological lines, which can lead to conflicting interests and varying levels of commitment among diaspora members. The article highlights this dynamic by demonstrating how unrecognized states compensate for their limited formal diplomatic access through the strategic mobilization of transitional networks. It argues that diaspora diplomacy serves not only as a complementary approach but also as a fundamental basis for external relations in this context. The article ends by identifying the main areas for future research, including the role of digital media in mobilizing the diaspora and the need to conduct comparative analyses in other countries.

Keywords: diaspora diplomacy, Somaliland, *de facto* states, transnationalism, soft power, remittances, peacebuilding, recognition

Introduction

Although the Somalis have long engaged in labor migration, departures from the country accelerated greatly as a consequence of the oppressive military rule in the 1970s, and the civil war in the late 1980s and early 1990s that left nearly a million refugees in various countries around the world. After a protracted conflict with Somalia military regime of Barre, Somaliland declared independence in 1991. Despite the establishment of a relatively stable political order with functioning democratic institutions, it is not recognized by any UN member or international organization (Walls, 2018; Phillips, 2020). In this context, the Somaliland diaspora, made up of Somalilanders who migrated during and after the war with Barre regime, has played an unusually prominent role in the economic and political life of the people of Somaliland. Estimates suggest

that some one million Somalis including those hailing from Somaliland live abroad, mainly in the United Kingdom, Scandinavian, and North American countries and Gulf States, transferring significant funds to support their families, public services, local administration, and humanitarian aid (Sørensen, 2004; Orozco & Yansura, 2013). But diaspora involvement goes beyond economic contributions. Emerging activities conceptualize these activities as diaspora diplomacy, stressing the role of transnational communities in shaping foreign policy processes and international perceptions of their own countries. Somaliland is a particularly striking case: without formal diplomatic recognition, embassies, or membership in multilateral institutions, the country relies heavily on its diaspora community as informal proxies and agents.

These diaspora agents are helping international recognition efforts, cultivating relations with foreign governments and civil society, and contributing to mediation and political dialogue within the Somaliland context (Awad, 2011). As reflected in official discourse, members of the diaspora are not seen as external actors but as integral members of the national polity. This article aims to refine and extend the existing analysis by placing the experiences of Somaliland in the context of current debates on diaspora-state relations. It examines how diaspora resources are strategically mobilized by national authorities and how diaspora actors act as agents of external action. By focusing on diaspora diplomacy in the context of the unrecognized state, the article transitions networks, replaces, and transforms traditional forms of diplomacy, ultimately highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities that arise when engaging with a diaspora in a politically sensitive environment.

While existing literature has consistently highlighted the contribution of the Somaliland diaspora to the development, much less attention has been given to its diplomatic and political function and engagement. In particular, the role of diaspora in shaping external relations, influencing international perceptions and creating political leverage which is not sufficiently explored (Ho & McConnell 2017; Brinkerhoff 2019). This omission is sufficient, at it risks reducing the involvement of the diaspora to an economic activity, while neglecting its wider strategic importance. Although the article begins to address this aspect, academic research on diaspora diplomacy in the context of Somaliland remains limited or absent.

This article therefore aims to fill this gap by placing Somaliland in a broader diplomatic context. It integrates empirical finding from the article with existing theoretical discussions to critically examine whether the Somaliland diaspora is primarily a state instrument or an independent political actor. In doing so, it promoted a more nuanced understanding of the diaspora and highlights the fluid and negotiated nature of relations between the diaspora and states in a context where formal diplomatic channels are limited.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Transnationalism

Diaspora is an outcome of migration which happens across the global regions. It is a reality that the current political dynamics in the world and the advance of science and technology and globalization are primarily linked with the increase of migration and movements among the world nations (Milner, 2009; Parsons & Linhard, 2019). Migration patterns in the Somali region are shaped by the conflicts and confrontations that plagued the state since 1991, in particular, Somalia; and the worsening climate in a changing environment. These two factors led to Somalis

mixed migration within the states in the Horn of Africa and other parts of the African continent, and the Middle Eastern countries, as well as Western European and North American countries.

