

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

### EPISODE #290

# The Borders of Reality: From Micronations to Somaliland

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

What separates a backyard project from a legitimate world power? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn dive into the fascinating world of microstates and micronations, tracing the line between eccentric performance art and high-stakes geopolitics. From the counter-culture legacy of Akhzivland to the pirate radio origins of the Principality of Sealand, they explore how tiny entities challenge international law. The discussion takes a serious turn as they analyze Somaliland's recent landmark recognition by Israel, examining how maritime security and strategic ports can turn an unrecognized territory into a global player. They break down the Montevideo Convention, the "Axis of Secession," and why a monopoly on violence—not just a flag—is often the true measure of a nation's survival. Whether it's blockchain-based states like Liberland or oil rigs in the North Sea, discover how the world map is far more fluid than you think. This episode is an essential guide for anyone curious about how countries are actually made.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

## Daniel

Hi Herman and Coran. One topic we have yet to discuss, which came to mind after the episode about diplomatic missions and UNRWA, is microstates. There have been several colorful microstate projects over the years, such as Akhzivland in Israel or the oil platform state between the UK and France. This raises a bigger question: where does the dividing line fall between what might be called "amusing" microstates and serious attempts at statehood, like Somaliland? What objective criteria can we point to that distinguishes between the serious question of national self-determination and these more frivolous attempts by individuals to create their own country?

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are coming to you from our usual spot here in Jerusalem, and I have to say, the house feels a little quieter today. Our housemate Daniel is out, but he did leave us with a voice note that really sent me down a rabbit hole this morning.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service, and yes, Daniel really knows how to pick them. He was listening to our recent episode on the invulnerability of diplomatic missions and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and it got him thinking about the edges of statehood. Specifically, microstates and those colorful, sometimes slightly unhinged projects where individuals just... decide they own a country.

## Corn

It is a great question because it touches on something we often take for granted. We think of the world map as this fixed, settled thing, but the lines between a legitimate country and a guy on an old oil rig with a flag are actually thinner and more legalistic than you might expect.

## Herman

Precisely. We are talking about the difference between a microstate, which is a recognized sovereign entity that just happens to be tiny, and a micronation, which is essentially an unrecognized claim to sovereignty. Daniel specifically mentioned Akhzivland, which is practically in our backyard here in Israel, and the Principality of Sealand. But then he contrasted those with Somaliland, which is a whole different level of serious.

## Corn

Right, and that is the core of what we want to explore today. Where does the amusement end and the actual geopolitics begin? How does a group of people go from being a curiosity to a candidate for a seat at the United Nations?

## Herman

To really get into this, we have to start with the baseline. If you want to start a country, what do you actually need? In international law, the gold standard is still the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States from nineteen thirty-three. It lays out four basic criteria. You need a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.

## Corn

It sounds simple on paper, but the fourth one is the real kicker, isn't it? The capacity to enter into relations. You can have a population and a government, but if nobody picks up the phone when you call, are you really a state?

## Herman

That is the big debate between the declarative theory and the constitutive theory of statehood. The declarative theory says if you meet those four criteria, you are a state, regardless of what anyone else thinks. The constitutive theory says you are only a state once other states recognize you as one. It is like the tree falling in the forest. If a country declares independence and no one is there to sign a treaty with it, does it exist?

## Corn

Well, let's look at the amusement side first, because that is where the lines get really blurry. Daniel mentioned Akhzivland. For our listeners who aren't familiar, this was a project by a man named Eli Avivi back in the early nineteen seventies. He was a colorful character, a sailor and veteran who settled in an abandoned village on the northern coast of Israel near Nahariya. When the government tried to demolish some of the buildings he was living in, he just declared it the independent state of Akhzivland.

## Herman

And what is fascinating about Akhzivland is how the Israeli state reacted. They didn't send in the army to crush a rebellion. They actually took him to court. He was arrested for the creation of a country without permission, but the judge famously ruled that such a charge didn't even exist in the law. Eventually, the state basically gave up and leased him the land for ninety-nine years.

## Corn

It became this counter-culture hub. He had his own passport stamp, a national anthem which was just the sound of the sea, and he even hosted celebrities like Sophia Loren and Paul Newman. Eli passed away in twenty eighteen, but his wife Rina, the First Lady of Akhzivland, still runs the place as a guest house and museum. Despite the passports, no one seriously considered Akhzivland a threat to Israeli sovereignty. It was seen as a tourist attraction, a piece of performance art that the state was happy to tolerate because it was essentially harmless.

