



info@isirthinktank.org | www.isirthinktank.org

+252 (0) 63 6226667 | +252 (0) 65 6226667

# UNDERSTANDING LAS ANOD'S CONFLICT: EXCLUSIONARY POLITICS, STRATEGIC (RE) ALIGNMENT, AND RUPTURE

Dr Abdifatah Ismael Tahir

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## Abstract

*This working paper examines the making of the exclusionary political order in Somaliland and the trajectory of Dhulbahante's strategic alignment, realignment, and ruptures with this order. Relying on unstructured interviews with residents and key informants in Las Anod and beyond, the paper argues that the Las Anod conflict can be understood as the result of Somaliland's exclusionary politics. It shows that, in 1991, key Dhulbahante elites aligned themselves with Somaliland's unilateral declaration of independence from Somalia not because their constituents wanted it but to avoid conflict with the Isaaq clans and their armed political organisation, the Somali National Movement (SNM). Equally, in 1993, SNM's internal power struggle over controlling revenue-generating sites and infrastructures gave the Dhulbahante elites an opportunity to realign with Somaliland's state building in slightly different terms by joining forces with those pursuing a non-SNM leadership to emerge from the Borama summit. While these strategically salient (re) alignments have provided the Dhulbahante elites temporary stability, they have failed to create the conditions required to convince their constituencies to remain in Somaliland. The higher exclusion imposed by the current administration, which sought to centralise authority far more than the fragile state could withstand, made a rupture attractive. In this light, the current war may be viewed as a violent disengagement from the exclusionary order in Somaliland.*

Keywords: Somali, Somaliland, conflict, security, exclusion, Las Anod.

## INTRODUCTION

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In early February 2023, a major conflict broke out in Las Anod, the capital of the Sool region, between Somaliland forces and the local community. This followed the shooting and crackdown on protesters expressing their frustration over the killing of an opposition party official, Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi (aka Hadrawi), in the evening of December 26, 2022. He was the latest victim of a string of assassinations targeting prominent figures in the city. These continued killings and the government's harsh response to the protesters aggravated the tension, prompting traditional leaders to gather in the city and issue a communal statement, calling on the government to leave their land peacefully, failing which they will take up arms against it. Somaliland rejected the elders' decision, and the two parties started fighting over the control of the city. The human and material cost of the war are not independently verified, but the elected local mayor and council have on March 2 reported 210 deaths, 680 injuries, and over 200,000 people displaced. The two sides trade blame; the locals insist theirs is a homegrown uprising, but Somaliland alleges a bigger plot.

Due to stiff opposition and pressure, the government declared a ceasefire on Friday evening, February 10, but fighting resumed on Saturday morning. President Muse Bihi Abdi again called for peace talks on the week following, February 18; however, Garad Jama, the de facto leader of the uprising, insisted that they would only enter negotiations if two conditions were met: 1) abandoning the labelling of the revolt leaders as terrorists; and 2) the withdrawal of Somaliland's forces from the region.

The warring parties use identical albeit conflicting narratives to garner support for the war. These narratives revolve primarily around three arenas.

*The first is nationalism.* In its view of nationalism, Somaliland criminalises the concept of union. It justifies this by citing the constitutional referendum of 2001<sup>1</sup>, in which the inhabitants of the Sool region did not meaningfully participate, and the passing of legislation prohibiting activities related to unification. It also constructs its version of nationalism around the SNM by commemorating the movement's significant dates, naming them after key installations and public spaces, and devoting a sizeable portion of its education curricula to the movement's achievements. Nationalism for the Dhulbahante is founded on a counter-narrative that regards the referendum as illegal<sup>2</sup>, Dervish as a freedom fighter, and SNM as an organisation that collaborated with Somalia's arch enemy, Ethiopia, to demolish the state.

Clannism is the second arena. To understand this, it is important to point out that Somalia's history is rife with examples of clan-based exclusion. This allows both sides to justify secession and counter-secession efforts as strategic decisions to avoid domination. For instance, the Isaaq elites say they will not return to the union because of the atrocities committed by the military government in the 1980s and, more importantly, because their chances of assuming power are slim and unsustainable if they do exist.



On their part, Dhulbahante believes that they belong to a major clan, Daarood, in Somalia and hence will not be dominated by their immediate neighbours, Isaaq, with whom they have long standing rivalries. It is, however, important that this justification and counter justification is less prominent than the previous one. It frequently appears in casual conversations, even though it has deeper roots than its appearance suggests.

