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SSC-Khaatumo: Perspectives on the significance and implications of its formation

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Abbreviations

FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FMS	Federal Member States
SNM	Somali National Movement
SSC	Sool, Sanaag and Cayn
SSC-K	Sool, Sanaag and Cayn – Khaatumo
USC	United Somali Congress

1. Summary

The emergence of SSC-K and the political dynamics, interests, choices and the competing perspectives on it is a fluid subject matter because the process of SSC-K's formation and expansion continues as we write this. In the course of researching and writing this report, there have been several important developments. First, there is a conference in Las Anod, supported and facilitated by the federal government, to expand and transition SSC-K from an interim administration to a permanent federal member state. Second, this conference includes a delegation from eastern Sanaag, representing a segment of the Warsangeli. The Warsangeli, as will be detailed in section 4.2, are divided with the majority led by the traditional elders preferring to remain with Puntland, while others want to join SSC-K. Third, the conference has reached several important decisions: the name SSC-K was officially changed to North Eastern State of Somalia on 1 August (throughout this report, we will use SSC-K, rather than the newly adopted name because the transition is not complete); a new constitution for the new state has been adopted; and, at the moment, discussions are ongoing about the division of power and the selection of parliamentarians. Consequently, the dynamics, positions and perspectives described in this report should be seen as preliminary and subject to change given the fluid nature of the context.

Developments during the state formation conference in Las Anod are turning SSC-K into a reality as the newest member of Somalia's federal member states. The newly emerging state has several advantages that are assisting its transition to a permanent federal member state. These advantages include the support of a united and enthusiastic Dhulbahante community and the backing of the federal government. These advantages are helping to transition SSC-K into a permanent federal member state. There are also serious challenges that the newly emerging state will have to negotiate in the foreseeable future. These include the lack of Warsangeli consensus on joining SSC-K, the rejection of SSC-K by Somaliland and Puntland, and financial limitations. Given recent developments, the most likely outcome is that SSC-K transitions into a permanent federal member state without the resolution of any of these difficult challenges. This suggests that even if SSC-K is successful in addressing internal issues, such as its financial challenges and potential disagreements over power sharing arrangements, it will likely confront serious difficulties in securing and extending its administration over the territories it claims because the same territories are also claimed by Puntland and Somaliland. In this context, the report suggests the most reasonable position that external actors can take is to advise, encourage and pressure the various parties from taking any actions that exacerbate current tensions.

1.1. SSC-K

SSC-K is primarily a Dhulbahante project centred on Dhulbahante territories in Sool, Sanaag and Ayn (southern Togdheer from Somaliland's perspective). There were other attempts by the Dhulbahante to establish their own autonomous administration before the formation of SSC-K in 2023. After evicting Somaliland forces from most Dhulbahante inhabited territories, the newly formed SSC-K faced several challenges, including peacefully transitioning from war mobilization to civilian administration, and procuring

sufficient revenue to pay the salaries of its forces and civil servants. SSC-K has been relatively successful in the former, while it continues to face budgetary difficulties with many of its civil servants working voluntarily. As mentioned above, SSC-K is currently undergoing a transition to become a permanent federal member state. There are two important challenges to this process: first, the inclusion of the Warsangeli in an expanded SSC-K entails difficult negotiations over power-sharing arrangements; and second, there is the question of the borders of an expanded SSC-K that includes the Warsangeli. This is especially sensitive because Puntland is not only opposed to the inclusion of eastern Sanaag and the Warsangeli in SSC-K, but has also stated that it still considers SSC-K regions to be part of Puntland.

1.2. The Warsangeli in Sanaag

The emergence of SSC-K entails significant implications for the Warsangeli, who live in Sanaag, particularly eastern Sanaag. The Warsangeli are immediately affected by the emergence of SSC-K, and the ongoing attempt to include them in an expanded SSC-K. As noted above, the Warsangeli are divided on whether to join SSC-K. It is beyond the scope of this report to speak on percentages, but it appears that while there is support to join SSC-K, there is also strong support for staying with Puntland. There are Warsangeli politicians and delegates partaking in the conference in Las Anod, and they, speaking on behalf of the Warsangeli, have agreed to the formation of an expanded and permanent federal member state called the North Eastern State. It is not clear what will happen going forward because there are Warsangeli politicians and traditional leaders, including the highest-ranking traditional leader, Sultan Said Sultan Abdisalam, that are opposed to joining SSC-K. Furthermore, Puntland security forces are currently stationed in eastern Sanaag, creating the potential for armed confrontations should SSC-K forces or the militias of allied Warsangeli politicians confront them.

1.3. Puntland

The emergence of SSC-K has several implications for Puntland. The most important is perhaps the impact on its power-sharing arrangement and territorial claims. Puntland's 1998 power-sharing arrangement was mainly a deal between the northern Harti clans of Majerteen, Dhulbahante, Warsangeli and Darood sub-clans such as Leelkase, Awrtable and Arab Salah. With the emergence of SSC-K, the Dhulbahante have, for all purposes, withdrawn from Puntland and the power-sharing arrangement (although there are still Dhulbahante politicians within the Puntland administration, including MPs, Cabinet and Vice President Ilyas Osman Lugator). If, as is the intention of the conference in Las Anod, the Warsangeli join SSC-K and exit Puntland, it will have significant ramifications for Puntland's territorial claims and power-sharing arrangement. Additionally, the emergence of SSC-K reduces Puntland's share in the federal parliament, thereby influencing the presidential aspirations of Puntland. As such, the federal government's support for SSC-K has led to the deterioration of the already fraught relations between Puntland and the federal government.

1.4. Somaliland

Somaliland has also been significantly impacted by the emergence of SSC-K. For one, Somaliland's territory has reduced by as much as 30 per cent, according to some, though Somaliland maintains its territorial claims. The shrinking of Somaliland's territory has resulted in important security and political consequences. In terms of security, the conflict with SSC-K and the subsequent shrinking of Somaliland's border has created new and militarized zones in Sool, Sanaag and Ayn (Togdheer). These are zones where Somaliland and SSC-K forces are stationed in close proximity facing each other. Moreover, the conflict with SSC-K has also poisoned communal relations in

contested areas. A prime example of this is what has happened in the city of Erigabo in western Sanaag, as will be described in detail in section 4.4. SSC-K's emergence has also resulted in important political considerations in Somaliland. First, the secession of SSC-K regions from Somaliland might have implications for developments in other regions where there are grievances against the Somaliland administration, and for how the Somaliland administration deals with such grievances. Second, the emergence of SSC-K weakens Somaliland's position in any future talks with Somalia. Finally, the emergence of SSC-K might weaken Somaliland's practical, legal and moral argument for international recognition.

1.5. Recommendations

1.5.1. Between Puntland and SSC-K:

- a Push, encourage and support the contesting parties to avoid taking any steps that can further militarize eastern Sanaag.
- b Encourage the holding of a conference in eastern Sanaag among the Warsangeli to prevent further militarization of their region, to reduce further division of the people, and to see if the Warsangeli can reach a consensus about their political future.
- c The federal government and Puntland should be pushed to avoid any steps that will have adverse impact on the situation. The federal government should not introduce any weapons or armed forces in the regions of SSC-K, and Puntland should not move any more forces into Sanaag.

1.5.2. Between Somaliland and SSC-K:

- a Support the reduction of tensions in the frontlines by discouraging the two sides from introducing more men or weapons in these areas, encourage the creation of further distance between the armed forces, and establish a line of communication between senior military leaders to quickly resolve any incidents that could lead to unwanted escalations.
- b Support indirect peacemaking and dialogue efforts through traditional leaders, businesspeople, religious authorities and civil society organizations.
- c Assist SSC-K/North Eastern State in two respects: i) the improvement of revenue collection with, for instance, the establishment of effective customs and excise facilities; ii) the demilitarization of militias and improvement of command-and-control structures over SSC-K forces.

1.5.3. The city of Erigabo:

- a Support processes of dialogue between the leaders of the different communities of the city, mainly Issaq and Harti sub-clans, to reduce communal tensions and facilitate the return of the displaced. Encourage, as much as possible, the idea that communal relations can improve even in the absence of a settlement to the larger question of the city's final and future status.
- b City political and community leaders should focus on the return of any property that was confiscated after a segment of the city's population was displaced. Such a step would encourage the displaced to return by demonstrating the goodwill and desire for good relations on the part of those that remain in the city.

2. Introduction

On 15 April 2025, during a visit to the city of Las Anod in Sool, Prime Minister Hassan Abdi Barre officially declared the federal government's recognition of SSC-Khaatumo (SSC-K hereafter) as a federal member state, marking an important milestone in the emergence of a new and autonomous federal member state between Puntland and Somaliland. At the same time, this step brought to the fore unresolved tensions rooted in the collapse of the Somali state and the attempt to revive it. Unresolved issues, such as the status of Somaliland, relations between the federal government in Mogadishu and federal member states (FMS), and questions about the process of federal state formation and their borders. These issues have constitutional implications, particularly on power-sharing arrangements between the federal government and FMS, which the constitution does not fully define and clarify. The study explores how the emergence of SSC-K has generated, and has the potential to generate, conflicts and disputes rooted in these unresolved tensions, and possible constructive responses. The study is structured to answer the following questions: How is SSC-K managing the transition from wartime mobilization to civilian administration? How will it manage relations with Somaliland and Puntland? How is the emergence of SSC-K impacting the political futures of other Harti groups in these regions, particularly the Warsangeli? How is SSC-K's emergence impacting Puntland, internally? How will it redefine relations between Puntland and the federal government, especially as SSC-K seeks to disentangle itself from Puntland's historical claims and political frameworks? How will the formation of SSC-K impact the future trajectory of Somaliland's territorial ambitions and claims?

To answer these questions data was gathered through 43 interviews and 5 focus group discussions (FGD) in six different locations to examine the different and competing perspectives on the emergence of SSC-K. We gathered data in Hargeisa (7 interviews, 1 FGD), Erigabo (8 interviews, 1 FGD), Las Anod (6 interviews, 1 FGD), Badhan (7 interviews, 1 FGD), Garowe (8 interviews, 1 FGD), and Bosaso (7 interviews). The people interviewed came from all walks of life, including politicians, traditional leaders, businesspeople, NGO members, religious authorities and some young people. They included men and women, though men were over-represented. The interviews were audio recorded by field research teams and shared with the lead author for analysis.

The report is divided into the following sections: section 3 covers some of the historical and structural conditions that paved the way for the emergence of SSC-K, section 4 discusses the findings, starting with SSC-K and the findings from Las Anod interviews in section 4.1. Section 4.2 focuses on Warsangeli perspectives on their political future based on the interviews in Badhan, while sections 4.3 and 4.4 are analysis of data from Puntland (Garowe and Bosaso) and Somaliland (Hargeisa and Erigabo), regarding the impact the emergence of SSC-K has on these two administrations. Section 5 presents a brief conclusion, while section 6 provides some recommendations.