## Herman

That is the hallmark of the amusing micronation. The host state looks at it and decides it is more trouble to suppress than to ignore. It is the same with the Principality of Sealand, which is probably the most famous example globally. That is the one on the old World War Two anti-aircraft platform in the North Sea, approximately six to seven miles off the coast of Suffolk.

## Corn

Paddy Roy Bates, right? He was a pirate radio broadcaster who occupied the platform in nineteen sixty-seven. And the legal history there is actually quite dense. In nineteen sixty-eight, a British court ruled that because the platform was in international waters at the time, the United Kingdom had no jurisdiction. That was a huge moment for Sealand. They used that ruling as their founding myth, their proof of sovereignty.

## Herman

They have a constitution, a flag, a currency called the Sealand dollar which is pegged to the United States dollar, and they even had a minor civil war in nineteen seventy-eight involving a German lawyer and some mercenaries. Germany actually sent a diplomat to the platform to negotiate the release of a prisoner, which Sealand claims was de facto recognition.

## Corn

But if you look at it today, the United Kingdom extended its territorial waters to twelve nautical miles in nineteen eighty-seven, which technically brings Sealand back into British territory. The government just chooses not to do anything about it. It is a curiosity. It is not a state in any functional sense that impacts global trade or security.

### Herman

Exactly. And that brings us to the other side of Daniel's question. When does it become serious? Because while we were laughing about Sealand, something very significant happened just last month that shifts this whole conversation. On January sixth, twenty twenty-six, Israel became the first United Nations member state to formally recognize Somaliland as an independent country.

### Corn

That was a massive headline, and it really underscores why this isn't just a hobby for people in eccentric hats. Somaliland has been operating as a de facto independent state since nineteen ninety-one. They have their own army, their own currency, they hold peaceful democratic elections, and they have clear borders based on the old British Somaliland protectorate.

### Herman

They have been more stable and functional than the actual state of Somalia for over thirty years. Yet, until three weeks ago, they had zero official recognition from any United Nations member. The international community was terrified of opening the Pandora's box of secession in Africa. The African Union has a very strict policy of respecting colonial borders because they fear that if one group successfully secedes, the whole continent will fracture.

### Corn

So what changed? Why did the line move for Somaliland? It wasn't because they suddenly got more amusing. It was pure geopolitics. We saw that memorandum of understanding with Ethiopia back in January twenty twenty-four where Ethiopia wanted sea access in exchange for recognition. That deal stalled, but it put the wheels in motion.

### Herman

And then you have the Red Sea security situation. With the Houthis effectively paralyzing the port of Eilat and targeting shipping in the Bab al-Mandab Strait for the last two years, the geography of Somaliland became a strategic prize. They have eight hundred and fifty kilometers of coastline right across from Yemen. By recognizing them, Israel is entrenching itself in the Horn of Africa's strategic geography. In fact, Foreign Minister Gideon Saar just visited Hargeisa on January sixth to prepare for the opening of a formal embassy. This isn't a tourist stamp; this is about intelligence facilities and maritime security.

## Corn

This is where we see the objective criteria for serious statehood really emerge. It is not just about having a flag; it is about having something the rest of the world needs. Somaliland has a functional port at Berbera. They have a military that can actually control their territory. When a state can offer security or economic value to a major power, the legal technicalities of recognition start to bend.

## Herman

It is what some analysts are calling the Axis of Secession. You see it in places like Somaliland, or even to a different extent with Liberland. Remember Liberland? Vít Jedlička and his claim to that tiny patch of land on the Danube between Croatia and Serbia.

## Corn

Right, the disputed territory between Croatia and Serbia. He claims it is terra nullius, no man's land, because of a border dispute where neither Croatia nor Serbia wants to claim it. Daniel mentioned it as one of the colorful projects, but Liberland has been playing a very long game. They are actually at the Davos Forum at the Abraham House right now, presenting their model of a blockchain-based state.

## Herman

They are trying to bridge the gap between a micronation and a serious political entity by using technology. They have a Prime Minister now, Justin Sun, the crypto billionaire who was re-elected just this past October. They even have Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Brittany Kaiser in their congress. They are building decentralized autonomous organizations and their own banking solutions. They are betting that in the future, sovereignty won't be about how many tanks you have, but about how much economic activity you can facilitate on your own digital rails.

