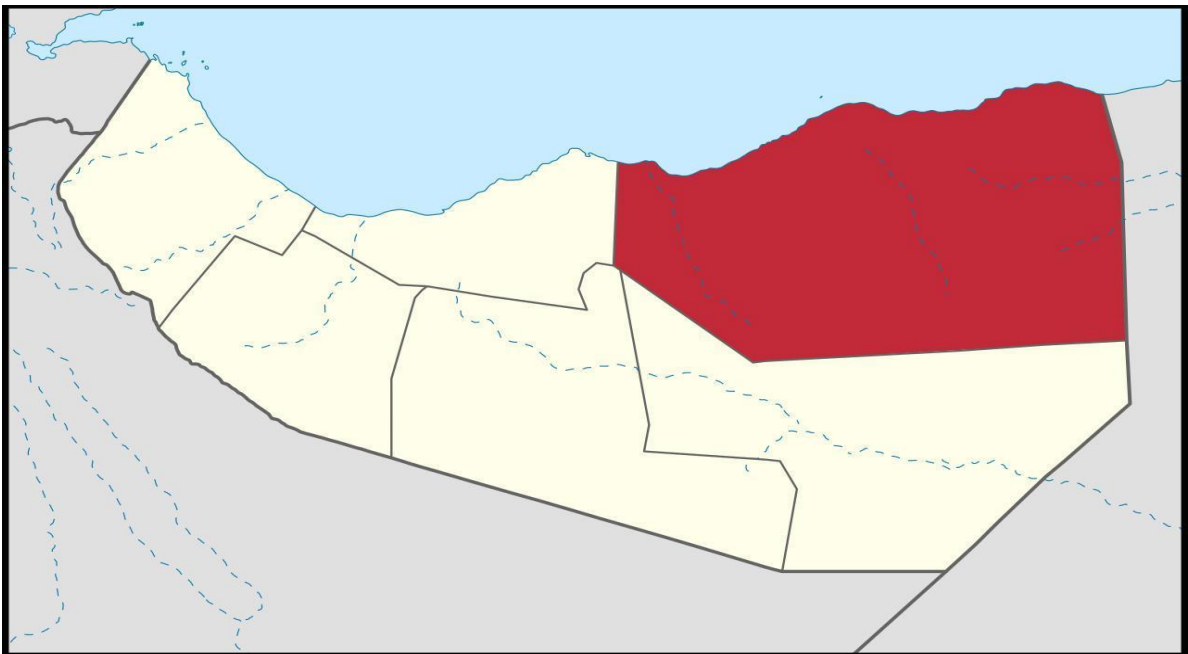


Sanaag at a Crossroads

Assessment on Conflict Dynamics, Political Fragmentation, and Prospects for Sustainable Peace in Sanaag



November, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This Post-Conflict Assessment was undertaken by the Academy for Peace and Development (APD) on November 9th, 2025 to examine and document the dynamics, impacts, and recovery prospects following the December 2024 inter-clan conflict in Erigavo, the administrative capital of the Sanaag region. The conflict involved members of the Isaaq and Harti-Darood clans and marked a significant disruption to social cohesion and community stability in the Sanaag region. In the aftermath, the Government of Somaliland, in close collaboration with the Puntland administration, initiated a peace and reconciliation process aimed at restoring harmony, rebuilding trust and preventing a recurrence of violence.

Additionally, the assessment analyzes the underlying causes and issues of the conflict, its socio-economic and political impacts, and the effectiveness of ongoing peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. It further generates evidence-based insights to guide policymakers, local authorities, and development partners in designing targeted interventions that promote sustainable peace, inclusive governance, and community resilience in the Sanaag region. Geographically, the assessment focuses on Erigavo and its surrounding areas, which were directly affected by the 2024 conflict and subsequently became the center of reconciliation initiatives culminating in the Erigavo Peace Conference. The peace process was nationally supported, bringing together multiple stakeholders—including traditional elders, local authorities, community leaders, women, and youth—under a cooperative framework jointly facilitated by the administrations of Somaliland and Puntland.

The study employs a qualitative and participatory research approach, combining key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and a review of historical and policy documents. The data collection tools were designed to capture diverse community perspectives, drawing on themes such as historical peace agreements, governance dynamics, conflict triggers, social cohesion, and the role of women and youth in peacebuilding. The approach emphasizes local ownership, inclusivity, and contextual understanding, ensuring that the assessment reflects the realities and aspirations of the affected communities. Its overarching aim is to deliver a thorough analysis of the post-conflict landscape in Erigavo, outline feasible pathways for sustainable peace and guide evidence-driven policy and programmatic interventions by

national authorities, regional administrations and development partners supporting peacebuilding and governance in Somaliland.

