

Book Review

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Phillips, Sarah G (2020), *When There Was No Aid: War and Peace in Somaliland*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, ISBN 9781501747151 (hardback), 256 pages

Sarah Phillips' *When There Was No Aid* succeeds admirably in developing an innovative explanation for Somaliland's relative peace and stability. She starts with the question: "Why did the large-scale violence end in Somaliland while continuing elsewhere in Somalia?" Her answer focuses, as many other scholars have, on the most obvious difference between them – the "virtual absence of external intervention" in Somaliland from 1991 to 1996 and the "overwhelming international attention" given to Somalia during the same time period (6).

In addressing this question, Phillips propels her book in two different directions. The first is outward-looking and speaks to the broader literature on international aid and, more specifically, post-conflict state rebuilding. Phillips is caustic about "the imperative of intervention" (chapter 1). She maintains that aid organisations produce arguments on fragile states to justify their interventions in them, even though their interventions do not work. She lambasts the international community's default solution of building strong state institutions as being based on the circular logic that "stronger institutions produce greater levels of stability, while greater levels of stability are evidence of stronger institutions" (35). She also highlights the irony that the prescription of stronger state institutions is "routinely offered as the solution to violent state institutions" (36). In this context, she argues that Somaliland, at least in its first decade or so, is as close as scholars can get to a counterfactual of no aid/no intervention versus "the internationalised model of peace/state-building that is the norm" (11). Phillips argues that her book "was not conceived as another contribution to the antiaid list" (165), but it will certainly be read as such by some readers. Her use of the Somaliland counterfactual to decimate international post-conflict state-building interventions is effective.



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The second direction Phillips takes is inward-looking and speaks to Somaliland's historical development and how it became the largely peaceful place that is today, at least in the central triangle formed by Hargeysa, Berbera, and Burco. In Phillips' view, most explanations for Somaliland's stability suggest "that its in/formal governance institutions, while weak, are still strong *enough* to maintain relative peace and civil order" (136, italics in original). In contrast, she puts forward a constructivist account of the importance of Somaliland's "independence discourse" in setting broad limits to acceptable behaviour that preserve peace in the absence of well-functioning institutions.

Phillips' discursive analysis starts with the close relationship between war and peace. She argues that Somaliland's "preoccupation with peace tells of an intimacy with war. Everywhere its presence is so barely concealed that one is reminded that a careless outburst could unearth it" (2–3). Somalilanders' intimate experience of the brutality of Siyad Barre's indiscriminate aerial bombing campaign and sustained human rights violations in the late 1980s, their own civil wars in the 1991–1997 period, and Mogadishu's experiences since 1991 have collectively seared both a fear of war and a concomitant awareness of the inherent fragility of peace into their DNA.

This argument then ties into Phillips' larger critique of institutionalist explanations for Somaliland's peace. In her view, Somaliland's traditional and modern institutions have been utterly ineffective in providing peace and security. Instead,

the *inability* of any of these institutions to offer a reliable security guarantee has indirectly stabilised peaceful cohabitation by reproducing two important ideas. One idea is that war is always possible, and the other is that mobilising for political violence would dissolve the differences that separate Somaliland from its Somali other. (104)

The paradoxical result so readily visible throughout central Somaliland is that "a relatively strong sense of public security is widely perceived despite people's awareness that the police and armed forces cannot provide a robust guarantee of that security" (163). Counterintuitively, Somaliland's peace comes not from the strength of its institutions but from their weakness.

There are some contradictions in this book. Phillips is highly self-reflective about her role as a researcher in Somaliland (17–18). She is not a Somaliland cheerleader, but she seemingly protests too much that she is not like other western scholars working on Somaliland who interview a lot of the same Hargeysa-based elites she does (20). There is also some tension between the title of the book, which, as Phillips readily acknowledges, is only accurate for the 1991–1997 or 1991–2001 periods (48, 70–71), and the larger focus of the book that draws multiple examples such as the 2003 presidential elections (140–144), a post-2010 inability to tax large telecommunications companies (127–135), and anti-piracy efforts (148–154) from more recent decades when Somaliland has received some foreign assistance and it is relatively easy to run into European Union (EU), United Nations (UN) or World Bank officials in Hargeysa.

Phillips also arguably exaggerates how weak Somaliland's institutions are and how little progress they have made. While true, her arguments on the inability of the

government to tax large businesses are at least partially countered by steady increases in its budget from \$20–50 million in the 2000s to \$180 million in 2013 to \$250 million in 2015 and more than \$300 million today. Phillips correctly highlights failures at the Ministry of Finance, but the steady growth in its revenue also suggests some successes. As another example, the 2012 local council elections that she observed were plagued by chronic problems with multiple voting. After successfully implementing a biometric registration system, the 2017 presidential election that I observed was not. Phillips is correct that Somaliland's institutions are weak. Yet at least some of them have increased their competence and capacity in recent years and this progress is not acknowledged in her book.

Those quibbles aside, *When There Was No Aid* is a lucid and compelling account of Somaliland's political development and its remarkable ability to maintain peace discursively by emphasising the omnipresent threat of a return to war and the extremely limited ability of state institutions to prevent that.

Scott Pegg 

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Indianapolis, IN, USA

ORCID ID

Scott Pegg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6505-2050>