Terrorism is the final arena. In Somaliland, it is cast to mean as a violation of the country's laws and order. Their assumption is that the people of Las Anod are within Somaliland's territorial rights (based on colonial borders), and thus an armed act against state authorities is terrorism. Dhulbahante, for their part, frames their conflict as locals resisting an imposed and illegal order. Therefore, their understanding of terrorism is any violence meted out against civilians (armed or otherwise) because of their political choice. In their justification and counter-justification, evidence suggest that both sides also refer to terrorism in a way that appeals (at least in their thinking) to external state actors fighting against Islamist groups in Somalia. It is not surprising that Somali elites use terrorism for political purposes in a manner that synonymizes it with Islam. Arguably, they do so to take advantage of the global counterterrorism agenda and its well-known misconceptions of Islam as the hive of terror to advance their agenda.

For instance, Somaliland claims that the assassination of the elites in Las Anod are organised by Islamist terror groups who have links with individuals undermining state authority.

On their part, Dhulbahante leaders charge that Somaliland has a long history with the Al-Shabaab group since several of their founders were from the Isaaq. In a nutshell, both sides use reference to terrorism for labelling purposes.

Whether or not the conflicting parties' characterizations and counter-characterizations of terrorism are accurate or not, their respective supporters continue to believe them. Irrespective of the contours of these labelling war of words, a crucial point to note is that, while Dhulbahante's mobilization narratives are consistent, the same cannot be said for Somaliland. The latter has changed their line of reasoning several times. Initially, they blamed the violence on Al-Shabaab and Farmajo, former president of Somalia, to a lesser extent. They then shifted the blame to Puntland. Finally, they concluded that the plot was larger, claiming that it was organized from Mogadishu by the federal government of Somalia to undermine Somaliland's stability and force it to consider union.



**Table 1: Mobilisation narratives**

Nationalism	<i>Somaliland</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somaliland Rejectors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Criminalising the union</li> <li>◦ Resisting the authority</li> <li>◦ Vilifying the military</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<i>SSC/Dhulbahante</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somalia Rejectors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Criminalising the secession</li> <li>◦ Illegal occupation</li> <li>◦ Vilifying SNM</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<i>Clannism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isaaq <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Resisting domination</li> <li>◦ Minoritisation</li> <li>◦ Strategic secessionism</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daarood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Resisting domination</li> <li>◦ Minoritisation</li> <li>◦ Strategic unionisms</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<i>Terrorism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Casting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Disorder</li> <li>◦ Killing public officials</li> <li>◦ Links with Al-Shabaab</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Countering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Resistance</li> <li>◦ Killing of elites</li> <li>◦ Origin of Al-Shabaab</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

In this paper, I will argue that the current conflict is the product of an Isaaq-centred process of exclusionary state-building. In doing so, I will describe how Dhulbahante elites have negotiated space within these exclusionary conditions. The first of these pivotal moments occurred in 1991, when Dhulbahante elites engaged in the secession effort. They did so not because their constituents desired it, but rather to avoid conflict with the Isaaq clans and their political organisation, SNM. The second time was when SNM lost its organisational capacity to govern in part due to disputes over revenue-generating vital infrastructures/sites. This conflict led to convening a summit in Borama, at which a non-SNM leader, Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, was elected. Notwithstanding that Egal's influence over the selection of Dhulbahante representatives infuriated the only Garad in attendance, there was a general feeling among the Dhulbahante delegates that non-SNM leadership is preferable.

In other words, they wished to avoid the likelihood of existing exclusions becoming more entrenched. I further contend that the current war might be seen as a violent means of disengagement from the Somaliland project and its exclusive nature. The elevated level of exclusion by the current administration, which sought to centralise authority far more than the fragile state could bear, made violence especially alluring. I also emphasise that demographic shifts and rising clan and (sub) national patriotism contributed to the conflict.

I gathered data for this paper by monitoring the build-up and conflict in Las Anod. I have also conducted telephone and in-person interviews with key informants in Las Anod and the region. In addition to the interviews, I have monitored the media reports on the region and often followed up with interviews to verify their authenticity.

In the following sections, I will outline how Dhulbahante elites navigated through the interlinked problems of exclusion and identity in the recent history of Somaliland. In the second section, I will discuss Dhulbahante elites' various attempts to disengage from Somaliland to forge a different future.

### **Las Anod conflict in the context of Somaliland's exclusionary politics**

Exclusion is defined as a state in which individuals or groups lack effective participation in crucial activities or benefits of society<sup>3</sup>. More simplified, to be excluded is to feel as if one does not belong and, as a result, to believe that one is neither a valued member of a community nor able to access the range of services and or opportunities others have<sup>4</sup>. In Somaliland, such a sense of exclusion exists at various levels and within different social groups. For instance, women feel excluded because elections rarely produce female representatives<sup>5</sup>; minority clans rarely make meaningful gains from the country's economic landscape or feel protected by the state<sup>6</sup>; and inhabitants on the margins of the state are politically and, by extension, developmentally disadvantaged<sup>7</sup>. While there are no statistics on the scale of exclusion subjected to the people of Las Anod, recent qualitative research and anecdotal evidence suggest it is severe<sup>8</sup>.

