

# **(Re)Drawing the African Map**

## **A Critique of the Idea of Secessionist Deficit in Africa**

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**O**n 9 July 2011, the Republic of South Sudan became an independent country. This redrawing of the African map represents just one of very few instances of such an occurrence five decades after the independence years and of a conflict with a secessionist agenda leading to the birth a new state. A growing body of literature holds that Africa has a “secessionist deficit” and that the “weak sovereignty equilibrium” of its states hinders the continent’s stability and development.<sup>1</sup>

Although the argument that Africa has a secessionist deficit is empirically sound, it has also served as ammunition for some other scholars to call for more secessionism in Africa. This article critiques such a position and challenges the idea that splitting large states and redrawing the African map offer the best solution for conflict resolution. Toward that end, the first part of the article presents the main thrust of the debate about the secessionist deficit, and the second examines other commentators’ call for a redrawing of the map by allowing more entities to secede and become sovereign states. Finally, it rebuts the idea that secessionism in Africa has successfully ended conflicts by discussing two cases in which secession has ended with the birth of new states—Eritrea and South Sudan.

### **The Secessionist Deficit Debate**

Pierre Englebort and Rebecca Hummel observe that Africa has experienced fewer secessionist movements over the past 40 years than any other place in the world. They claim to establish Africa’s secessionist deficit empirically and explain

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why they believe it exists.<sup>2</sup> One might ask, however, what the authors compare the deficit to and whether they envision a threshold or tipping point at which one can claim that the number of secessionist conflicts above or below deviates from the norm.

Englebert and Hummel note that “Africa offers a significant material premium to internationally recognized sovereignty, tilting the odds for elites in favor of staying within the state, even if they do not immediately benefit from power at the centre.”<sup>3</sup> The cases of secession in Africa are a function of variations in the relative rewards of sovereignty. Their article concludes that “Africa’s weak sovereignty equilibrium has contributed to its failure to develop.”<sup>4</sup>

During the past four decades, only 10 of 48 African countries have experienced secessionist movements whereas 30 of them have suffered nonsecessionist conflicts. Interestingly, Englebert and Hummel associate North Africa with the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Given the fact that North Africa’s colonial history resembles that of the rest of the continent and that state formation and consolidation after independence have followed the same path, one wonders why the authors exclude this region from their analysis. In fact, the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the Western Sahara would have proven valuable to their study, but they have not included it in the data of African countries.

Englebert and Hummel’s data indicates that “since 1960, 44 percent of domestic conflict years in the Middle East and North Africa, 47 percent of those in Asia, and 84 percent of those in Europe have had separatist content, as against 27 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>6</sup> They point to the resilience of Africa’s decrepit states, explaining that local elites pursue interests for access to weak national and local institutions that offer more benefits from seeking separatism and recognition.

According to the authors, Eritrea’s separation from Ethiopia in 1993, which they identify as the only successful case of secession, is actually more of a case of decolonization (granted, they wrote their article before the birth of South Sudan). Their data contains inaccuracies, however—witness their assertion that the secessionist conflict in Casamance ended in 2001 when in fact it continues to this day.

As mentioned above, Englebert and Hummel maintain that Africa has weak sovereignty equilibrium, noting that “African elites do not embrace their state out of nationalist sentiments, but out of necessity. Then they produce nationalist discourse to legitimate this choice and to undermine opponents, thereby simultaneously generating nationalism and subnational polarization.”<sup>7</sup> They believe, there-

fore, that the weakness of the state presents advantages for African elites and citizens, allowing them to engage in predation without accountability. Furthermore, the low odds of international recognition prevent regional elites from breaking away, especially those excluded from central power.

Although the data shows that, compared to other regions of the world, Africa does in fact have a secessionist deficit, Englebort and Hummel do not convincingly justify their assertion that its elites are less nationalistic than others and that such sentiments in Africa are based on necessity and predation.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is true that an emphasis on national sovereignty has made international recognition scarce; consequently, some entities have achieved *de facto* but not *de jure* statehood.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the difficulty of attaining such recognition does not explain why African elites would not engage in secessionist conflicts. At best, it could only account for the fact that such ethnic strife tends to last for a very long time.