3. Historical and structural roots

One of the most important consequences of the fall of the Somali Republic and the subsequent civil war has been the impact of clan politicization on territorial belonging. Historically, the notion of territorial boundaries between Somali clans, who were predominantly transhumant pastoral nomads in the north and centre of the country, was weak, even though certain areas, villages and water wells were associated with specific clans. Movement in search of water and pasture and intermarriage between different clans were very common. So were customary practices (xeer) that allowed for the sharing of resources during hard times, though conflict over resources between neighbouring lineages was also common (Lewis 2002). This fluid association between territory and lineage identity changed in the course of the civil war, resulting in internal dislocation and relocation as people moved into lineage homelands (deegaan). This development hardened the overlap between territory and genealogical identity and haunts the logics of border-making throughout Somalia. The first manifestation of this was in northern Somalia, in the formation of Somaliland and Puntland.

3.1. Emergence of competing political visions: Somaliland and Puntland

Among a number of different rebel groups that opposed the military regime of Mohamed Siyad Barre was the Somali National Movement (SNM) whose social base was in north-western Somalia among the Issaq clan. The Barre regime's response as the conflict with SNM intensified was to carry out full blown military operations on two major cities in the north-west, Hargeisa and Burco, causing massive civilian casualties and displacement, and further alienating the population of the area. When the regime fell and Barre was forced to flee Mogadishu by another rebel group, United Somali Congress (USC), in 1991, the SNM took over the north-west. A conference brought together traditional elders from the Issaq, and non-Issaq groups in what was the British protectorate of Somaliland, including the Gadabursi and Isse in the west and Dhulbahante and Warsangeli in the east. At the conclusion of the conference, it was declared that Somaliland was to secede from Somalia. Somaliland saw itself a successor state to British Somaliland and viewed its borders to run along the lines demarcated in the Anglo-Italian border protocol of 1894.

Not everyone at the conference, or the people they represented, was happy with the decision to secede, or the claim of Somaliland officials over their territory. The Dhulbahante in Sool and Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag were not too enthused, and many of their important leaders either did not attend or left the conference early because of this issue.¹ A combination of factors including a need to keep the peace, the fact that the Somaliland administration did not have any meaningful presence in their region until the 2000s, and perhaps

1. Markus V Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland – Marginalization, Militarization, and Conflicting Political Visions*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, May 2015.

some intimidation by the stronger SNM² caused people to not actively resist Somaliland. The newly declared Republic of Somaliland focused on stabilizing and consolidating governance structures at the centre, leading to the growth of central cities like Hargeisa and Bur'o. This led to an uneven development as the presence of administrative structures at the centre encouraged the flow of development aid and economic investment to the centre. Sool and Sanaag regions in the east became peripheral, economically and politically distanced from Hargeisa.

In north-eastern Somalia, particularly the regions of Bari and Nugal, and northern parts of Mudug, live the Majerteen clan. The Majerteen are genealogically related to the Warsangeli and Dhulbahante who live to their immediate east. They are all Harti, which is an important grouping within the larger Darod clan-family, one of the major clan-families in Somalia. In 1998, the Majerteen, Dhulbahante and Warsangeli, as well as other Darood clans, held a conference in Garowe. This conference led to the formation of Puntland. Unlike Somaliland, Puntland did not declare secession from Somalia. Instead, it saw itself as a member state in a future federated Somalia. Also, unlike Somaliland, whose imagined borders were based on the colonial borders of British Somaliland, Puntland's imagined borders were based on genealogical ties encompassing Harti lands in northern Somalia. Puntland, therefore, considered all the Harti inhabited territories of northern Somalia as Puntland territory, and affirmed this in its constitution. The divergent border-making imaginaries between Somaliland and Puntland produced overlapping claims over the territories between the two administrations, the regions of Sool, Sanaag and Ayn (southern Togdheer) where the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli live. However, similar to Somaliland, Puntland's administrative presence and economic development concentrated in the Majerteen-dominated centre to the detriment of Sool, Sanaag and Ayn. Thus, despite the different border-making logics between Somaliland and Puntland (territorial versus genealogical), administratively and economically the two entities had similar presence and relations with Sool, Sanaag and Ayn.

3.2. Contested borderlands and the emergence of SSC-Khaatumo

In the course of the formation of Somaliland and Puntland, the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli inhabited regions of Sool, Sanaag, and Ayn emerged as contested and neglected borderlands between these two administrations. This fact has shaped the economic and political developments and dynamics in this region over the past 30 years.³ Somaliland and Puntland focused on consolidating their administrative structures in their centres. This was partly necessitated by the limited capacities of the newly emergent administrations, but also by the fact that the dominant lineages in the two entities, the Issaq in Somaliland and Majerteen in Puntland, were more concentrated at the centre. There was also, particularly in Sool in the 1990s, real insecurity that made it extremely challenging for aid organizations to work. The periodic efforts by the Somaliland administration to extend government resources to these regions in the mid-1990s and post-2007 never quite managed to win over and integrate the region's populations. The resultant limited administrative presence of these regions undermined economic growth as international aid, development projects, and diaspora investment concentrated in the centres. This resulted in the populations of these regions, particularly the Dhulbahante, feeling neglected and marginalized. The contested nature of these regions became more evident starting in 2002 as Somaliland and

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2. Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, Oxford: James Currey (African Issues), 2008; Markus V Hoehne, 'The Conflict Over Lasanod – Long-term and Immediate Factors, and Prospects for Settlement', RAAD Peace Research Institute, June 2023.
 3. Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland*; Omar S. Mahmood, 'Overlapping Claims by Somaliland and Puntland: The Case of Sool and Sanaag', Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 2019.

Puntland attempted to extend their respective administrations over the region. Politically, politicians in the borderland areas developed a political culture that reflected the contested nature of their region and their in-betweenness.⁴ Dhulbahante and Warsangeli political elites became adept at using the unsettled status of their regions to secure favourable positions of power in Somaliland and Puntland administrations. Both communities had, and continue to have, representations in Somaliland and Puntland. One consequence of this political practice has been a growing distance between the political representatives of Dhulbahante and Warsangeli in Hargeisa and Garowe, and the sentiments and realities of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli populations in Sool, Sanaag and Ayn. Despite the similarities of their predicaments, political developments among the Dhulbahante and the Warsangeli have diverged.

The Dhulbahante is a larger clan and has played a more prominent role in Somali history and politics than the Warsangeli. They live predominantly in Sool, Ayn (created in 2003 by Puntland in an area that Somaliland calls southern Togdheer), and in parts of Sanaag, particularly in the city of Erigabo. As the Dhulbahante communities' political distance, sense of marginalization, and grievances against Somaliland and Puntland increased, so did their agitation for an administration of their own, independent from Somaliland and Puntland. The first formal expression of this desire came in 2009, when the formation of SSC, symbolizing Dhulbahante lands in Sool, Sanaag and Ayn (spelled as Cayn in Somali, thus the C in SSC), was announced at a conference in Nairobi. The formation of SSC was followed by clashes between SSC militias and Somaliland troops in Sool and Ayn in 2010 and 2011. Eventually, due to differences within the Dhulbahante and external pressures, the SSC endeavor collapsed in 2011.

Soon after, in January 2012, the Khaatumo⁵ State of Somalia was formed at a large gathering of the Dhulbahante in Taleh, Sool. Khaatumo was envisioned as a federal member state under Mogadishu. Both Somaliland and Puntland were opposed to Khaatumo as both viewed it a challenge to their borders and political visions. For Somaliland, the formation of an autonomous administration under Mogadishu within what it considers its territory was obviously a challenge to its political vision as an independent state. Meanwhile, Puntland feared that the formation of Khaatumo would undermine its influence in national politics as Puntland would no longer be the sole representative of northern Somali Harti.⁶ Somaliland and Puntland were, therefore, opposed to Khaatumo, but for different reasons. Though Khaatumo was formed with a wider support base from the Dhulbahante in comparison with SSC, it also failed to form a functioning administration over Dhulbahante territories. Even the efforts by Ali Khalif Galaydh to integrate it with Somaliland failed.

Meanwhile, Somaliland expanded its administrative and military presence in Sool since taking over Las Anod from Puntland in 2007 and remained in control until 2022. Though there has been modest growth in administration and economic development in the city under Somaliland, the population's distance and grievances against Somaliland only worsened. Most Dhulbahante traditional leaders left the city after the Somaliland takeover in 2007, underlying the distance of the Dhulbahante from Somaliland. Insecurity in the city also increased during this period due to assassinations of prominent personalities starting in 2009. Though some of the assassinated included officials working in the Somaliland administration, the local population blamed

4. One commentator has referred to this political culture as "borderline entrepreneurs". See Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland*.

5. Khaatumo meaning "absolute finality" comes from the Arabic word Khaatim.

6. Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland*.

Somaliland as the culprit.⁷ There were also economic factors that exacerbated tensions between the Dhulbahante and the Somaliland administration. Some Dhulbahante businesses were pushed out in Hargeisa and in Las Anod. For instance, the largest qad importer in Las Anod, a Dhulbahante, was displaced in 2022, leading him to support the uprising against Somaliland.⁸ Additionally, the investment in Berbera port and the Berbera corridor benefited the west and further marginalized the east. Things came to a head with the assassination in December 2022 of Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi 'Hadrawi', a young Dhulbahante man who was an official of Somaliland's largest opposition party, Wadani. Demonstrations against Somaliland troops broke out in the city, which were met with gunfire by Somaliland security forces, causing the deaths of over a dozen people. More demonstrations and confrontations followed leading to the withdrawal of Somaliland forces from the city on 5 January 2023. Dhulbahante traditional leaders started returning to town and a Council of 33 (Guddiga 33) composed of Dhulbahante and Fiqishini, a Hawiye clan who have long resided in Sool, declared their decision to form an autonomous state and demanded that Somaliland withdraw from Dhulbahante and Fiqishini lands. As the fighting worsened, Somaliland troops stationed outside of Las Anod indiscriminately bombarded the city causing significant casualties and displacement. The Dhulbahante started receiving assistance from other Harti clans, and Somaliland was eventually forced to withdraw from almost all Dhulbahante territories by August 2023. Thus, was born SSC-Khaatumo as primarily a Dhulbahante administration, controlling Dhulbahante inhabited areas of Sool and Ayn (southern Togdheer), and claiming parts of Sanaag.

Political developments among the Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag reveal similarities and differences: though sharing the predicament of the Dhulbahante as a borderland people living in a contested and underdeveloped zone with grievances against both centres, Hargeisa and Garowe. In comparison with Sool and Dhulbahante territory, eastern Sanaag has remained relatively peaceful with the Warsangeli maintaining a delicate balance between the two centres of power. This relative stability, however, changed in 2006 as a resource-based conflict erupted between the Warsangeli and Puntland. Adde Muse, who became president of Puntland in 2005, signed a mineral exploration and extraction deal in the Golis Mountains with Australian owned Consort Private Ltd., later taken over by Range Resources, also Australian owned.⁹ When a team of specialists and a contingent of Puntland armed forces attempted to implement the agreement without the consent of the local Warsangeli sub-clan in the area, Dubays, a conflict erupted between Puntland forces and Dubays militias. The Dubays received assistance from other Warsangeli clan militias. Eventually, Range Resources abandoned the project, but tensions remained.