Scholars differentiate between the experience of exclusions as perceived by the person or others and when the actors acknowledge that experience or perception<sup>9</sup>. In the case of Las Anod, not only do the people feel excluded but there also seems to be a consensus on its severity.

This is not to say that individuals from Las Anod did not at all benefit from Somaliland, but rather that the scope of their participation is much lesser (relative to their geographical and numerical coverage) than that of the Isaaq. The scholarship allocations, in which the Sool region received just one posting out of 100, are a prime illustration of this exclusion<sup>10</sup>.

Often, exclusion is inextricably linked to identity<sup>11</sup>. This is often reflected in how state authorities define who is included or excluded from the rights and responsibilities of/to the state<sup>12</sup> and how their attempts to produce a single national identity from competing communal identities<sup>13</sup> creates exclusion and resistance in both violent and peaceful forms<sup>14</sup>. In Somalia, where subnational authorities seek to produce a distinct identity, clan-based cooperation or resistance is common. Clan is a complex system of identity where members have rights and responsibilities based on patrilineal ancestry or contractual membership<sup>15</sup>. At the heart of this system is the dogma of "hiil iyo hoo," which translates as protection and provision. When a member is threatened or becomes a target of aggression, for instance, his fellow members mobilise their resources and forces to defend or avenge him/her<sup>16</sup>. Significant literature is devoted to understanding how clan identity is produced and perpetuated and how it generates state and non-state violence, but most contentious are those exploring its analytical utility<sup>17</sup>.

Bearing in mind the intricacies of using clan as an analytical unit, my reference to the clan in this piece is descriptive.

Having said this, Dhulbahante is a member of the Daarood clan's Harti branch, which can be found in Somaliland, Puntland, Jubaland, and Ogaden. Amid historical rivalry between them and the Isaaq clans, they feel excluded from the three decades of Somaliland's state formation<sup>18</sup> primarily because of who they are. This exclusion is manifested in spatial and political terms.

Spatially, Dhulbahante inhabits the eastern flank of Somaliland, which is considered insecure<sup>19</sup>. As a result, neither the government nor international development agencies that help it deliver many critical services are present in the region. The public discourse is that the insecurity in the area is generated strategically to create a spatial advantage for the Isaaq inhabited regions in the west. This is not surprising as there are examples in which Somali political elites produced strategic insecurity to make a gain<sup>20</sup>. It is within this logic that the state's desire to maintain political control amid financial hardship creates conditions where the state is unable, unwilling, or allowing/tolerating other actors to deliver services that would have otherwise been expected from it.

In political terms, Dhulbahante feel excluded 1) because they do not form the core group (Isaaq) that demographically and historically dominates Somaliland; and 2) they did not willingly participate in Somaliland's secessionist state-making conversations<sup>21</sup>. They did not also participate in the referendum for the constitution. Therefore, understanding the current conflict as a crisis of identity and exclusion is essential for several reasons.

First, the dominant clan (Isaaq) in Somaliland, and the resisting clan (Dhulbahante), draw their social identification from different repertoires. The former identifies as Isaaq or the larger Dir when there is a sufficient external threat, whereas the latter identifies with Daarood. Second, they have a long history of competition over territories, resources, and politics. In a society dogmatically committed to *hiil iyo hoo*<sup>22</sup>, trusting a state controlled by a traditional rival is not ideal at best and even less so in the absence of reasonable safeguards. Third, they draw their relationship to and experience with contemporary state-building from various historical episodes. The Isaaq strongly emphasises their recent history of resistance against Mohamed Siad Barre's dictatorship, while the Dhulbahante refer to the Sayyid's anti-colonial campaigns<sup>23</sup>.

### Negotiating space in an exclusionary political order

Somaliland is an exclusionary state. This was intrinsic in its parent organisation's foundation, SNM, which was established in 1981 by a group of Isaaq politicians to fight the dictatorial regime of Mohamed Siad Barre<sup>24</sup>. Arguably, exclusion was necessary to mobilise human and material resources for its struggle against Barre<sup>25</sup>. Somaliland is a continuation of this exclusionary project. The fact that SNM's chair and his deputy became the first president and vice president of post-conflict Somaliland reflects this. Furthermore, a significant political power was at this time concentrated in the hands of the Garhajis members of the administration.



