

Puntland and Somaliland Clashing in Northern Somalia: Who Cuts the Gordian Knot?*

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The political future of Somalia will at least partly be decided in northern Somalia. In this regard, the recent escalation of conflict in the Sool region, in the central north of Somalia, merits closer attention and analysis. On Monday, 1 October 2007, Puntland and Somaliland armed forces clashed near Laascaanood, the capital of Sool region.¹ Fighting escalated again two weeks later, on 15 October. Since then, Laascaanood has remained in the hands of the Somaliland forces. Though precise numbers are not available, roughly half the town's population has fled. Some traditional authorities are involved in negotiations, while others wait on the sidelines. At the time of writing Puntland and Somaliland are mobilising for a new round of fighting.

The clashes are localised around Laascaanood but they have a far wider regional relevance. In the first place, they indicate political splits and conflicts within the local community, the Dhulbahante clan, which inhabits most parts of Sool region as well as parts of eastern Sanaag and Togdheer in northern Somalia. The fighting further divides a community already fractured by a number of internal conflicts, 'traditional' blood feuds, but also tensions over split loyalties towards Somaliland or Puntland. Second, the clashes bring war to an area that has not seen serious fighting before.² In addition to large numbers of internal displaced people, further armed confrontation will result in a humanitarian disaster with attendant victims and the destruction of the already poor infrastructure. Third, fighting in the region has implications for the whole security structure in northern Somalia. In this process, Somaliland and Puntland risk the loss of their most important asset—their relative peacefulness in comparison with the situation in the south of Somalia, particularly in Mogadishu. Fourth, the current crisis between Somaliland and Puntland over Laascaanood and Sool brings a focus on one of the underlying conflict drivers for the whole region, the territorial integrity of the former unitary state of Somalia. It points at ongoing and intensifying processes of state—(re)formation in a post-colonial context with high significance also for other African settings. Fifth, in regional security terms, the conflict could fall prey to the counter strategies of the larger players in the Horn of Africa. Though Somaliland and Puntland are currently closely allied to Ethiopia, deepened conflict could result in interventions by Ethiopia and Eritrea on opposing sides. Finally, if the conflict over Laascaanood and Sool were decisively won by Somaliland, it would be another step toward formal recognition and independence. This would set precedence for other secessionist movements, e.g., in Ethiopia. In order to understand the current crisis in its historical context, the next section will briefly outline the developments preceding the most recent events. The second part of the text disentangles the local and wider dynamics of escalating violence involved in the most recent clash between Somaliland and Puntland.

Background to the current crisis—the tightening of the knot

The government of Maxamed Siyad Barre was overthrown in Mogadishu in January 1991. At the same time the Somali National Movement (SNM), the guerrilla organisation dominated by members of the Isaaq clan-family, took control over north-western Somalia. Shortly afterwards this region, as the Republic of Somaliland, declared its independence from the rest of Somalia, in line with the borders of the former British Protectorate.³ These old/new borders cut Somalia in the central north, about 70 km east of Laascaanood, where the British and the Italians drew the line in 1874 (Lewis 2002: 55).

There were a number of reasons for this step, but two reasons stand out in particular. First, was the unfolding civil war in southern Somalia after the fall of Barre and the usurpation of the presidency by Cali Mahdi. Mahdi was one of the two leaders of the United Somali Congress (USC), and he took the presidency without the consent of his co-leader in USC, Maxamed Farax Caydiid and without consulting with the other guerrilla

factions, e.g., the Somali National Movement, who felt that the south was again marginalising the north (present day Somaliland). Subsequently, Caydiid and Mahdi started to fight for power in Mogadishu causing large-scale destruction and disaster. Additionally, the news coming from Mogadishu was truly horrifying and repelled people in the north. Of second and equal importance for Somaliland's secession was the still fresh memory of the bombardment of Hargeysa and Burco by Siad Barre's army. The SNM had taken the two towns in north-western Somalia, which are predominantly inhabited by Isaaq, in a surprise attack in late May 1988. The regime's counter-attack with indiscriminate shelling and bombing caused thousands of civilian casualties, and hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to the countryside or across the border into eastern Ethiopia (Africa Watch 1990). This collective experience of suffering transformed the SNM into a mass movement, which a close observer at that time described as 'simply the Isaaq people up in arms' (Prunier 1990/91: 109).