The attempt by the Majerteen-led Puntland to forcefully extract resources in Warsangeli land without their consent increased Warsangeli suspicion and questioning of their place in Puntland. This was the immediate context to the founding of an autonomous Warsangeli administration, Maakhir, in eastern Sanaag in 2007. Similar to the SSC and Khaatumo projects among the Dhulbahante, Maakhir state was also conceived as an autonomous state under the federal government in Mogadishu. Though the Maakhir project never really took off and Warsangeli elites continued to be associated with either Puntland or Somaliland, its formation underlines the existence of similar sentiments and dynamics among the Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag as the Dhulbahante in Sool. Relations between the Warsangeli, particularly

7. People pointed to the fact that Somaliland was never able to capture and convict anyone for the assassinations, as well as the fact that some of the assassinated, particularly after 2020, were people critical of Somaliland. See Hoehne, 'The Conflict Over Lasanod'.

8. Hoehne, 'The Conflict Over Lasanod'.

9. Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland*.

the Dubays sub-clan, and Adde Musa's administration in Puntland remained tense. What started out as a conflict over resources, however, transformed over time as a Warsangeli sheikh, Sheikh Mohamed Said 'Atom', took up the cause, but gave it an Islamist colouring. Eventually, Atom lost influence among the Golis militants as al-Shabaab took over the leadership of the insurgents, transforming the conflict into a struggle between Islamists and Puntland.

The Warsangeli were also impacted by the conflict between the Dhulbahante and Somaliland centred in Las Anod, which started in late 2022. As the conflict escalated and involved more Harti, Warsangeli clan militias participated, fighting alongside their Harti brethren, the Dhulbahante. Additionally, as the conflict spread to western Sanaag, it led to clashes in Erigabo between Somaliland forces and allied Issaq clan militias on one side, against Harti militias, on the other side. When Somaliland gained the upper hand, it led to a significant displacement of Dhulbahante and Warsangeli people from Erigabo. Though some Warsangeli have since returned to the city, the vast majority of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli have left the city. These events have further distanced the Warsangeli population in Sanaag from Somaliland, even though there is still official Warsangeli representation in the Somaliland administration.

These dynamics and developments among the Warsangeli did not lead to the emergence of an autonomous administration representing the collective will of the Warsangeli, as has happened with the emergence of SSC-K among the Dhulbahante. Thus, while the federal recognition of SSC-K represented a milestone and a major achievement for the Dhulbahante, it represented for the Warsangeli the emergence of yet another neighbouring administration that competes with Somaliland and Puntland for the Warsangeli's allegiance. This exacerbates the internal division of the Warsangeli, particularly as the federal government pushes SSC-K to include the Warsangeli in an enlarged administration. It also potentially represents an opportunity for the Warsangeli to overcome their predicament as a contested borderland people and region by becoming one with SSC-K.¹⁰ For Somaliland and Puntland, the emergence of SSC-K, and its federally-supported drive to expand and include the Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag, represents a challenge for different reasons, as we will see in sections 4.3 and 4.4. It is crucial to have a grasp of these historical and political factors in order to understand the divergent and competing perspectives about the significance and potential impact of SSC-K's emergence that we will encounter in Badhan, Bosaso, Hargeisa, Garowe, Las Anod and Erigabo.

10. This was one of the reasons why some Warsangeli in Badhan preferred joining SSC-K, as we will see in section 4.2.

4. Findings

As mentioned above, the emergence of SSC-K and the subsequent federal recognition of it raise several important and unresolved issues, such as the status of Somaliland, relations between the federal government and federal member states, and questions about the process of regional state formation and their borders. To gain insight into these issues, the study is guided by the following questions: How is SSC-K managing the transition from wartime mobilization to civilian administration? How will it manage relations with Somaliland and Puntland? How is the emergence of SSC-K impacting the political futures of other Harti groups in these regions, particularly the Warsangeli? How is SSC-K's emergence impacting Puntland, internally? How will it redefine relations between Puntland and the federal government, especially as SSC-K seeks to disentangle itself from Puntland's historical claims and political frameworks? How will the formation of SSC-K impact the future trajectory of Somaliland's territorial ambitions and claims?

4.1. SSC-Khaatumo: “We are at a dangerous intersection”

Though the above questions necessarily intersect and inform each other, the various sections of this report address the specific questions concerning the respective area or people. This section tackles the following questions: How is SSC-K managing the transition from wartime mobilization to civilian administration? And, how do people view their political future and relations with Somaliland and Puntland?

Since 2023, the Dhulbahante have managed to successfully evict Somaliland troops from almost all Dhulbahante inhabited areas in Sool and Ayn,¹¹ create an autonomous administration, transition peacefully from war mobilization to civilian administration, and win official federal recognition as a federal member state. These are indeed important milestones that the Dhulbahante have reached, and the people interviewed in Las Anod were clearly proud of these achievements, and encouraged and hopeful for the future, particularly because of the recent formal recognition by the federal government. There were also some worries expressed about potential dangers in the near future. The dangers most articulated were in relation to the ongoing process of expanding SSC-K to be more inclusive, particularly the invitation to the Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag to join SSC-K. Interviewees were overwhelmingly welcoming of this endeavor but realize it will not be easy. There are also some worries regarding future relations with Somaliland. Most interviewees thought that there is real danger of armed confrontation with Somaliland, describing Somaliland as a threat and an enemy. People are more hopeful that differences with Puntland can be resolved through dialogue due to the belief that the people in Puntland are largely sympathetic to the Dhulbahante cause and supportive of SSC-K, given the close genealogical relations between the two peoples as members of Harti, and the overarching pro-unionist stance of both Puntland and SSC-K.

11. There are areas of Sanaag, particularly the city of Erigabo, as well some historical claims on the wells of Aynabo, that some Dhulbahante maintain.

4.1.1. Transition from war footing to civilian administration

The Dhulbahante uprising against Somaliland, centred in the city of Las Anod, was initially largely spontaneous. Events unfolded very quickly, and partly because of the heavy-handed response of Somaliland forces, reached a point of no-return. The initial demonstrations against the presence of Somaliland troops in the city, which took place in December 2022, were led by young people. As things escalated and Somaliland troops withdrew from the city, Dhulbahante traditional leaders, many of whom have not seen the city since it came under Somaliland's control in 2007, started returning to the city. This was followed by the establishment of the Council of 33 (Guddiga 33) made up mostly of traditional leaders, religious authorities and politicians. This Council oversaw the initial war mobilization and acted as the political leaders of the community, establishing a modicum of control over the clan militias confronting Somaliland troops, and establishing local committees.

After several weeks of consultations, the Council announced their decisions, including reiterating the demand that Somaliland withdraw its forces from the region, and the establishment of SSC-K as an autonomous administration. Following this announcement, a committee comprising 45 members that was equated with parliament was established. The parliament was sworn in on 5–6 July 2023, and a parliament chair and deputy were chosen. On 6 August, the president of the interim administration, Abdulqadir Ahmed Aw-Ali 'Firdhiye', and his vice president were chosen by parliament. Once the interim administration was established, it took over as the political leadership of SSC-K, and traditional leaders stepped back from political matters, focusing more on their traditional role of mediating inter-clan and intra-clan conflicts and disputes. The administration established 16 ministries, including the Ministry of Justice.¹²

In its current setup, SSC-K fashions itself as a modern polity with executive, legislative and judicial branches—each playing its assigned role in the governance of the region. Based on the information from the interviews, a committee of about ten people was tasked with conducting region-wide consultations and drafting a constitution. The drafting of the constitution is complete, and was endorsed on 30 July 2025 in the conference in Las Anod by delegates representing both Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans, among others. As it stands, SSC-K administration is primarily a Dhulbahante project, though it was being expanded in the Las Anod conference. Care has been taken to ensure an equal power-sharing arrangement between the three main lineages of the Dhulbahante: Mohamud Garad, Farah Garad and Baha Nugaleed. Also represented in the SSC-K administration is the Faqashini, a small Hawiye/Habar Gidir clan that lives in Sool, and a minority clan called Madhiban. SSC-K's current parliament comprises 45 seats, 40 for Dhulbahante, three for Fiqishini, and two for Madhiban.

Once Somaliland troops were evicted from Dhulbahante lands and the SSC-K administration was established in 2023, there were several challenges having to do with the transition from war footing to civil administration and governance. In general, the process was made possible by the unity of the Dhulbahante people forged in the course of the conflict. As one interviewee put it, "[P]eople were very united. They assisted the police by capturing criminals and drug users."¹³ Among the most significant challenges that the new administration faced was what to do with the proliferation of arms and the presence of mostly armed young men in the region.¹⁴ A decision was taken,

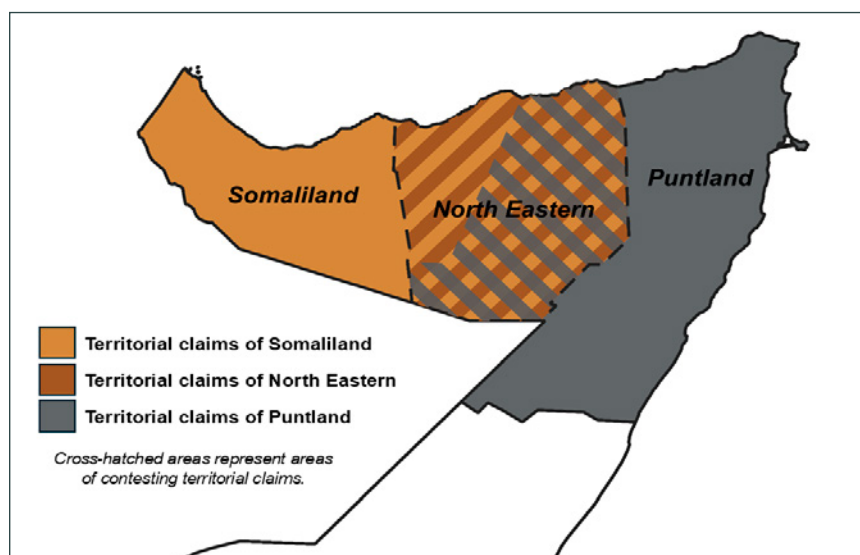
12. There are interesting parallels between the emergence of SSC-K with the processes that led to the formation of Somaliland and Puntland—in the roles of traditional leadership, politicians, and diaspora. These were self-financed processes, i.e., not supported by international aid.

13. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

14. There was no mention of Islamist militants, a claim often asserted by the government in Hargeisa.

supported by the people, to order the armed fighters to leave the cities and remain on the frontlines or in military bases. At the same time, a police force was established to maintain order in the cities. The formation of a Ministry of Justice, and the active role of traditional elders, helped to resolve emerging disputes and conflicts before they got out of hand.

In addition to achieving basic stability, the other problem the new administration faced was financing. As others have pointed out,¹⁵ the natural characteristics of the region and years of neglect have rendered Sool a region with a low resource base, though rich in livestock. This, combined with the limited revenue generation capacity of the new administration, means that SSC-K faces real financial challenges, including an inability to pay the salaries of civil servants. Some interviewees claimed that all the civil servants and even parliamentarians worked voluntarily because there was no money to pay them. Most, however, asserted that some civil servants received salaries, while others worked voluntarily. Some noted that this was decided on the basis of department priority. The staff in some ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, whose responsibility it is to generate revenue for the administration, receive small salaries. Interviews in Garowe pointed out that the Puntland administration pays some of SSC-K's forces and civil servants. It is not clear if these are people who were previously employed by Puntland before the emergence of SSC-K.¹⁶ What little revenue SSC-K gets comes from three sources: customs and regular tax, diaspora support and some budgetary assistance from the federal government. So far, this financial constraint has not proved fatal, probably for the same reason that the transition from war footing to civil administration has not proved fatal: because of the enthusiasm, unity and support of the people for the SSC-K project. This is evidenced by the fact that people are willing to work voluntarily. But this is not a situation that is sustainable in the long term. People will eventually find it impossible to work without pay, and disputes will emerge threatening the current unity of purpose of the Dhulbahante people, if SSC-K's financial difficulties persist.