When Egal took over as the second president, the political landscape he created did not only resemble the patrimonial state of the 1960's criticised by scholars as corrupt elite centric polity<sup>26</sup> but it was also an exclusivist Awal project where both material and political benefits of the state go to this subclan. Over the course of Dahir Rayale's tenure, a securo-centric state mirrored on Barre's clan manipulation was reproduced. Like before, the exclusionary nature of the state building continued slightly on a different plain than the rest. Instead of empowering his clan, he empowered the Harar Yonis elites of the Garhajis clan to dominate decision making. Subsequent administrations, Siilaanyo and Bihi stand accused of continuing a "clanist" approach to governance and misappropriation of state resources.

As evident here, the metamorphosis of Somaliland's state produced exclusionary clan-based politics, which can best be characterised as divisive and a recipe for fragmentation. How did the Dhulbahante clan negotiate space in Somaliland amid severe exclusionary practices? I show that they did so through strategically salient toleration – the ability to endure a particular condition for which you may or may not have the means to resist for a strategic purpose<sup>27</sup>.

### **Engaging SNM for peace**

The Dhulbahante elites are repeatedly blamed for being divided and forum shopping. However, one may appreciate the shrewd ways in which they navigated through the exclusionary conditions of Somaliland.

Such navigation has provided them with the space and time necessary to create the critical mass to reject the Isaaq domination of Somaliland<sup>28</sup>. This strategic navigation could no longer hold because the threshold at which a sub-secession would be a necessary response has been reached. This is evident in the fact that the current uprising is different from the previous ones. Before we tease the reasons for this, let us briefly look at how Dhulbahante engaged with contemporary Somaliland and its mother organisation, SNM, which waged war for ten years before Barre was ousted, placing it in control of the northern territories<sup>29</sup>. Amid tensions and fears of reprisal, the new leadership prioritised peacebuilding over state building. They held the first post-Barre political conference in Burao to consult about a shared future for people in Somaliland including Dhulbahante.

But then something unexpected happened in Mogadishu. A new interim leadership was formed without consulting SNM. Moreover, their political allies – United Somali Congress (USC) led by Mohamed Farah Aideed, and Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), led by Mohamed Omar Jeess, were sidestepped by mostly civilian southern elites who were concerned about changing one military leadership with another<sup>30</sup>. Aside the fact that this had become one of the core causes of the long-running conflict in the south<sup>31</sup>, it has also played a key role in the SNM controlled north's decision to declare secession.

The Isaaq clan sensed continuation of their exclusion from the Somali body politic. And the other clans participating in the conference had no option other than agreeing to whatever the Isaaq clans – who inherited a significant arson from the ousted regime and who also had sympathy among other Somalis stemming from the severity of the state's response to their insurgency – wanted<sup>32</sup>.

The declaration of independence did not however translate into political stability. Competition for rule and resources led conflicts to erupt in many cities<sup>33</sup>. The first of these conflicts took place in Burao in September 1991 where local clan militias collided over taxation and related politics of resource control. The second conflict took place in Berbera in March 1992 when the SNM administration tried to impose control over the port and the local clans refused to abide by that order. Not long thereafter, the third major political conflict occurred in Hargeisa and Burao again in 1994 as some of the clans felt they were not given their due share in government structures and resources<sup>34</sup>. The conflict within the Isaaq clans over the control and benefit of the new state had two important implications for the Dhulbahante engagement with SNM. First, it provided Dhulbahante with breathing space by allowing them to recover from the guilt (or perception of it) of being (or accused of) collaborators of the military regime. Their newly found counterargument is that the inter Isaaq conflict is indicative that SNM had not known better.<sup>35</sup> Second, it allowed Dhulbahante to take a neutral position (at least up until the Borama conference) in the mediation of the Isaaq conflict to create a less exclusionary space where SNM history does not dominate the new political dispensation.

### Towards a non SNM state

The peacebuilding processes aimed at solving these problems began with clan-based meetings sanctioned by the SNM and were motivated by a desire to reconcile the clans in Somaliland. The first major one occurred in Sheikh in October 1992<sup>36</sup>. Walls<sup>37</sup> observes that there were two outcomes from the conference; a ceasefire agreement between the warring clans and the foundation for another peace conference to be held in Borama. The Borama conference was from the beginning 'intended to be a bigger' conference and aimed to have a fundamental impact on the country's political landscape. Non-SNM Isaaq politicians who were not long ago vilified for not taking part in the struggle against Barre were the driving force behind the conference. This was a welcome news for Dhulbahante and other clans' elders and the first opportunity to get a shot at writing a non-Isaaq centric history of the new state (irrespective of whether it becomes de facto or de jure state). In the end Egal<sup>38</sup> was elected as the new leader of Somaliland.

