



SOMALILAND-KHATUMO CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND PATHWAYS TO PEACE

Policy Brief
July 2025

COPYRIGHT © 2025 by ISIR Institute

All rights reserved.

No part of this policy brief may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, without permission in writing from the publishers.

ISIR INSTITUTE

Off Airport Road, Masallaha Hargeisa

SOMALILAND

Phone: +252 63 6226667

www.isirinstitute.com | info@isirinstitute.org

[X](#) @ISIRInstitute [f](#) @ISIRinsitute [in](#) @ISIRinsitute [@](#) @isirinsitute

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR)

ISIR INSTITUTE

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) is an independent, nonpartisan organization that uses research to inform its policy advocacy work.

It undertakes impartial policy research, training and analysis to organizations and decision-makers in the horn of African region who are working toward innovative thinking to stimulate formulation of sound public policies leading to positive outcomes in the fields of peace & security, good governance, safeguarding human rights and democracy.

Table of Contents

SUMMARY	IV
1. CONTEXT OVERVIEW	1
2. KEY CONFLICT ACTORS	2
3. EMERGING SECURITY VACUUM: UNCERTAIN FUTURES IN SOMALIA	2
4. POLITICAL LANDSCAPE	3
5. CONFLICT DYNAMICS: SOMALILAND - KHATUMO	3
6. PEACE PROSPECTS AND RISKS	5
7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	5
ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....	6



SOMALILAND-KHATUMO CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND PATHWAYS TO PEACE

July 2025

Ahmed Y. Hersi and Rudolf Schoch

Summary

This policy brief examines the Somalia-Somaliland conflict, intensified by Somaliland's 2024 port deal with Ethiopia and Somalia's recent push to integrate the breakaway Khatumo region into its federal system. This move, aimed at undermining Somaliland's claim over the east, risks triggering broader regional instability. External actors like the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, and the U.S. have further complicated the landscape. Despite escalating violence, especially in the Khatumo region, the brief highlights the potential of grassroots-led peace efforts. It urges inclusive dialogue, support for Somaliland's Peace Commission, and coordinated international engagement to prevent further fragmentation and promote lasting stability.

1. Context Overview

The Somalia-Somaliland conflict is rooted in historical and political fractures that date back to the decolonization period. In 1960, British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland, both internationally recognized states, united to form the Somali Republic. However, disparities in development, governance, and internal fighting of rival clans sowed long-term resentment in the north.

Following the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991, Somaliland unilaterally declared independence, establishing its own institutions and democratic processes. Despite internal stability, Somaliland remains internationally unrecognized, and this has been a major drawback hampering access to international financing of much-needed development programmes.

In recent years, significant developments have reshaped the political landscape. In January 2024, Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ethiopia, offering sea access through the Port of Berbera in exchange for the possibility of formal recognition. The agreement triggered a diplomatic crisis, with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) denouncing the deal and mobilizing regional opposition.

Efforts to de-escalate tensions culminated in the December 2024 Ankara Declaration, brokered by Turkey, which led to the normalization of diplomatic ties between Somalia and Ethiopia. Meanwhile, conflict has escalated in eastern Somaliland, particularly in the contested Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn regions, where battles between Somaliland forces and Khatumo forces have displaced tens of thousands.

¹ Buhodle district (Togdher region) comes under Khatumo Administration

2 Somaliland - Khatumo Conflict Dynamics and Pathways

2. Key Conflict Actors

While Somaliland is *officially* not part of the Federal Republic of Somalia, its recent MoU with Ethiopia has further complicated the ongoing negotiations regarding their future relations. Simultaneously, the FGS has shown overt support for Khatumo Administration, seemingly motivated by political expediency, particularly in light of the upcoming 2026 federal presidential elections, adding another layer of complexity to the already fragile political landscape.

Somalia's internal cohesion remains fraught due to persistent disputes between the FGS and several Federal Member States (FMS), most notably Puntland and Jubaland. These regions remain tense and resistant to central authorities and continue to demand greater autonomy.

Khatumo Administration remains politically and militarily aligned with the FGS and is receiving federal support, including oversight of its upcoming elections scheduled for 5 August 2025. However, this involvement has provoked discontent among some Khatumo leaders, who view federal oversight as undermining the political autonomy they fought to secure after separating from both Somaliland and Puntland.

3. Emerging Security Vacuum: Uncertain Futures in Somalia

Al-Shabaab's renewed offensive in February–March 2025² has reversed critical territorial gains, revealing structural weaknesses of the Somali state and the limitations of the international military strategy. The group's resurgence has highlighted deep governance deficits, fractured federal-state relations, and a dangerous reliance on external military support.

Nearly three years into the government's offensive, Al-Shabaab is once again advancing toward Mogadishu, as witnessed in March 2025. Meanwhile, the Islamic State–Somalia has gained strength in Puntland amid weak federal coordination.