4.1.2. Hopes and future aspirations

Despite the challenges noted above, people interviewed in Las Anod expressed overwhelming pride in what they have achieved so far, and enthusiasm for the future. The enthusiasm is partly due to the recent federal recognition of SSC-K. This move was largely supported by the

15. Mahmood, 'Overlapping Claims by Somaliland and Puntland'.

16. It is likely, for instance, that some soldiers in Puntland's armed forces, who took leave during SSC-K's conflict with Somaliland, remain on the frontlines and receive salary.

interviewees, “The whole reason for why people fought to liberate themselves from Somaliland is to become a separate administration under the federal government. There is no difference and debate on this issue among the people.”¹⁷ These sentiments are, however, tempered by feelings that there are potential dangers from several corners. As one interviewee put it, “We are at a dangerous intersection.”¹⁸ One potential source of danger has to do with the next step(s) in the evolution of SSC-K. The two-year interim administration came to an end on 6 August 2025. Some of the interviewees conveyed their worry that if this process is not handled correctly, it could cause problems. If, for instance, there is a long delay in the formation of a new administration, it could cause suspicions and lead to accusations of corruption. Even if the elections are held on time, there could be problems. “What if the losing politicians are unhappy and start problems?”¹⁹ asked one interlocutor. The dominant fear is that the potential jockeying for power in the course of the transition to a new administration could jeopardize the hard won Dhulbahante unity. This is not surprising given that politicians from this region are notorious for their opportunism, leading to stereotypes about the Dhulbahante as more prone to division than other Somali clans.²⁰

Both fears about the dangers inherent in the formation of a new administration, and excitement about what is possible, are further heightened by the potential joining of the Warsangeli in an expanded SSC-K administration, as the current conference in Las Anod is attempting. On the one hand, the interviewees are united in their support of expanding SSC-K, particularly the inclusion of the Warsangeli. “This was an issue that was discussed from the very beginning, and most people are in agreement that this is needed.”²¹ Interviewees articulated a number of different but related reasons for why they desire the inclusion of the Warsangeli. The fact that SSC-K, as it stands, is primarily a Dhulbahante project, is seen as a limitation. “It is not possible to have a state made up of only one clan.”²² There is also a sense that it is logical and also inevitable that the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli join under a single administration. In this regard, people point to the similarities of the conditions and predicaments of Sool and Sanaag, as contested borderland regions between Somaliland and Puntland. To this end, it is said that “Dhulbahante and Warsangeli are in the same boat.”²³ Most think that unity of the interests of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli necessitates their coming together under one administration: “[W]e need each other” or “[O]ur interests and their interests intersect. We need a port.”²⁴ Others note that the constitutional requirement that at least two or more regions have to come together to form a FMS necessitates the inclusion of the Warsangeli in SSC-K. As we will see in section 4.2, similar sentiments of the complementarity of Warsangeli and Dhulbahante interests is also shared by the Warsangeli in Badhan.

The views welcoming the potential inclusion of the Warsangeli in SSC-K are accompanied by a realization that this will not be straightforward. Some think that the rearrangement of power-sharing within SSC-K, which will be necessary to integrate the Warsangeli, will be difficult to achieve. Difficult but not impossible, according to most. What is viewed as more problematic is the current state of the Warsangeli and their region. First, it is not lost to people in Las Anod that the Warsangeli are politically divided, and it is by no means given that there will be a Warsangeli consensus to join SSC-K. This is a major issue determining whether and how the Warsangeli join SSC-K. If SSC-K,

17. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

18. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

19. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

20. Mahmood, ‘Overlapping Claims by Somaliland and Puntland’.

21. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

22. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

23. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

24. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

pushed by the federal government, insists on including Warsangeli in the newly forming SSC-K administration without prior consultation and general agreement among the Warsangeli, it risks further dividing the Warsangeli and turning Sanaag into an arena of political and military contest between Puntland, SSC-K (supported by the federal government) and Somaliland. In fact, the highest ranking Dhulbahante traditional leader, Garad Jama Garad Ali, has recently warned SSC-K political leaders against the inclusion of the Warsangeli without first giving them a chance to reach a consensus amongst themselves on this issue.²⁵ The problem of Warsangeli division and what it means for their joining SSC-K is highlighted by many interviewees. Another issue that is underlined is that parts of Warsangeli land are occupied. Though the interviewees did not specify whom they were referring to as the occupying power, it could mean both Somaliland, in western Sanaag, and Puntland, in eastern Sanaag. Some thought that this was perhaps a good thing as it would pull the Warsangeli towards SSC-K as a means of liberating their region. Others, however, thought it a problem as it would deny the Warsangeli in the occupied areas freedom of choice.

Interestingly, among the Dhulbahante interviewees in Las Anod, Puntland rarely came up as an issue in their discussion of the challenges associated with the inclusion of Warsangeli and Sanaag in SSC-K. This is surprising because, as we will see in section 4.3, Puntland's main problem with the emergence and federal recognition of SSC-K is over Sanaag region and the Warsangeli. For the most part, interviewees in Las Anod addressed the potential Warsangeli inclusion of SSC-K simply as a matter for the Warsangeli and Dhulbahante. Regarding Puntland, people generally seemed to downplay the potential escalation of tensions or the risks of conflict between Puntland and SSC-K. This is again somewhat surprising because tensions are indeed rising between Puntland and SSC-K, as attested to by a 17 July press statement by Puntland stating that it still considers the Dhulbahante and the Warsangeli, and their regions, as part of Puntland.²⁶ It is also surprising because, historically, Puntland has never really welcomed the formation of an autonomous Dhulbahante administration.²⁷ Nonetheless, most interviewees in Las Anod downplayed potential tensions with Puntland as only political differences that ultimately would be resolved because they were the same people. As one interviewee put it, "politicians will have differences, but there is nothing between the people."²⁸ They described Puntland as a "sister" or "brotherly" state and forecasted that future relations between SSC-K and Puntland will be very good.²⁹ On the few occasions when the potential for tensions with Puntland is admitted, people insisted that such tensions would and could be resolved by traditional leaders of the Harti.

While sentiments and future expectations of relations with Puntland were largely positive, views were very much the opposite with regards to Somaliland. Somaliland is described as an enemy and a threat with little room for dialogue. No doubt a big reason for the antagonism towards Somaliland is explained by the recent armed conflict with Somaliland, whom most interlocutors consider to have been occupying their land. Another major reason is the divergent political views and aspirations in regard to Somali unity: Somaliland's secessionism versus SSC-K's pro-unionist stance. Somaliland's secessionism and territorial imagination is premised on the perception of itself as the successor state to British Somaliland. This undergirds Somaliland's claim to

25. 'Garaadka guud ee SSC-Khaatumo Garaad Jaamac Garaad Cali oo ka hadlay xaaladda SSC-Khaatumo', *YouTube*, 11 July 2025. Accessed 10 December 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTmxrqnJ-PY>.

26. "On the status of Sool, Cayn, and the Dhulbahante Community," Press Statement, Puntland Government of Somalia, 17 July 2025.

27. For more on this, see Hoehne, *Between Somaliland and Puntland*, 88.

28. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

29. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

Sool and other Dhulbahante territories. This is underlined by most interviewees as the major reason why dialogue is impossible with Somaliland. To some, the idea that Somaliland, who some simply referred to as the Issaq clan, would lay claim to their land on account of British colonization seemed incredible. “It is a very weak argument”, said one.³⁰ For others, the argument of Somaliland was illogical because “Somalis live as clans, and the British colonized clans. The clan that lives here never signed any protectorate treaty with the British. They were colonized by force and fought the British for 20 years.”³¹ So, there is no legal basis upon which Somaliland can lay claim on our land.”³² Ultimately, most interviewees felt that there is no room for dialogue with Somaliland as long as it maintained its claim on their land. Though some claimed that Somaliland still occupies some of their land, most interviewees expressed the view that the Dhulbahante are not looking to engage Somaliland in an attempt to recover more land: “The problem is them, not us.”³³ Room for dialogue is not entirely closed off if Somaliland abandons its claim on their territory, because “they are a Somali people, and they also need peace.”³⁴

4.2. The Warsangeli: Divided and in-between competing administrations

The Warsangeli, who live primarily in eastern Sanaag,³⁵ share many historical and structural similarities with their neighbours, the Dhulbahante. Unlike the Dhulbahante, however, the Warsangeli have not established their own administration independent of Puntland and Somaliland. This is not for lack of desire as is proven by the creation of the short-lived Maakhir project in 2007. The Warsangeli, therefore, find themselves today in the same predicament they were in during the past several decades: a people in a borderland region whose territory and loyalties are contested by competing administrations. Historically, they were between Puntland and Somaliland. Today, they are confronted by the emergence of SSC-K, which with the support of the federal government, is vying for their territory and their loyalty. Divided as ever, they view SSC-K both as a problem and as a potential solution to their problematic status as a contested region and people. The interviews we have conducted in Badhan among the Warsangeli reveal their division and the sense of a difficult moment confronting them, as one interviewee asserted: “This is one of the most difficult moments for the Warsangeli in terms of solutions. Many people support Puntland, some, mostly young people and some politicians support Maakhir, others are with SSC-K.”³⁶

The main options under consideration by the Warsangeli, according to our interviews, are: a) developing Maakhir as an autonomous Warsangeli state under the federal government; b) maintaining and renegotiating relations and power-sharing arrangement in Puntland; or c) Joining SSC-K. Historically, Somaliland was an option, at least for Warsangeli politicians. The majority of the Warsangeli public lives in eastern Sanaag, which has been under Puntland’s control. But the Warsangeli did have political representation in Somaliland, and continue to do so, since Somaliland claims Sanaag as part of its imagined territory. This was satisfactory to all the parties involved: Puntland, Somaliland, and the Warsangeli. But, as Mahmood points out, the situation began to shift around 2009 as the Warsangeli, for various factors,

30. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

31. This is in reference to the anti-colonial Dervish uprising whose center of operations was in Dhulbahante territory. For more on the Dervish movement, see Abdi Sheikh-Abdi, *Divine Madness: Mohammed Abdulle Hassan (1856-1920)*, London: Zed Books, 1993.

32. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

33. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

34. Interview in Las Anod, July 2025.

35. In 2003, Puntland created a new region called Haylan with Badhan as its capital in eastern Sanaag.

36. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

became more politically distanced from Somaliland.³⁷ One would suspect that this movement away from Somaliland has only intensified since 2022 with the Dhulbahante uprising, which impacted the Warsangeli, including causing their displacement from the city of Erigabo in western Sanaag. The comment from one interlocutor that “Somaliland is not part of this conversation and should not be”³⁸ seems to be the prevailing feeling in eastern Sanaag today.