A major challenge for the new leadership was the existence of different militias loyal to their respective clans. During this hopeful renaissance of the state, clan-based grievances have re-emerged. Two reasons underpinned these grievances. The first was concerned with the fact that the Garhajis clans (Habar Yonis and Eidagale) felt underrepresented. The second related to the new president's choice of cabinet<sup>39</sup>. He appointed people (chief among them the current president and interior minister) who undermined the previous president to key positions.



Garhajis clans saw this as a judgement or lack of respect for their clan. A conflict rooted in this contestation erupted in Somaliland in 1994, continuing until 1997 when the sides sorted their differences through negotiation<sup>40</sup>. The resolution of this conflict consolidated state building in Somaliland at least in the Isaaq inhabited parties of the country.

In the bigger scheme of things, Dhulbahante elites saw this consolidation an attractive opportunity to minimise the exclusionary state making under SNM leadership. On its part, the new leaders expected that the nominal political buy-in of Dhulbahante clans would eventually result in territorial control and subsequent state legitimacy. The protracted political conflict in the south has particularly aided the latter view as there were no viable alternative for Dhulbahante until 1998 when Puntland was formed as a semi-autonomous clan entity<sup>41</sup>. This gave the Dhulbahante elite a new platform in which they could negotiate a political space. The administration of Puntland at the time not only used the clan factor as a unifying policy but it also projected itself as a caring administration that mediated an internal conflict between the Dhulbahante clans. It was through these strategies that Puntland gained control over Las Anod and ruled it for few years before it was ousted in 2007 by Somaliland backed forces recruited from the Dhulbahante ranks<sup>42</sup> with a political backing from the then EPRDF regime of Ethiopia.

Somaliland's return to the city was in part triggered by Puntland's inability to address its own exclusionary politics where presidency is rotated among the élites of certain Majeerteen sub-clans (Mohamoud Suleiman).

Stated differently, the Dhulbahante clans' identity as a platform of negotiating political power has been dealt a blow. It is in this light that the fragmentation and shifting allegiances and alliances of the Dhulbahante elites can be understood.

### **Rupture with an exclusionary order and reaction**

The previous section has shown the important ways in which the Dhulbahante elites have sought to negotiate space in the exclusionary state of Somaliland. This section places emphasis on the moments in which ruptures occurred. The formation of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn, abbreviated for SSC, in 2009<sup>43</sup>, and Khatumo State in 2012<sup>44</sup> are some instances of this rupture. While the emergence of these administrations can be traced to local political manoeuvres, it is also important that Dhulbahante's renewed unity was influenced by the prospect of clan-based federalism taking root in Somalia where five clan dominated administrations – namely Jubaland, Southwest, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and Puntland – have emerged<sup>45</sup>. Each administration (SSC and Khatumo) involved episodes of violent confrontation pitting local forces against the Somaliland military<sup>46</sup>. However, the present conflict seems to be different from the past in several important ways.

Firstly, the administration of Somaliland has parted ways in its long-standing tradition of dealing with Dhulbahante.



The unwritten yet working arrangement of maintaining political and administrative control over Dhulbahante's territories was the instrumentalisation or empowerment of local elites with financial incentives and governmental positions or privileges to buy temporary support. The current administration has shifted from this approach more into centralised and repressive one. This works primarily well in the central parts of the country because the Isaaq clans feel the ownership of the secession project<sup>47</sup>. Even the Garhajis clans who are often regarded as pro-union stand and who feel largely excluded from the benefits of the state find no problem in the centralisation of power<sup>48</sup>. The same however is not the case with Dhulbahante where informal governance was the norm 'for far too long'<sup>49</sup>. *Second*, Dhulbahante's economic elites felt that they were excluded from the state's benefits much more than before Bihi came to power.<sup>50</sup> *Thirdly*, the behaviour of Somaliland security personnel under Bihi has created a sense of occupation<sup>51</sup>.

*Fourthly*, the continued resistance to Ali Khalif Galaydh agreement implementation has created a sense of despair where even pro-Somaliland Dhulbahante elites have become convinced that there is no hope for inclusive Somaliland.<sup>52</sup> *Fifthly*, there are demographic changes that have significantly impacted the terms of engagement between Dhulbahante and Somaliland. In both sides of the equation, young men and women who grew up in conflicting rationalities of dignity and identity have emerged<sup>53</sup>. For the Isaaq youth, Somaliland's statehood is sacred<sup>54</sup>. It is narrative so repeatedly reinforced both at the street and institutional levels<sup>55</sup>.