However, according to IOM (2017), this characterization is not as easily made in the Somali migration context, where economic migration is often a coping strategy to the enduring conflict and is considered as forced migration. This article adopts a relational and transnational framework for analyzing the relationship between diaspora and states, drawing on the insights of political science and international relations (Tellander & Horst, 2019; Kennedy, 2020). It is based on three basic assumptions: first, that diaspora communities are internally diverse and cannot be considered as coherent or homogeneous entities; second, that while national governments can actively institutionalize diaspora involvement through policies and agencies, diaspora actors maintain their own interests and agendas. Third, this diaspora influence works through both formal channels – such as funding initiatives led by states – and informal channels, such as advocacy, dissemination of norms and transnational networking. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of diaspora agencies as relational, negotiated, and embedded in overlapping political context. This perspective draws on the typology of Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff (2019) who conceptualizes diaspora as autonomous entities, state instruments, or ad hoc partners depending on the convergence of interests, however, this article argues that these categories are fluid rather than rigid. In practice, diaspora frequently move between these roles, navigating and transforming state-driven framework simultaneously.

Ultimately, instead of solely being characterized by their geographical distribution, diasporas are more accurately understood through their persistent social, economic, and political connections to their homeland (Brubaker, 2005). They function as transnational actors that operate beyond borders (Gamelin, 2014; Kennedy, 2024). In the context of public diplomacy studies, an important differentiation is drawn between diaspora-led diplomacy (initiatives taken independently-led by diaspora communities) and state-driven diplomacy through the diaspora (government efforts to engage diaspora populations) (Cull, 2008; Huijgh, 2019).

Diaspora Soft Power and Lobbying

The concept of soft power is closely related to diaspora diplomacy, and helps to explain how diaspora communities influence international perceptions outside formal state structures. As non-state actors embedded in host societies, diaspora have cultural capital, professional experiences and social legitimacy which can help to improve the global image of their country and facilitate informal diplomacy (Cull, 2022). At the same time, their role is not uniformly positive, as some countries see diasporas as politically challenged when they challenge official narratives (Ibid). Empirical studies show the influence of the diaspora is particularly visible in the lobbying of host countries. The U.S. and European cases show how organized diaspora groups shape foreign policy debates even if their effectiveness depends on their organizational power, strategic orientation, and access to political elites (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007; Tellander & Horst, 2019). What matters is that diaspora influence tends to work if it is consistent with the interests of the host country (Adamson, 2018). This article argues that this is dynamic and is even more important in contexts where formal diplomatic channels are limited, which has led to the emergence of diaspora soft power as the main mechanism for international engagement.

The impact of the diaspora is particularly visible in the lobbying of host countries, though its effectiveness often depends on organizational power, access to political elites, and alignment with the geopolitical interests of the host country (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007; Tellander & Horst, 2019). This soft power emerges as a primary mechanism for international engagement when formal diplomatic channels are legally restricted or non-existent. Comparative studies on Taiwan, Palestine, and Kosovo shows that diaspora activism can strengthen national aspirations and institutional legitimacy at home (Gamelin, 2014; Koinou, 2013). However, the scholarly exploration on the diaspora of unrecognized states remains limited. A specific analysis of Somaliland demonstrates how a transnational community handles the structural absence of statehood by relying on informal diplomacy, civic networking, and substituting traditional diplomatic access with alternative arrangements.

Diaspora Contributions to Peace and Reconstruction

The Somaliland diaspora has had a structurally foundational role in the history of the country's recovery. Prior to the escalation of conflict with the Barre regime in the 1980s, Somalilanders working in the Gulf States remitted funds to support families and local economies. This cross-border financial lifeline was sustained during the military struggle and persisted through Somaliland's declaration of independence from Somalia in 1991. Beyond this economic support, diaspora nationals have contributed significantly to peacebuilding and state development. They took part in a succession of national reconciliation conferences, helped construct governance institutions, and backed democratic activities including elections and civil society initiatives (Abokor & Ali, 2018).

As argued by Sarah G. Phillips (2016), the diaspora played a key role in the peace processes of the early 1990s, acting as organizational facilitators and funding clan-based reconciliation conferences. A key example is the landmark Grand Conference in Borama (January 24 – May 25, 1993), where financial contributions from diaspora donors and local business people facilitated the peace process and fostered subsequent reconstruction efforts. Given the emphasis on this point, during the liberation struggle of the 1980s, the Somali National Movement (SNM) was sustained by support from diaspora communities organized through kinship transfer systems. This collective mobilization managed to influence world powers, notably leading the United States to cut military aid to the autocratic Somali military government in the late 1980s (Bulhan, 2008; Bradbury & Healy, 2010; Dualeh, 2019).