Englebort and Hummel argue that “in Africa, political violence usually provides the means of fighting for (re)insertion into the system by marginalized and excluded groups. It does not represent attempts to challenge, reform, revolutionize, or break away from the state.”<sup>10</sup> According to this reasoning, African elites have extremely low incentives to engage in secessionism. If that is the case, then one might wonder how and why secessionist conflict arises in the continent. The authors offer two possible explanations. First, secessionist movements claim a separate colonial existence, using the international recognition of sovereignty in their favor (as occurred in Eritrea, Western Sahara, Cabinda, Somaliland, and to a lesser degree in Casamance, South Sudan, and Katanga). The second explanation involves the timing of secessionist claims, the two secessionist movements occurring in Africa during the 1960s and the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

This notion of a secessionist deficit raises certain questions. Why do the marginalized communities not secede instead of attempting to reintegrate into the system? Englebort and Hummel demonstrate that secessionist conflicts rarely attain their goals, but why would that be a lesser factor than the supposed greed of African elites who would rather maintain their ties to the state for their own benefit rather than break away, as argued by the authors? In light of data indicating numerous conflicts in Africa but relatively few of a secessionist nature, why don't the warring factions include a secessionist component in their agenda? Will secessionist conflicts help end the many wars in Africa? Finally, how does the idea of a secessionist deficit relate to arguments that favor dividing Africa?

## The Case for Dividing Africa

Englebert and Hummel conclude that “African countries are maintained so that they can be taken apart,” guaranteeing their weakness and thereby “facilit[ating] the exploitation of state power by political elites for their own personal strategies of accumulation.”<sup>12</sup> If one can attribute the weakness of African countries to an elaborate project led by African elites, then one would also expect that the emergence of South Sudan as a sovereign country would have given a stronger voice to those who make the case for the further division of African countries and that the international community should prove more willing to recognize the sovereignty of new political entities. In that sense, some individuals have intensified their calls for more secessionism in Africa.

G. Pascal Zachary writes that “Sudan has been successfully split into two independent countries,” urging “more African nations [to] divide, secede, splinter, or otherwise scramble the old colonial borders.”<sup>13</sup> At this point, though, we do not know whether or not the split between Sudan and South Sudan has been “successful.” On what criteria does the author base his assessment? How does one evaluate success in such a situation? Although the independence of South Sudan has consecrated the end of the longest ongoing civil war in Africa, it remains to be seen whether the two neighboring countries can coexist peacefully. Furthermore, no one knows how this new landlocked, fragile country will fare in terms of becoming a viable nation that can meet the basic demands of its citizens. Rather than relying on a mere percentage of the referendum votes in favor of independence, one should take those factors into consideration when judging the success of this division. Therefore, calling for more secession in Africa, based on the uncertainty of the case of South Sudan, remains problematic.

Zachary claims that “letting these [African] countries reform into smaller nations might actually reduce conflict, increase economic growth, and cost less in foreign aid.”<sup>14</sup> But how might this occur? The author seems to forget that smaller countries are not necessarily more stable. In fact, Rwanda and Guinea Bissau are among the smallest in Africa. Moreover, Zachary recommends that the Eastern Congo integrate with Rwanda and join the developing region of East Africa. Additionally, granting international recognition to Somaliland and Puntland “would open a flow of assistance to these countries.”<sup>15</sup> This assertion, however, focuses on foreign assistance as one of the benefits that accompanies recognition as independent states—a paternalistic view of international relations that places African countries at the receiving end of foreign aid. Worse, this proposal delib-

erately avoids addressing the fact that such recognition would also open the gates for Western corporations to do business in those newly independent countries.

## Too Big Not to Fail

Another implication of the concept of a secessionist deficit in Africa involves a call for the international community to acknowledge that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is not a state but an illusion: “The international community needs to recognize a simple, albeit brutal fact: The Democratic Republic of the Congo does not exist. All of the peacekeeping missions, special envoys, interagency processes, and diplomatic initiatives that are predicated on the Congo myth—the notion that one sovereign power is present in this vast country—are doomed to fail. It is time to stop pretending otherwise.”<sup>16</sup>

