

# **A Constructivist Approach to Analysing Somalia's State Failure**

Written by Carolina Mañoso Gimeno

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## **A Constructivist Approach to Analysing Somalia's State Failure**

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This dissertation aims to answer the question of how Somali struggle to establish a stable central authority is generated. The significance of this thesis lays in the fact that although State Failure theory is the theory chosen to explain the case of Somalia, it is argued here that its logic is severely flawed and unable to offer an accurate understanding. Ultimately, this thesis offers an alternative to the state failure logic through the use of a constructivist approach to highlight the importance of identities and historical context. The first chapter is divided into two sections; the first section is a literature review which outlines the content of the literature on the State Failure theory. The next section is a critical analysis of the literature's logic and theoretical assumptions, followed by the empirical problems for the application of the theory. This chapter intends to demonstrate that the "state failure" theoretical approach misrepresents the social conditions and is unable to find the actual causes or explanations for the conflict in the states it is applied to. Therefore, the second chapter introduces an alternative with the constructivist theoretical approach which understands state performance alongside a continuum of time, accepting that violence and social struggle are part of the process. Instead, constructivism focuses on the intersubjective meanings and social nature inherent in Somali identity, claiming it is the process of state formation and the national identity construction which are most likely to provide an explanation of how Somali struggle was generated. Lastly, the third chapter is divided into three sections which define the essential features of Somali identity. With the analysis of Somalia's identity formation through the study of Somali nomadic lifestyle, the Greater Somalia ideal and its clan organisation, this chapter gives an explanation of the persistent lack and rejection of centralized state institutions and the rivalry between factions. This dissertation concludes that to find an effective solution to the Somali crisis, we need an approach that understands Somali identity and its state formation so that Somalis can be part of this solution.

This thesis has been conducted through desk-based research mainly using secondary types of data. The desk-based research was the most practical methodology for this study due to the location of the subject of analysis on another continent. Data was acquired using books, journal articles, magazines and online media. An obvious limitation to this thesis is its reliance on secondary data rather than a primary source of information. However, this restriction was recognized from the start of this study and therefore this dissertation aims to offer an unbiased understanding of the Somali nation through the analysis of the social construction and the essential aspects of Somali identity. On a similar note, another handicap that appeared in the research of this dissertation was that most of the literature on State Failure comes from Western scholars from traditionally state-centred disciplines such as Political Science. The concept of failed state is rooted in a Western understanding of statehood, based on the definition offered by Max Weber who is widely considered the leading influence in European and American thought. Furthermore, Rotberg a prominent scholar of the State Failure literature was a professor of Political Science and History in the United States. Because of most of the literature being from a Western state-centric background, their understanding of the inner workings of Somalia in the absence of a central governing authority is very limited, and this bias is manifest in their writings on the matter.

### **Chapter 1: "State Failure"**

Paul Cohen, the American historian argues:

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“The West thinks of itself as probably the most cosmopolitan of all cultures. But it’s not. In many ways, it’s the most parochial, because for 200 years, the West has been so dominant in the world that it’s not really needed to understand other cultures, other civilizations. At the end of the day, it could, if necessary by force, get its own way. Whereas those cultures which have been in a far weaker position, vis-à-vis the West, have been thereby forced to understand the West, because of the West presence in those societies” (Martin, 2011).

This chapter starts with a literature review on the State Failure theory, as it is the theory that is most applied to the Somali case. For the purposes of this dissertation, the literature review section has focused more on the content of the literature and not so much on naming all the prominent scholars as they will inevitably be quoted or referred to throughout this chapter. In this sense, the whole chapter is also a literature review; Though instead of supporting this theory, it will criticise its main assumptions. Namely its adoption of Weberian approaches to the state, which limits its ability to recognise social constructions and historically specific agents of the state. This critical analysis will be divided into two sections, the first one outlining the three theoretical flaws within the theory and the latter will analyse the empirical problems for the application of the theory. The aim of this chapter is not to deny the reality of deficiencies within “failed states”, but the way this theory characterizes and explains the nature and production of such conditions.

## *Literature Review on State Failure Theory*

The term “failed state” is only about a decade old, the concept gained momentum at the start of the 90’s with the article “Saving Failed States” by Helman and Ratner (1993) describing the “failed nation-state as utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community” (1993, p.33). Although definitions of “state failure” vary throughout the literature, they all share a common feature: they rely on realist and neoliberal understandings and are built in opposition to the idea of “successful states”. The latter are assumed to be the norm and depart from the classical Weberian definition of statehood as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Gerth and Mills, 1946, p.77). Brooks, a prominent author within the literature, offers a Weberian understanding of “state failure” arguing it occurs when states “lose control over the means of violence, and cannot create peace or stability for their populations or control their territories” (2005, p.1160).

Overall, the “state failure” literature aims to identify specific traits that characterize those states unable or unwilling to perform according to the Weberian model. However, “failed states” do not remain fixed in their status or history and can show more than one “failing state” characteristic at once (Gros, 1996, p.461). Therefore, state performance is conceptualised in terms of the government effectiveness and states are divided between strong states, weak states, quasi-states or failed states accordingly. This way, Rotberg, one of the most eminent scholars, explains that strong states outperform weak states in performance of political will by delivering political goods, mainly security (Rotberg, 2004, p.2-4). Quasi-states stand in between, described by Jackson, as states with “limited empirical statehood operating without fulfilling the bare basics of positive sovereignty” (1996, p.21). However, the adoption of Weberian approaches by the “state failure” literature leads to the association of the state as a consistent goal-oriented polity, very much like the Western models of the state. This tendency limits state failure understanding as it neglects the differences and historical conflictual nature of the state.