In other words, it is preached in the homes, taught in the schools, and commonly defended in the street and social media spaces. To the contrary, the Dhulbahante youth idolise the union because it represents a cause for which their forefathers have fought, it is space that offers them a communal and national identity they could relate, and it is arena in which they could equally participate in the struggle for economic and political opportunities<sup>56</sup>. It is this youth with fundamentally opposing ideas about where their interest lies that clash in both the physical and virtual spaces of Las Anod.

*Finally*, the conflict occurred at a time when the country's political landscape was experiencing unprecedented uncertainty. Previously, there was widespread agreement among Isaaq elites on how power is produced but that seems to have changed with the ascension of President Muse Bihi Abdi, a radical and non-compromising military man, to power<sup>57</sup>. Opposition parties believe that Bihi has no desire to hold an election and even if he does, he will rig it in a broad daylight. Because of this belief, the country is polarised, and its core faces enormous challenges<sup>58</sup>. Dhulbahante's war is amplified in this environment and has a different outlook than in the past.

### Reaction in Somaliland

The conflict in Las Anod has generated significant and quite varied responses. Within the Isaaq, people are significantly divided on the issue. While some regard it as the outcome of institutional failure to undertake reforms, others see it as the inevitable outcome of some clans refusing to accept the inalienable decision to pursue independence.

Whichever way viewed; division can be mapped onto three categories of people. *The first* is hardcore ultra-nationals (nationalism seen from Somaliland's perspective) who are committed to the project of the secession in hell or high water. For this group, the end justifies the means. In other words, they support the government's strategies and tactics regardless of whether such policies are illegal or inhumane. *The second* group are hardcore clannists who believe that the revolt against the government in Las Anod is a rejection of their clan (Isaaq) and hence they have the duty to defend it from rejectionists. For them control over Las Anod is a matter of clan pride more than it is for state building. *The third* group are those who regard themselves as rational pro-peace people who (despite their difference in supporting secession or unification) support a negotiated settlement to the crisis.

### Reaction among the Dhulbahante

Within the Dhulbahante, four groups dominate the public discourse. *The first* is those who believe in Dhulbahante's self-determination. For them, the primary concern is not to unite with Somalia, remain in Somaliland or join Puntland but rather to have their land under their control and address the question of where to put their eggs after securing their territories. *The second* group is pro-Harti/Daarood unionists who believe that Dhulbahante's interest is inextricably linked to the Daarood's interest. *The third* group are nationalists who are based outside the region most notably the diaspora and Mogadishu who magnify Dhulbahante's centrality in the struggle against the colonial power and hence their historically informed orientation towards a united Somalia.

This pride centric group is small but influential. The fourth group is an Islamist group who unlike Al-Shabaab believe that they are religiously obliged to defend their land and property against a secessionist administration that wants to rule them by force. While Somaliland pursues to depict this group as a terrorist, they seem to be no more than just local people justifying their resistance against Somaliland through Islamic lenses. The SNM itself had done a similar justification when they were fighting Barre's brutal regime. This is why veterans of the SNM war are called Mujahideen and Somaliland's flag has 'tawhid' in it.

### Reaction beyond Somaliland/Dhulbahante

Beyond Somaliland, the conflict has generated three critical responses. The first came from the Somali people in the region. This has taken clan lines. For instance, in the Daarood inhabited regions of Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya, Dhulbahante resistance enjoys tremendous support. Most people in these regions see the conflict as a domination of one of their own by another. Hence, they feel obliged to support them in rhetorical, material, or and military terms. The second is non Daarood Somali unionists who support the fight against Somaliland because it refuses to remain in Somalia. For them, secessionism must fail at any cost. The third group is those who support Somaliland because they see a danger in further gains of the Daarood clans as that would endanger the present political and administrative equilibrium in Somalia. The fourth is a group of people who promote the idea of Dir or even Irir alliance. This group of people particularly take an issue with social media campaign against Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti, suspected of backing Bihi.



Randomly, you may also see some Somalis in the south who one way or the other support Somaliland's stand in Las Anod. In addition to the abovementioned categories, the conflict has generated significant institutional responses.