The DRC, bordered by nine countries, does indeed consist of 67 million people from more than 200 ethnic groups, but those facts do not invalidate its existence—no more than a country’s status as a failed state would render it nonexistent. Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills declare that “Congo has none of the things that make a nation-state: interconnectedness, a government that is able to exert authority consistently in territory beyond the capital, a shared culture that promotes national unity, or a common language. Instead, Congo has become a collection of peoples, groups, interests, and pillagers who coexist at best.”<sup>17</sup> This list of requirements for a nation-state poses some problems, especially the contention that a “shared culture” and “common language” are essential components of a nation-state. The authors also argue that the outlying parts of the DRC are better integrated with its neighboring states, overlooking the fact that parts of any country form zones of border dynamics in the sense that borders do not merely serve as lines of demarcation. Indeed, borders also function as zones of integration for territories that belong to different political entities, forming regions of interconnectedness and shared features that often differentiate them from the rest of the political entities to which they belong. Thus, it is not so much that the outlying parts of the DRC are disconnected from the rest of the country as that those regions are also connected to nations bordering the DRC.

In any case, does this lack of connectedness warrant a call for those regions to secede from the DRC? Herbst and Mills diagnose the DRC’s illness as follows:

The many combatants in today’s Congo have little incentive to form a united country; they benefit from the violent chaos that ensures that so many can pick at the country’s resources. The international community does not have the will or the resources to construct a func-

tional Congo. Nor do neighbors want one Congo, as many find it easier to deal with a plethora of ungoverned parts over which they can exert influence. Rwanda, Angola, and Uganda, for example, have all intervened to protect their security interests over the past decades.<sup>18</sup>

Wouldn't resolving the conflict end the problem and pave the way to reconstruction of the Congolese nation-state? How would dividing the DRC end the struggle?

Herbst and Mills made a similar recommendation in 2003: "Given the immense human tragedy, it is time to ask if provinces such as the Kivus and Katanga (which are themselves the size of other African countries) can ever be improved as long as they fall under a fictional Congolese state. . . . The international community should say, plainly and simply, that the DRC is not a sovereign state."<sup>19</sup> The authors fail to identify "the international community" and to tell us why it has the legitimacy to issue the decree that "the DRC is not a sovereign state." Actually, it would be easy to imagine that that authors' solution must come from the West. In fact, Herbst and Mills advise that "a solution to Congo's troubles is possible with a re-imagined approach. The West could start by making development and order its first priority in the Congolese territory, rather than focusing on the promotion of the Congolese state. . . . Instead of continuing to spend billions of dollars on putting Congo together, the international community could regionally address actual security and political problems."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, they approach the issue only from the perspective of the West spending money in Congo, not of Western companies benefiting from the conflict. Furthermore, Herbst and Mills seem to confuse the failure of the state and incapacitation of the government with the inexistence of the Congolese nation—an "imagined community," according to Benedict Anderson.<sup>21</sup> The DRC does in fact exist as a nation although one could make the case to some extent that it is a failed state.

Obviously, in terms of political geography of the African states, size does matter. Herbst and Mills discuss the exceptionally poor economic performance of large countries, which have suffered the consequences of ethnic conflicts: "The chronic problem facing the DRC, Ethiopia, and Nigeria has been that ethnic divisions have been serious enough to prompt civil war."<sup>22</sup> Again, however, one must point out that the large size of those countries has not necessarily prompted instability and ethnic strife. Africa offers many examples of sizable states that have not failed and of small ones that struggle to retain the most basic features of a functioning country.<sup>23</sup>

## A Rebuttal to Calls for Redrawing the African Map

Only two cases of secessionist conflicts in Africa have resulted in the birth of a new nation: Eritrea in 1993 and South Sudan in 2011. Arguably, it is too early to assess whether the independence of South Sudan has ended the long-term civil conflict and to what extent it has helped stabilize the region. Clearly, relations remain tense between Sudan and its new neighbor, and the ongoing separatist war affects many areas of Sudan, including South Kordofan and the Nubian mountains. One can hardly conclude, therefore, that the birth of South Sudan represents a case of successful conflict resolution.

