

THE ISIR DIGEST

Politics and Security Analysis

CAN SOMALILAND & SOMALIA ENGAGE IN A MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE?

The Institute for Strategic
Insights and Research (ISIR)
Off Airport Road, Behind the Adam's Inn
Hargeisa-Somaliland

Email: info@isirthinktank.org
Website: www.isirthinktank.org



June 2023

Table of Contents

Overview	1
Introduction	1
Major hurdles facing the resumption of the Dialogue	2
Renewed hostilities and the unresolved SSC/Khaatumo case	2
Internal political crisis	4
Federalism as untested waters: The Puntland Dilemma	5
The Existing threat of Al Shabaab	6
Recommendations	7
Somaliland's political and security challenges.	7
A Thorough Preparation for the Negotiations	7
Relations between the FGS and federal member states	7
Advance the Dialogue from Facilitation to Mediation Stages	7
Involvement of civic actors in the dialogue process	8

Overview

The attempt for a second phase of the Somalia-Somaliland talks is set to commence after both Somaliland and Somalia appointed special envoys to revive the now-defunct Somalia-Somaliland Dialogue which began in 2012. ISIR Digest has observed that Both sides of the negotiations have to overcome major challenges in order to increase the likelihood of success during the resumption of the talks; The Federal Government of Somalia needs to contain the security risks associated with the future of Al-Shabaab and build better relations with other Federal Government members states mainly Puntland. Similarly, the Somaliland Government needs to contain inter-clan clashes in the SSC/Khaatumo region and resolve the long-standing election dispute. It is important for Somalia and Somaliland to welcome the involvement of international mediators in the talks. They should also integrate the views of civic actors in the debates, to increase the public buy-in of any agreements reached.

Introduction

The Somaliland-Somalia dialogue started in 2012 and was considered an opportunity to resolve the longstanding dispute surrounding the secession of Somaliland. Both regional and international actors have supported the dialogue, with a number of nations offering facilitation in the initial process. Between 2012 and 2015, there were nine rounds of talks held in Turkey, London, Dubai, Ankara, and Djibouti, with Turkey hosting the most meetings after assuming the roles of facilitator and official host of the dialogue. The dialogue process, however, stalled for 5 years between 2015 and 2020 due to heightened tensions and verbal hostility between the two governments.

The tensions created the potential for further escalation of the rift and eventual failure of the dialogue. In June 2020, Djibouti president Omar Guelleh hosted and chaired a brief dialogue process. There had also been earlier attempts to resume the talks, driven by Ethiopia's Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed who managed to bring together President Bihi and President Farmajo in Addis Ababa for an impromptu face-to-face meeting in February 2020 though no further developments were realized. Somalia and Somaliland both pursued their goals unilaterally after nearly a decade of minimal progress and a lack of innovative ideas, with Somaliland eager to present its case internationally while Mogadishu insists that it is the only legitimate representative body of Somalia, thereby erasing any possibility of "shared sovereignty." These sharp differences in outlook led to the discontinuation of the dialogue.

Recently, there has been renewed interest by both Hargeisa and Mogadishu to resume the talks. Both sides have appointed special envoys to lead the dialogue process. In particular, President Bihi of Somaliland has welcomed the move by his counterpart President Hassan Sheikh to name Abdikarim Guled as the Somalia envoy. The Somaliland government has also renewed the mandate for Dr. Edna Aden as the special envoy to lead the dialogue. These efforts demonstrate a desire and willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. The Somaliland president even went on to welcome the appointment of Abdikarim Husein Guled. This particular move by the Somaliland administration demonstrates a policy shift in contrast to its previously held standpoints where the Bihi administration regularly threatened to pull out of the dialogue process. The policy shift could be attributed to the change of leadership in Mogadishu when President Sh. Mahmoud came to power. It was obvious that President Bihi and President Farmajo did not manage to negotiate in earnest despite various attempts to revive the talks in Addis Ababa and Djibouti in 2019 and 2020 respectively.