Three broad and admittedly loose responses can be mapped. *The first* is Puntland. There is a dilemma. On the one hand Puntland includes Dhulbahante elites who may chart their own responses without regard to their leadership. But more importantly, Puntland's response is shaped by the fact that it is concerned about the political outcome of the conflict. For instance, if Somaliland is removed from Dhulbahante territories, the odds of the people in the region replacing Somaliland with Puntland is exceedingly rare. The more probable path is that Dhulbahante will have their own administration which will come under the federal government. This can upset the present representational politics at the federal level. For example, Dhulbahante MPs will be directly elected from Las Anod rather than Garowe. This explains their silence up to now. *Second*, the federal government is facing moral but also political, and legal dilemmas. Their response therefore reflects this predicament. On the one hand, they must legally respond to the crisis because a) it is a subnational state violence against its own civilians, and b) it is a legal issue that requires national intervention because a local state violating the sanctity of the constitution is forcing itself upon citizens acting within their constitutional rights to remain under the Somali flag. The same applies to Dhulbahante's cause.

On the other hand, the *federal government* is in a political dilemma. This is so because a) it is constructed on clan representation. Thus, both the Isaaq and Dhulbahante clans have significant representation in the federal structures. It is common for political representatives from the region to take clan lines. While most Isaaq MPs seem to support Somaliland remaining as one entity along the geographical lines of the British colonial rule, most of the Dhulbahante's MPs oppose such consideration<sup>60</sup>. This may explain the federal government's measured but weak if not inconsequential response.

Another equally important actor is the *international community*. While many analysts dismiss them as being overrated, their influence over the Somali leaders could not be more important than ever. This is the case because the Somali elites have heavily become dependent on foreign capitals to access services unavailable in Somalia in the same quality as they desire including but not limited to health and education for their children. This makes them vulnerable to international community's punitive tools such as travel bans and financial sanctions. But the international community has not yet put meaningful pressure on the administration to stop the shelling. Their response is informed by geopolitical consideration including security.

## **Probable outcome and political implications**

### **Some scenarios**

Several outcomes can be speculated. The *first* is a win-win situation in which the government of Somaliland and the traditional leaders and key politicians renegotiate (dis) engagement terms.



*Second* is loose-win situation in which one of the actors wins over the other and hence pursues or imposes their desires on the other. Stated differently, if the Dhulbahante wins and can force the Somaliland troops to retreat to Isaaq inhabited territories, they will be able to establish their own administration, re-join Puntland or Somaliland under updated terms. On the other hand, if Somaliland militarily wins it will impose its law and order on Dhulbahante. If this happens, guerrilla warfare and subversion politics will ensue. And even if the population chooses to return to their homes under Somaliland's administration, the grievances will remain to erupt another day.

The *third* is lose-lose situation where both sides are unable to make military or diplomatic progress. In such scenario, both sides will eventually tire out asymmetrically. On its part, Somaliland will bleed to death as the administration will be unable to service the war efforts. Equally, both human and material resources now allocated for servicing cities will be shipped to the front line and this will create internal pressures and war weariness. For the Dhulbahante, they will face a situation in which the financing of the wars creates rifts between the clans who will accuse each of not making enough contribution to the war. This may undermine their ability to continue the war in a meaningful way, but it will not affect the negative ways they view the state of Somaliland.

Some may argue that there is a risk of Al-Shabaab taking over the city if Dhulbahante elites fail to agree among themselves in case Somaliland leaves the area for whatever reason (defeated or otherwise). This is however highly unlikely for at least two reasons.

*Firstly*, Las Anod is of little strategic value to Al-Shabaab as its terrain is not ideal for guerrilla warfare. *Secondly*, the city is located in-between two relatively strong administrations. Thirdly, Sool shares people and a border with Ethiopia, which is currently playing a critical role in mediating the sides, sending its officials to Hargeisa and Garowe to come up with political proposals for ending the conflict (in consultation with IGAD Member States).

### **Beyond exclusionary state-making**

For Somaliland, the war in Las Anod has far reaching political consequences. For instance, Somaliland is incomplete (as seen by its elites) without the territorial control of what used to be called British Somaliland protectorate. Even if Somaliland decides to negotiate a political settlement with the south, the non-Isaaq's presence on Somaliland's side makes their case strong. Taking advantage of the fact that Somaliland cannot legally exist without them and the fact that they have the upper moral hand and public sympathy, they can create an opportunity in which state building in Somaliland could be rethought. For instance, a peace conference could be organised in Las Anod where all stakeholders participate and where a new arrangement of political participation, governance structures and state society relations could be charted. In other words, this would create a communally negotiated participation where constitutional safeguards are put in place to ensure that the clans at the margins of the state are ensured to have an equal and guaranteed chance to ascend to power.

This may face resistance from hardcore Dhulbahante unionists who may interpret it as being advancing the secession. Equally, this may face significant resistance from Isaaqists who believe the Somaliland project is their baby. However, it could be argued that a strong Somaliland politically, institutionally, and economically benefits not only secessionist but unionists who might come from a stronger bargaining position than when Somaliland is divided.