1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since its unilateral declaration of independence from Somalia on May 18, 1991, the Republic of Somaliland has made substantial progress in consolidating peace, rebuilding governance structures, and strengthening its democracy. Over the past three decades, the country has distinguished itself through a bottom-up approach to reconciliation grounded in traditional authority, local dialogue, and inclusive participation.¹ This locally led model has enabled the reconstruction of public institutions, the establishment of a multiparty system, and the conduct of peaceful, credible elections—earning Somaliland a reputation as a relatively stable post-conflict entity in the Horn of Africa. However, despite these achievements, recurrent inter-clan conflicts in the Eastern regions of Togdheer, Sool, and Sanaag continue to pose serious challenges to peace and stability. These disputes are largely driven by competition over grazing land, water resources, and mineral deposits, alongside overlapping political and territorial claims. The resulting violence has caused population displacement, property destruction, and the breakdown of essential services, eroding the social fabric of affected communities.

The Sanaag region, one of Somaliland’s most diverse and strategically important areas, has historically been home to multiple clans. The Isaaq clan primarily inhabits the western and southwestern parts of the region, while the Harti-Daroodclans—notably the Warsangali and Dhulbahante reside in the Eastern and Southeastern zones. Following the collapse of Somalia’s central government in January 1991, Somaliland authorities extended control over Erigavo, the regional capital, and surrounding Isaaq-inhabited territories. However, the Harti clans’ refusal to accept Hargeisa’s authority led to a series of inter-communal peace consultations between 1991 and 1993.² These efforts culminated in the signing of the Erigavo Peace Charter on 31 August 1993, which ushered in an extended period of coexistence, stability, and inter-clan harmony in Sanaag that endured for nearly three decades.

¹ Interpeace, 2021; UNDP, 2022

² APD, 2024; UNDP, 2021

This longstanding peace was disrupted in December 2024, when violent clashes erupted in Erigavo between the Isaaq and Harti (Dhulbahante and Warsangali) communities.³ The renewed hostilities occurred amid escalating tensions stemming from overlapping administrative claims involving Somaliland, Puntland, and the re-emerging SSC-Khatumo State. The dispute, which centered on territories inhabited by Isaac and Harti-Darood clans, has deepened political fragmentation across the region—exacerbated further by the Las Anod conflict of early 2023. While Puntland and SSC-Khatumo base their claims on kinship and historical lineage, Somaliland asserts sovereignty grounded in colonial-era borders.⁴ In the broader political landscape, Sool and Sanaag have remained divided along clan and administrative lines. The Harti-Darood clans have largely aligned with Puntland, citing shared ancestry and political affinity, whereas the Isaaq clan has remained loyal to Somaliland. This divide has contributed to the region’s contested status and its limited access to international aid and development support since 1991.

Amid this ongoing contestation, the Dhulbahante clan, following years of intermittent conflict between 2007 and 2023, declared the formation of the Northeastern State administration in Las Anod on 30 July 2025. The newly announced entity claimed jurisdiction over Dhulbahante-inhabited territories in Sool, Sanaag, and Buhodle, including parts of Erigavo, intensifying tensions in the region.

1.1 THE BATTLE OF ERIGAVO

To assert its authority and expand territorial control, the Dhulbahante clan reportedly mobilized militias and smuggled weapons into Erigavo, initiating armed confrontations on 14–15 December 2024.⁵ The fighting aimed to annex parts of Sanaag into the newly declared Northeastern State. Somaliland security forces, supported by local Isaaq community militias, succeeded in repelling the offensive and regaining control of the city.

³ Bradbury, 2008; Walls, 2014

⁴ Hoehne, 2015; APD, 2019

⁵ International Crisis Group, 2023

However, the clashes triggered widespread looting, destruction of property, and mass displacement of Harti-Darood residents, particularly from the Warsangali and Dhulbahante sub-clans, many of whom fled to their rural clan territories for safety.

1.2 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND PEACE INITIATIVES

In response to the escalating violence and humanitarian displacement, President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdillahi Cirro issued a Peace Declaration aimed at halting hostilities and restoring communal harmony across the Sanaag region. The President appealed to stakeholders—including traditional elders, scholars, business leaders, women, and youth—to participate actively in the peace process, emphasizing that peace and coexistence form the cornerstone of Somaliland's state-building agenda.⁶ The Declaration received broad support in Badhan District, where local elders and intellectuals endorsed the President's initiative as a first step toward dialogue between rival communities in Erigavo. Traditional leaders also issued a public condemnation of the Federal Government of Somalia's involvement in Dhahar, denouncing external interference and reaffirming Somaliland's sovereignty and commitment to locally driven peace-building.⁷

1.3 SECURITY SECTOR REFORMS

Parallel to the peace process, the government implemented a significant security sector reform, integrating approximately 6,000 civil defense personnel into the Somaliland National Army. Previously operating outside the formal military command, these forces were viewed as contributing to fragmentation within the security apparatus. Through standardized training, a uniform code of conduct and dismantling of parallel armed groups, their integration marked a strategic shift toward a unified, accountable, and professional security force.⁸ These measures aim to strengthen institutional cohesion, reinforce the rule of law, and enhance the government's capacity to maintain national stability.