The newly launched African Union Support and Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM) in January 2025 faces an uncertain future due to funding gaps, and the U.S. administration has signaled it will not contribute financially. The EU has also expressed reluctance to extend funding beyond AUSSOM's 2025 mandate - signaling a broader international drawdown. Without a clear successor framework, Somalia risks entering a destabilizing security vacuum as it approaches the

² <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/somalia-at-a-crossroads-resurgent-insurgents-fragmented-politics-and-the-uncertain-future-of-aussom/>

volatile 2026 election year, jeopardizing hard-won gains.

The emergence of the leadership has added a new layer of complexity. Representing communities in the disputed eastern regions, Khatumo leaders have mobilized local militias to resist Somaliland's territorial claims and jurisdictional control. These clashes have turned towns like Erigavo and Jiidali into battlegrounds, drawing in significant civilian populations. In response, the Somaliland government has relied on pro-government clan militia to maintain control.

Regionally, external actors are deeply involved. Ethiopia's strategic interest in securing sea access through Berbera has elevated Somaliland's regional standing. The UAE has invested heavily in Berbera's port infrastructure, while Turkey has strengthened its alliance with the FGS. Egypt, concerned about Ethiopian political expansionism, has supported Somalia diplomatically and militarily.

The United States, mindful of China's growing influence, has signaled renewed interest in Somaliland, even entertaining discussions of potential recognition. These competing interests risk transforming a local dispute into a broader geopolitical contest.

4. Political Landscape

In Somalia, political instability is exacerbated by the slow implementation of federalism and the absence of a widely accepted constitution. The FGS often fails to build consensus with FMS leaders, resulting in parallel power structures and conflicting narratives of statehood. The ambiguity surrounding the federal system has hindered the establishment of a unified stance on Somaliland, further complicating negotiations.

In contrast, Somaliland projects a confident political posture. It operates a functioning government with elected institutions and maintains a strong claim to the territory inherited at independence. However, its assertion of sovereignty over parts of the Eastern region has faced strong resistance.

The integration of clan-based militias into Somaliland's security forces has been a noteworthy achievement, helping to stabilize the eastern regions and curb anarchy.

5. Conflict Dynamics: Somaliland - Khatumo

The Somaliland-Khatumo conflict stems from historical marginalization, contested governance, and unfulfilled political agreements. A central grievance relates to the unimplemented "Ali Khalif Galeyr Agreement" (or Ainaba Agreement), which aimed to enhance eastern representation in Somaliland's institutions.

4 Somaliland - Khatumo Conflict Dynamics and Pathways to Peace

According to the ISIR analysis, Somaliland's 2025 national budget³ reveals significant regional disparities. In the Khatumo region, infrastructure and social development investments are virtually absent. Health, education, and road funding in Sool and Sanaag remain critically low.

Among Khatumo communities, perceptions of exclusion from the national agenda have fueled calls for autonomy. These frustrations—deeply intertwined with clan identity and territorial loyalty—have led Khatumo leaders to seek greater autonomy and formal recognition, whether within or outside Somaliland's framework.

These frustrations, also deeply intertwined with clan identities and territorial loyalties, have fuelled growing political alienation and led Khatumo leaders to demand not only greater autonomy but also formal recognition of their distinct identity within or outside the Somaliland framework.

Governance remains a central flashpoint. Somaliland's attempts to integrate Khatumo region through military and administrative measures are often viewed locally as occupation rather than unity.

Violence in the region tends to recur, even in places far from the traditional domain of Khatumo, as seen in the clashes in urban Erigavo (December 2024) and the attack on Jiidali (January 2025) by Khatumo militias.

The state-aligned militias emerged in response to the Goojaadde "withdrawal" or retreat of Somaliland forces in Las Anod thought to be civic defence forces or "madani".

In 2025, the newly elected administration has made strides in restoring stability, particularly in parts of Sanaag and Sool loyal to the government⁴. A major breakthrough has been the absorption of local militias into the official Somaliland army – a critical step in disarming rogue groups, restoring order and peace, enforcing the rule of law, and reinforcing national unity.

A key breakthrough has been the absorption and integration of local militias into the official Somaliland army. This measure was to control marauding loose militias, an essential step toward restoring peace, enforcing the rule of law, and enhancing national unity.

This security achievement sets the stage for the upcoming political process in Sanaag and Sool with the scheduled peace conference during the 3rd week of July 2025 in Erigavo. Somaliland's upcoming peace initiative in the Sanaag region, involving clan leaders from the entire country, aims to foster trust, cease hostilities, reopen roads, and guarantee freedom of movement and the resumption of trade.

The breakaway region of Las Anod will hold an election for a new president in

³ (<https://isirthinktank.com/2025/03/somaliland-2025-budget-analyses-how-decentralized-is-it/>)

⁴ See <https://www.horndiplomat.com/2025/03/somaliland-government-integrates-first-two-batches-of-civilian-forces-into-the-national-army/>

August 2025. Two main candidates are vying for the position: one backed by the FGS and another by Puntland. These rival influences illustrate the external interventions complicating Somaliland's internal affairs. While most clans in the region remain aligned with Somaliland, a minority supports the self-declared Khatumo Administration.