In early 1991, when Siyad Barre was overthrown in Mogadishu by the USC, the SNM took control over much of north-western Somalia. The decision to secede was taken at a conference (Somali sing.: shir) in the town of Burco in May 1991. Representatives of all clans inhabiting north-western Somalia were present, among them Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli.⁴ At the shir in Burco the SNM leadership—mostly former army officers, politicians and intellectuals—was not clearly in favour of secession.⁵ However, the rank and file of the movement, remembering the bombardments in 1988, was. The situation was volatile since everybody around the conference had arms, and the SNM was without doubt the most powerful party. One of the high ranking traditional leaders of the Dhulbahante, the late Garaad Cabdiqani, recounted the situation as follows:

We saw that it was impossible to reach an agreement with the people of the southern regions. We decided to establish an administration for the northern region. [...] While we were in Burco, big demonstrations happened in the large towns of Hargeysa, Burco and Berbera. There was no other choice than to say: 'Yes, we accept.' At this moment we were not convinced about secession, but no one could say 'no' (in Höhne 2007).

This step was presented by the SNM as revocation of the voluntary union between British and Italian Somaliland that had united to form the Republic of Somalia on 1 July 1960 (Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). Despite this historical reference, the declaration of independence in 1991 was clearly born out of the momentary dramatic situation and was ill-prepared. A number of SNM leaders and many members of the non-Isaaq clans were not in favour of cutting themselves off from the rest of Somalia. In the early 1990s Somaliland was riven by internal conflict (Gilkes 1993). The SNM could not even manage to establish basic law and order in the capital city of Hargeysa. Somaliland's first president, the former SNM chairman Cabdiraxman Axmed Cali 'Tuur', abandoned the secessionist project and turned to the south after he lost his position to Maxamed Ibraahim Cigaal in 1993. During the early 1990s various Isaaq clans (that made up the core SNM) fought each other in Hargeysa, Berbera and Burco. The other non-Isaaq clans in Somaliland, i.e., the Gadabuursi and Ciisa in the west and the Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli in the east, existed in a limbo, in a situation of 'no war, no peace' (Richards 2005). The situation in Somaliland stabilised in the second half of the 1990s (WSP 2005; Renders 2006).

Under Maxamed Ibraahim Ciigal, who was re-elected president in 1997, important steps to democratise the emerging state were taken. In May 2001 a referendum on the constitution was held. The first article of the constitution states that Somaliland is an independent country. However, votes on this constitution as well as in all following elections in Somaliland—the local government 2002, the Presidential 2003 and the parliamentary elections 2005—were not or were only very incompletely cast in the Harti inhabited territories in Togdheer, Sool and eastern Sanaag. This resulted in the disproportionate under representation of Harti, particularly Dhulbahante, in the government institutions of Somaliland (Hansen/Bradbury 2007: 470-471).⁶

The political marginalisation of the Harti was partly self-induced. Many Dhulbahante and other non-Isaaq clans opposed the secession of Somaliland from Somalia in 1991; the anti-secessionist position of Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli further hardened when Puntland was founded in 1998 as autonomous regional state in north-eastern Somalia, under the rule of the Harti clan-federation. The division of power in Puntland followed the estimated size of the clans in the federation. Majeerteen took the lead, followed by Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli. The experienced Majeerteen military officer and leader of the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Cabdullahi Yusuf, became president and established himself in the capital city of Garowe.⁷

From 1998 onwards, Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli had representatives in both of the regional administrations of Somaliland and of Puntland. Members of their elite managed to hold positions in the respective centres and supported their extended families at home. At the same time, since they were an insecure constituency for both regional governments, the Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli lands in eastern Somaliland and western Puntland remained politically and economically marginalised. With very few exceptions, no international NGOs came to their areas, and no state development projects were implemented. Sool and eastern Sanaag became 'no go areas' also for many politicians in the respective centres. Even the presidents Maxamed Ibraahim Ciigaal and Cabdullahi Yusuf wisely refrained from visiting Sool and eastern Sanaag. Rump-administrations representing both sides, Somaliland and Puntland, were established in towns and villages of the regions, staffed with locals who received small salaries from either side but remained largely ineffective. The only effective control was exercised by traditional authorities, who, however, increasingly got caught up in regional power politics and conflict (Höhne 2007).