4.2.1. The option of Maakhir

As described above, Maakhir was established in 2007 following clashes between Warsangeli militias and Puntland troops in the Golis mountains. It was meant to be an autonomous Warsangeli state under the federal government, and independent of Somaliland and Puntland but never really took off. Following recent developments in Sool and Sanaag, there was another conference by reer maakhir (the people of Maakhir) in March 2025 in Badhan, the main city in eastern Sanaag. Underlining the division of the Warsangeli, this conference was not widely attended, and some of the interviewees dismissively referred to it as mostly a gathering of women and youth who were carried away emotionally. Consequently, when discussing the Maakhir project as an option for the Warsangeli, many referred to it as dusting off the Maakhir option because it is seen as dormant.

Nonetheless, some of our interlocutors conveyed their feeling that Maakhir is the best option currently for the Warsangeli. There are two reasons for this. First, it is suggested that the Warsangeli need their own political organization to unite them and articulate their common interests, “I support Maakhir because the Warsangeli need someone to bring them together and the only organized party that can take on that role today is Maakhir.”³⁹ The argument is that Maakhir is necessary to unify Warsangeli and present a united front that then takes decisions about their future. Others, value Maakhir because it is an organic Warsangeli political project motivated by Warsangeli interests, such as “the defence of our borders”.⁴⁰ For others, Maakhir is the Warsangeli manifestation of a phenomenon that is taking place all over Somalia: clans creating their own administrations. Some see this in a positive light, but others were less convinced: “[T]hey just want Maakhir because they see that everyone is creating their own administration”.⁴¹ In general, most of the interviewed concluded that “the Maakhir project is not a viable option.”⁴² Two reasons were given for this: a) it only has the support of a small minority of the Warsangeli, according to them, and; b) even if there is support for it, the Warsangeli alone in eastern Sanaag cannot establish an autonomous administration, given the requirement of at least two regions to create a federal member state. Perhaps because of these reasons, it appears that supporters of “the Maakhir project look to be getting closer to SSC-K”⁴³ as a more realistic option.

4.2.2. Puntland as an option

Along with SSC-K, the option of maintaining relations with Puntland appears to enjoy significant support among the Warsangeli, according to some. There are a number of reasons for why some Warsangeli view Puntland as their best option. First, for some the sentiment appears to be, ‘better the devil you know’, as one woman said, “If Warsangeli could not get what they

37. Mahmood, ‘Overlapping Claims by Somaliland and Puntland’.

38. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

39. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

40. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

41. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

42. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

43. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

wanted from Puntland, how can they get it from this new administration?”⁴⁴ This statement reflects not only skepticism about SSC-K, but also the real grievances that Warsangeli people hold against Puntland, as we will see shortly. Some thought that Puntland is the best option because it is an already existing administration with more resources than SSC-K, “Puntland is better because it’s an already existing administration, that has ports, large land, road infrastructure, and so on.”⁴⁵ This pragmatic sentiment has further interesting implications. Some noted that the Warsangeli should remain with Puntland because they stand to gain from the withdrawal of the Dhulbahante from Puntland. The Puntland power-sharing arrangement that was established in 1998 was primarily between the Harti clan groupings of Majerteen, Dhulbahante and Warsangeli. The Dhulbahante, as the second largest Harti clan, received a significant share of parliamentary seats and cabinet positions. With the Dhulbahante forming their own administration and being recognized by the federal government, there is an expectation that the Harti power-sharing arrangement of Puntland will have to be revisited. Consequently, some Warsangeli are concluding that this will benefit them and their standing in Puntland: “It has created an expectation that their share within Puntland can increase.”⁴⁶ The Warsangeli, as we will see in section 4.3, are not alone in arguing for a new power-sharing arrangement in Puntland.

Despite these pro-Puntland views, there are real grievances held by the Warsangeli against the Puntland administration. Similar grievances were previously expressed by the Dhulbahante in Sool, underlining the historical and structural similarities of the Warsangeli and Dhulbahante as borderland people. Even those who expressed their wish to remain with Puntland often conditioned their support with “if Puntland addresses people’s grievances”.⁴⁷ The grievance that is often expressed against Puntland is that it “failed to defend Sanaag’s borders sincerely” against Somaliland.⁴⁸ This issue might have been more present in the minds of the interviewed because of recent events, such as the displacement of Harti groups, including the Warsangeli, from Erigabo in December 2024. Puntland’s lack of direct military intervention in that conflict is highlighted by several people. It is viewed as a failure on Puntland’s part to protect its official border: “While Puntland’s official border is somewhere in Erigabo, it doesn’t appear that Puntland has any intentions of securing that border in reality.”⁴⁹ This failure to protect the official border and fellow Harti from Somaliland was unfavourably compared with Puntland’s readiness to send forces to Sanaag in light of recent tensions with SSC-K over Sanaag: “[T]hat Puntland should send its forces to Sanaag today, forces that were never here to counter Somaliland’s aggression, is what most people in this region find hard to comprehend”.⁵⁰

Another important grievance articulated by the Warsangeli is the claim that “the people of this region have been deprived of their rights over the past 34 years”.⁵¹ The said rights include the lack of economic development in the region and limited political representation. It is important to highlight that the grievance of lack of political representation is not just about the number of seats afforded the Warsangeli in Puntland’s power-sharing arrangement. It includes the manner in which Puntland engages the Warsangeli politically, and how their political representatives are selected: “At the moment it simply goes through the Suldhan and listens to what he says. The way it selects

44. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

45. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

46. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

47. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

48. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

49. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

50. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

51. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

Warsangeli representatives. There are sub-clans who have no representation. One clan is over-represented.”⁵²

Another important critique of Puntland addresses suspicions about the Puntland administration's position on Somali unity in light of its conflict with the federal government. This suspicion has been exacerbated by Puntland's recent overtures to secessionist Somaliland.⁵³ This is particularly concerning for the Warsangeli because they view Somaliland and its secessionist-informed claim on their territory as a threat. One interviewee put the matter as follows, “That Puntland appears to be warming to Somaliland, whom the people of this region have fought in Erigabo, made the people of this region worried. This has made people worried about Puntland's intentions towards this region.”⁵⁴ This issue underlines the Warsangeli people's support for Somali unity, another thing they share with the Dhulbahante. While the articulation of these grievances against Puntland does not necessarily mean support for joining SSC-K, for many it means just that, for example: “[T]here are many grievances against Puntland, which is why we are welcoming the SSC-K agenda. I believe that the political future of Sanaag is to unify with Sool, 100 per cent.”⁵⁵

4.2.3. SSC-K as an option

The third option, and perhaps the one with the most momentum based on what has happened at the conference in Las Anod, is for the Warsangeli and eastern Sanaag to join SSC-K administration. For those in favour of this option, the emergence of SSC-K is a welcome opportunity, not just for the Dhulbahante, but for all the people of this region. Essentially, their reasons for preferring SSC-K are the obverse of their grievances against Puntland and Somaliland. Unlike these two administrations, which are viewed as having created the economic and political problems of the region, SSC-K and the Dhulbahante are seen as natural allies because of similarities of conditions, “The way I see it, is the way most people of the region, the Warsangeli, see it. It is seen as an opportunity for the people of the region. Dhulbahante and Warsangeli share both political and economic conditions.”⁵⁶ They see SSC-K as an opportunity to solve the region's economic and political predicaments, and as a way to overcome the status of their region as disputed: “Many people view SSC-K as the one entity that can remove the status of a disputed territory from this region.”⁵⁷ The view that SSC-K will remove the disputed status of this region is based on the belief that SSC-K will be ready to confront the threat to the region: “Both of us face a common threat from Somaliland, which wants these regions in its quest for recognition.”⁵⁸ The perception of Somaliland as a threat, which the people need to defend (or be defended) against seems to be directly correlated to recent events, particularly in Erigabo: “Maybe SSC-K can secure the border and ensure that the person who lives in Erigabo will live there with dignity rather than being a guest for Somaliland.”⁵⁹ Finally, there is a belief that the Warsangeli and the Dhulbahante share a commitment to Somali unity, which finds expression in SSC-K: “I believe that finally the voices of Somali unity from these regions has representation at the federal

52. Interview in Badhan, July 2025. See also, “Sanaag and Haylaan elders reject participation in SSC-Khaatumo administration”, *Hiiraan Online*, 9 July 2025. Accessed 10 December 2025, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/july/202136/sanaag_and_haylaan_elders_reject_participation_in_ssc_khaatumo_administration.aspx.

53. “Successful prisoner exchange between Puntland and Somaliland,” *Interpeace*, 5 December 2025. Accessed 10 December 2025, <https://www.interpeace.org/2005/12/successful-prisoner-exchange-between-puntland-and-somaliland/>.

54. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

55. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

56. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

57. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

58. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

59. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

government and can reach the world. It is a victory for the people of Sool and Sanaag, who desire Somali unity.”⁶⁰ It appears that Warsangeli support for SSC-K has increased since the federal government’s recognition of SSC-K, even as it has also increased tensions with Puntland.

Given that there is an ongoing attempt, led by the federal government, to unite Sool and Sanaag, we tried to gauge what people expect out of this process, and their confidence in it. As one would expect, those who are in favour of joining SSC-K think that the process will be transparent and the outcome fair. One interviewee went so far as to spell out exactly the outcome the Warsangeli expect in terms of the power-sharing arrangement: “The top positions are the president, the capital and the vice president. We expect to get either the president or the capital. We would particularly like to bring the capital to Badhan, and we would like to use it to open the coastal districts, which are closed now, so we can get ports that connect us to the world.”⁶¹ Those who are not in favour of joining SSC-K very much doubt that the outcome will be fair. Some think that since the Dhulbahante have already struggled for and created SSC-K, the Warsangeli would only be tolerated guests: “My view is that SSC-K is a Dhulbahante project, and if Warsangeli goes to join them, they will be as guests.”⁶² For others, it is clear that the outcome will be unfair because the Warsangeli are divided: “If Warsangeli participated in a united way they would have received a good share, but since a united Warsangeli will not participate, the division of power will not be as it should.”⁶³

What is undeniable is that the Warsangeli are divided between the Maakhir project, staying within Puntland, or throwing their lot in with the newly forming SSC-K. As one interviewee put it, “There is division in Sanaag. One brother is with Puntland and another is with SSC-K.”⁶⁴ Based on the interviews, it appears that the latter two options have more support because they are viewed as more realistic. While many people view the emergence of SSC-K as an opportunity to end their history of division and divided loyalties, others see the continuation of the same old story: “It is the same people that were getting salaries from Puntland, who are now pushing this agenda.” The same people being mainly politicians. In other words, SSC-K might prove to be just another option for opportunistic politicians to draw a salary in the name of representing the Warsangeli people.