In the contemporary period, annual remittances—estimated in the range of \$400–\$500 million USD—exceed key export earnings and serve as a major source of household income, sustaining public services and local infrastructure in the absence of broad international aid or foreign direct investment (Phillips, 2016; Chatham House, 2016). This economic involvement cannot be understood in a purely developmental sense; it is deeply intertwined with state-building and legitimacy, providing both the material and symbolic basis for Somaliland's claim to statehood.

Furthermore, and very importantly, the diaspora diplomacy has been active and building bridging between the unrecognized state of Somaliland and the international community. Therefore, understanding the crucial foundation established by grassroots groups prior to the official institutionalization of state-led tactics is essential to comprehending the development of Somaliland's diaspora diplomacy. The Somaliland Forum (SLF) became the most significant global

force behind Somaliland diplomacy in the late 1990s and early 2000. The SLF successfully led the way in early digital diaspora diplomacy during a time when Somaliland had neither official overseas representation nor domestic internet infrastructure. In coordinating a global advocacy, issuing news releases, and directly petitioning international institutions through internet-based networks, the SLF gave Somaliland's political accomplishments previously unheard-of international attention. A foundational milestone of the SLF's diplomatic agency occurred during the 2001 constitutional referendum. The forum was effective in organizing the diaspora to directly fund international observers lodging, transport and logistics. Transforming the diaspora from humanitarian senders into methodical, skilled political advocates, this calculated effort gave the international world the empirical. Independent confirmation needed to demonstrate Somaliland's democratic viability.

Government Engagement of Diaspora: Institutions and Strategies

The second key is the formal institutionalization of diaspora engagement by the Government of Somaliland. In recent years, the Government have established policies and structures specifically aimed at mobilizing the diaspora communities, most notably the establishment of the Somaliland Diaspora Agency (SDA) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in 2017 under Musa Bihi Abdi's administration. Official discourse frames the diaspora not as external actors but as integral citizens, central to be development and building of states.

Government initiatives including diaspora mapping investment facilitations and support for returnees, further position the diaspora as vital link between Somaliland and international arena (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). More importantly, these policies explicitly identify diaspora communities as promoters of international recognition, reflecting a strategy of state-led mobilization in line with diaspora diplomacy (Ho & McConnell, 2017). This article argues that this development shows the increasing involvement of diaspora actors in the external engagement of Somaliland, while leaving room for independent diaspora agencies.

Domestic Politics, Diaspora Fragmentation and Cohesion

Domestically, the influence of the diaspora is multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, remittances support households, support local businesses and finance community projects, including initiatives led by the diaspora in the fields of education and health (Kleist, 2018). This economic contribution can be translated into political leverage, as investors and returnees from the diaspora seek to influence local policies, politics, and governance decisions.