The situation changed in late 2002 following the death of President Maxamed Ibraahim Ciigaal and the inauguration of his vice president, Daahir Rayaale Kahin, as president. The new president visited Laascaanood in December 2002. This unprecedented event triggered a brief but fierce shoot out in the town and resulted in the withdrawal of the Somaliland forces and administration from there. The void was filled gradually by Puntland, which took serious steps to establish an effective military and then civilian administration in early 2004. Somaliland reacted by sending armed forces to the Sool region. The Somaliland troops could only proceed as far as Isaaq clans and the few Dhulbahante sub-clans sympathetic to Somaliland resided. Somaliland established itself near the village of Cadhadeye, about 30 km west of Laascaanood. Puntland secured Laascaanood's western exit and established its troops close to the town. In early October Cabdullahi Yusuf was elected president of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for Somalia at the internationally sponsored peace conference in Nairobi, Kenya (Schlee 2006). On 29 October 2004, substantial numbers of Puntland and Somaliland troops clashed for the first time. In the one day battle near Cadhiadeye about a dozen soldiers died and more than 20 were taken as prisoners of war on each side. Subsequently, traditional authorities and representatives of the nascent civil society on both sides succeeded in easing tensions. Further fighting was also prevented through the limited military and economic capacities of the parties in conflict. The situation remained tense and militarised (Höhne 2006).

In the years 2005 and 2006, the main focus of Somali and international politics with regard to Somalia was on the south. The TFG moved from Kenya into Somalia in mid-2005, but immediately split. The first session of the parliament held in the provisional capital city of Baydhoa in central Somalia, in March 2006, was overshadowed by the escalation of serious fighting in Mogadishu. Warlords who were partly members of the TFG cabinet and were aligned with the US fought against the militias of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The latter had grown over the years in various neighbourhoods of lawless Mogadishu. The sharia courts had gained some local legitimacy, but after the September 11th attacks in New York, they had attracted the suspicion of the US (Menkhaus 2007; Marchal 2007 a).

Against all expectations the UIC defeated the warlord alliance and took control over Mogadishu in June 2006. It consequently expanded its rule over much of southern Somalia and thereby challenged the TFG in Baydhoa. In December 2006, a few thousand TFG soldiers, aided by a massive Ethiopian military force of about 40,000 fighters plus tanks and warplanes, and supported by US intelligence, overran the UIC forces and took hold of Mogadishu. The year 2007 saw massive fighting in Mogadishu and parts of southern Somalia between TFG and Ethiopian forces and an unclear amalgam of former UIC militias, Hawiye clan fighters who stand against the 'Darood dominated' TFG under Cabdullahi Yusuf, and ordinary criminals taking advantage of the renewed lawlessness (Barnes/Harun 2007).⁸

When Cabdullahi Yusuf took power in Mogadishu in early 2007, he drew a considerable number of soldiers who were members of the Puntland armed forces from the northeast to the south. Moreover, his earlier presidency campaign in Kenya and his current policy in southern Somalia diverted much of Puntland's economic resources, which were mostly generated in the port of Boosaasso, to the south. Consequently, Puntland suffers from severe internal weaknesses, engaged as it is in two conflicts—in Sool and, indirectly, by supporting Cabdullahi Yusuf, in the south. Financially, it has teetered for years on the edge of bankruptcy, and

salaries to administrative and military staff are paid only irregularly, which weakens the morals of some politicians and soldiers.