4.3. Puntland

Though Puntland’s territorial claims include all Dhulbahante land, it was effectively in control only a small fraction of it. The city of Las Anod, the capital of Sool, was under Somaliland administration from 2007. So, when the Dhulbahante uprising against Somaliland started late 2022, the Puntland administration led by President Said Abdullahi Deni found itself in something of a conundrum. On the one hand, Puntland was happy to see Somaliland evicted from Sool, and furthermore, there was general Harti support for the uprising. On the other hand, as we saw in Puntland’s opposition to the creation of Khaatumo in 2011, Puntland did not look favourably on the formation of an autonomous Dhulbahante administration. It appears that there was a continuation of this uncertainty in Puntland as SSC-K emerged. The people we interviewed in Garowe and Bosaso describe a Puntland administration whose position on the conflict was less than clear: “Puntland did not have a clear position on the conflict other than supporting it. It wanted the region to be liberated from Somaliland, but it was not sure what would become of it. Even the president’s position was not very clear. It is still not clear what

60. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

61. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

62. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

63. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

64. Interview in Badhan, July 2025.

Puntland's position is.”⁶⁵ Puntland's support to SSC-K during the conflict was indirect, facilitating the movement of people and giving time off for soldiers that wanted to join the fight, among other things.⁶⁶ Deni made some statements at the beginning of the conflict that the people of SSC-K should decide their destiny, but this was probably more directed at Somaliland than a reflection of his own position. Puntland's expectation appears to have been that, if and when the Dhulbahante liberated their land, there would be a Harti-wide conference to decide the future. Such a conference never materialized, and SSC-K proceeded to engage directly with the federal government until it won recognition.⁶⁷ Most of the people we interviewed blamed SSC-K's president, Abdulqadir 'Firdhiye', arguing that he prevented SSC-K traditional leaders from holding such a conference, and prioritized dealing directly with the federal government. Consequently, relations between SSC-K and Puntland soured, and even more so after the recent formal federal recognition of SSC-K.

4.3.1. The impact of SSC-K's emergence on Puntland

This section looks at the security, economic, administrative, and political impact of SSC-K's formation on Puntland, based on what the interviewees shared with us. The initial security impact on Puntland from SSC-K's formation was limited, since most of the fighting between SSC-K and Somaliland took place in areas of Sool that were some distance from the centres of Puntland. Security fears and the potential of instability have increased recently after the federal government's recognition of SSC-K, and the ongoing attempt to join Sanaag with SSC-K. These security fears are particularly acute in eastern Sanaag, specifically border areas such as Shahda, where a limited armed confrontation between Puntland forces and the militia of an SSC-K allied Warsangeli politician occurred in July. With the rising of tensions and the militarization of Sanaag, there is a higher likelihood of armed confrontations. Such confrontations could occur between Puntland and SSC-K forces, or between Puntland and Warsangeli militias led by politicians allied with SSC-K. There is also the potential for a conflict between different factions of the Warsangeli, in support of Puntland and SSC-K. Relations between different clans could also be affected by the tense political environment. It is important to point out that these insecurities are not simply a direct result of SSC-K's formation, but are also due to Puntland's reaction.

Administratively, the impact, so far, is miniscule. Most of the areas that are now under SSC-K's administration are areas where Puntland was administratively either not present or present only in name. In most of those places where Puntland had some administrative presence, it still does, even if there is also a parallel SSC-K administration now. Examples of such areas where both administrations are present are Bo'ame and Buhoodle. Some interviewees note that “Puntland's administrative reach has shrunk since the emergence of SSC-K”,⁶⁸ but it cannot be by much. Financially, the impact has also been small because Puntland's main source of revenue from Sool was its customs station, and it still “has its customs station in Sool. Khaatumo has taken over the customs' station that was previously under Somaliland.”⁶⁹ The interviewee added that the two men operating the two customs stations are “probably cousins from Sool”.⁷⁰ Any significant decline of customs revenue is likely to be caused by the reduction of movement of goods and people from Somaliland

65. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

66. Hoehne, 'The Conflict Over Lasanod'.

67. It is worth noting that on a recent press statement, Puntland points to the lack of such a conference in its opposition to SSC-K. “On the status of Sool, Cayn, and the Dhulbahante Community,” Press Statement, Puntland Government of Somalia, 17 July 2025.

68. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

69. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

70. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

to Puntland. Another interviewee claimed that even if Puntland lost all the customs revenue from Sool, it would have no impact on Puntland because “the income from it used to go into the hands of some Sool politicians”.⁷¹

The most important impact of SSC-K’s formation on Puntland, according to interviewees, is the political impact, both within Puntland and on Puntland’s influence and standing at the national level. The next section examines the impact at the national level. Here, we focus on the political impact within Puntland, particularly the Harti power-sharing arrangement that is the foundation of Puntland. The withdrawal of the Dhulbahante and the potential withdrawal of the Warsangeli from Puntland has huge ramifications for Puntland’s internal political arrangement, which was essentially a Harti federation. To take an example, of Puntland’s 66-member parliament, 17 come from the Dhulbahante, and a further nine come from the Warsangeli. Together, that is 26 out of 66, almost 40 per cent. If one or both of these blocs exit the Puntland administration, it will force Puntland to reconvene the remaining communities and re-structure the power-sharing arrangement. Already, various clans are having this conversation in the hope of improving their standing within Puntland’s politics. As things stand, the Dhulbahante still have their political representation in Puntland, even after the formation of SSC-K.

4.3.2. Sources of tensions between Puntland and SSC-K

This section looks at what interviewees thought were the major sources of the current tensions between Puntland and SSC-K. One source of the problems, people thought, is the fraught relations between Puntland and the federal government. The conflict between Puntland and the federal government is part of a larger struggle between the federal government and federal member states. This has mainly to do with disagreements over resource and power sharing arrangements. The management of elections is one place where FMS and the federal government compete for power. Disputes over the management of elections inevitably dovetails with the national ambitions of politicians. In this case, it involves the ambitions of the president of Puntland, Said Deni, who has national ambitions, and federal President Hassan Sheikh. With federal presidential elections due by May 2026, they are jockeying for influence over elections. Thus, the problems between Puntland and the federal government are also about the presidential ambitions of Deni and Hassan. “The root cause of the problem between SSC-K and Puntland is the political issues between Puntland and the federal government or Deni and Hassan.”⁷² Another concurred: “The only problem between Puntland and SSC-K has to do with the contest between Hassan and Deni. There is nothing else.”⁷³

Unsurprisingly, people we interviewed in Puntland blame the federal government and Hassan. In explaining how the tensions between SSC-K and Puntland are really about the competition between Deni and Hassan, they point out that if SSC-K regions were to leave Puntland, it would mean Puntland would lose 11 seats in the federal parliament. This obviously has ramifications in political power: “There is a difference between when you have 48 parliamentarians (37 lower house and 11 upper house) and when you have 38. It decreases the power of Puntland as a state, and it also decreases the power of Puntland politicians who have national ambitions. It is a bitter pill to swallow.”⁷⁴ Interviewees explained that Deni opposes the formation of SSC-K because it will decrease the number of federal parliamentarians he has influence over. Nonetheless, many blame federal government actions for

71. Interview in Bosaso, July 2025.

72. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

73. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

74. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

the increasing tensions: “It was hasty for the federal government to recognize SSC-K before matters were resolved between Puntland and SSC-K.”⁷⁵ Some said that if the federal government did not intervene, “SSC-K could still have become a separate administration, but maintain close relations with Puntland with an eye towards increasing Darod influence at the federal level.”⁷⁶ Expressed in this quote is also the thought that the emergence of SSC-K has the potential to increase Darod influence at the national level. This is to presume that there is a single ‘Darod’ (or any other clan-family) agenda at the national level, which rarely there is. Another reason for the conflicts between SSC-K and Puntland, interlocutors point out, is the failure to hold a Harti wide conference after the liberation of SSC-K regions. Such a conference, led by Harti traditional leaders, it is claimed, would have led to a solution agreeable to both Puntland and SSC-K, whether to stay together or separate on friendly terms. Most blame the SSC-K president, Firdhiye, for preventing this conference from taking place, while a few also blame Deni.

4.3.3. Potential solutions

Given the above articulations of the root causes of the conflict, interviewees think that the main solutions are for the federal government to refrain from intervening in SSC-K, and the holding of a general Harti conference to decide matters between SSC-K and Puntland. Most think that the lack of such a conference is one of the root causes of the conflict, and that holding it offers a possible solution because “everyone, traditional elders from both Sool and Puntland as well as most politicians believe in principle that there should be two regional states.”⁷⁷ Given that the involvement of the federal government is viewed as hindering such a conference, its withdrawal is seen as necessary by many. Others reason that as long as Deni and Firdhiye are in office, solutions will be difficult to obtain, on the assumption that there are personal animosities between them. Others suggest more immediate solutions, such as removing armed forces from potential hot zones. A few cannot see past the potential for conflict. Others view the conflict as primarily political and insist that there is no hostility between the peoples of these regions. Consequently, they hope that ultimately traditional leaders will have the influence and wisdom to correct what they see as the mistakes of politicians and prevent an armed confrontation.

4.4. Somaliland

Given the impact the emergence of SSC-K has had on Somaliland, and will likely have going forward, the study conducted two sets of interviews and focus group discussions in Hargeisa and Erigabo to understand the perceptions of people in Somaliland, and the various ways the conflict has impacted Somaliland. In terms of people’s perception of the causes of the conflict between SSC-K and Somaliland, views can be divided into two. There are people who put the blame on Somaliland’s previous administration led by Musa Bihi, saying that it failed to address what were legitimate grievances by the people of Sool. As one interview put it, “It is born out of political, historical and administrative conditions that has existed for a long time, which Somaliland did not give the necessary attention to, treated it as a peripheral matter, and did not resolve issues that could have been resolved.”⁷⁸ Others thought that the problem lies with the long-established Dhulbahante rejection of Somaliland: “I have been there before in 2011, people were saying that Somaliland was created by a particular clan and it has nothing to do with us. The different administrations did not deal with them honestly. They were never

75. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

76. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

77. Interview in Garowe, July 2025.

78. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

part of us.”⁷⁹ It is perhaps not surprising that those who ascribe the conflict to Somaliland’s mismanagement are more likely to think reproachment is possible. There is also the more reflective conclusion that an underlying cause of the conflict is the transformation of the nature of the state in Somaliland. According to this view, Somaliland was established “to work on peacebuilding, but all the sudden it became a state, acting like a state, managing resources in exclusionary way. So, the people whose original social contract was to work on peacebuilding are now renegotiating state belonging.”⁸⁰ The interviewee adds that this was not limited to Somaliland, but shared by other state/administrative building efforts in the Somali territories.

4.4.1. Impacts of S3SC-K’s emergence on Somaliland

Regardless of the different causal factors, most are aware that the conflict’s impact is significant. Some of the impacts highlighted include, military, economic, security/stability, and political. The economic and military impact worried people the least,⁸¹ while the security and political impact drew the most attention. We will thus focus on the latter two in this report.