## Corn

But that brings up a really interesting friction point. If I declare my apartment a state, like Daniel joked in his note, I have a population of one and a defined territory. But I don't have the power to protect that territory if the Jerusalem municipality decides I haven't paid my property taxes. The amusing microstates exist because the host nation allows them to exist. The serious ones exist because the host nation cannot stop them from existing.

### Herman

That is a brilliant way to put it. Sovereignty is often just a polite word for a monopoly on violence within a territory. Somaliland has that monopoly. Somalia cannot effectively project power into Hargeisa. Therefore, Somaliland is a state in every practical sense, even if the diplomats in New York were slow to catch up. Sealand does not have that monopoly. If the Royal Navy wanted to take that platform back, they could do it in ten minutes. They just don't want to.

### Corn

So the dividing line is really about the cost of suppression versus the benefit of recognition. For Akhzivland, the cost of suppression was bad public relations for a government trying to look democratic and cool in the seventies. For Somaliland, the benefit of recognition for Israel and potentially others now is maritime security and a stable partner in a chaotic region.

### Herman

And we shouldn't overlook the role of historical precedent. Somaliland was actually independent for five days in nineteen sixty before it merged with the former Italian Somaliland. They argue they aren't seceding, but rather dissolving a failed union. That is a much stronger legal argument than just saying I found a rock in the ocean and now it is mine.

### Corn

It reminds me of what we discussed back in episode seventy-seven about the U S B C revolution. It sounds unrelated, but it is about standards. International law is a set of standards. If you want to join the club, you have to fit the interface. Somaliland has spent over thirty years trying to fit the interface of a modern democracy. They have a central bank, they have a passport that is accepted in several countries now, and they have a functioning civil service.

### Herman

Whereas if you look at some of the more frivolous attempts, like the Kingdom of Enclava or the North Sudan project where that guy tried to claim Bir Tawil to make his daughter a princess, they lack the institutional depth. You can't just buy a flag and call it a day. A state is an ongoing, collective project of governance. It requires the consent of the governed, or at least their effective organization.

## Corn

There is also the second-order effect of recognition. Now that Israel has recognized Somaliland, what happens next? We are seeing the African Union and the Arab League coming out with very strong statements supporting Somalia's territorial integrity. This isn't just a local dispute anymore; it is a flashpoint in the broader contest between regional powers. Turkey and China are very invested in the One Somalia policy.

## Herman

Right, because China sees a direct parallel with Taiwan. Somaliland and Taiwan actually have very close ties. They both exist in this weird limbo of being functional states without full recognition. If Somaliland gets a seat at the table, it sets a precedent that Beijing finds terrifying. This is why the amusing ones stay amusing. They don't threaten the global order. The moment a microstate project starts to challenge the territorial integrity of a major player or a regional standard, the amusement stops.

## Corn

I think about the people living in these places, too. If you are a citizen of Somaliland, your life is defined by this lack of recognition. You can't easily get international loans, your students struggle to get their degrees recognized abroad, and your businesses face massive hurdles in the global banking system. For them, statehood isn't a colorful project; it is a necessity for survival and development.

## Herman

That is the tragedy of the unrecognized state. They are doing everything right by the standards of the Montevideo Convention, but they are stuck in the waiting room of history because of the interests of much larger powers. It really makes you question the fairness of the system. We have microstates like San Marino or Liechtenstein that are fully recognized because they have been around for centuries and don't threaten anyone. But a new entity with six million people like Somaliland has to fight for decades just to get one embassy.

## Corn

It is a bit like the legacy systems in tech. Once a standard is set, it is incredibly hard to change it, even if a better version comes along. The current map of Africa is a legacy system of the colonial era. Everyone knows it is flawed, but no one wants to be the one to hit the reset button because they are afraid of the system crashing.

### Herman

And yet, we are seeing the reset button being pressed in real-time. The recognition of Somaliland by a United Nations member is a huge crack in that wall. It will be interesting to see if the United Arab Emirates or even Ethiopia follows suit now. If that happens, the de facto reality becomes a de jure reality, and the map officially changes for the first time in a long time in that region.

### Corn

What about the future of these micronations like Liberland? Do you think the digital angle gives them a real shot? If they can create a state that exists primarily in the cloud but has a physical footprint for its servers and a few residents, does that fulfill the territory requirement?

### Herman

That is the million-dollar question. Balaji Srinivasan wrote that book about the Network State, where he argues that we will see these communities start online, build economic power, and then eventually crowdfund territory. Liberland is basically trying to be the first prototype of that. If they can prove that a seven square kilometer floodplain can generate hundreds of millions in economic value through crypto and decentralized finance, other countries might start competing to host them.