In April 2007 Somaliland and Puntland forces clashed again for one day, for the first time since October 2004. This time the fighting happened in eastern Sanaag, in Warsangeeli territory near the village of Dahar. Subsequent and heavier fighting occurred in October 2007 around the town of Laascaanood. In the following section I will briefly mention the main factors involved in the current escalation of violence.

Dynamics of escalating violence in Sool

As outlined above, the most recent fighting between Somaliland and Puntland forces in Sool is nothing new. However, the questions are: why did it escalate now, and, what is at stake? Reason for the timing of events can be found in recent internal power struggles within Puntland and Somaliland. Moreover, the developments in Mogadishu, where Cabdullahi Yusuf fights to establish his rule over Somalia, sharpen the debate over the respective status of Somaliland and Puntland regional administrations. Besides these regional and 'national' issues, the personal interest of some Dhulbahante politicians and their respective local constituencies were decisive for the escalation of the conflict in early October 2007.

Personal interest, clan rivalries and strategic choices

As borderland communities, Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli occupy positions in both Somaliland and Puntland administrations. One of the prominent Dhulbahante politicians in the region is Axmed Cabdi Xabsade. In the mid 1990s he was speaker of the House of Representatives (*Golaha Wakiilada*), one chamber of the bicameral Somaliland parliament, in Hargeysa. He fell out with President Maxamed Ibraahim Ciigaal and subsequently turned his back to Somaliland (Liban 2004: 14). As a Dhulbahante politician and former military officer, he was involved in the establishment of Puntland and finally became Minister of Interior in Garowe. Over the summer 2007 Xabsade had got into open disagreements with the current President Maxamuud 'Cadde' Muuse and the vice president of Puntland, Xassan Daahir 'Afqurac', a Dhulbahante from the Sool region. Both had come to power after Cabdullahi Yusuf had been elected Somali president in 2004.

Xabsade had previously sided with Cabdullahi Yusuf against Maxamuud 'Cadde' Muuse when the latter was in military opposition to Cabdullahi Yusuf in 2002.⁹ This had negatively affected the relationship between the Puntland strong-men. Moreover, Xabsade perceived the policy of the Puntland government towards Laascaanood and the Sool region as mistaken and not benefiting the local community (personal communication with an informant in Galkacyo, 30.10.2007). While visiting the town of Buuhoodle and other Dhulbahante inhabited places in September 2007, Axmed Cabdi Xabsade initiated the establishment of a local administration which was supposed to be independent from Somaliland *and* Puntland.¹⁰ Behind this step were not only the personal discontent of the minister with the general policy towards the Dhulbahante inhabited area, but also the looming tensions between two large Dhulbahante sub-clans, Maxamuud Garaad and Farax Garaad. Many of the Farax Garaad sub-clan felt that the new vice president of Puntland, Xassan Daahir 'Afqurac', who belongs to the Maxamuud Garaad branch, distributed important positions under his authority to members of his own group to the exclusion of other Dhulbahante groups. Axmed Cabdi Xabsade, who by descent is a member of the Farax Garaad branch, tried to counter these developments by initiating a kind of Farax Garaad administration in some places, e.g., in Buuhoodle. President Maxamuud 'Cadde' Muuse reacted by calling Axmed Cabdi Xabsade back to Garowe. The minister delayed his return, allowing the president of Puntland to dismiss him for defying his orders (telephone interviews with informants in Garowe and Buuhoodle, 27 and 28 October 2007).

Following his dismissal Axmed Cabdi Xabsade went to Laascaanood and other places in order to mobilise members of his Dhulbahante/Farax Garaad sub-clan against Puntland authority. He also received support from Jamac Siyaad, a sub-sub-clan belonging to the Maxamuud Garaad branch, which nevertheless had for some years already opposed Puntland. As well as encouraging local opposition to the Puntland administration, the dismissed minister approached Somaliland for support. The government in Hargeysa was more than willing to give him a helping hand. Consequently, Somaliland troops, with the consent and help of some Dhulbahante, advanced towards Laascaanood and pushed Puntland out of its positions in and around the town.