Several security/instability problems are attributed to the conflict between SSC-K and Somaliland. Many people pointed out that the shrinking of Somaliland’s border means that conflicts and instability are now more likely. This is particularly the case because there are opposing armed forces now stationed at the new borders in Sool, Ayn (southern Togdheer) and Sanaag. Based on the information from the interviews, the new and militarized borders are as follows: in Sool the Somaliland army is stationed near Oog; in Ayn/Togdheer, the Somaliland army is in the areas of Qorilugud, not far from Buhoodle, where SSC forces are stationed; in Sanaag, the Somaliland forces are about 20–30 km east of Erigabo. Understandably, people feel that this situation could easily turn violent: “There is nothing preventing from escalation; there are no forces between the belligerents.”⁸² One source of hope that armed confrontation might not take place in the immediate future is that neither side believes it can achieve its aims militarily. Another security concern about the shrinking of Somaliland’s border is the fear that actors unfriendly to Somaliland are now geographically closer, and could take advantage of the situation. Two actors were specifically mentioned: Islamist militants and the federal government of Somalia. Islamist militants—al-Shabaab and ISIS (Islamic State)—are thought to pose risks, particularly in Sanaag: “The biggest danger is that terrorist groups can easily spread to this region and perhaps they are already there, especially in eastern Sanaag. It could be a place where terrorist groups can attack Somaliland from.”⁸³ This is in relation to the history of Islamist militant activity in the Golis mountains of eastern Sanaag. Others think that the federal government’s involvement with SSC-K in Sool threatens Somaliland’s stability: “If the federal government is successful in Sool, it will create problems in other places in Somaliland. Sool is a place that can be used against Somaliland. It is a source of insecurity.”⁸⁴

Another source of instability highlighted is the worsening of communal/clan relations as a consequence of the conflict between SSC-K and Somaliland. A closer look at the conflict in Erigabo demonstrates this dynamic. Erigabo, the biggest city in western Sanaag, is a city that has been shared by multiple clans, including Issaq sub-clans, such as Habar Yonis and Habar Je’lo, and Harti

79. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

80. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

81. Some even thought that there was a positive in Somaliland’s military defeat in Sool. It revealed a weakness that was hidden from everyone, thereby provoking a necessary reorganization of the military.

82. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

83. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

84. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

sub-clans, such as Dhulbahante and Warsangeli, among others. Historically, these communities lived together and socially intermixed: “People were very mixed, living together, relatives through marriage.”⁸⁵ This was, however, made possible by a prolonged peace process that took place in Sanaag in 1993.⁸⁶ According to interlocutors, Relations with the Somaliland administration by Harti and Issaq communities in Erigabo were not equal because the Harti clans felt they were excluded from positions of power, while “the Issaq person believes he owns the government and power”.⁸⁷ This, however, was not a major problem because as a peripheral city, government services and development projects were limited in Erigabo. The situation began to change, however, after the Dhulbahante uprising in Sool. Both Harti and Issaq residents of the city had relatives and friends fighting and dying in Sool, on different sides of the conflict. Communal relations began to deteriorate as people began to openly express their sympathies for the different warring parties. Matters came to a head in late 2024, leading to the displacement of most Warsangeli and Dhulbahante from the city. This has had a lasting impact on communal relations in Erigabo, and the city remains tense. Some of the interviewees expressed the fear that the city would never go back to what it was: “It will take a long time for people to return as they were before. It is even possible that it never happens.”⁸⁸ When the question of a shared governance of the city between the different communities is raised, people are divided: “I have communicated with Harti people, and they think the Galkayo model is possible. But it’s not possible, because even though the city of Erigabo is shared, all the surrounding area is primarily inhabited by one clan.”⁸⁹ This makes the Galkayo model difficult.”⁹⁰ On the outskirts and to the east of the city is stationed Somaliland troops, while the Harti communities displaced from the city view it as an occupied city. Erigabo thus remains a contested city and a flashpoint for future conflicts. While many of the interviewed were pessimistic about the likelihood of peace and harmonious community relations in the near future, others expressed hope: “People can find a workable solution. The people of Erigabo have xeer [customary practices]. What is needed is to hold a meeting so that people can resolve their differences.”⁹¹

Politically, interviewees pointed to several political consequences on Somaliland from SSC-K’s emergence. There are several sides to these consequences: there are implications for internal politics in Somaliland, its relations with Somalia, and Somaliland’s quest for recognition. In terms of the impact on internal politics, the conflict in Las Anod, “began at a time when there were elections in Somaliland, so it affected political debates, and the decisions that were made”.⁹² Some suggested that the mismanagement of this conflict is one reason why Musa Bihi lost the last elections. This suggests that this issue is one of the central issues in how the current administration is and will be judged. Another internal political impact is how Somaliland addresses grievances by other communities. As one interviewee put it, “If the grievances that led to SSC’s rejection of Somaliland are present elsewhere, isn’t it possible that other regions also reject Somaliland? This issue should have become a wake-up call but it has not.”⁹³ Awdal state is highlighted as another region where there are grievances against the Somaliland administration, and where there is also pro-unionist sentiment. Some fear that the example of Las Anod would encourage others: “When a particular community reaches a political goal, it impacts other

85. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

86. Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*.

87. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

88. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

89. The one clan being Issaq.

90. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

91. Interview in Erigabo, July 2025.

92. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

93. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

communities because they see that it is possible.”⁹⁴ Another political impact of SSC-K’s emergence regards Somaliland’s relations with Somalia. In general people thought that the emergence of SSC-K has weakened Somaliland’s position in any future talks with Somalia, while making conflict with Somalia more likely. Particularly underlined is the fear that the federal government could use SSC-K to weaken Somaliland.

Another important political consideration that came up is whether and how the emergence of SSC-K impacts Somaliland’s quest for recognition. Research participants were almost equally split on this issue. Some thought that it will have little influence on the prospects of Somaliland’s recognition, while others thought it will damage such prospects significantly. Those who thought it will have no impact pointed to several factors. They argued that this region “has always been a volatile region. It was once under Puntland, and then Somaliland. Their elders were once here, and then they were in Puntland. This is just a continuation of that.”⁹⁵ Another added “over the past ten years when Somaliland controlled these regions, it made Somaliland’s argument a bit more whole but it did not really weigh heavily with the international community. And today, it is not likely to impact much Somaliland’s argument for recognition. It is not like anyone is going to say you are missing a big chunk of your territory.”⁹⁶ Moreover, “whether Somaliland is recognized or not does not really depend on the fact that Las Anod is no longer under Somaliland’s administration. More important is the interest that important external powers have on the Red Sea, and how they view Somaliland in relation to the Red Sea.”⁹⁷ As such, they concluded, SSC-K’s emergence does not really change Hargeisa’s calculus and strategy on international recognition.

Others thought SSC-K’s emergence was hugely damaging to Somaliland’s argument legally and morally. Legally it is damaging to Somaliland’s case because “it demonstrated that there are a lot of people who live in the area that was once the British protectorate of Somaliland that want Somalia’s unity, who have formed a separate administration, that fought Somaliland”.⁹⁸ Another added, “It caused a huge damage to Somaliland’s claim that it was the legitimate authority in the areas of the former British protectorate. Close to 30 per cent of that territory is now out of its hands. From the perspective of some, Somaliland is becoming a one-clan enclave.”⁹⁹ It is also morally damaging to Somaliland’s case “because Somaliland’s moral claim is based on having being a victim of the violence of Siyad Barre’s military regime. It’s actions in Las Anod have damaged that argument.”¹⁰⁰ Others noted that the new administration in Somaliland and the people of Somaliland have not really reflected on the impact of SSC-K’s emergence on their statehood because there is still hope for reproachment with SSC-K.

4.4.2. Possible solutions and reasons for hope

Most of the interviewed applauded what they described as a commitment to peace and dialogue by Somaliland’s current administration and president, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi ‘Irro’. They point out that there have been “peaceful messages and the formation of peaceful committees. There have been meetings between businesspeople or people have self-organized, and the government has encouraged that peaceful co-existence and negotiations are possible.”¹⁰¹ There have also been the demilitarization and incorporation

94. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

95. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

96. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

97. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

98. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

99. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

100. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

101. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

into the formal security apparatus of Issaq clan militia along the borders by the new administration. This comes with the warning that if the current president's peaceful gestures do not bear fruit, it could give room for worrying voices to emerge. People also think that if someone more amenable to Somaliland emerges in the upcoming SSC-K elections, it could improve chances of dialogue: "They are now in the middle of elections. If a different leadership is elected, it is possible for there to be dialogue."¹⁰² People are also hopeful that the absence of an expectation of an easy military victory by either side can prevent armed conflict in the immediate future. But there is an awareness that the more prolonged the status quo remains, the more likely that conflict emerges. Efforts outside the respective administrations, particularly efforts by local leaders, are thought to be able to resolve local disputes, up to a point. This is particularly important in disputed border areas, such as Erigabo (the subject of unconfirmed reports of talks).¹⁰³ "A lot of times the two different communities that live in these areas discuss the situation. There are community level efforts by people who have been touched by the conflict. There are efforts behind the scenes."¹⁰⁴ The existence of a long history of local reconciliation is also helpful, though this was happening at less militarized times.

But dialogue between SSC-K and Somaliland has, so far, remained elusive. There have been indirect efforts, led by traditional elders or businesspeople, but their success has been limited because of the differences between the two administrations. One interviewee mentioned an effort between Dhulbahante and Issaq businesspeople in Nairobi that failed to bear fruit because of discouragement from the respective administrations: "After the meeting, each of them got in touch with the leaders of their respective administrations, that ended that effort."¹⁰⁵ The main reason why dialogue between Somaliland and SSC-K has failed to materialize is because of conflicting priorities and approaches. To begin with, there is a basic disagreement over who should be holding the talks. SSC-K would like for the talks to be between it and Somaliland, as two administrations: "SSC-K is saying this is a political issue between two administrations, so let us talk as two equal administrations."¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, SSC-K would first like to get clarity on Somaliland's position on its lands. In other words, does Somaliland's territorial claims still include SSC-K regions? Somaliland, on the other hand, would like to open dialogue on other issues, such as the "exchange of prisoners, to open the roads and movement of population and businesses".¹⁰⁷ And, it would prefer that traditional leaders take the lead on this. This is because Somaliland does not want to sit with SSC-K as an equal, and it does not want to discuss the political question of its territorial claims. Consequently, dialogue between SSC-K and Somaliland remains mostly frozen at the level of the two administrations. This has undermined efforts by other actors, such as traditional leaders, businesspeople, and religious authorities.

102. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

103. "Senior Puntland Advisor in Hargeisa for Talks with Somaliland President on Erigavo Peace Deal," *Somali Dispatch*, 19 July 2025. Accessed 10 December 2025, <https://www.somalidispach.com/latest-news/senior-puntland-advisor-in-hargeisa-for-talks-with-somaliland-president-on-erigavo-peace-deal/>.

104. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

105. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

106. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

107. Interview in Hargeisa, July 2025.

5. Conclusion

Developments during mid-2025, during the course of writing this report, are turning SSC-K into a factual reality as the newest of Somalia's federal member states. These developments have occurred at a state formation conference taking place during August in Las Anod. Recent developments announced at the conference have included the official declaration of a name change from SSC-K to North Eastern State of Somalia, and the adoption of a constitution for the newly emerging permanent member state. Discussions over the formation of a new administration, including the selection of a legislature and an executive are ongoing. The most relevant question is, therefore, the type of challenges this new FMS will encounter which will shape its immediate future.