## *Critical analysis of “state failure”*

The main challenge when addressing “state failure” lays in its own definition. There exist many attempts for an official definition but there is no agreement within literature for the basis of the concept. This is illustrated by Zartman’s definition of a failed state: “state collapse occurs when it can no longer perform the functions required of them to pass as states” (1995, p.5). Nonetheless, Zartman does not explain which state functions must necessarily be lost for a state to be considered “collapsed”. “State failure” is a highly contested concept, yet this is not only because there is no official definition. Other scholars offer a more detailed definition like Branwen Gruffydd Jones, who frames the concept as to when a state is unable to maintain “secure boundaries, ensure the protection and security of all of the population, provide public goods and effective governance, maintain law and order throughout the territory” (Jones, 2008, p.180). However, it is possible to contest most of the requirements that encompass this definition. Specifically,

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in the case of Somalia this dissertation will show how boundaries or borders are one of the initial originators of the said "state failure" process. Next in order, we have security which is also a very contested concept as there are many aspects that influence security and several ways to achieve it, ergo actors might perceive security in different ways. Distinguished scholars of the Copenhagen School of Thought explained this: "the use of the security label does not merely reflect whether a problem is a security problem, it is also a political choice, that is, a decision for conceptualization in a special way" (Wæver, 1998, p.51). In other words, Branwen Gruffydd Jones understanding of security as a British Politics and International Studies lecturer will be completely different to the understanding of security of an actual citizen of Somalia as both citizens inhabit completely different political structures. The same logic can be applied to the understanding of effective governance and law and order. This means that to appropriately understand "state failure", we must consider the epistemological underpinnings of the "state failure" literature. The main methodological burden of the "failed state" discourse is its inability to recognise social constructions and historically specific environments. In his writings, Jones presents an effective manner to define the ahistorical nature and inadequate analytical capabilities of the "failed states" discourse through the analysis of the following three defining features

## *Political Labelling*

First, is the unnecessary reliance on an excessive amount of descriptive terminology. States are characterized as imploding, disintegrating, failed and collapsed throughout the literature, yet each scholar has its own way and argumentation for the attribution of each adjective (Clapham, 1996; Zartman, 1995; Rotberg, 2002; Carment, 2003). "The "failed states" discourse is characterized by a tendency to relegate history to adjectival explicatives" (Jones, 2008, p.184). It is quite incoherent to believe that adjectives have the capacity to provide enough information about variations of state capacity across functions. Moreover, these qualifications emerged and entered the political lexicon in the post-Cold War era as an attempt to encourage new strategic action in security and development (Nay, 2013, p.329-30). On the one hand, through the realist conception of state failure as a threat to peace and international security expressed by the Bush Administration (Rotberg, 2003). Especially since 9/11, failed states have been associated with extremism and terrorist groups. "In the absence of effective governmental control...both terrorist groups and the leaders of rogue states take ready advantage of the prevailing anarchy" (Brooks, 2005, p.1162). On the other hand, there is the neoliberal approach associating the concept with state institutional weakness and underdevelopment. Development is understood as consisting of building institutions to generate and manage economic policies and processes (Call, 2008). This was first incited by the creation of a programme on "fragile states" by the UK Department for International Development (DFID, 2005)

## *Social struggle and "state failure"*

Furthermore, the following defining feature of "state failure" focuses on its portrayal as coming primarily from within the state. In this respect, one of the most prominent authors on this topic Robert Rotberg states: "Destructive decisions by individual leaders have almost always paved the way to state failure" (2002a, p.1) and "failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and bitterly contested by warring factions" (2003, p.3). The idea that internal social struggle or repression is a fundamental indicator of "failure" is an ahistorical proposition. Evidence throughout history demonstrates that the process of state formation has been scattered with conflict as power struggles appear repeatedly through history. In the past, before democracy became the main source of legitimate government rule, due to the uncertainty around the state institutional infrastructure, the different social groupings fought to establish themselves in the legitimate position of power (Cramer, 2006). Most of the developed states nowadays were formed through a process of social struggle. Thus, it is inaccurate to equate violence with "state failure". Instead, it would be more accurate to pay attention to the duration of such violence, its direction, whether it is aimed at the government infrastructure or the regime in place, its demands, causes and justifications. This alternative, would offer a more rational explanation of the assumed "state failure".

## *Western-centrism*

Finally, the third feature relates to the descriptive approach of the concept and argues that the basis of this sense of "failure" is by cause of the comparison with an ideal notion of what the state is or should be. Clapham (1996)

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epitomises this way of thinking in his book, arguing that some nations like Somalia were destined to fail from its inception. He argues that this is because only societies with precolonial echoes of state formation are capable of effective statehood. This is relevant as Clapham assumes that state formation in such “failed states” is non-existent, nonetheless this dissertation will prove otherwise. In this manner, it is argued that the concept contains culturally specific assumptions about what a “successful” state should look like and groups together different states with diverse problems characterising them under the mutual condition of “failure” (Call, 2008, p.1495). Moreover, the state failure literature in the matter of state formation assumes there is a certain kind of good governance finality and that this movement is somehow a natural process for all states. Just like “the ‘modern’ standard of three decades ago, the ‘successful state’ standard of today is based on the features of the dominant Western states” (Call, 2008, p.1499). In practice, Western democratic and market-oriented states are considered the reference point with which to assess the goal of state building. However, it is important to point out the lack of analysis or discussion within state failure literature about Western states partial failures, such as “The Troubles” or the Northern Ireland Conflict of the 1960’s. If included, these would serve as proof that “successful states” can go through a plethora of forms of violence, political conflict and social struggle and thus, there is more beyond the narrow narratives of either “successful” or “failed states”.