It is clear that Axmed Cabdi Xabsade overplayed his hand. He might have hoped to just threaten the Puntland administration in order to regain his position. Alternatively, he might have speculated that he would gain a new and equally influential position in Somaliland. At the moment, however, he has no position, either in Somaliland or in Puntland. Axmed Cabdi Xabsade told a Somaliland journalist from the newspaper *Jamhuuriya* who visited Laascaanood in late October that he was ready to become a Somaliland citizen and to compete even for the presidency in the upcoming elections. Commenting on that, the reporter indicated that Xabsade's reputation as a power hungry and opportunistic politician might thwart his plans (Jamhuuriya online, 26.10.2007).¹¹

For the government in Hargeysa, Axmed Cabdi Xabsade's approaches represented a golden opportunity to break the stalemate in Sool and to recapture Laascaanood with some Dhulbahante support. The Somaliland government's reasons for a renewed push against Puntland were two-fold. First, since January 2004, Somaliland troops had been stationed in Sool without achieving any discernable progress, and Hargeysa was increasingly humiliated by the advance of Puntland in Sool. Moreover, the establishment of a more effective Puntland administration in Laascaanood seriously challenged Somaliland's claim for internationally recognised (ex-colonial) borders. Second, the Somaliland president, Daahir Rayaale Kahin, faces upcoming presidential elections in spring 2008. Throughout 2007 he was involved in several internal conflicts over limits of freedom of speech in Somaliland, electoral legislation, and the question of increasing the number of legal political parties beyond the current three allowed by the constitution (Hansen/Bradbury 2007: 468-469; 472). For these reasons, the opportunity to divert the attention of the voters away from internal problems toward an external threat that helps to mobilise 'national' consciousness is most welcome to leading figures in the Somaliland government. The possible extension of the term of office in time of crisis and 'state of exception' may also be part of the president's agenda.¹²

War-making and state-making in Somalia and Somaliland

Tilly's famous dictum of 'state making' through 'war making' (1985) brilliantly captures the processes of state formation in Europe since early modern times. Its applicability to similar processes in Africa was, however, long denied. States in Africa are generally perceived as internally weak but territorially stable colonial constructs (Herbst 1990: 137, in Niemann 2007: 26). In a recent article Niemann (2007) refuted this argument and used Tilly's model of state-making for explaining the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He convincingly argued that the current wars in the DRC have to be understood as re-negotiations of the territorial and political framework in Central African states. Niemann underlined that the question of political community—who belongs to which polity, and who has what rights – lies at the heart of many territorial conflicts in the continent.

This argument also captures important issues at stake in northern Somalia. Up to now the process of state formation in northern Somalia has basically been limited to the central regions of Somaliland and Puntland where the government institutions, but also international organizations and NGOs, are predominantly located. It is in the centres that the political decisions are taken, and also where debate occurs when the nascent civil society (particularly in Somaliland) has a chance to articulate its positions peacefully. In the periphery, e.g., in much of Sool and Sanaag, economic development and political participation are very limited, and the sense of belonging to one of the two regional states is weak. At the same time, among many Dhulbahante and Warsangeeli, the hope that Somalia will be re-established as a strong national state has not yet died. This links the local developments in Sool directly to the situation in southern Somalia, and wider still to the international politics toward Somalia.

In the arena of Somali regional politics, since the international community refuses to acknowledge Somaliland as an independent state and remains wedded to the ideal of the territorial integrity of Somalia, the fight for power in Mogadishu causes nervousness in Hargeysa. If Cabdullahi Yusuf gains control over Mogadishu and much of the south, then Somaliland would have to confront a strengthened and internationally recognized Somalia. The latter would include Puntland as a federal state. Therefore, it is imperative for the government in Hargeysa to gain military control over the dissident regions of Sool and eastern Sanaag before southern Somalia and Puntland can form a united front in the north against Somaliland. A large-scale military confrontation between Somaliland and Puntland would most probably also clarify the contradictory and opaque notions of belonging held by a number of the inhabitants of northern Somalia (Höhne 2006).¹³ They would

have to decide whether to fight for an independent Somaliland or to stand for the unity of Somalia. By creating a new ‘reality on the ground’ through capturing and holding Laascaanood, Somaliland would probably also enhance its chances for international recognition, provided southern Somalia remains unstable for the coming years (Faisal 2007). This connects well with Niemann’s use of Tilly and the argument that state-making can be a (side) product of war-making.