⁶ ACLED, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023

⁷ APD, 2025

⁸ Interpeace, 2020; UNSOM, 2023

1.4 RENEWED RECONCILIATION AND THE ERIGAVO PEACE CONFERENCE

Against this backdrop, Sanaaga region long known for its social diversity and political sensitivity, became the focal point of renewed peace and reconciliation efforts. After months of consultations among clan elders, local leaders, and civil society representatives, a preparatory committee, with support from national institutions and development partners under the R2P Programme, successfully organized the Grand Peace Conference in Erigavo from 21–22 October 2025.⁹ The Conference brought together more than 500 delegates, including traditional elders, parliamentarians, government officials, women, and youth representatives.

Notably, the participation of Warsangali traditional leaders, led by their titled elders, symbolized a significant step toward regional inclusivity and reconciliation. However, the Dhulbahante clan, aligned with the Northeastern State, did not attend. At the closing ceremony, President Cirro commended the delegates for their constructive engagement and reaffirmed that sustainable peace depends on collective responsibility and ongoing dialogue.¹⁰ He also acknowledged the President of Puntland for his cooperation and extended an open invitation to the Dhulbahante community to join the peace framework in the region. The Conference concluded with a six-point resolution centered on peaceful coexistence, national unity, inclusive dialogue, development priorities, strengthened security cooperation, and recognition of national leadership. The Erigavo Peace Conference thus marked a critical milestone in the restoration of trust and social cohesion in Sanaag, laying a durable foundation for sustainable peace, improved governance, and equitable regional development.

2 OBJECTIVES OF THE ASSESSMENT

This study sought to assess the underlying drivers, impacts, and post-conflict recovery prospects of the inter-clan conflict in the Sanaag region as well as to identify practical strategies that promote reconciliation, social recovery, and sustainable peace and stability among affected communities. In particular, the study was aimed at; examining the root causes, triggers, and patterns of the December 2024 inter-clan conflict, including the historical, social, and political factors shaping peace and security in Sanaag.

⁹ Chambers, 2014; Creswell, 2018

¹⁰ APD, 2025

- Identifying and mapping key peace-building actors and institutions, clarifying their roles, relationships, and coordination across local, regional, and national levels.
- Assessing the functionality, inclusivity and legitimacy of existing peace and governance mechanisms, and evaluating how they contribute to dialogue, conflict prevention, and community resilience.
- Understanding community perspectives on justice, trust, inter-clan relations, and key grievances, with attention to the views of women, youth, and other marginalized groups.
- Generating evidence-based recommendations to guide reconciliation, recovery, and governance-strengthening efforts and supporting long-term stability in Erigavo and the wider Sanaag region.

3 METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The APD uses participatory action research (PAR) as a research strategy. This approach enables the involvement of stakeholders in the entire research process including in research design field operation, validation of the research findings, and prioritizing of proposals. As a result, the inquiry was conducted in accordance with PAR guidelines. PAR made sure that participants in the study and other stakeholders could influence and gain from information sharing, which in turn could influence their local dispute resolution methods and further alter their response to conflict, climate change, drought, and famine. This study was conducted by the APD research team. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed to collect and analyze the data. Given the complexity of the research subject, the researchers adopted an exploratory model. The study was structured in four steps. The first step involved the development of the research framework, interview schedules, and work plans. The second step entailed a detailed literature review to determine research gaps and explore the status and historical and political account of the conflict. The third component involved data collection and analysis. Three key informant interviews, three focus group discussions (FGDs) and consultation meetings were conducted in Erigavo. 50 men and 30 women were interviewed. These included officials of the regional government, traditional leaders, clan elders, public intellectuals, and women rights organizations. The audio-visual crew at APD filmed the focus groups and interviews. The data

was then analyzed thematically based on the objectives of the study. Preliminary findings were presented to the APD management team. The last step involved compiling and finishing this report.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 DIVERGENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE 1993 ERIGAVO PEACE AGREEMENT

One of the most persistent challenges to sustainable peace in Sanaag is the starkly diverse ways in which Isaaq and Warsangali elders interpret the legacy and implementation of the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement^{11,12} These contrasting narratives reveal the complexity of post-conflict memory in the region and demonstrate how divergent understandings of past settlements continue to shape present-day relations. For Isaaq elders, the 1993 agreement is remembered as a landmark achievement that brought an end to the intense inter-clan violence of the early 1990s.¹³ They describe the settlement as comprehensive and effective, crediting it with creating the conditions for forgiveness, the return of looted or occupied assets, and the reintegration of communities through customary reconciliation led by traditional authorities. In their view, the agreement provided a durable foundation for stability and coexistence in Erigavo and its surrounding areas for many years.¹⁴

However, Isaaq elders also believe that the symbolic power of this settlement has gradually eroded. They attribute this decline not to flaws within the agreement itself, but to shifting political narratives, growing external pressures, and the weakening of cultural norms around forgiveness, compensation, and social cohesion. From their perspective, the dilution of traditional authority and changes in political leadership has weakened the spirit of the original accord.