Somalia, once distant from the conflict in eastern Somaliland, now plans to host a political conference in Las Anod to facilitate Khatumo's integration as a new federal member state. This effort appears aimed at counterbalancing Puntland's growing autonomy from the federal system. However, Khatumo does not meet the constitutional threshold of three regions required for federal statehood, thus posing a significant legal obstacle.

Increased FGS involvement threatens Somaliland's territorial integrity and political stability, which could destabilize the wider region, including adjacent areas of Somalia, Puntland, and Ethiopia's Somali region, by stoking inter-clan mistrust and weakening the eastern territories.

6. Peace Prospects and Risks

Despite the deepening crisis, viable pathways to peace remain. Traditional elders, religious leaders, and civil society actors retain legitimacy across Somaliland and Khatumo. Their past involvement in reconciliation efforts suggests they could lead effective, locally-driven peacebuilding processes. Initiatives like those by the Centre for Dialogue and International Cooperation (CDI) show promise in fostering inter-communal dialogue and de-escalation.

However, risks abound. Regional powers continue to pursue their strategic interests, risking cross-border instability. Continued militarization could escalate displacement, arms proliferation, and insecurity. The fragile political situation in Mogadishu and the lack of a coherent national peace strategy heighten the dangers.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The FGS's recent push to recognize Khatumo and integrate it as a federal member state - timed ahead of elections in Las Anod - threatens to ignite a new conflict dynamic. Such moves could undermine Somaliland's territorial integrity, deepen clan mistrust, and destabilize neighboring regions.

As Khatumo territories does not meet the constitutional criteria for federal statehood, Somalia's actions could set a controversial precedent and accelerate fragmentation in the Horn of Africa.

6 *Somaliland - Khatumo Conflict Dynamics and Pathways to Peace*

To promote sustainable peace, it is crucial to:

- Support local peace initiatives led by community and traditional leaders that prioritize grassroots dialogue.
- Empower civil society to create inclusive forums for addressing grievances without external manipulations.
- Develop inclusive dialogue platforms to facilitate structured dialogue involving Somaliland authorities, eastern clans, Khatumo leaders, at a later stage and eventually the FGS.

At the same time, greater coordination among peace actors - including the African Union, United Nations, and regional bodies such as IGAD - is necessary to prevent fragmented or counterproductive interventions. International actors must carefully calibrate their engagement to avoid inflaming tensions, instead promoting principles of sovereignty, inclusion, and regional stability.

The establishment of early-warning systems and localized conflict mitigation mechanisms will be vital to preventing the escalation of future clashes. By aligning international efforts with local realities and pursuing a dual-track approach that balances high-level diplomacy with grassroots engagement, both Somalia and Somaliland can move closer to a peaceful and durable resolution to the conflict.

A key takeaway: Strengthening Somaliland's newly formed Peace Commission - and supporting grassroots peace actors - could be pivotal in advancing local conflict resolution and mediation. Locally-based partners and Think Tanks, with their strong environmental expertise, can provide valuable support to peacebuilding efforts, both locally, regionally and internationally.

About the Authors

Rudolf Schoch holds a doctorate in geography. He worked in academic research focused on developing countries at the University of Zurich (Switzerland). As a delegate for a major aid organization, he was responsible for overseeing a development programme in India. He also travelled extensively as a corporate consultant, advising on strategic issues in development cooperation for bilateral and multilateral agencies. His career concluded with leadership roles as a development diplomat of the Swiss Foreign Ministry in the Balkans, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. Since retiring, he has been volunteering in the development of a value chain for organic and Fairtrade nuts from Africa, South America, and Asia, and continues to advise governments on policy issues in development.

Ahmed Y. Hersi is a Senior Researcher at ISIR Institute, and an experienced Peace and Security Expert involved in conflict mediation efforts in South Sudan under IGAD. He is also a Regional Maritime Specialist, focusing on areas including the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean. Mr. Hersi has led and coordinated regional organizations (EAC, COMESA, IOC, and SADC) on international maritime security initiatives through IGAD during times of increased maritime insecurity. He is a member of the International Association of Maritime Security Professionals (IAMSP) in the UK. Mr. Hersi is committed to advancing peace and security in the region as his work primarily focuses on the Horn of Africa and provides lectures on Conflict and Security at the International Peace Security Training Centre (IPSTC). He has previously worked with various United Nations agencies and is passionate about working in the public sector at the senior policy level in peaceful and transitional environments, advocating for regional integration.

SOMALILAND-KHATUMO CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND PATHWAYS TO PEACE

Policy Brief | July 2025

COPYRIGHT © 2025 by ISIR Institute

ISIR INSTITUTE:

Off Airport Road, Behind the Adam's Inn
Hargeisa, Somaliland
T: +252 63 6226667