While these developments are not yet in train it is clear that nearly all further endeavours to set up a fully effective state recognized under international law will most probably produce large-scale armed conflict between Somaliland and Puntland/Somalia. Without clarifying their territorial borders, Somaliland and Puntland/Somalia cannot exist as states in the formal sense recognised under international law.¹⁴ Statehood is important, since it allows entrance to the international system of states and thereby access to development aid and bilateral economic cooperation on a large scale. The ‘Gordian knot’ mentioned in the subtitle of this article refers to the mutually exclusive aspirations of Somaliland, on the one side, and Puntland/Somalia, on the other, with regard to statehood.¹⁵ Moreover, while the current crisis might present a chance for at least one of the two parties in conflict to ‘win it all’, there is also a high risk of losing what so far has been the biggest asset of Somaliland and Puntland, internationally, and what attracted moderate assistance by some NGOs and international organisations (short of political recognition): their relative peacefulness and internal stability, when compared to the instability in the south.¹⁶

The positions of Ethiopia and Eritrea on the crisis in northern Somalia are so far unclear. For many years, both powers have used the civil war in Somalia in their own politics, and most recently they have intensified engagement with their Somali proxies when Ethiopia intervened in support of the TFG, while Eritrea gave a helping hand to the UIC (Menkhaus 2007). Both Puntland and Somaliland have accused each other of collaboration with Ethiopia’s enemies, the Ogadeen National Liberation Front (ONLF) and Eritrea/the UIC, respectively. However, none of these allegations can be substantiated and both are likely to be driven by propaganda purposes.

It is safe to argue that for Ethiopia much more might be at stake in the current conflict in northern Somalia than for Eritrea. Ethiopia has good economic relations with Somaliland and receives a considerable number of sea imports via the port of Berbera, north of Hargeysa. At the same time, Ethiopia backed Puntland militarily against the advancing UIC militias in mid 2006, and continues to underpin Cabdullahi Yusuf’s fight for power in Mogadishu. In this sense, the conflict between Somaliland and Puntland is a conflict between two ‘client states’ of Ethiopia. On the one side, this poses a problem for Ethiopia, which backs both. On the other, it doesn’t, since its overall objective is to prevent a unified, resurrected Somalia. That’s why Ethiopia puts its bet on different ‘horses’ at the same time (Somaliland, Abdullahi Yusuf etc.).¹⁷

According to most sources Ethiopia has not yet openly interfered in the crisis in northern Somalia. In early October the Ethiopians failed to engineer a meeting between Puntland President Maxamuud ‘Cadde’ Muuse and the Somaliland President Daahir Rayaale Kahin in Addis Ababa.¹⁸ It is also arguable that that Addis Ababa does not gain anything from an internationally recognized secession of Somaliland. Therefore, Ethiopia might be eager to maintain the status quo of contested borders in northern Somalia and prevent politically decisive fighting between Somaliland and Puntland over Sool. For Ethiopia, the most important thing is that ‘someone’ controls Laascaanood and Sool, in order to prevent the infiltration of the area through ONLF fighters or UIC cells.

Options for the future—cutting or circumventing the Gordian knot

The government of Somaliland pursues international recognition, and therefore the fragmentation of the former Somali state; the government of Puntland works for the rebuilding of Somalia in the borders of 1990. Against this background it becomes clear that the political future of Somalia will at least partly be decided in Northern Somalia. A peaceful compromise between Somaliland and Puntland seems not at hand, and in fact is largely impossible in the civil war-ridden Somali context, where military force has prevailed over political compromise for two decades. Most observers believe that at this moment neither of the two parties to the conflict has enough resources and material to engage in prolonged military conflict. Nevertheless, Somaliland

and Puntland are still on a war footing. More worrisome still is that this mobilization does not only concern the respective armies, which are relatively small, but also the masses of the population.