### Corn

It turns the concept of a state on its head. Instead of a government ruling over people who happen to live there, you have a group of people who choose a government and then go find a place to put it. It is statehood as a service. But again, you still run into the problem of the neighbors. Croatia has been blocking access to Liberland for years, and they have even arrested people for trying to settle there.

### Herman

Precisely. You can have all the Bitcoin in the world, but if you can't get past a guy with a clipboard and a boat at the border, your sovereignty is theoretical. This is why I think the physical aspect, the capacity for defense and the control of territory, remains the ultimate objective criterion. You can be as colorful or as digital as you want, but at the end of the day, a state is a physical reality.

### Corn

So to answer Daniel's question, the dividing line is one part capability and one part utility. If you are capable of governing and you are useful to the powers that be, you are a serious state in the making. If you are just a guy on a platform or a hippie in a village, you are a micronation, and your survival depends entirely on the indulgence of your neighbors.

### Herman

And that indulgence can be withdrawn at any time. We saw that with the Republic of Rose Island back in nineteen sixty-eight. An Italian architect built a platform in the Adriatic Sea, declared independence, and the Italian government sent in the navy to blow it up. They didn't find it amusing at all because they thought he was trying to avoid taxes.

### Corn

That is always the fear, isn't it? That these places will become tax havens or centers for money laundering. That is the quickest way to turn an amusing microstate into a target for a special forces raid.

### Herman

Exactly. If you want to be taken seriously, you have to show that you are willing to play by the rules of the international community, which usually means some form of taxation and regulation, which is exactly what the libertarians starting these places are trying to avoid. It is a fundamental paradox. To be recognized as a state, you have to act like a state, but acting like a state involves all the things that made you want to leave your old state in the first place.

### Corn

It is a bit of a trap. You want freedom from the system, but the only way to protect that freedom is to be recognized by the system. I think that is why Somaliland is so interesting. They aren't trying to be a libertarian utopia; they are trying to be a normal, functional, boring country. And that boringness is actually their greatest strength.

### Herman

Yes! Boring is stable. Boring is predictable. Investors love boring. If you are a micronation and you are making headlines for having a king who wears a cape made of seagull feathers, you are never getting a seat at the United Nations. But if you are making headlines for your new port regulations and your successful anti-piracy operations, people start to take notice.

### Corn

I wonder what Eli Avivi would think of all this today. Akhzivland is still there, and Rina still keeps the dream alive. It has outlived him, which is more than you can say for many actual countries in the twentieth century. It has its own kind of permanence, even if it is just as a state of mind.

### Herman

There is a certain beauty in that. It is a reminder that the world is still full of these little pockets of eccentricity. But as we see with the news from Somaliland, the stakes are rising. The competition for the Red Sea and the changing nature of digital sovereignty are making these questions of who gets to be a state much more urgent.

### Corn

It really makes you realize that the map is never finished. We are living through a period where the very definition of a nation-state is being challenged from above by global institutions and from below by these micro-projects and secessionist movements.

### Herman

And if you are sitting in a place like Jerusalem, you are already at the epicenter of these questions of sovereignty and recognition every single day. It is not an abstract legal theory for us; it is the reality of the streets we walk on.

### Corn

Well, I think we have given Daniel plenty to chew on. It is a fascinating topic that goes from the whimsical to the deadly serious in a heartbeat. Before we wrap up, I want to say thanks to everyone who has been sticking with us. We have been doing this for two hundred and eighty-six episodes now, and the community we have built is just incredible.

### Herman

It really is. We love getting these prompts that push us to look at the world from a different angle. If you are enjoying the show and you want to help us out, a quick review on your podcast app or a rating on Spotify goes a long way. It helps other curious minds find us in the vast ocean of content out there.

### Corn

Definitely. And you can always find us at our website, myweirdprompts dot com. We have the full archive there, and a contact form if you have a prompt of your own that you want us to dig into. We are also on Spotify, obviously, so make sure you are subscribed there so you don't miss any of these deep dives.

### Herman

Alright, I think that covers it for today. I am going to go see if I can find my old Akhzivland passport. I think it is in a drawer somewhere.

### Corn

Just don't try to use it at the airport, Herman. I don't think the border police share our appreciation for micronational history.

### Herman

Valid point. Until next time, this has been My Weird Prompts.

### Corn

Thanks for listening. We will catch you in the next one.

### Herman

Bye everyone!