However, the Dhulbahante leadership based in LasAnod and the Puntland state of Somalia issued press statements expressing concern about the appointment of the new envoy and expressing disinterest in any future dialogue with Somalia until it withdraws its forces from the fighting in lasAnod. In appointing an envoy for the Somalia-Somaliland dialogue, the federal government of Somalia indicated an elevation in the level of prioritization structure-wise, whereby the talks now fall under the immediate charge of the president. In the past, the process was administered under the auspices of the Ministry of internal affairs.

While the latest developments from Mogadishu and Hargeisa present a rare gesture of goodwill, there also exist major stumbling blocks that have to be overcome before any meaningful dialogue can be re-initiated. In the past, ISIR publications have labeled the approach to the dialogue as 'haphazard' owing to the two governments' insistence on repetitively applying the same approaches and reluctance to consider the lessons learned from the failed attempts of the past decade. One significant factor that led to the breakdown of the past rounds of negotiations was the absence of an international mediator. The reason for this can be attributed to Somalia's external actors' competing interests, which result in them not sharing a unified position. In the last ten years, any potential involvement of international actors was compromised by accusations from the negotiating sides that said actors would be partial regarding the outcome of future agreements. During future engagements, the importance of impartial mediators and guarantors cannot be underrated.

What Are the Major hurdles facing the resumption of the Dialogue?

- **Renewed hostilities and the unresolved SSC/Khaatumo case**

The Somaliland-Somalia talks could not be affected without both parties considering the Sool and Eastern Sanaag case (The Dhulbahante and Warsengeli of the Harti tribe), since their areas of dominance have been the epicenter of the decades-old border disputes between Somaliland and Puntland.

These areas have witnessed protracted armed conflict as both sides claim these lands on either historical justifications or based on clan-affiliation justifications. While each party believes in their right to these lands, both sides of the dialogue should prioritize staving off any potential bloodshed and instead seek to settle their differences through the dialogue.

The most recent armed clashes between the Somaliland Armed Forces and local militia forces loyal to SSC/Khatumo function (The Dhulbahante) may be a consequence of the long-standing Sool and Sanaag case, which has been ignored during previous negotiations between Hargeisa and Mogadishu. The outcome of the Dhulbahante Consultative Conference held on February 6, 2023 in LasAnod that brought together all the traditional leaders of Dhulbahante concluded that it was in their best interest to remain part of the federal government of Somalia. Consequently, they rejected Somaliland's quest to secede from the rest of Somalia.

While the current armed standoff has been building up for a long time, it is believed that the outcome of the Dhulbahante Consultative Conference triggered the current full-fledged conflict. The ongoing Lasanod Conflict shows no signs of de-escalation and both sides have been heavily arming their forces. The prevailing hostilities are detrimental to meaningful negotiations concerning future agreements on the nature of the relations between the two sides. Besides the current LasAnod conflict, the residents of SSC¹ have long-held grievances against Somaliland and have even waged wars against Somaliland in the past.

In 2009, the Sool, Sanaaq, and Cayn (SCC) administration was formed, and in 2012, the Khaatumo state emerged as the Dhulbahante.

The two merged into what is now known as the SSC/Khatumo faction. The faction has given indications that they will not be part of either Puntland's or Somaliland's political futures. In particular, the residents of those areas believe Somaliland is dominated by the Issaaq Clan who have disregarded their heritage and excluded them from political and resource-sharing spheres. This reasoning is the major driver of Somaliland's secession from Somalia.

The Isaaq Clan's dominance has been the subject of national discourse ever since Somaliland declared its independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991. The declaration even led to intra-clan conflicts within the Isaaq clan in 1994. Between 1988 and 1991, fighting in the northern parts of Somalia (present-day Somaliland) led to the collapse of the Somali government, which at the time was led by the military regime of Siyad Barre. The Isaaq clan led the SNM militias while the Dhulbahante and the Warsengeli as well as the Gadabursi of Awdal joined the military regime and were engaged in hostile conflicts with the SNM². While the 1991 clan conference in Burao involved the Dhulbahante traditional leadership, their participation did not achieve the required buy-in or the backing of the majority of the conflicting clans.

