

## SOMALIA IN SEARCH OF BALANCE – Four approaches to stability

Horn of Africa Team, CMI

*The new President of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, completed his first five months in power in November. His administration is confronted by the concrete challenges of seeking to reconcile Somalis among themselves, uniting the nation in repelling Al-Shabaab, saving the most vulnerable from famine, and striking a new balance in Somalia's international relations.*

Following elections that were delayed for over eighteen months by the previous government of Somalia, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has returned to the presidency of a much-changed country. The region is in turmoil, while, globally, rivalries among the great powers overshadow and risk disrupting the country's economic and political progress.

In responding to these challenges, he will have to consider the policies inherited from the last administration. The government of the previous president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also known as Farmaajo, created serious tensions by trying to extend its mandate. It centralised authority, disrupting the balance of relations between the Federal Government and Federal Member States. During the later stages of the previous government, Al-Shabaab became a financial and political power within Somalia and expanded its recruitment and operations into its neighbours. Additionally, the alliance – details of which have never been published – between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia eroded the consensus on the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, IGAD.

Against this background, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has tended to emphasise consultation and consensus in politics while mobilising confrontation with Al-Shabaab. The administration is obliged to detoxify the relations between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States. Since his inauguration, the president has already convened three meetings of the National Consultative Council (NCC) com-

prising the Federal government and the leaders of the Federal Member States. The latest meeting created consensus on the need to confront Al-Shabaab. The government has emphasised that a military strategy against Al-Shabaab is not enough, opting instead for a combination of politics, economic, ideology and military policies. It must also deal with two big neighbours: Kenya, which has a new President, and Ethiopia, whose regional role has been denied by its own civil war in the north.

There is no return to a status quo ante for Somalia, its neighbours, and

international partners. The new Somali administration must now find the fiscal space to manage the politics of its own transition to an internally reconciled and durable stability in an unpredictable region and with its traditional foreign partners distracted by rivalry among the great powers. In this sense, international partners should consider how they might rethink several key aspects of their relations with Somalia.

Fairly soon, Somalia and its international partners will have to agree on priority issues, which stakeholders can be effectively mobilised and the appro-

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Somalia and its international partners need to agree on priorities, sequencing, and which stakeholders to mobilise, to tackle the challenges the country currently faces and build a Somalia at peace with itself and its neighbours.
- Strengthening local politics will move Somalia beyond the current debate over federalism, strengthen accountability and give marginalised communities a deeper sense of belonging.
- The momentum of the current mobilisation against Al-Shabaab can be built on to strengthen Somali ownership of security, but it must be placed within a broader political strategy. International support for nationally owned solutions requires a clear legal and constitutional basis.
- Somalia's relations with its regional neighbours require confidence-building, as violence by Al-Shabaab spills over beyond the country's borders. While Al-Shabaab is first and foremost a Somali issue, it must be supported within a regional security engagement.

appropriate sequencing. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has repeatedly made it clear in statements and speeches that the issue of Al-Shabaab must be tackled. Following the recent devastating attacks in Mogadishu and Ethiopia, he has called for the consolidation and strengthening of the “national uprising” against Al-Shabaab, based on collaboration between the national army and local clan militias. He has also emphasised that military approaches of containment and degradation must be complemented by fighting the group on the ideological and economic fronts. The president has rejected the option that Al-Shabaab has a right to represent Islam in Somalia. A new strategy that encompasses political, economic, security, and diplomatic approaches thus seems to be emerging. This also signals the need to engage in dialogue and prepare for political work to deal with Al-Shabaab. The government must now coordinate and support local clan militias that have undertaken attacks against Al-Shabaab and retaken once occupied villages.

As Somalia builds on these early initiatives, Somalia’s international partners might want to consider more innovative approaches – the following recommendations are a valuable basis for pursuing stability.

**Federalism can only thrive when democratised and deepened to incorporate local district politics.** How political life and accountability is allowed and encouraged to reach local politics is central to Somalia’s future. It will add a new layer of political participation and give a greater sense of belonging to a large number of communities marginalised by the current federal states. This will move Somalia beyond the current debate about federalism and the attendant disputes between the Federal Government and the Federal Member States. It will also bring a greater accountability in the collection and sharing of revenue. The encouragement of such a process will help build consensus in addressing security threats and narrow the fault lines between the centre and the periphery that Al-Shabaab consistently manipulates. To achieve this, Somalia will also have to finalise its still provisional constitution.

**Somalia’s business community should be encouraged to participate.** The country’s entrepreneurs can be of great help in finding solutions to local and national problems. The business community has every reason to shift from protecting itself from protection rackets (which now include Al-Shabaab) to engaging fully in Somalia’s opportunity to benefit from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief programme, which will restore Somalia’s position in the global financial system. Somalia’s economy is not simply concerned with managing existing government finances but also with generating revenue from taxes and investment that benefit a transparently managed public finance system. The dynamism of this community should be harnessed to benefit the process of reconciliation and economic growth.

**Security should be a Somali responsibility.** The current operation against Al-Shabaab has demonstrated an unusual degree of operational coordination between Somali National Army (SNA) units and community defence forces. This could serve as a basis to enhance command and control within Somalia’s entire security system. In the last three years, clan loyalties were allowed to penetrate SNA structures, and multiple training missions led by different international partners have created an army that still requires a unified doctrine and interoperable units. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) requires clarity of purpose for the remaining time it still has in Somalia, since its mandate will expire in 2024 with a full transition of security operations to the SNA. Somalia’s federal structure allows for local control of policing and the “gendarmerie”. However, Somalia needs an international constituency that is unified in consolidating a security reform that provides Somalis with an unequivocal sense that the security of Somali citizens is delivered by constitutionally authorised Somali forces. The sooner this occurs, the sooner the security sector is brought within a set of national priorities that include the political reforms described above and a dynamic push for economic growth. A clear legal and constitutional basis for Somali security forces is an essential condition for further investment.

**A reset in Somalia’s relations with its neighbours is long overdue.** Many Somalis are active citizens of Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. The history of perceived Somali irredentism cannot be wished away and remains a key reason for potential mistrust and insecurity in the region. Arriving at relations that enhance confidence among the countries will be central to the rebuilding of the Somalia state. At the same time, there have been changes in Somalia as Al-Shabaab resurgence has infiltrated and established indigenous cells beyond Somalia and remains a threat to the region. However, it should be emphasised that Al-Shabaab has become cancerous to Somalis first and foremost. This is why Somalia’s internal struggle against Al-Shabaab needs to be supported within a regional security engagement, and with full support from the international community.

**As we look to Somalia’s future, the above recommendations are important steps for ensuring stability and reconciliation in a country with a history of turmoil.** Local ownership and full support from the international community are crucial for providing Somalia a fresh start and building on the current momentum in their stabilisation efforts.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

*This paper draws on informal discussions held as part of CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation’s project “Enhancing constructive dialogue and cooperation on peace and security in the Horn of Africa”, funded by the European Union.*