

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Crisis in a Desert

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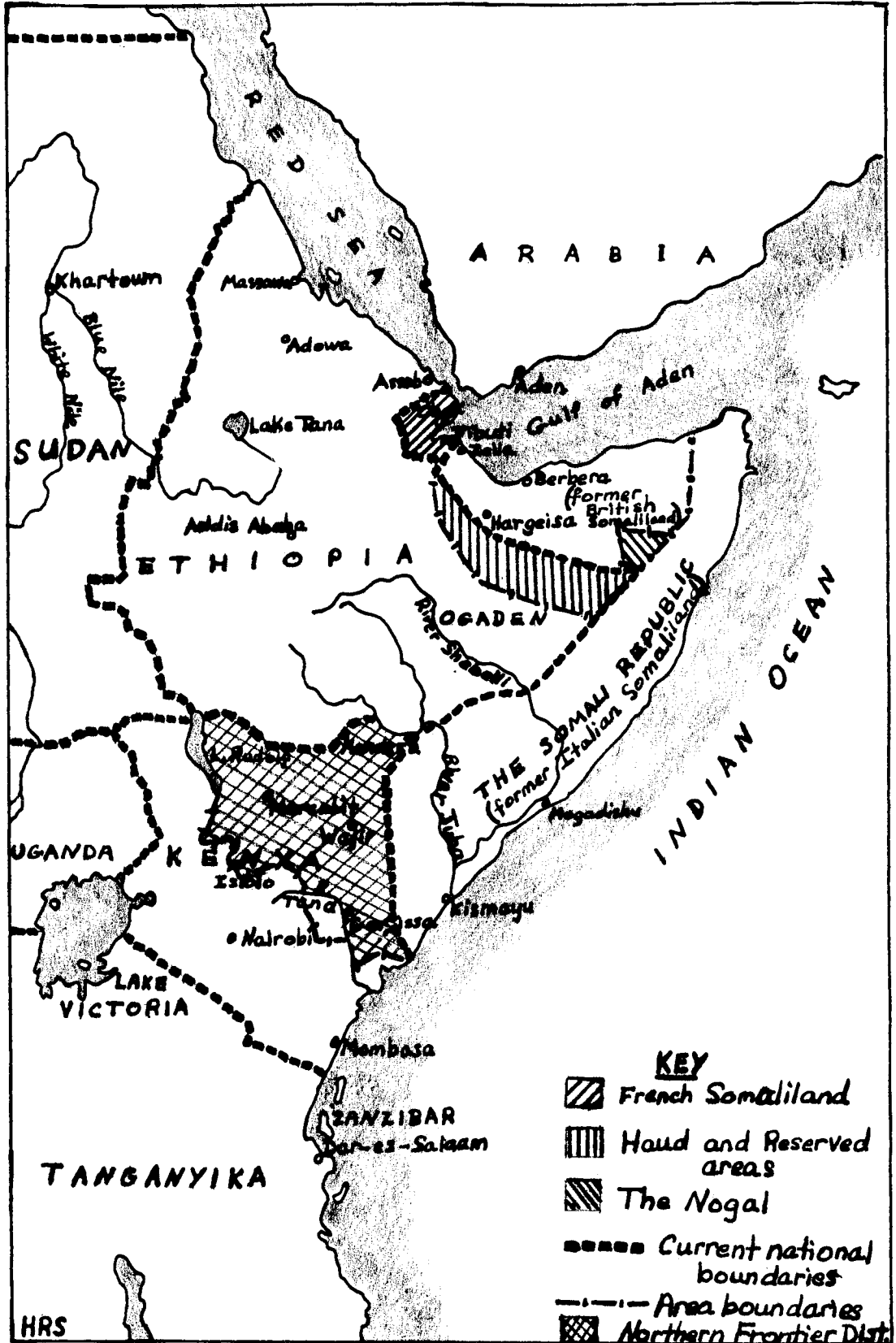
Dear Mr. Nolte:

The clash between Kenya and the Somali Republic over Kenya's Northern Frontier District blackens Nairobi headlines.. What is the NFD? What history lies behind the dispute? What are the Kenya and Somali feelings? what might happen?