In 1998, a majority of people from the Dhulbahante and the Warsangeli clans participated in the formation of the Puntland state of Somalia which led to successive armed confrontations between Somaliland and Puntland.

¹ The Sool Sanaag and Cayn abbreviated for SSC is a term constantly used by the Dhulbahante who reside in Sool, parts of Sanaag, and Buuhoodle.

² The Somali National Army was a militant group fighting the Somali regime between 1982 and 1991. This fight led to the declaration of independence from the rest of Somalia to form Somaliland.

These conflicts also have roots in the colonial legacies in Africa which left a number of disputed borders. The Somaliland case is tied to the borders marked by the British before they granted independence to the former British protectorate. Somaliland's independence was short-lived since the country entered into a union with Italian-administered Somaliland in the 1960s to form the Somali Republic.

The resistance of the Dhulbahante to join Somaliland's case of separation from the rest of Somalia was evident when the Somaliland army moved in to remove Puntland from LasAnod. The army experienced constant armed insurgency. Somaliland also employed a policy of engaging with the Dhulbahante leadership and entered into agreements with several factions of the Dhulbahante but always fell short of realizing a final settlement. The late Khatumo leader Ali Khalif Galaydh coined the name "Somaliland la Wada Leeyahay", which roughly translates as "inclusive Somaliland". The Khaatumo leader later decided to make peace with Somaliland on the condition that there would be equal sharing of power and natural resources. Khalif passed away while still advocating for inclusivity.

• Internal political crisis

The Somaliland opposition parties have expressed concerns about the timing of the dialogue, as Somaliland faces a mounting political crisis that is related to delayed presidential and political parties' elections. Particularly, disputes have arisen concerning the sequencing of the elections; which election comes before the other between the presidential elections and the political parties' elections.

The Somaliland presidency maintains that there should be political party's elections before presidential elections are held while the opposition claims that all the delayed elections should be sequenced in order of their original schedules. These disputes have led to polarized politics in Somaliland for the past two and half years, and have now reached a tipping point where neither side recognizes the legitimacy of the other. On November 13, 2022, the opposition parties claimed the president's duly elected mandate had ended while the president in a speech to the joint houses of parliament referred to the opposition parties as 'former parties' and expressed doubts over the candidacy of his main political rival Abdirahman Cirro of the WADDANI party.

The internal political strife facing Somaliland, and the fact that the opposition parties have voiced their concern about the timing of the resumption of the talks means that any future dialogue will require Somaliland's political stakeholders to first settle their internal differences. Failure to do this, Somaliland may not achieve its ideal objectives from the talks. During the last round of talks, Somaliland was highly praised for its symbolic show of unity, having previously involved or consulted with political parties or parliamentarians prior to any negotiations. As things stand currently, the opposition parties insist that only a newly elected administration/president with an irrefutable mandate can negotiate with Somalia.

The political crisis in Somaliland, coupled with the flaring conflict in LasAnod, is likely to weaken Somaliland's stance in any fresh negotiations. Unlike during the first phase of the talks back in 2012 when Somaliland was represented by a democratically elected president with a fresh mandate and with the support of opposition parties, the current presidency is refuted.

Somaliland also faces mounting pressures from its international partners to hold long overdue elections. The delayed elections have drawn international criticism, with various diplomatic envoys trying to convince the Somaliland administration to break the election-related deadlocks. Somaliland has also seen its human rights records questioned with the arrest of political opponents becoming the norm.

The reasoning behind the international community's push for elections is to promote democracy and strengthen security, in efforts to maintain regional peace and stability. Somaliland has traditionally enjoyed relative peace owing to a culture of peaceful transfer of power. This was commended by the international partners. The current internal challenges undermine both Somaliland's pursuit of international recognition and its standing during negotiations with Somalia.