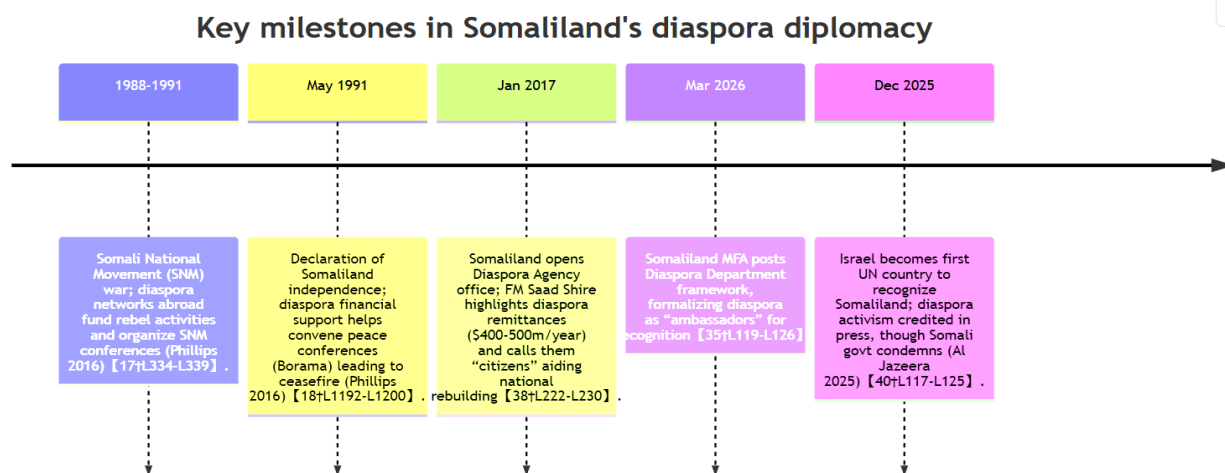
On the other hand, involvement of the diaspora may also create tensions and disparities. The dependence on remittance raises sustainability concerns, especially as the family ties to the homeland are weakening. Moreover, diaspora players can align themselves with specific clans or political parties, which magnify internal divisions and shape electoral dynamics. Their prominent role has sometimes been criticized by local stakeholders who see diaspora participation as intrusive or uneven. To elaborate on the issue further, the establishment of the political parties along clan lines is the major, if not the sole, source of Somaliland's division both within the country and outside. For example, the politicians raise funds from the clan-affiliated diaspora and take advantage of every mechanism necessary to reach their goal. The major goal of the politicians is to secure funds from the diaspora and thus retain state power. This kind of engagement has

impacted the state security and citizens' coexistence (Abokor & Ali, 2018). This article argues that these dynamics underline the ambivalent character of diaspora influence in which economic support and political intervention are closely linked.

The Somaliland diaspora's effectiveness as a global political player is essentially conditioned by its deep internal fragmentation. The community is divided by socioeconomic, geographic, and generational fault lines that weaken lobbying coherence and prevent group action. First-generation migrants, whose political identities are still rooted in nationalist myths, and younger cohorts, who frequently place a higher priority on socioeconomic assimilation within host societies, represent the fundamental divide. Geographic stratification exacerbates this divergence: those in Europe and North America are more likely to work in professional and academic capacities, whereas the diaspora in the Gulf states is concentrated in labor and finance. Due to this variability, rival organizations can have conflicting strategic aims and overlapping agendas, divergent strategic priorities, specifically regarding the tension between pursuing international recognition versus domestic governance reform.

Cohesion is further hindered by the continued existence of clan-based identities. Diaspora identification often reflects Somaliland's internal clan patterns. As a result, the diaspora has a mixed nature, functioning as both an autonomous agent of "diaspora diplomacy" and a structural tool of state strategy through investments and remittances (Brinkerhoff, 2019; Ho & McConnell, 2017). In the end, internal fragmentation continues to be a major factor in determining political success, as Tellander and Horst (2019) indicate, especially in situations when official diplomatic avenues are limited.

Timeline of Somaliland's Diaspora Engagement



This timeline (drawn from the literature) illustrates the evolving role of the diaspora. Early on, diaspora acted as wartime backers (1988–1991). Decades later, they are formally engaged in state diplomacy and development programs. The late-2025 diplomatic milestone (recognition by Israel) demonstrates global consequences of these long-term efforts.

Result and Analysis

Several significant patterns emerge from this analysis. First, Somaliland's history serves as an example of how a polity acting under severe external limitations can strategically instrumentalize the diaspora. State authorities have depended more on expatriate groups as quasi-diplomatic agents in the lack of formal diplomatic recognition and restricted access to foreign aid. A conscious attempt to incorporate diaspora players into state strategy and position them as collaborators in international lobbying, cultural engagement, and economic development is shown by the creation of specialized diaspora institution within the Somaliland public institutions. Somaliland is a prime example of diplomacy through diaspora, which is consistent with more general claims that nations intentionally deploy diasporas as tools of foreign policy.

The second point to note is the grassroots mobilization throughout host nations that demonstrates the role of diaspora diplomacy. Through their engagement with policymakers, think tanks, and civil society players, diaspora organizations have maintained Somaliland's worldwide exposure and gradually shaped external perceptions. The research that is presently available indicates that diaspora-led lobbying has increased access to decision-making settings and contributed to changing forms of external participation, even though much of this influence is still hard to measure. In regard of Somaliland's lack of official recognition, the article argues that when considered collectively, these interactions show how diaspora networks actively participate in redefining Somaliland's international posture rather than only serving as supportive players.