The vast semi-desert of the Northern Frontier District stretches from Lake Rudolf in the west to the Somali border in the east. Its 102,000 square miles contain little to sustain the nomadic tribes that cross its burning surface in a constant search for grazing and water. Oil companies once thought the District promising, but so far their explorations have been unsuccessful. No one is sure exactly how many people live in the six administrative districts that divide the area. Population figures vary from the 200,000 cited in the report of the recent Northern Frontier District Commission to 388,000 quoted in one of Nairobi's newspapers. It is easier to talk in terms of tribal distribution. More than half of the people living in the NFD are Somalis whose Hamitic ancestors moved southwards from Arabia in a series of aggressive migrations that halted at the Tana River in the first decade of this century. The Somalis are Islamic and occupy the western half of the NFD. The other significant tribes in the District are the Boran, Gabbra, Orma, Rendille, Sakuye, and a group known collectively as the Riverine.

In the 1930s the British declared the NFD a closed District because of intertribal battles and the difficulty of travel within the area. The visitor still needs a permit to enter and the resident a permit to leave. Since the Somalis continued to press southward and to harass their Galla neighbors, the British Government established a boundary known as the Somali-Galla line which neither tribe is allowed to cross. These restrictions have created a feeling of isolation among the NFD tribes who describe a trip to Nairobi as a trip to "Kenya".

We would rarely hear of the NFD, except for the occasional brief news report of another killing at a water hole, were it not for its Somalis, who now demand cession of the entire district to the neighboring Somali Republic and who refuse to consider themselves connected in any way with Kenya. The government of the Republic urges them on, for its stated goal is to unite all the Somali speaking peoples under the single flag of a "Greater Somalia".



The story behind "Greater Somalia" begins over a hundred years ago when, in 1829, Britain established a coaling station in the harbor of Aden to fuel her ships on the India route. Ten years later, Britain annexed Aden outright and began to make treaties with rulers along the Red Sea and northern Somali coasts hoping to keep other countries out of the area. British hopes were short lived, however, for the building of the Suez Canal quickened France's interest and in 1862 she acquired the port of Obok at the mouth of the Red Sea. Shortly after the formal opening of the Canal in November 1869, the Egyptians claimed the Somali coast and received immediate recognition from the anxious British who depended on coastal sheep and cattle for Aden's meat supply. A fourth contestant entered the arena when Italy, late to the colonial race, took over the harbor of Assab on the western shore of the Red Sea. Two years later, in 1885, fears of French expansion forced Britain to approve Italian occupation of Massawa, another Red Sea port. Further east, when the Mahdi rebellion in the Sudan caused Egypt's withdrawal from the Somali coast, Britain quickly signed agreements with the Somali chiefs so that by 1887 she could claim practically the whole northern coast, from the important harbor of Jibuti westwards. In these agreements, the chiefs promised to refuse entry to any other power. In return the British guaranteed to preserve Somali independence, law and order.

The three European countries were not long in bumping shoulders as their ambitions increased and in a series of treaties, they recognized each other's "spheres of influence". In 1888, Britain and France set the boundary between their protectorates at a point half-way between Jibuti and Zeila. This pact separated Jibuti from what was later British Somaliland and eventually the Northern Region of the Somali Republic. Three years later, in 1891, Italy and Britain divided their East African territories with a boundary line that stretched from Kismayu on the Indian Ocean up the Juba River* to its headwaters, over to the Blue Nile and then to the middle of the Red Sea's western shore. In 1894 the two countries signed a protocol which defined the British Protectorate in Northern Somalia.

While the European powers were jostling for supremacy in the Horn of Africa and dividing it with lines of their own choosing, a formidable rival to their pretensions appeared in central Abyssinia. A struggle for power between the four major kingdoms of Abyssinia occurred during the first 70 years of the nineteenth century. From a turmoil of assassination, battle, and suicide, Menelik the King of Shoa, arose to weld the warring factions into one nation. The French and Italians soon began to court the new Emperor with the aim of supporting their

*This river marked the northern boundary of Jubaland, a territory which came under British rule in 1890 when Germany surrendered her claims north of the Tana River and agreed to the present Kenya-Tanganyika border. In 1925 Britain ceded Jubaland (by then the area between Kenya's present eastern boundary and the Juba River) to Italy under the terms of a secret treaty signed in 1915. As a result, Jubaland is now part of the Somali Republic.