## *Empirical analysis of “state failure”*

Rotberg (2004) designed a ranking of “positive” state functions with security at the top, followed by regulatory institutions, the rule of law, secure property rights and contract enforcement. In third position he chose political participation, followed by social service delivery, infrastructure and regulation of the economy. There is criticism around the division of state functions into categories arguing that “[g]iven the variation in state capacity across sectors, aggregate measures or categorisations of “failure” can be misleading” (Di John, 2010, p.14). Thus, Rotberg then rightfully clarified that it is fundamental to look at the indicators together, as just one is unable to provide enough proof about the states’ decline. Moreover, he emphasizes that to get an accurate understanding of “state failure” it needs to be specific in which dimension it fails. For instance, a nation can suffer an economic crisis without experiencing large-scale political conflict, such as the cases of Tanzania or Zambia or in the case of Colombia where “the state has an effective macroeconomic management despite being unable to control substantial parts of its territory” (Di John, 2010). Although this dissertation argues the concept “state failure” is severely flawed, the idea that it should be broken down into sub-categories is useful for analysis. There have been many attempts within the “state failure” literature to divide its different realms. However, this dissertation will use the Failed State Index produced by the Fund for Peace. It is the most accurate as it includes over 100 sub-indicators grouped into twelve key political, social and economic categories and the best one yet to incorporate the historical nature of the concept. Its 12 categories are:

1. DP: Demographic pressures (i.e. water scarcity, mortality, population growth)
2. REF: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (i.e. displacement, disease flow)
3. GG: History of aggrieved communal groups based on past injustices (i.e. powerlessness, ethnic violence)
4. HF: Human flight & Brain drain (i.e. vacuum of human capital)
5. UED: Uneven Economic Development (i.e. rural vs. urban distribution of services, slum population)
6. ECO: Poverty & Economic Decline (i.e. unemployment, inflation)
7. SL: State Legitimacy (i.e. increased corruption, institutionalised political exclusion)
8. PS: Public Services (i.e. literacy, water and sanitation)
9. HR: Human Rights & Rule of Law (i.e. civil liberties, political prisoners)
10. SEC: Security Apparatus (i.e. internal conflict, appearance of private militias)
11. FE: Factionalized Elites (i.e. political competition, defectors)
12. EXT: External Intervention (i.e. UN Missions, Foreign Assistance)

The FSI specifies not only that a bottom up approach for state strengthening is the key to tackle “state failure” but also recommends which parts of the body politic should receive more attention. Moreover, the FSI top 10 ranking displays a wide range of distinct states such as Sudan, Syria, Haiti and Somalia as the number one. Given that the manifestations of states failure range from ethnic violence to unequal distribution of services to unemployment or presence of UN Missions, the idea that a single policy applied to the same institutions will solve the problem proves

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quite unrealistic. "The one-size-fits-all state-building answer to failed states misses important tensions and trade-offs in pursuing state strength" (Call, 2008, p. 1497).

The literature has come to understand "state failure" as an after-effect of underdevelopment and violent conflict. Consequently, the international community has constructed the state-building solution for addressing state failure concerned primarily with the institutional capacity of a state as conflict and violence are perceived as manifestations of institutional weakness. When scholars such as Di John (2010) refer to this logic as misleading, it is because for some "failed states" like Somalia or Syria the strength of state institutions is far less relevant than how those same state institutions address and reflect popular aspirations, needs and identity. This goes to say that although the obvious response to "state failure" points towards state building or state strengthening, institutional change or improvement is still not enough.

Going back to the analysis of the epistemological foundations of the "state failure", in this aspect the literature often confuses or wrongly applies the concepts of state building and state formation. State building comprises a set of technical interventions, typically coming from external sources and is not considered a long process. It is described by Call and Cousens as "actions undertaken by international or national actors to establish, reform, or strengthen the institutions of the state which may or may not contribute to peacebuilding" (2008, p.4). On the other hand, "state formation is a historical, highly varied, non-linear and conflictual, typically more internal process" (Di John, 2010, p.26). It is argued in this dissertation, that what makes "failed states" distinct lays on its process of state formation, not state building. State building by its nature cannot account for what kind of regime is appropriate for each case or even for instance the proper implementation of minority group rights. In fact, if it is inadequately done state-building can even threaten peace and contribute to insecurity and group tensions (Call, 2008, p.1497-8) as history has shown us in the cases of Iran and Iraq. Iraq in particular is a clear example of an obvious state building approach aiming for a radical transformation into a market-oriented liberal democracy; however, it achieved the opposite. It is fundamental to understand that by exposing fragile rebuilt states to the powerful economic forces of our globalised international system, neo-liberal state building weakens the foundations of the very states that it aims to help. Putzel explains "with markets overwhelmingly stronger than states, the international organisations' advice to state leaders about strengthening the regulatory functions of the state seems, in retrospect, either disingenuous or entirely naïve" (2005, p.10). External contributions for state building in those cases also led to the escalation of conflict, as the implemented state did not acknowledge the needs of its citizens.

Moreover, related to the formation of states, this dissertation finds ranking entities using the terminology of "failure index" problematic. State formation is a long term ongoing historical process, yet the terms "state failure" or "failed state" suggest the state has reached its ultimate form implying that there is an "end state". To avoid this, scholars like Dorff (2000) propose to use the term "failing" instead as it incorporates the idea of a continuum in which the state may go through transformations throughout its governing capacities. Regardless how we choose to interpret failure, it must be understood in the historical context in which it occurs. It is incorrect to define a state as "failed" if we only understand state formation through the neo-liberal approach. Since developed states, which are mostly Western, are represented as the key to modernity, it simultaneously supports the discourse on African failed states reinforcing the stereotype that Africans are unfit for modernity (Duffield, 2005, p.294). Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the differences between the state formation of post-colonial states and European states, which developed gradually from empirical to judicial statehood. In contrast, African states suddenly came into existence by colonial fiat. In these cases, external factors are more likely to provide an adequate explanation of the formation and persistence of states (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982, p.23). Finally, the portrayal of statehood associated with Western standards of the state, perpetuates the Euro-centric vision of modernisation theories and hides post-colonial practices.