Following that, it is easily observable how homeland politics and diaspora diplomacy interact. There are domestic ramifications to the government's open-door policy toward diaspora participation (such as permitting dual citizenship and providing investment incentives). Diaspora projects frequently target larger populations (such as education and health initiatives benefiting rural children), so on the one hand, diaspora inflows can be inclusive and stabilizing. However, they have the power to sabotage local politics. Diaspora financing of clan-based militias or media organizations, for example, has generated controversy: is this acceptable democratic engagement or excessive meddling? In keeping with Uysal's (2019) caution that the diaspora is not always in harmony with governmental ambitions, the article may include objections from opposition figures or domestic NGOs. This conflict may show up in Somaliland as disagreements about Somaliland's international representation: the independent civic council or the government's diaspora council.

Lastly, the instance demonstrates how diaspora diplomacy is limited by state capability and the global environment. Somaliland must rely largely on unofficial routes, which increases the relative significance of diaspora actors in contrast to recognized governments with official diplomatic networks. Somaliland is therefore positioned on a spectrum between state-directed mobilization and completely autonomous diaspora engagement. However, the lack of external sovereignty structurally limits diaspora advocacy. Diaspora actors encounter obstacles when trying to participate in national-level decision-making processes in the absence of legal recognition. Instead, they use indirect routes like municipal governments, civil society platforms, or global forums where Somaliland is not separately represented. This imbalance sets Somaliland apart from situations involving recognized states and emphasizes how international status affects the reach and efficacy of diaspora diplomacy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research provides valuable insights, it is limited by its reliance on reconstructed data from the original article and its inevitably selective use of available sources. The gathering of primary empirical data, such as multi-sited interviews with diaspora populations, surveys of Somaliland citizens, and methodical content analysis of diaspora media, should be the top priority for future research. Triangulation, which combines qualitative narratives with archival data (such as government documents on diaspora policy) and quantitative indicators (such as remittance flows and patterns of diaspora political participation), will increase methodological rigor.

Theoretically, minimal is acknowledged about the digital aspect of diaspora diplomacy. According to recent research, social media platforms have emerged as crucial venues for transnational interaction, with online campaigns and diaspora-run media influencing how younger generations and viewers around the world perceive Somaliland's stability and governance (Kennedy, 2024). One important area for future research is to look at how these virtual networks interact with diplomatic procedures on the ground.

Lastly, comparative studies are required to place Somaliland in the larger context of *de facto* states. When evaluating whether diaspora diplomacy tactics are context-specific or generalizable, cases like Taiwan, Transnistria, and Kosovo before recognition offer helpful points of comparison. Theoretical knowledge of how unacknowledged polities use diaspora networks under situations of limited sovereignty would be strengthened by such investigation.

Conclusion

The article re-examines the analysis on Somaliland's diaspora within the context of broader discussion on diaspora diplomacy and trinational politics. It demonstrates how the Somaliland diaspora functions both as a political actor and as an economic lifeline. Diaspora communities effectively serve as an informal extension of the state's external engagement by supporting local peacebuilding and development efforts while also advocating internationally. The government's institutionalization of diaspora relations further illustrates how states mobilize transnational communities as quasi-diplomatic actors to respond to structural constraints.

Such an approach also draws attention to significant conflicts. Diaspora involvement raises Somaliland's profile and aids in state development, but it also highlights inherent weaknesses, such as reliance on outside parties and unequal internal dynamics. These results suggest a more general theoretical understanding: diaspora diplomacy is not incidental but rather constitutive of statehood practices in unacknowledged or diplomatically restricted circumstances, influencing both legitimacy and governance outcomes.

From a policy standpoint, Somaliland's Government might profit from further institutionalizing diaspora engagement through inclusive and transparent processes, especially in the areas of investment facilitation and knowledge transfer. Addressing internal fragmentation may improve diaspora communities' ability to work together effectively in advocacy and development initiatives. In the long run, Somaliland's path will continue to be intimately linked to

the activities and networks of its overseas diaspora, both in terms of domestic consolidation and international recognition.

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