● **Federalism as untested waters: The Puntland Dilemma**

The federal government of Somalia consists of five symmetrical member states. Puntland, which was formed in 1998 and became the first federal state in Somalia long before Somalia adopted federalism in 2012, is one of them. The first president of Puntland, the late Abdilahi Yusuf, became the transitional federal government's first president between 2004-2008. It is therefore arguable that the framework of structuring Somalia into a federal state was first developed in Puntland. Puntland shares borders with Somaliland and claims the disputed Sool and Sanaag areas.

At the same time, both Mogadishu and Hargeisa are engaged in different types of disagreements with Puntland. The conflict between Puntland and Somaliland is based on border claims of the SSC/Khaatumo areas.

Somaliland claims to have inherited the region from the British while Puntland argues for a political administration that is clan based. The clans of Dhulbahante and Warsengeli, both present in Sool and Sanaag, are part of the Puntland administration. The conflict in this region arises from clan dynamics and colonial border demarcation. Without the involvement of both communities, as well as direct collaboration between Hargeisa and Mogadishu, no sustainable resolution can be reached.

Puntland and the Federal Government of Somalia have also been engaged in a long-running conflict over power and resources in the past five years. The absence of a president or prime minister hailing from Puntland was something unusual during the formative years of the FGS. Puntland considers itself the most senior federal state and has at times threatened to declare its own independence whenever it has been excluded from decision-making processes. Puntland has reservations about the FGS entering into dialogue with Somaliland, which is seeking to get independence from the rest of Somalia and hence would not support the continuation of the dialogue if it is not part of the negotiations.

In addition, the Federal Government of Somalia lacks a coherent strategy in regard to negotiating with Somaliland. The FGS may be unprepared for an outcome that would be different from its primary objective of "retaining Somali unity". Their core objective is incongruent with the reality that Somaliland has been self-governing for the last three decades, which calls for thorough preparation and consultations with its member states. The issue of Puntland also emerged during the first round of negotiations when the air traffic control discussions came up.

Puntland and the remaining federal member states must be addressed internally by the Federal Government of Somalia in order to broaden the dialogue between Hargeisa and Mogadishu.

• The Existing threat of Al Shabaab

The Federal Government of Somalia is long considered a fragile state which is still struggling to emerge from nearly three-decades-long civil wars. The rebuilding of the Somali army is still far from completion and the government doesn't control major towns beyond Mogadishu. In the past decade, the FGS's major security threat was coming from the insurgency of the radical group Al Shabaab, which is linked to the international terror group Al Qaeda. The FGS's security forces face sustained threats as the Al Shabaab group continues to wage attacks on government installations and public centers which claim a high number of casualties on a regular basis.

As the FGS remains weak, it relies on military support through the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) which replaced AMISOM when its mandate ended in 2020. The ATMIS is part of wider global efforts to defeat Al Shabaab and restore lasting peace in Somalia. Nonetheless, the impending exit of foreign troops (ATMIS) presents security concerns after fighting alongside the Somali security forces for more than 17 years and is likely to leave the FGS exposed on the security fronts.

There has been a renewed campaign against Al Shabaab as newly elected President Hassan Sh. Mohmoud made defeating the radical militant group of Al Shabaab a key priority. The campaign against Al Shabaab has mobilized local communities and clan militias to fight the group.

While the campaign against Alshabab received the support of the FGS's external backers and even the participation of some federal member states, it is yet to gain significant progress. These challenges hinder the Federal Government of Somalia to enter into any meaningful negotiations that involve future relations.

Recommendations

In order for the Somalia-Somaliland dialogue to be meaningful and achieve the goal of lasting peace and stability, current obstacles must be removed with each side looking to improve internal challenges. In an effort to apply lessons learned from a decade of unsuccessful negotiations, the Federal Government of Somalia, the government of Somaliland, and the international partners are advised to take the following steps.

• Somaliland's political and security challenges

- The government of Somaliland is faced with a myriad of challenges not least on the political and security fronts. The ongoing conflict in LasAnod is taking a significant toll on human lives and stagnating the economy. Somaliland will have to achieve lasting peace in the Sool region before it negotiates with the federal government of Somalia. The absence of the highest-ranking politician from Sool who is the current speaker of the parliament Mr. Abdirizak Khalif demonstrated the importance of representation for Somaliland when negotiating with Somalia.