Many of the arguments criticized thus far in this article view secessionism in Africa as a practical solution to conflict, but one must exercise caution and verify empirically whether or not that has been the case. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler look askance at taking discourse about secessionist movements at face value: “Self-determination is presented as the solution to the challenge of peaceful coexistence between distinct peoples. The global public not only accepts this message but reinforces it.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the populations of South Sudan do not have a common identity, given the civil war within South Sudan as well as between South Sudan and the North. Moreover, the discovery of oil fields in South Sudan during the 1960s gives the secessionist conflict an economic component.<sup>25</sup> The Eritrean secession is also linked to natural resources although they appear superficially motivated by deep-rooted assertions of identities.<sup>26</sup> Collier and Hoeffler explain that Eritrea was the richest region of Ethiopia, enjoying per capita income almost double that of the rest of the country. Consequently, secession from Ethiopia also became a case of “tax exit.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, to view secessionist movements as cries for social justice would be reductionist. Oftentimes, they contain some elements of “resource grab” or the “fantasies of diasporas settled in rich countries.”<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Eritrea is not a culturally homogeneous population; in fact, none of the secessions called for will result in homogeneous political and cultural entities. Commentators who desire more secessions in Africa, based upon what they deem a successful one in South Sudan, must bear in mind the case of Eritrea, whose “population includes three major religious groups, five ethnic groups, nine official languages, and three official writing scripts. Further, the creation of the country split its major ethno-linguistic group, the Tigrini, into a majority living in Ethiopia and a minority in Eritrea.”<sup>29</sup> Collier and Hoeffler also warn that “secessions in low-income countries may carry some dangers. Secession commonly re-

duces ethnic and religious fractionalization without eliminating it: the quest for an ethnically pure society is a chimera. Our results suggest that a reduction in ethnic and religious fractionalization is likely to increase the danger of civil war rather than diminish it.”<sup>30</sup>

Further, although it is true to some extent that Eritrea earned its independence from Ethiopia after a long, heroic struggle, one must remember that sovereignty has not brought peace but merely “transformed a civil war into an international war, with a huge escalation in human and economic costs. It also has created a nation of 50 million people without direct access to the sea.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Eritrea has become one of the most brutal authoritarian regimes in Africa and has been involved in many other conflicts in the region. In fact, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its support of the insurgency in Somalia, and, according to the International Crisis Group, “Eritrea has fought, directly or indirectly, with Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti, and Sudan.”<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion:

#### Redrawing the Map and Reimagining the Boundaries?

Jeffrey Herbst writes that “the fundamental problem with the boundaries in Africa is not that they are too weak, but that they are too strong.”<sup>33</sup> As something meant to provide and ensure stability, however, a boundary can never be too strong. The same logic applies to boundaries in Africa. Although most of them were arbitrarily drawn, the fact that they endured after nations gained their sovereignty has saved Africa from the chaos that followed the independence of the Indian subcontinent, for example. One must not rule out consolidation of the borders in Africa ipso facto, but proposals for redrawing the African map as a means of enhancing stability are not convincing because doing so will likely create more fragile, landlocked, nonviable states. Data shows that no secessionist movement in Africa resulting in the creation of a new state has either resolved conflict or led to more stability in the country or the region.



## Notes

1. Pierre Englebert and Rebecca Hummel, "Let's Stick Together: Understanding Africa's Secessionist Deficit," *African Affairs* 104, no. 416 (July 2005): 399–427.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 399.
4. Ibid., 400.
5. Ibid., 399.
6. Ibid., 400.
7. Ibid., 411.
8. Ibid.
9. Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 11.
10. Englebert and Hummel, "Let's Stick Together," 417.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 424.
13. G. Pascal Zachary, "After South Sudan: The Case to Keep Dividing Africa," *Atlantic*, 11 July 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/after-south-sudan-the-case-to-keep-dividing-africa/241705/>.
14. Ibid.
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16. Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills, "There Is No Congo: Why the Only Way to Help Congo Is to Stop Pretending It Exists," *Foreign Policy*, 18 March 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/03/17/there\\_is\\_no\\_congo](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/03/17/there_is_no_congo).
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills, *The Future of Africa: A New Order in Sight?* Adelphi Paper 361 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.
20. Ibid.
21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006).
22. Herbst and Mills, *Future of Africa*, 19.
23. Christopher Clapham, Jeffrey Herbst, and Greg Mills, eds., *Big African States* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006).
24. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "The Political Economy of Secession," in *Negotiating Self-Determination*, ed. Hurst Hannum and Eileen F. Babbitt (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 37.
25. Ibid., 49.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 53.
29. Ibid., 49.
30. Ibid., 52.
31. Ibid., 53.
32. International Crisis Group, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, Africa Report no. 163 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 21 September 2010), [i], [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa-horn-of-africa/ethiopia-eritrea/163%20Eritrea%20The%20Siege%20State.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa-horn-of-africa/ethiopia-eritrea/163%20Eritrea%20The%20Siege%20State.pdf).

33. Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 253.

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