Likewise, "state failure literature does not acknowledge other forms of state authority organised outside the state, sub-state or transnational authority arrangements" (Call, 2008, p.1499) even when these prove more helpful than the traditional forms of state authority. This is of extreme importance in Somalia as it is a profoundly decentralised society. Before the implementation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the Somali people had no stable, hierarchical political units and no chiefs wielding centralised power in the familiar European pattern, this Somali peculiarity constitutes a defining feature (Lewis, 2011). Instead, Somalis would naturally organise themselves socio-politically through patrilineal descent or clan gatherings, constructing a very flexible political system adapted to

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Somali nomadic life. However, the realist and neoliberal logics of “state failure” regard the state as the primary unit of analysis. Thus, they associate the absence of a legitimate central government with anarchy and consequently classify such polity in this case Somalia, as a ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed’ entity. We find evidence of this logic being embedded in the understanding of state failure by Rotberg, who describes collapsed states as “a total vacuum of authority... a black hole into which a failed polity has fallen” (2002b, p.90). One of the findings that appeared in the research of this dissertation was that most of the literature on “state failure” comes from mainly Western scholars from traditionally state-centred disciplines such as political science. Therefore, due to their background, they have great difficulty imagining that life may continue in the absence of the state and this bias is manifest in their writings on the matter.

## *Conclusion*

The cultural specific and associated terminology of the “failed state” concept has led to the widespread portrayal of conditions of crisis in the Global South, especially in Africa. African societies are constantly subjected to the misuse of the “failed state” discourse. In fact, Africa has been referred to as a “failed continent” by British MP Clare Short (Short 2002). Rather than identifying states as “failed” or “successful”, the analytical framework should consider state performance along a continuum of time, accepting that violence and social struggle are part of the process. Moreover, it should avoid the assumption that Western-like centralised state authority is the only effective type of statehood but allow for an interrelated but differentiated production of forms of state sovereignty. Jones advises that to do so requires “locating the notion of “failed state” in a longer history of imperial ideology, and emphasizing its current role in legitimizing intervention” (Jones, 2008, p.182). This however, does not deny the reality of a deep social and political African crisis but disputes its characterization in terms of “failure”. What this dissertation aims to criticise about the ‘failed state’ discourse has nothing to do with its empirical identification of flaws within state performance but with the manner in which it characterises and explains the nature and production of such conditions. “The notion of ‘state failure’ has been so easily adopted precisely because it holds a self-evident appeal” (Jones, 2008, p.182). The reality is that the system of nation states was created by Europeans, they even drew the borders of the African continent, promoted colonial institutions and its leaders. This needs to be included in the understanding of African state formation, because it greatly handicapped the natural “emergence of plural and civil societies that might have diminished poverty, warfare and weak institutions” (Call, 2008, p.1500).

## **Chapter 2: Constructivist approach**

This chapter reviews constructivist contributions to the analysis of state failure arguing that it is the best theoretical approach because it uses identity as an alternative explanation for struggle, peace, alliances and warfare. Constructivists argue that “identity relations explain both enduring rivalries and security communities, cooperation on security and non-security issues, and failure to reach such agreements” (Hopf and Allan, 2016, p.4). National identity involves some sense of continuity of a political community through its history, territory and common values and ideals. Understood as a “measure of common culture and a civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas that bind the population together in their homeland” (Smith, 1991, p.11). It is materialised with one’s identification of oneself in relationship to the other. Thus, states identities and interests are constructed through social interaction with other states. Identities and interests become a “social fact” through an ongoing process of shared interactions and knowledge (Wendt, 1999, p.327-333). Any political actor or state has multiple identities because its identity changes with different types of interaction. Ultimately, political actors “adopt and follow norms because to do so is consistent with their identities” (Hopf and Allan, 2016, p.7) This will be further explained and exemplified throughout this chapter and dissertation through the constructivist analysis of the Somali identity formation. The aim is to prove that constructivism can offer a more complete and substantive understanding of the Somali dilemma.

### *Constructivist theoretical approach*

Based on the analysis of “state failure” theory it is arguable that its logic comes from positive-rationalist international relation theories such as realism and neoliberalism. In this sense, from realism we identify the notion of state as the main actor and survival as the main goal. Realism assumes “states are rational actors, which is to say they are

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capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival" (Mearsheimer, 2013, p.74). Realism's emphasis on state survival explains the employment of the concept of failure. Moreover, neoliberalist influence becomes evident in "state failure" criteria as it is concerned with democratic government structures and a liberal type of economic development. However, these theoretical foundations offer a flawed analysis of the case at hand because they focus mainly on the state system as the primary unit of analysis. Thus, they are unable to incorporate main agents such as identity, other forms of social organisation or a historical method. This is because rationalists recognise the social experiences as explained in the same way as the natural world and do not consider facts and values as important. Therefore, they believe that "actors act in this pre-given world according to the demands of instrumental reason" (Zehfuss, 2002, p.3).

On the other hand, constructivism focuses on the intersubjective meanings and the social nature of identity, state interaction, norms, culture, knowledge and history. Post-positivist theories like Constructivism stress the dual character of the social and material world. Adler argues that "the material world shapes human interaction and vice versa" (Ikenberry, Adler and Barnett, 1999, p.12-13). In this sense, constructivism can omit the politics already involved in representing reality to achieve a more accurate understanding of its subject of analysis. This is useful in the case study of this project since the concept of failed state is based on a Western understanding of statehood as most of the literature comes from Western scholars. This offers a limited version of reality because knowledge is socially constructed as constructivism explains. It is our experience which over a longer period, makes us construct knowledge and the meanings of ideas through ongoing interactions of various modalities. Constructivism does not ask the question "What is knowledge?" but "How is knowledge generated?" (Riegler, 2001, p.10). In this case, how is Somali struggle generated will be the subject of analysis. In Riegler's words, "meaning is a human construct; it does not reside somewhere else and is not independent of the person who makes it" (Riegler, 2001, p.6). Thus, to avoid limited versions of reality and understand whether Somalia is a failed state or not, we must first understand its identity and how it is socially constructed.