Gulf of Aden and Red Sea ports with Abyssinian trade. However, Menelik was no savage to be wooed with bright beads and the two countries (plus, later, Britain) quickly discovered that they had to win his attention with rifles and ammunition. Soon arms poured into Addis Ababa. Worried by Menelik's new strength, the Italians persuaded him to sign the Treaty of Uccialli in 1889 in which he agreed, or so the Italians thought, to allow the Italian Government to represent him in dealings with other nations. For his compliance in this and a supplementary treaty, Menelik received 43,000 rifles, a million rounds of ammunition, 28 cannon, and a loan of \$120,000. It was a transaction that the Italians were soon to regret.

Menelik rapidly and angrily discovered that the Italians considered his country their protectorate, whereas he thought himself free to act as he wished. He refused to accept the Italian interpretation of Uccialli and turned his attention towards the French, allowing them to start work on a railway from their port of Jibuti to Addis Ababa. The relations between Italy and the Emperor continued to deteriorate until 1896, when the Abyssinian leader routed an Italian army at Adowa using the very arms he had received seven years before with the signing of Uccialli.

Menelik's victory forced the three colonial nations to recognize him as a competitor who might reach for the lands that they had already won and they soon sought assurances from him that he would respect their boundaries. The British in particular, were apprehensive that Menelik would join with France and march on the Nile. In 1897, a year after Adowa, a worried British mission arrived at Addis Ababa. After lengthy discussions, Britain agreed to redraw the boundary of her Somaliland Protectorate, giving over one fifth of it to Abyssinia. France also gave the Emperor land. A few weeks before the British mission arrived in Addis, the French agreed to shrink their protectorate to the area around Jibuti and paid for the privilege with 100,000 rifles. Ten days after the Anglo-Abyssinian pact, the Italians joined the parade of supplicants to the Emperor's throne and in an unwritten agreement defined the boundary line of their Somaliland possessions.

At the turn of the century, a figure burst upon the Horn who was first to halt the imperial advance and then to force it back. The Somali Sheikh Mohammed Abdille Hassan (the "Mad Mullah") was a learned and fanatically religious man. It is said that once he dreamt that 300 of his women followers failed to say their prayers correctly. The next day, at his orders, the women were savagely sterilized and staked out in the sun to die. His troops-- "dervishes"--revered him and, spurred by the promise of loot in victory (and of castration in dishonorable defeat) delivered blow after deft blow to the Abyssinians, British, and Italians. The cumbersome colonial forces could not cope with the "Mad Mullah's" dextrous cavalry attacks or the sudden wild raids of his dervishes and in 1905, the Italians sued for peace, giving Sheikh Mohammed land in the Nogal and Haud areas of Italian Somaliland. Two years later, the British recognized the 1905 agreement and the Mullah received more land. In the years that followed, the military skill of his dervishes drove the British to

the Gulf of Aden coast and it was not until 1920 that the British finally defeated him by using aircraft to bomb his previously impregnable forts. His army broken, the Mullah vanished into the wastes of the Ogaden where he was born.

The Horn erupted again in 1935 when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. Italy took British Somaliland in 1940, but lost it a year later when Britain swept victoriously through the former Italian territories. The British returned Haile Selassie to his throne in 1942 and kept control of the Ogaden, the Haud and the so-called Reserved Areas. The Emperor protested and in a series of agreements ending in 1954, Britain returned the land she had withheld.

Just after the Second World War, there was talk of merging the Somali-speaking peoples. In 1946, Ernest Bevin, then Britain's Foreign Secretary, suggested that "British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, and the adjacent part of Ethiopia, if Ethiopia agreed, should be lumped together as a trust territory..." Two years later, a four power commission, composed of American, British, French, and Russian representatives, considered the suggestion. The French did not want to give up Jibuti, Britain was afraid of offending Haile Selassie, and the Americans and Russians vetoed the idea to gain favor with Italy who was still interested in the area. With the death of hopes for a "Greater Somalia" the future of former Italian Somaliland caused long debates in the United Nations. Eventually, in 1950, the U.N. declared it a trust territory under Italian administration, to become independent in ten years. British Somaliland had far less time to prepare for her independence. A London conference in May 1960 agreed that the Protectorate would be independent one month later, on 26 June. On 1 July, the former British and Italian wards joined to become the Somali Republic.