Two worst case scenarios that could result from the current situation are, first, that the local community in Sool will split violently and a 'green line' will run through the area, with Dhulbahante (and Warsangeeli?) allied with Somaliland and opposing their brothers and sisters who stand with Puntland/Somalia;¹⁹ or, second, that the conflict could escalate into an inter-clan war between 'Isaaq' and 'Harti'. This would mean that Dhulbahante, Warsangeeli and Majeerteen plus several smaller groups would unite (despite serious internal divisions) if threatened by Isaaq and form a united front on a 'tribal' basis. Both scenarios are real possibilities in northern Somalia, where the density of small arms is very high.

If the governments in Hargeysa and Garowe pursue their strategies of escalating the conflict, we might see attempts to violently cut the Gordian knot in Sool and eastern Sanaag. Such an escalation of violence between an amalgam of 'state' armies and clan militias on both sides will be difficult to contain. An option to avoid the immediate danger of massive civil war in northern Somalia would be that the international community, e.g., the US and Europe, pressure the Somali parties to the conflict, but also Ethiopia and Eritrea, to refrain from further provocations and steps towards war. This would make it necessary for the international community to expand its focus, which is largely paralysed by the events in Mogadishu and fixed on rather short sighted anti-terrorism politics.²⁰ So far, external policy makers hardly recognise the local and regional diversity of Somali political orders in the Horn of Africa (Hagmann/Höhne 2007).

In the long run, however, disaster in northern Somalia can only be averted if all the stakeholders in Somaliland and Puntland have a chance to sit together in a new round of peace meetings (Somali sing.: *shir*) and discuss their visions and wishes with regard to territorial and internal political order. Regrettably, this scenario is rather improbable. Niemann (2007: 30-32) has already pointed out several crucial differences between war-making and state-making in the European past and similar processes, e.g., in Africa at the moment. The most relevant differences regarding the current conflict in northern Somalia, which apply also to the Somali civil war as a whole, are the global flow of private capital (e.g., money collected by the Dhulbahante Diaspora to finance warfare in Sool), and the political and military interventions by neighbouring and other powers, who are often less interested in preventing conflict but in 'winning a battle' in an ongoing war (over local or regional power, on terrorism etc.).