Constructivism believes the social world is constructed, not given (Wendt, 1999, p.1-4). The structure of the international system is primarily cultural rather than material. Hopf illustrates how contrarily to realist theory, security dilemmas do not occur because of state's norms, instead it is "by providing meaning, identities diminish uncertainty" (Hopf, 1998, p.186-188). Identity can explain, for example, why France does not fear UK nuclear weapons but Pakistan and India mutually fear each other's possession of nuclear weapons. Uncertainty depends on the meaning of the other's identity, whether it is understood as a friend or a foe. "Change becomes possible because people and states can start thinking about each other in new ways and thus create new norms" (Jackson and Sørensen, 2006, p.162). Thus, political actors can redefine their identities and shared norms through social construction. To appreciate the influence of identities and/or norms, it is necessary to explore intersubjective meanings and the social construction of such. "The meaning of these material forces depends largely on shared ideas in which they are embedded" (Wendt, 1999, p.193). State identities allows them to understand who they are and identify their interests. After all, it is the socially constructed identity that develops interests and guides the policies and actions of states.

Moreover, constructivism proves helpful because although it acknowledges that states are important actors, it believes non-state actors and the structure of the international system also constitute identities and interests. This is relevant because positive-rationalist approaches, which consider the state as the main unit of analysis, are unable to offer a proper understanding of the situation in cases of state collapse or absence of a central authority. Instead, identity is always present in a political entity regardless of its political stance. "Once one has uncovered a prevailing discourse of national identity, one can expect that discourse to both persist over time and explain a broad range of outcomes, regardless of who is making foreign policy in that state" (Hopf and Allan, 2016, p.11).

## *Conclusion*

State failure theory has a positive-rationalist theoretical background which constricts its understanding of such states because it focuses mainly on the state as the primary unit of analysis. However, constructivism offers an alternative by focusing on identity and the intersubjective meanings of social constructions. Instead of arguing whether a political entity has succeeded or failed, it is able to offer explanations on why and how such entity is going through said

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“success” or “failure”. Hence, it avoids the simplistic political labelling this dissertation condemned in the first chapter. Constructivism underlines the duality of the social and material world. In a solely material world, the absence of the state would imply the dissolution of the nation-state. Alternatively, constructivism can offer an explanation in those situations where national identity is shared among individuals belonging to a community with a dysfunctional state. Identity reflects the sentiment of belonging to the nation regardless of whether it has or does not have an operational state of its own. National identity involves some sense of continuity of a political community where the population share history and the collective destiny of its culture (Smith 1991, p.25). Thus, to understand whether Somalia is a failed state or not, we must first understand its identity and how it is socially constructed.

## Chapter 3: Somali identity and statehood

This chapter, argues that Somali identity poses a challenge to the general understanding of statehood by the “state failure” literature. This will be done using constructivist theory to analyse the impact of the defining features of Somali identity on statehood. It will contest the assumption that Western-like centralised state authority is the only effective type of statehood by explaining the Somali alternative. Somali identity is defined by a transcendent love of freedom, strong sense of unity and independence of spirit forged over the centuries (Egal, 1968, p.219). Somali identity challenges the common contemporary type of state will be divided in three sections: the nomadic tradition, the paradigm of the Greater Somalia and the clan system.

Somalia has one of the worst reputations in the world. It is constantly referred to as the embodiment of a “failed state” and it is considered a heaven for terrorist groups, like al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda, because of its structural security problems. Its homogenous characteristics make it seem extraordinary that Somalia is such a dysfunctional nation-state. Most of its population shares the same religion, language, culture and ethnicity. Smith argues that the ideal-type of nation is “a community possessing a historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs” (Smith, 2002, p.15). The only other country with such characteristics on the continent is Botswana, which is one of the most successful nation-state. However, while “the central state has ‘failed’ in Somalia, it would be wrong to assume that the failure of government has led to the inevitable collapse of everything else in the country” (Harper, 2012, p.106). There are many fundamental differences between the inner workings of Somalia and the ones of any common contemporary nation-state as most regions in Somalia do not fit any familiar paradigm of statehood (Ibid, p.3). This chapter aims to find an explanation for why Somalia has not been able to achieve a stable operational government. Indeed, without analysing identity formation and the relationship between interests and identities, conflicts in Somalia cannot be sufficiently understood and explained. In this respect, through constructivist theory I aim to describe how the three following aspects of Somali identity pose a challenge to statehood.

### *Nomadic lifestyle*

Somalia is geographically an arid country, which means Somalis are in a constant battle for survival. “The vast majority of the Somali people follow their nomadic way of life not from choice but from the necessity of having continually to seek pastures for their livestock” (Egal, 1968, p.219). Due to inhabiting such an unforgiving environment, Somalis are very resilient, resourceful and enterprising. It can be argued that Somalia’s best resource is its people. Besides themselves and their clan, Somalis haven’t got much to rely on. Somali nomadic mode of life, which accounts for around 60 to 70 percent of the population, is almost unique in the world (Bradbury and Lewis, 2009, online). This is because instead of being culturally and socially isolated from the urban residents like in many other African nations, nomads are admired. Nomadic lifestyle is idealized by those Somalis living abroad or in the cities (Harper, 2012, p.21). The most venerated practice is the one of the camel herders, viewed as the finest and fiercest of all Somalis. Pastoral nomadism accounts for the economic basis of the Somali population and the “manifestations of the nomadic lifestyle and traditions pervade almost all aspects of Somali life” (Bradbury and Lewis, 2009, online).

The absolute independent character of the Somali expressed through the nomadic life has carried on through generations since pre-colonialism. Precolonial Somali society was not organized through centralized state monopoly though this should not be understood as a deficiency. There were no bureaucratic structures or class hierarchy and



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all inhabitants were involved in the direct production of subsistence. Moreover, colonial powers made no serious attempts to interfere with this aspect of traditional lifestyle as their interest in Somalia was mainly strategic for their economic benefit. Hence, over time “specific institutions and values of social and political order were integrally related to securing the societal reproduction of a decentralized social order based on a pastoral economy” (Jones, 2008, p.188).