The forming of the new Somali nation increased Somali demands for union with their fellows in French Somaliland, the Ogaden Province of Ethiopia, and the Northern Frontier District of Kenya. At Kenya's second Lancaster House conference in February 1962, a Somali delegation from the NFD presented its views and the Colonial Secretary (over Foreign Office objections) appointed a commission to determine the wishes of the residents of the District. The commission's report appeared in December 1962 and stated officially what everyone already knew; that the Somalis of the District, to a man, wanted the NFD to join Somalia. Riots followed the publication of the report and the issue took on more heat with the arrival in Kenya last February of the present Colonial Secretary, Duncan Sandys. After hearing the petitioners from secessionist and anti-secessionist groups, Mr. Sandys declared that, "the predominantly Somali area... should be formed into a separate Seventh Region enjoying a status equal to that of the other (six) Regions in Kenya." The Somali Government immediately cried that the British had ignored the wishes of the people and urged a U.N. plebiscite. The crisis reached its peak when, in a storm of nationalist sentiment, the Somali Parliament voted 74 to 14 to break off diplomatic relations with Britain. The formal break came on 16 March.

Somalia's flag, light blue with a single white star in the middle, symbolizes her nationalistic spirit. The five points of the star represent the five elements of "Greater Somalia": British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, the Ogaden Province of Ethiopia (including the Haud), and the NFD. The Somalis revere the days of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi whose Somali troops conquered three quarters of Abyssinia in the first half of the sixteenth century, and still talk about the "Mad Mullah's" triumphs over the colonial invaders fifty years ago. They point to the fact that their ties of blood, religion, language-- spoken language, as no written form of the Somali tongue yet exists-- culture, economy, and history make them the largest homogeneous group in the continent. History, they say, proves that no other nation justly can claim the lands of "Greater Somalia".

Implacably opposed to the idea of a "Greater Somalia" is Ethiopia, Somalia's oldest and bitterest enemy. The slight, bearded figure of Haile Selassie combats the Somali will at every turn. To the Somali eye, he jealously hugs the Ogaden and Reserved Areas to himself and supports the French in their unreasonable retention of French Somaliland. On 26 June 1960, the day of British Somaliland's independence, Ethiopia revoked the Somali grazing rights in the Haud that she had guaranteed in her agreements with Britain in 1897 and 1954. The action and its timing infuriated the Somalis and there has been increased violence in the Haud ever since. During the present NFD crisis, several Ethiopian officials have said that their country will help Kenya maintain her territorial integrity. These pledges anger Somalia, but they also make her afraid. She realizes that Ethiopia is far stronger than she and knows that war would bring defeat.

On their side the Ethiopians see themselves as a Christian island in a Moslem sea and fear that cession of one part of their territory will lead to the loss of another and eventual engulfment by her Moslem neighbors. To guard against menacing Islam, Haile Selassie has acquired modern weapons, largely from the U.S.A. The Somalis note American military aid to their enemy and bitterly resent it, even though U.S.A. economic assistance has been pouring into the Republic since its independence. Just last month, our new Ambassador, Horace Torbett, was stoned as he traveled through Somalia on a familiarization tour.

No such animosity attended the recent British departure from Somalia, yet, for all the cordiality of the diplomatic break, the Somalis bitterly blame Britain for her past deference to Ethiopia and for her broken pledges. They feel that Britain has used Somalia as pawn in her imperial maneuvers ever since she allowed France to have Jibuti and gave part of her Somali Protectorate to Menelik without consulting the chiefs whose independence she had guaranteed several years before. The Somalis remember Britain's action just before the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 when, fearing a general war and hoping to placate a belligerent Mussolini, the British Government sent Anthony Eden to Rome with the suggestion that Britain attempt to persuade Haile Selassie to accede to Italian demands by offering him part of British Somaliland. Fortunately for the present Republic,

the private secretary of a member of the British cabinet leaked the news of the offer to the press and, in the ensuing tumult, it was withdrawn.

British military occupation of the Horn from 1942 to 1948 brought all the territories of "Greater Somalia" under one rule for the first time in memory. The Somalis have not forgiven Britain for her 1948 veto of a "Greater Somalia" nation or for the way in which, bit by bit, she subsequently gave Haile Selassie Somali land. As the most recent example of Britain's perfidy, the Somalis cite the promise they claim Mr. MacMillan and Lord Hume gave them last year that British policy in the NFD would be guided by the findings of the NFD Commission's report. When, instead of agreeing to the unanimous NFD Somali demand for secession, the Colonial Secretary simply made another administrative region of their area, the Somali government loudly protested that, once more, Britain had broken her word.