SSC-K, or North Eastern State, has several important advantages that will aid its actualization in the immediate future. As suggested by our interviews in Las Anod, SSC-K enjoys the enthusiasm and support of a large majority of the Dhulbahante. The Dhulbahante view SSC-K as an achievement that enables them to overcome what they view as a history of neglect rooted in the contested nature of their region, caught between the overlapping claims of Somaliland and Puntland. This enthusiasm has so far enabled SSC-K to successfully transition from war mobilization to peaceful civil administration despite scant resources. This enthusiasm is the reason why many civil servants are working voluntarily, thereby affording the administration the space to prioritize more pressing issues, such as security, and the time to put its budget in order. The support of the Dhulbahante will be critical as SSC-K transitions from an interim administration to an expanded permanent FMS. Another important advantage that SSC-K has is the support of the federal government in Mogadishu, which has been crucial in facilitating the ongoing transition to a permanent federal member state. The federal government can also provide SSC-K badly needed budgetary assistance. Another important advantage that SSC-K has as it undergoes a transition to a permanent status is the support of a segment of the Warsangeli clan in Sanaag. Given that the transition to a permanent status envisions the inclusions of Sanaag and the Warsangeli, it is vitally important that there is a delegation representing the Warsangeli partaking in the conference at Las Anod. The inclusion of the Warsangeli is also significant because it would mean that the new state would have the port of Las Qorey in eastern Sanaag. This is essential for the emerging state's economic viability.

There are also significant challenges that this new state faces. First, the newly forming state is confronted by the fact that the Warsangeli are not united in wanting to join SSC-K. While it is extremely important that there is a Warsangeli delegation at the conference in Las Anod, it is equally significant that there is a segment of the Warsangeli that is against SSC-K, and in support of maintaining relations with Puntland—including important Warsangeli traditional leaders. Based on our interviews, it is hard to gauge Warsangeli opinions on this matter in terms of percentages, but the report clearly indicates that they are divided. This lack of a Warsangeli consensus is made a more difficult challenge for SSC-K to overcome by Puntland's rejection of SSC-K. Furthermore, Puntland has forces in eastern Sanaag, a region that the newly declared North Eastern State claims as its own. The Warsangeli division combined with Puntland's rejection is perhaps the most difficult challenge that the newly forming state faces. This situation might have been avoided had the federal government

first sought to obtain the consensus of the Warsangeli in Sanaag before declaring its intention to recognize a federal member state that includes their region. But this was probably made unlikely by the fraught relations between the federal government and Puntland. Given where things stand, the fear now is over the potentiality of armed confrontations in eastern Sanaag, between Puntland and SSC-K or between Puntland and Warsangeli politicians allied with SSC-K. One source of hope that might prevent such an outcome is that the local Harti populations in Sool and Sanaag have no enmity or grievances against each other. This might make it easier for traditional leaders to prevent or quickly resolve armed confrontations.

The other main challenge facing SSC-K is Somaliland's rejection of SSC-K based on its claims of SSC-K regions. Our interviews in Hargeisa and Erigabo reveal the existence of an expectation, on the part of Somaliland's administration and some of the people, that differences with SSC-K could somehow be overcome through dialogue, and that the Dhulbahante may yet be convinced to tie their fate to Somaliland's. As that expectation diminishes in the face of the transformation of SSC-K into a permanent federal member state, it could pave the way for a more aggressive approach leading to armed confrontations. Armed conflict could initially erupt in flash points, such as the city of Erigabo, before spreading to other areas. Another challenge facing SSC-K is financial—as explained in section 4, Sool and other areas that SSC-K effectively controls are relatively poor, though rich in livestock. This, combined with the limited revenue generation capacity of SSC-K administration, means many civil servants are currently not receiving any salary. This budgetary limitation is likely to become more acute as the administration is expanded in the transition to a permanent federal member state. This will likely mean that SSC-K, and its successor, will rely on outside budgetary support to sustain itself. This might make it more reliant on the federal government, which could further complicate its relations with Puntland and Somaliland.

Finally, as SSC-K expands to include the Warsangeli and transitions to a permanent status, disagreements over the power-sharing arrangement and the process of selecting the new administration might divide people. Such disagreements, occurring at different levels, might lead some people to abandon the project and even support Puntland or Somaliland's positions.

The formation of a new permanent federal member state is becoming a reality as we speak. Because of the grievances that have led people to create their own administration, the fact that it is becoming a reality on the ground, and the support of the federal government makes it challenging for external actors to take any actions that could be interpreted as undermining this process. At the same time, external actors cannot appear to be actively supporting the newly emerging state because it would undermine relations with Puntland and Somaliland. The most advisable position for external actors is, therefore, to prioritize the prevention of the deterioration of the situation and to lessen the likelihood of armed confrontations. This can be done by focusing on specific issues or zones of tensions rather than focusing on the larger issue of the emergence of SSC-K.

6. Recommendations

As described throughout the report, the emergence of SSC-K and the ongoing attempt to expand it, has broad security and political ramifications at various scales, from the national to the local.¹⁰⁸ The formation of SSC-K has raised difficult disputes and conflicts rooted in fundamental and unresolved issues, such as the status of Somaliland and relations between the federal government and federal member states. As such, the tensions raised are not easy to resolve. We, therefore, recommend an approach that does not seek or expect immediate solutions, but focuses on preventing the situation from deteriorating. Such an approach will hopefully buy time for emotions to cool down and calmer heads to prevail. The priority should basically be to create space and conditions for dialogue between the various contesting parties, so that they can explore creative, context-relevant, and flexible arrangements/solutions.

The formation of SSC-K has raised interrelated tensions involving the federal government, Puntland, SSC-K, the Warsangeli clan and Somaliland. There are several points or zones of tension that should be prioritized. These are not the only zones of tension, but they are the ones this report recommends some steps that can hopefully reduce the tensions. We suggest two or three recommendations for each of these zones of tension: between SSC-K and Puntland, between SSC-K and Somaliland, and the contested city of Erigabo.

6.1. Between Puntland and SSC-K

The tensions between SSC-K and Puntland are not easy to resolve because they involve the federal government, which has officially recognized SSC-K and supports its expansion and inclusion of the Warsangeli. It also involves the Warsangeli, who are divided over whether to join SSC-K or maintain relations with Puntland. Getting a handle on these tensions is made more complicated because of the conference in Las Anod, where decisions are being made that are directly relevant to the political future of the Warsangeli, relations between SSC-K and Puntland, as well as relations between the federal government and Puntland. The main risk here is that it leads to the further militarization of eastern Sanaag and armed confrontations, as tensions rise based on the decisions being made at the conference in Las Anod and how different actors react to it. Our recommendations in relation to these tensions are:

- a External actors should pressure, encourage and support the contesting parties to avoid taking any steps that further militarize eastern Sanaag. Puntland currently has forces in some of the border areas of eastern Sanaag. The fear is that as the conference in Las Anod concludes with the declaration that the Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag have agreed to join SSC-K, it could lead to further escalation and potential armed confrontations. The withdrawal, or at least the prevention of further introduction of weapons and armed forces, in this region will hopefully avert escalation of the situation, and create space for dialogue.

108. There are also influential regional factors. The role of Ethiopia and the Somali region of Ethiopia has long had an influence on events in Sool.

- b Encourage the holding of a conference and/or community meetings in eastern Sanaag, particularly among the Warsangeli, to prevent further militarization of their communities, and to reduce further division of the people. They should explore steps the community can take to ensure that communal relations do not deteriorate in this region, as a result of the competition for influence. It might be necessary to involve non-Harti Darod traditional leaders, particularly Ogaden elders from the Somali region of Ethiopia, to play mediators in eastern Sanaag.
- c The federal government and Puntland should be pushed to avoid any steps that will have adverse impact on the situation. The federal government should not move weapons or armed forces into SSC-K, and Puntland should refrain from doing the same in eastern Sanaag, and if possible, to reduce its force posture in eastern Sanaag.

6.2. SSC-K and Somaliland

Since the end of active armed conflict between SSC-K and Somaliland in late 2023, there has been little dialogue between them. A central reason for the limited dialogue is because of a political disagreement over whether Somaliland still maintains its claims on SSC-K territories. It is difficult to find a solution to this problem because Somaliland is committed to its territorial imagination, even as SSC-K is becoming a reality. Rather than focusing on this larger political issue, other steps should be taken to prevent the situation from deteriorating. Our recommendations are:

- a Encourage the reduction of tensions on the frontlines. There are several areas in Sool and Ayn (Togdheer) where SSC-K and Somaliland forces are stationed in close proximity. This can be done by discouraging the two sides from introducing more men or weapons in these areas. The sides should also be encouraged to create further distance between the armed forces, to reduce accidental escalation of the situation. Finally, the two sides should establish a line of communication between senior military and political leaders to quickly resolve any incidents that could lead to unwanted escalations.
- b Support indirect peacemaking and dialogue efforts through traditional leaders, businesspeople, religious authorities and civil society organizations. Even though such efforts have, so far, had limited success, given the stance of the two administrations, it is still worth encouraging them. These efforts can focus, among other things, on resolving communal tensions, facilitating movement of people and goods, and potentially, the exchange of prisoners between SSC-K and Somaliland.
- c Assist SSC-K/North Eastern State in two respects: i) the improvement of revenue collection with, for instance, the establishment of effective customs and excise facilities; ii) the demilitarization of militias and improvement of command-and-control structures over SSC-K forces.

6.3. City of Erigabo

The main issue in Erigabo is the displacement of Dhulbahante and Warsangeli from the city in December 2024, and the contest over the city's future status. Again, the issues are difficult to resolve because they are rooted in the unresolved status of Somaliland, and the overlapping territorial claims between Somaliland, Puntland and now SSC-K. The focus should, therefore, be on improving relations between the people of the city, and facilitating the return of the displaced.

- a Support processes of dialogue between the leaders of the different communities of the city, mainly Issaq and Harti sub-clans. Encourage, as much as possible, the idea that communal relations can improve even in the absence of a settlement to the larger question of the city's final and future status. The fact that Somaliland and Puntland are wary of the federal government's support for SSC-K, and might be willing to collaborate on certain issues, might lead them to facilitate dialogue on this issue. There are already unconfirmed reports that the two administrations are discussing the situation of the city. But at the same time, if these two administrations' collaboration over Erigabo is seen as aimed at undermining the claims of SSC-K, the chances of success will be limited.
- b One of the issues that resulted from the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli displacement from the city is the turnover of property. City political and community leaders should focus on the return of any property that was illegally obtained. Such a step would encourage the displaced to return to the city by demonstrating the goodwill and desire for good relations on the part of those that remain in the city.

7. Further research

Below, we highlight several topics and areas that were beyond the scope of this report but are important factors in shaping the political dynamics and interests playing out in the SSC-K regions. These topics can benefit from further research.

- There are regional and international dimensions of the conflict that are important to understand. Ethiopia, the Gulf states, the Trump administration, as well as the Somali regional state of Ethiopia have direct or indirect influences. This is particularly the case for Ethiopia and the Somali regional state of Ethiopia.
- Further analysis and understanding of the Islamist dimension, in Sanaag in particular, is important. This would help to either highlight or assuage concerns of Islamist involvement or potential involvement if a conflict were to escalate.
- The diaspora's role in initiating SSC-K, in supporting the fighting with Somaliland, and sustaining SSC-K in the future is another topic that needs further understanding.
- The political economy of the conflict, which was both a driver of the conflict and has implications for the sustainability of SSC-K, is another topic that could benefit from further research. For instance, the port town of Las Qorey, in eastern Sanaag, appears to be emerging as a flash point between SSC-K and Puntland because of its economic implications on both.

8. Additional reading

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