Somali nomadic culture is tough, autonomous and used to travelling great distances. This has given them a head start for entrepreneurship in the current era. The long years of war with its subsequent displacement joined with the nomad lifestyle mean that efficient global communication and money transfer services are essential for Somali society. This has materialised with the development of a very advanced money transfer system, advancement in mobile phone technologies and livestock sectors, all of which are central to the Somali identity as they enable and improve the nomad pastoral lifestyle. It is paradoxical, that Dahabshiil, the largest African money transfer business, which offers banking services to businesses and international organisations, including the United Nations, World Bank and Oxfam, was founded in Somalia (Dahabshiil, 2017). This is particularly true in Somaliland, a breakaway territory still fighting for international recognition of its independent status.

On the other side, due to their rough lifestyle, nomads can easily adapt to the life of a fighter (Harper, 2012, p.23). Since the collapse of the central authority in 1991, this has been exploited by terrorist groups who profit from the structural security problems of the region. There exist consistent reports of the Islamist group Al-Shabaab recruiting fighters from the countryside or directly from the government army because during droughts or economic crisis nomads will simply fight for whoever pays the most (Ibid, p.23) On the bright side, livestock trade, which is Somalia's most valuable commodity, has prospered since 1991. Herders have “always relied heavily on social relationships and kinship to gain access to markets” (Powell, Ford and Nowrasteh, 2008, p.8). Thus, their profession never had much to do with central authority. Economic order is possible because of the existence of a clan customary law dispute resolution systems and a non-state monetary system, based on the trade of camels, which are their most valuable commodity. Since the fall of Siad Barre dictatorship in 1991, Somali life animal trade between Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as to international markets, has noticeably increased. In “Garissa, a major export market in Kenya for southern Somali cattle, the value of cattle sales increased 600 percent and the volume of sales quadrupled from 1989 to 1998” (Little, 2003, p.91).

### *Greater Somalia*

The current borders of Somalia were defined in the colonial period when Somali ethnos was occupied by four external powers. The British signed treaties to establish their colonies in the Gulf of Aden and what later became the Northern Frontier District of Kenya in the south. Southern Somalia was occupied afterwards by the Italians who established their sovereignty over Mogadishu and the regions of Hiran and Alta-Juba, and years later over-threw the Bogor of Mijertainia and the Sultan of Mudug (Egal, 1968, p.222). Italian occupation was characterized by their larger ambitions of colonisation which were thwarted

by emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia in the battle of Adowa in 1896 over the Ogaden. Menelik II ended up taking the Ogaden region and part of what is now the Harar Province into his Empire. Lastly, the French established themselves in Djibouti. Finally, in 1960, the Italian Somalia and the British Somalia (Somaliland) gained independence and united to form the Somali Republic. The five-pointed white star on light blue of the Somali flag symbolises “Greater Somalia” representing the five regions where Somalis reside: Ethiopia, Djibouti, Northern Kenya, Somaliland and Somalia.

Contemporary Somalia inherited two fundamental legacies from colonial occupation. First, the partitioning of the Somali ethnos left the Somali Republic in a predicament. As the only independent sovereign Somali state, it assumed the role of defending the cause of those other Somali territories still under foreign authority. Consequently, Somalia has found itself in confrontation with some of these African states (Egal, 1968, p.224). The 19th century disputes around the Ogaden region became a “central cause in the emergence of Somali nationalism and formed the basis of long-term hostilities between Somalia and Ethiopia” (Jones, 2008, p.189). Furthermore, during the Cold War, Ethiopia and Somalia became subject of proxy Cold war competition because of their strategic position. The US and USSR supplied both with arm transfers, which turned them into the largest armies in Africa. “Under Soviet support,

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Somalia's military forces more than doubled in size and major imports of Soviet military hardware drained the economy" (Ibid, p.194). As a result, the "militarization of the region secured the longevity and brutality of authoritarian rule" (Ibid, p.194) and fuelled conflict for the Ogaden region that ultimately led to the Ogaden War in 1977. Moreover, American support enabled Siad Barre's dictatorship to endure throughout the 1980s. His authority deliberately politicized and militarized clan identities because despite his anti-clan rhetoric, he privately supported the interests of his own clan, an alliance of the Darod sub-clans. This triggered hostility among clans which led to brutal repression against internal dissent. The US throughout Reagan's presidency followed by the George H. W. Bush administration maintained economic and military support in awareness of Barre's brutal oppression against dissident groups and the civilian population, including bombing raids in the north killing tens of thousands (Ibid, p.196).

The second legacy derived from the different colonial experiences of Southern Somalia under Italian domination and Somaliland under the British rule, which created an arrangement of uneven socio-economic development between the regions. The British chose the region of the Gulf of Aden due to its geostrategic position to trade routes with India. British interests in militarizing the Gulf for the protection of their commercial interests encouraged an economy based on the export of livestock to supply the military. The commercialisation of cattle originated in the appearance of a merchant class to control the export of livestock. Thus, creating the differentiation between the rural producers and the classes of merchants and state elites. Furthermore, "the intensification of livestock trade impoverished most of the direct producers who were also nomads" (Ibid, p.190). In the South, Italy applied a much more invasive policy of colonial expansion seeking a settler colony in Somalia. It aspired to successfully transform Somalia into a plantation economy. This meant there was an even bigger appropriation of lands by the Italian settlers and a need for even cheaper labour. "This need was met through a combination of taxation and forced labour" (Ibid, p.190). To ensure the economic transformation, they implemented institutions in rural areas and integrated clan leaders into the authoritarian executive constructions of the colonial state.