It is not surprising, then that the Somalis feel that Britain, not the coming African Government in Kenya, bears the responsibility for resolving the NFD problem. The Somali Prime Minister has said, "In our view, this is a matter for the British Government alone." The Somalis want the matter settled before the British leave Kenya. They do not want a repetition of Uganda's "Lost Counties" difficulty where, before independence, the British appointed a commission to recommend a solution, received practical suggestions from the commission and did nothing, leaving newly independent Uganda to sort out an answer for herself.

The most vocal opposition to Somali NFD demands comes from the African leaders in Kenya, yet last summer Jomo Kenyatta (head of the Kenya African National Union) and Ronald Ngala (head of the Kenya African Democratic Union) received triumphal receptions during separate official visits to Somalia, although both men clearly stated that they considered the NFD part of Kenya. This may be because there has been much pan-African talk in Mogadishu and it appears that the Somalis want to consider themselves as Africans rather than as members of the Arab world. They are disturbed by black African resistance to "Greater Somalia" and were deeply troubled by the walk-out of Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda during the Somali delegate's speech at the Afro-Asian conference held at Moshi, Tanganyika, last February. An unfortunate prior remark by an "unofficial" Somali observer derogating the Bantu peoples had inflamed East African tempers and the Somalis subsequently spent much time in red-faced apologies. Somalia's pan-African feelings include a desire for federation with East Africa after the NFD controversy is settled to their satisfaction. Needless to say, this stipulation cools Kenyan interest in any partnership with the Republic.

Until June, Kenya's main interest will be in the pre-election campaigning of the two major political groups. As vitriolically as they may attack each other on the platform, the parties are solidly united in their belief that the NFD is an integral part of Kenya and shall remain so. Kanu has been the more explicit in its denunciation of Somali claims. At the 1962 Lancaster House conference it made its position clear in a 3000 word memorandum which said, "Self-determination

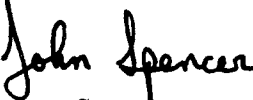
is not just a generally accepted principle but a right for all humanity. But exercise of such a right like the exercise of any other right, must not perversely affect any other person's rights...What Kanu finds itself unable to accept is the expectation by some Somalis to have countries neighboring the Republic give up territorial spaces to enable the Republic to cry out its philosophy of an ethnically homogeneous nation-state." The memorandum emphasized that Somali penetration of the NFD is recent and that the Boran, Gabbra, Sakuye, and other tribes lived in the area long before the Somalis forced their way in. Kanu stressed its belief in African unity and claimed that Somali demands for the NFD undermine the pan-African movement.

In a recent radio interview, Mr. Kenyatta said, "We will not entertain any secession or handing over of one inch of our country. We will not give in to threats and intimidation. We are going to rule this country and defend it." He spoke for most Kenyans (especially the non-Moslem sector of the NFD) when he said that if the Somalis do not want to stay in Kenya, "they can pack up their camels and return to Somalia."

Kenya's adamant rejection of the Somali position makes immediate secession unlikely and no one here thinks that Britain will surrender the District during what remains of her colonial rule. What, then is the future of the NFD? A U.N. plebiscite? Revolt? War? Negotiation? It is considered certain that Kenya's new government will not allow a plebiscite in the NFD for the simple reason that the outcome would not be in Kenya's favor. Knowledgeable sources believe that there is little chance that the Somali Government will encourage a revolt in the NFD or go to war over its secession. Somalia's poorly led 5000 man army would be no match for the combined forces of the the three East African countries (who have just agreed to sign a mutual defence pact) nor for the modern jets and tanks which Haile Selassie might immediately throw against the Somalis. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether an outside power such as Russia would come to Somalia's aid, since in siding with the Republic in the dispute, the outside country would in fact align herself against Black Africa, as Kenya has much support among the new African nations. One questions if any power would think Somalia economically, politically, or strategically worth such a stand.

If the above opinions are valid, it seems that the NFD Somalis have the best chance of achieving their desired union with Somalia by negotiation. But Kenya must have the some sovereign status as the Republic before the negotiations can have meaning. Solution by negotiation, therefore, must wait until Kenya is independent. Meanwhile, as each day passes, the two countries grow steadily more obdurate.

Sincerely,


John Spencer