- Secondly, Somaliland needs to overcome the ongoing political crisis and prioritize holding elections. Reaching an agreement with political stakeholders about the framework of the elections will be key to breaking the deadlock. Once the election-related disputes are resolved and a new government with a fresh mandate comes to power, negotiations with Somalia and peace efforts in LasAnod could follow.

• A Thorough Preparation for the Negotiations

- In order for the second phase of the dialogue to succeed, the two sides must apply the lessons learned from previous attempts at dialogue. The process of negotiating complex issues such as the unification or cessation of countries calls for technical expertise, and the negotiating parties should appoint technical committees with the necessary expertise. This involves both sides making budgetary allocations toward preparing their respective negotiation teams.

• Relations between the FGS and federal member states

- As part of the inclusive state-building agenda under the federal government constitution, the federal member states should be consulted on major decisions, including when negotiating future relations with Somaliland. The federal government of Somalia needs to improve its relations with all member states and in particular with the Puntland state of Somalia, which suspended cooperation with the federal government on the 10th of January 2023.

• Advance the Dialogue from Facilitation to Mediation Stages

- The role of the international community in past negotiation attempts was limited to hosting and facilitating the dialogue so that the negotiating parties engage directly with each other. This was crucial to breaking the deadlock and catalyzing talks for the first time since Somaliland declared its unilateral independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991.

- As part of the international frameworks for peace, it is recommended that a mediator joins the process so that the negotiations reach the resolution stage. In addition, the international mediators could double as guarantors to help monitor the implementation of agreements. As a lesson learned from the first round of talks, there should be a mediating country to play a regulatory role in case either party violates any agreement. This will prevent the talks from collapsing at the more advanced stages.

- The process of international mediation would be more effective if the risk of geopolitical rivalry is mitigated. The regional blocks such as the IGAD and AU could identify an impartial mediating country that could appoint a special envoy, preferably a person of reputable character. At the same time, the Somali international partners should extend financial and technical assistance toward the establishment of a secretariat. This would mitigate the competing interests of foreign actors while ensuring fairness and justice in the dialogue process.

● Involvement of civic actors in the dialogue process

- The negotiating parties should shift focus from the elitist approach and embrace an approach that is inclusive of civic actors. These include; scholars, intellectuals, traditional leaders, religious scholars, marginalized clans as well as women activists. Through consultative forums and public debates, the parties should welcome new perspectives i.e. new thinking and creative solutions into the dialogue process, which would contribute to the achievement of long-lasting peace.

. It is believed that getting re-elected is one of the key priorities of recent administrations from both Hargeisa and Mogadishu, and their actions are motivated by a fear of losing political support. This is a major impediment to the peace process.

- The involvement of civic actors, particularly the adoption of recommendations from academic debates and scholarly papers, would give much weight to the arguments made by politicians during the negotiations. These would also lead to more conclusive agreements, and speed up the buy-in process from the general public. The involvement of civic actors in the Somaliland-Somalia Dialogue also has the potential to improve relations between the political class and citizens, which would ease the implementation of the peace agreements.



This page was intentionally left blank!

About the ISIR Digest:

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) publishes a bi-monthly newsletter that puts into perspective and analyzes the latest political and security news in Somaliland. The newsletter is targeted at stakeholders in the peace and security sector and partners in governance. These include diplomatic missions, development partners, and policy and research institutions. This is the fifth issue of the ISIR Digest.

In this issue, we assess the likelihood of a successful revival of the Somalia-Somaliland talks which are currently defunct, by analyzing the factors that led to the failures of previous efforts and making recommendations for policy considerations.

Contact Us

Off Airport Road, Behind the Adam's Inn
Hargeisa–Somaliland

Email: info@isirthinktank.org

Website: www.isirthinktank.org