In conclusion, since European empires were built through the ideological legitimisation of imperial intervention, colonial rule entailed forms of racial ideology. The partitioning of the Somali people and the subsequent regional rivalry transformed Somali ethnicity into a fixed political identity. The imposition of hierarchical structures "froze previously fluid identities and built inequalities of power along ethnic lines into the heart of the social order" (Ibid, p.191). The division of labour and creation of a mercantile class by colonialism led to the emergence of class disparities and an economy heavily dependent on a small range of exports and external financial aid. These economic transformations were necessary for the success of global capitalism which created unequal economic structures worldwide and in the case of Somalia generated a chronic deficit in the balance of payments. The interaction of these factors is crucial in explaining the emergence of authoritarianism, elite rivalry and the following disintegration of Somali society into adverse violent conflict during the 1990s, after the final overthrow of Barre's regime (Ibid, p.197).

### *The Clans*

Nomadic lifestyle "carried on through many generations, has formed Somalis into family clans that stick together with fierce loyalty" (The Economist, 1999). Somali clans trace their patriarchal ancestries back to the spread of Islam from Arabia during in the middle ages. There exist five main clans in Somalia: the Hawiye, the Isaaq, the Darod, the Dir and the Rahanweyne (also known as Digil). The first three are transboundary clans; they inhabit neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti as well as Somalia. This reinforces the influence of these countries on the intra-political situation in Somali, as those clans with Somali identity in other territories still feel under foreign authority. Clan identity is the foundation of Somali society, which means that "although the Somali did not traditionally form a unitary state, it is this heritage of cultural nationalism which, strengthened by Islam, lies behind Somali nationalism today" (Lewis, 2002, p.16). It is impossible to understand Somalia without acknowledging its clan organisation. It has "traditionally been the basis of the organisational and legal structure of Somali society, especially among the nomads" (Harper, 2012, p.39). Clannism lets Somalis place themselves in specific positions in a very disperse society and all aspects of social life adhere to this structure such as welfare, matrimony, peace-making and social assemblies.

However, due to the politicisation of clan identity throughout the authoritarian rule, clans structure has become a very divisive; This Somali popular proverb offers an idea of the disruptive nature on its society:

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Me and my clan against the world;  
Me and my family against my clan;  
Me and my brother against my family;  
Me against my brother. (Peterson, 2002, p.1)

The clan structure poses an obvious challenge to the imposition of a central authority in Somalia. Clans are in constant flux since membership is not permanent and alliances shift frequently. They are also very fragmented, subdividing themselves over and over until sometimes they end up with a collective of families which then differentiate themselves into their own distinct family names. Hence, the clan structure is not a stable unit. However, it is very dynamic and inherent to Somali identity which makes it infinitely adjustable to the political situation in the country. Consequently, whenever a political system is introduced it is “almost immediately transformed by the clan, which is stronger and more durable than any other form of government” (Harper, 2012, p.11). Clashes between clans occur often due to insufficient resources, clan rivalry or because of the overall insecurity in the region. However, conflict strengthens clan loyalty as it creates a stronger sense of identification since they are “the most clearly defined political unit in Somali pastoral society,” (Lewis, 2002, p.11). The only constant feature of the clans is their Islamic belief which constitutes a supra-clan locus of order and leadership.

Following the collapse of Barre's dictatorship some distinction of a federal system based on its municipal clan organisation was becoming manifest in Somalia. Puntland still serves as an example of a legitimate functional regional polity. Stability of this autonomous quasi-state is based on membership to a single clan, which safeguards internal stability and a neutral position from central authorities (Brazhalovich, Klyuchnikov and Lukyanov 2016, p.269). Clans also serve as the basis for the judicial system and rule of law. Before Islamic extremism corrupted and took control of some regions in Somalia, the original sharia courts were “formed and controlled by a coalition of local clan elders, business people, and traditional Sufi sheikhs” (Menkhaus, 2007, p.85). The sharia courts respected Somali customs and incorporated both customary and sharia law; This hybrid judicial arrangement was accepted and effective within Somali society. The main reason for the triumphs of clan organisation is that citizens feel part of this arrangement as interests are served locally by organized rule of law and public order. On the other hand, “at higher political levels, political institutions are perceived mainly as conduits of “rents” over which the elite rule and as a potential source of political domination by one clan over others” (Menkhaus, 2014, p.166). The concept of state authority is viewed in Somali mind-set as a zero-sum game. This is because in the case of the establishment of a central government, state authority can be used for the appropriation of economic resources for their own benefit through their monopoly of the military and executive power. This kind of rule is the only experience Somalis have had so far. Thus, “it tends to produce risk-aversion and to instigate conflict rather than promote compromise, whenever efforts are made to establish a national government” (Menkhaus, 2003, p.408).

Somaliland is an example of a political system with a parliament that enables the amalgamation of elected members as well as traditional clan leaders. This hybrid voting system gives its political structure greater flexibility and more endurance than the organisation of the current Federal Government in Somalia. Moreover, it proves successful in the sense that thanks to clan incorporation Somaliland citizens feel represented by their government. Unfortunately, the application of this kind of system is unlikely since neither Somalia nor the international community recognise the state of Somaliland ever since its unilateral declaration of independence in 1991. Additionally, “Somaliland wants to have as little to do with Somalia as possible, at least in its current state” (Harper, 2012, p.139).

The clan-based logic of politics in Somalia is unlikely to disappear; it is preserved in the tradition of narrating one's ancestry, in poetry and elsewhere (Harper, 2012, p.39). It is hugely embedded in the Somali lifestyle and provides a form of assurance, a ready social structure and trusted ties for commerce and other social transactions. An understanding of this fundamental part of Somali identity is essential. The failure of a central Somali state is mainly due to westernized elites' attempts to “impose ill-suited European systems of governance that did not encourage political collaboration among the main clans at the grass-roots level” (Bradbury and Lewis, 2009). Moreover, Somaliland's decision to recognize the centrality of clans and to incorporate traditional clan elders into its parliament offers an alternative that recognizes Somali identity.