## Conclusion

From the above analysis, I reach three conclusions: First, the conflict in Las Anod can be understood as the outcome of Somaliland's exclusionary politics. This is the case because Somaliland has been increasingly becoming an Isaaq-centric administration where elites from this clan hold all the key positions and benefits of the state. This has deepened the existing and future fears of exclusion, endearing people on the margins to an already dominant political view: Somali unity. Second, the strategic management of Dhulbahante's elites with the state of Somaliland has not been fully appreciated and has instead been misconstrued as a weakness. For instance, Ali Khalif Galaydh and other notables' desire to participate in an inclusive Somaliland was recast as a lack of a viable alternative on the part of Dhulbahante. Galaydh, seeing the political establishment in Somaliland was determined to retain the exclusive character of the state, attempted to circumvent the elites by talking directly to the populace in order to raise their awareness about the necessity for inclusion.

Prof. Ahmed Ismail Samatar, a prominent intellectual from Awdal, has also joined the awareness-raising trip known as "tabliiq siyaasadeed," which translates to "political evangelism." However, Galaydh died in Jijiga in October 2020 without achieving his objective of establishing an inclusive political regime.

Third, the demographic changes in Somaliland and the conflicting political rationalities within which the youth grow up have created a divergent political trajectory whose encounters would inevitably have resulted in significant friction that would necessitate a different ballgame than the current elites are accustomed to. Finally, the fragile state's ability to withstand authoritarian centralisation of power has been overstated. It is with this consideration that the war in Las Anod has shifted the terms of engagement between Somaliland and Dhulbahante. It provides an opportunity for the state-building process in Somaliland to be rethought.

Three significant shifts mark the Somaliland state-building process. The first was the conference in Burao, where Somaliland was declared independent from the rest of Somalia. This conference was significant because it alleviated fears from the hearts and minds of the SNM supporters who saw the importance of reconfiguring state-society relations and bringing governance closer to home. However, the same feeling did not exist among the non-SNM clans, who, as mentioned earlier, cared more about peace than governance and political participation at the time.

The subsequent years have seen SNM-led Somaliland descend into a civil war where militias belonging to different clans were organised against the then-existing administration<sup>62</sup>. While this has crippled the administration, it has also created conditions in which political participation of the new Somaliland could be discussed. The result was to hold a conference where the warring parties could be reconciled, and a new administration with a fresh look and feel could be established. This was the second time Somaliland significantly shifted in reorganising politics and governance. Both the first and second shifts emerged in the context of conflict. This would lead us to believe that the conflict in Las Anod could present another opportunity for Somaliland to revamp itself as a resilient state, regardless of whether that state is considered independent or subnational by the actors.

So far, Somaliland seems prepared to continue using a lethal force to subdue the resisting clan, but it will come off the conflict weakened both financially and politically. It is not the first time that conflict has erupted in the Dhulbahante-inhabited region, but the current conflict will, like no other, have significant security and political implications for the state building in Somaliland and beyond. This is because, first, the scope, scale, and timing (considering election were owed to be held late this year) of the conflict calls into question the romanticisation of Somaliland's success as a democratic polity distinct from south central Somalia . It particularly reveals the bias (for whatever reason, intentionally or unintentionally), as well as the lack of or underappreciation of the shocks and shakes of the political and social intricacies surrounding the questions of secession and unification.



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<sup>51</sup>Could you please elaborate those Isaaq security personals in Las Anod?

<sup>52</sup>Interviewee 12 February 04, 2023. Former politician in Las Anod.

<sup>53</sup>Interviewee 16 February 09, 2023. Academic in Hargeisa.

<sup>54</sup>Interviewee 18 February 10, 2023. Resident in Burao.

<sup>55</sup>Interviewee 11 February 05, 2023. Government official in Hargeisa; Interviewee 20 February 13, 2023. Resident in Hargeisa.



<sup>56</sup>Interviewee 8 February 02, 2023. Resident Las Anod.

<sup>57</sup>Interviewee 14 February 07, 2023. Member of parliament in Somaliland.

<sup>58</sup>Interviewee 26 February 27, 2023. Opposition political party official in Hargeisa.

<sup>59</sup>One may notice the absence of the diaspora from my analyses. I omitted them because it is difficult to see them as a district category since they subscribe almost to all the above-mentioned categories. Therefore, I regard it as a cross cutting theme.

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**Author:** Dr Abdifatah Ismael Tahir is a research associate at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. He can be reached at [abdifatah.tahir@gmail.com](mailto:abdifatah.tahir@gmail.com). His twitter handle is [@AbdifatahTahir](https://twitter.com/AbdifatahTahir).

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