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- 1 Place and personal names in this text follow the Somali orthography (with the exception of ‘Mogadishu’ (Somali: Moqdisho), which is so well established in English orthography). ‘C’ stands for a sound close to the Arabic ‘ ’ (ayn); ‘x’ denotes ‘ ’ (ha), as in, e.g., Laascaanood or in Farax.
- 2 Before the collapse of the Somali state, fighting in northern Somalia was concentrated in the Isaaq and the Gadabuursi inhabited areas. In early 1991, the SNM fought with some Dhulbahante militias in Sool, but the region was never effectively conquered by the SNM, since traditional authorities managed to broker peace.
- 3 While Somaliland supporters tend to speak and write of ‘declaration of independence’, more skeptical observers or opponents of Somaliland’s independence often prefer ‘secession’. I use both terms in this text, since the people about whom I am writing do so, depending on their stand in the conflict. For a brilliant study on the (emotionless) legal issues involved see Schoiswohl 2004.
- 4 These two clans, together with the Majeerteen clan and several smaller groups, form the Harti clan confederation inhabiting mainly central and eastern north-Somalia. Some Majeerteen and Dhulbahante, however, reside also in eastern Ethiopia and in southern Somalia, particularly in the town of Kismayo.
- 5 For long it had been the official aim of the SNM to topple Barre and to rearrange power-sharing in Somalia.
- 6 In fact, a number of Dhulbahante have positions in the government institutions of Somaliland. However, there is a strong feeling in the community in Sool that their share is not big enough. Moreover, some of the Dhulbahante representatives in Hargeysa do not enjoy much support among their supposed constituency.
- 7 The SSDF was the oldest Somali guerilla front. It was founded in 1979 as the Somali Salvation Front (SSF) and changed its name into the Somali Salvation Democratic Front after the incorporation of several other opposition movements in 1981.
- 8 As Harti/Majeerteen, Cabdullahi Yusuf belongs to the Darood clan-family. As president he enjoys the strong backing of his own descent group, and other Darood clans. This and his personal history made Cabullahi Yusuf suspect to many Hawiye in Mogadishu who remember the Hawiye-Darood fighting in the city in 1991 and later on in the north, in and around the town of Galkacyo.
- 9 Cabdullahi Yusuf’s term as President of Puntland had ended in mid 2001, according to the draft constitution of Puntland adopted in 1998. Cabdullahi Yusuf, however, refused to step down. Jamac Cabdi Jamac was elected counter-president by several traditional authorities and parliamentarians in Puntland in late 2001. Cabdullahi Yusuf mobilized some forces and, with some Ethiopian support, soon chased Jamac Cali Jamac out of Puntland. General Maxamuud ‘Cadde’ Muuse, who belongs to the same sub-clan as Jamac Cali Jamac, took up the cause against Cabdullahi Yusuf. General ‘Cadde’ Muuse was supported by Somaliland. In summer 2003, however, both Majeerteen opponents reached a peace agreement, which had been facilitated by Isaaq and Warsangeeli traditional authorities. Subsequently, Maxamuud ‘Cadde’ Muuse was integrated into the political and military framework of Puntland, until he finally became a candidate for presidency in late 2004.
- 10 In mid 2007 a similar self-declared autonomous ‘mini-state’, the Makhir state, was set up in eastern Sanaag, which is inhabited by members of the Warsangeeli clan. Its establishment had been the outcome of the growing sense of marginalization among the Warsangeeli. The idea behind autonomy was to gain preferential access to international aid and to have a stronger position for negotiating with the TFG in Mogadishu (Weinstein 2007).
- 11 At the beginning of November, a minister delegation from Hargeysa arrived in Laascaanood. They reportedly shall find a satisfying solution to accommodate Axmed Cabdi Xabsade in Somaliland, at least in the short run.
- 12 In fact, this had already been an important reason for Puntland’s intervention in Laascaanood in December 2003 and January 2004. The then vice president of Puntland, Maxamed Cabdi Hashi, who belongs to the Dhulbahante clan, was in charge since the then Puntland President Cabdullahi Yusuf was in Nairobi to compete for the Somali presidency. Both Hashi and Yusuf were eager to get a prolongation of their terms in office, which was finally granted by the parliament in the face of the crisis in Laascaanood and Sool.
- 13 Particularly Harti, but also some Gadabuursi and the members of certain Isaaq clans have ambivalent positions on Somaliland’s independence.

- 14 Officially, and according to international law, Somalia still exists, however, as an empty shell. The conflict in northern Somalia shows that legal fiction and political reality on the ground frequently do not merge. For a critique on the failed international policy towards Somalia see Terlinden/Hagmann 2005.
- 15 The 'Gordian Knot' is a legend associated with Alexander the Great (4th century before Christ). It is often used as a metaphor for an intractable problem, solved by a bold stroke ('cutting the Gordian knot').
- 16 Weinstein (2007) comes to a similar conclusion when he describes the recent takeover of Laascaanood by Somaliland forces as a 'Pyrrhic victory' and outlines, how, in a new round of fighting, Hargeysa could lose any hopes for international recognition if defeated.
- 17 I thank Tobias Hagmann for making me aware of this 'double bet' of Ethiopia.
- 18 The Minister of Finance of Somaliland went, instead, but no details have emerged from the meeting.
- 19 The term 'green line' refers to the frontline that divided Mogadishu in the 1990s due to the fighting between the Hawiye sub-clans of the warlords Maxamed Farax Caydiid on the one side and Cali Mahdi on the other.
- 20 For a well researched criticism on the stereotypical perception of the 'failed state' Somalia as safe haven for international terrorism see: Marchal 2007 b, and Harmony Project 2007.



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