## *Conclusion*

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Somali identity proves challenging for the general understanding of the state failure literature because in some aspects Somalia does not fit the general archetype of state. With the analysis of Somalia's identity formation through the three defining aspects outlined in this chapter, this dissertation aims to shed some light on the persistent lack and rejection of centralized state institutions. First, by analysing how Somali nomadic lifestyle and the concept of the Greater Somalia explain the fact that current national borders are of little relevance to many Somalis. Their way of life is in many ways "incompatible with a formal, centralized state; they tend to ignore national borders and have their own traditional social structures and legal economic systems" (Harper, 2012, p.117). Somali reliance on social relationships and kinship expressed through the clan membership allows societal organisation. Unfortunately, colonial occupation also had a major impact on the identity formation of Somalia. The partitioning of the Somali ethnos and the consequent regional rivalry reconstructed Somali ethnic identification into a fixed political identity. It also implied the creation of unequal paths of socio-economic development between the regions. Colonial economic transformations entailed a process of class formation which accounts for current elite rivalry. Moreover, militarization of the region and financial aid secured the authoritarian rule of Siad Barre, who intentionally politicized and militarized clan identity for his own benefit. "Although dressed in the appearance of 'traditional' clan identities, the modern development of violent factional rivalry and competition is rooted in the social relation of the colonial and postcolonial transformations to the political economy of Somalia" (Jones, 2008, p.192). Through the analysis of the essential aspects of Somali identity this chapter demonstrates how colonial occupation infringed the natural process of state formation which consequently led to the rise of rivalry between clans and a dissenting sentiment towards the establishment of a central governing authority.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has shown that to understand a social phenomenon like the Somalian crisis, its social and historical context need to be included into the analysis. This represents a shift from the State Failure theory understanding of the conflict. This literature's reliance on a realist and neoliberal understanding of statehood based on a Weberian model leads to the association of the state as a consistent goal-oriented polity. This limits the understanding of Somalia because the state-centric logic of the theory neglects main agents of the state such as identity, domestic social organisation or a historical context. Therefore, the characterisation of Somalia as a "failed state" without an understanding of its history, identity construction and inner workings of the state offers a flawed interpretation of reality.

The nature of the inaccurate explanatory capacity of the State Failure theory resides in the use of political labels like "failure" which are unable to provide enough information about the causes or developments of the state crisis. Followed by the notion that "state failure" is provoked by internal violence and institutional weakness, which is an ahistorical understanding of state formation. And finally, the culturally specific assumptions about what a "successful" state should look like, which allows grouping together very different types of state under the common "failed state" characterisation. Western market-oriented democracies are considered the reference point for "successful" states; Accordingly, the international community has constructed a state building solution for state failure which is primarily concerned with the enforcement of liberal institutional capacity. However, through incorporating fragile states in the global capital system the neo-liberal state building approach undermines the foundations of such states. This "state failure" discourse, "in persistently mischaracterizing social conditions and misidentifying their causes, serves to legitimize and reproduce the very imperial qualities of international order which lie at the heart of so called "state failure"" (Jones, 2008, p.197). Thus, some of the literature adverse to the state failure logic advises to place the concept of "state failure" in a longer historical context dominated by imperial ideology and to recognize its role in legitimising intervention.

Moreover, as most of the literature comes from Western scholars it is argued that the "state failure" theory has a Western understanding of statehood. Alternatively, through focusing on the intersubjective meanings and social nature inherent to Somali identity, Constructivism can disregard the politics involved in the "state failure" discourse of Somalia. This dissertation argues that there is a lot to learn from the Somali way of doing things, and that there is more to the country than just a "failed state". Claiming that instead of concentrating on the state as the main unit of analysis and blaming institutional weakness for the state malfunction, it is the process of state formation and the national identity construction which are most likely to provide an explanation of how Somali struggle was generated.

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Contrary to categorising state performance in terms of “failed” or “successful”, constructivist theoretical approach understands state performance along a continuum of time, accepting that violence and social struggle are part of the process. The constant process of shared social interactions constructs Somalia's national identity which develops interests and guides the policies and actions of the nation-state. Therefore, to understand the central differences between the inner workings of Somalia and the ones of any other common contemporary nation-state, we must appreciate the influence of identities and interests and explore intersubjective meanings and the social construction of such.

As Lewis describes, “a hierarchical pattern of authority is foreign to Somali nomadic pastoral society which in its customary process of decision-making is democratic almost to the point of anarchy” (Lewis, 2002, p.10). Moreover, imperial intervention during colonialism and post-colonialism has led to the reconstruction of the Somali ethnic identification into a fixed political identity. Colonial economic transformations and the creation of a mercantile class originated a process of class formation which accounts for current elite rivalry. This kind of rule, which only benefits those in power, is the only experience Somalis have had so far and consequently Somalis have developed dissenting sentiment towards the establishment of a national government. “The legacy of imperial policies constitutes a major contributing factor in the global political economy of socio-political crisis in Africa today, this legacy is silenced by the “failed states” discourse” (Jones, 2008, p.199). Furthermore, despite the lack of central authority, the aspects of society central to nomadic pastoral economy, such as money transfer trade and communications, have been successful. Moreover, Somaliland is an example of the success of a hybrid political structure which gives room to the clans, essential to Somali identity, and traditional authority systems. The categorisation of “state failure” can be dangerously limiting as it overlooks the potential value of social, economic and political mechanisms peculiar to the Somali identity.

It is still possible to identify notions of the “failed state” discourse in the projection of Somalia as harbouring terrorist groups. This does not deny the existence of security problems due to the spread of terrorism; however, the Somali crisis is much more complicated and cannot be solely explained in terms of security. More than 6 million people in Somalia need humanitarian assistance and protection due to being at risk of famine and starvation. Stephen O'Brien, the UN humanitarian affairs chief, told the UN Security Council in March 2017 that “without collective and coordinated global efforts, people will simply starve to death” and “many more will suffer and die from disease” (Aljazeera, 2017). This dissertation does not deny the current disastrous structural security problems, which affect Somalia so deeply, nor does it try to diminish its relevance. Instead it aims to shed some light on the inner workings of Somalia arguing that for an effective solution to be found, it needs to be consistent with the Somali identity so that Somalis can be part of this solution.

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