¹¹ Traditional Elder. (2025, November 9). *Focus Group Discussions on reflections on the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement*. Erigavo District.

¹² Traditional elders. (2025, November 9). *Focus group discussion on reflections on the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement* [Focus group discussion]. Erigavo District.

¹³ Traditional elders. (2025, November 9). *Focus group discussion on reflections on the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement* [Focus group discussion]. Erigavo District.

¹⁴ Elder Cabsiye, C. (2025, November 9). *Focus Group Discussions on reconciliation and community forgiveness*. Ceerigaabo District.

Warsangali elders, by contrast, present a fundamentally different interpretation. While they acknowledge the 1993 agreement's role in halting violence, they view it as an incomplete and transitional settlement rather than a fully implemented peace accord.¹⁵ They argue that major issues, ranging from unresolved murder cases to destroyed property and the displacement of entire sub-clans, were intentionally deferred at the time, with the expectation that a functioning regional or national government would address them later.¹⁶ According to this perspective, the failure of successive governments to act on these deferred responsibilities has left a legacy of unaddressed grievances that continue to fuel mistrust and periodic instability.

These divergent narratives indicate that the legacy of the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement remains deeply contested. For some, it represents a successful settlement whose influence has weakened over time while for others; it is an unfinished process whose unresolved elements still shape the dynamics of conflict today. This divergence underscores the urgent need for a shared, multi-clan understanding of past agreements; one that acknowledges differing experiences and addresses gaps in implementation, to ensure that future peace-building efforts do not repeat the shortcomings of the past.

4.2 SHIFTS IN CONFLICT DRIVERS: FROM WARTIME HOSTILITIES TO POLITICALLY CHARGED TENSIONS

The nature of conflict in Sanaag has shifted dramatically over the past three decades, moving from the wartime fragmentation of the early 1990s to a more complex landscape shaped by political agendas, external influence, and diminishing governance structures.¹⁷ Isaaq elders recall the earlier conflict as a struggle born out of state collapse and militia rivalry, where communities fought for security and survival amid institutional vacuum.¹⁸ The reconciliation that followed, culminating in the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement, relied heavily on customary

¹⁵ Warsangali clan elders. (2025, November 10). *Interview on unresolved issues of the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement. Erigavo District.*

¹⁶ Harti elder (Warsangali clan). (2025, November 10). *Interview on unresolved grievances related to historical conflict resolution, property destruction, and displacement. Erigavo District.*

¹⁷ Harti elder (2025, November 10). *Interview on unresolved issues of the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement. Erigavo District.*

¹⁸ Isaaq clan elders. (2025, November 10). *Interview on unresolved issues of the 1993 Erigavo Peace Agreement. Erigavo District.*

norms—collective forgiveness, negotiated compensation, and the expectation that grievances would be redressed in the interest of restoring social order.

In contrast, elders noted that today's tensions bear little resemblance to those earlier dynamics.¹⁹ They describe a shift toward increased politicization, where demands for compensation have become more frequent and transactional, even for minor disputes, signaling a departure from long-standing norms of restraint and tolerance. Additionally, political actors outside Sanaag—particularly groups aligned with SSC and Puntland—have assumed a growing role in shaping the local conflict environment, influencing perceptions, loyalties, and security dynamics in ways that extend beyond traditional clan structures. A similar pattern emerged in the accounts of Warsangali elders, who emphasized that recent instability in the region has not been driven by inter-clan hostility but by politically charged confrontations between Dhulbahante fighters and Somaliland security forces.²⁰ Local communities, including many Harti-Darood families, consciously disengaged from these clashes, viewing them as political struggles unrelated to historical relationships among Sanaag's clans. Their deliberate withdrawal reflects a widening gap between grassroots social dynamics and the broader political agendas now influencing events at the grassroot level. Together, these perspectives reveal a fundamental evolution in the drivers of conflict in Sanaag.

Thus, whereas earlier violence was rooted in militia competition and the collapse of state authority, contemporary tensions are fueled by external alliances, political calculations, and shifting expectations around justice and compensation. Understanding this transformation is critical for shaping peace-building strategies that respond to present-day realities rather than relying solely on mechanisms designed for past inter-clan conflicts

4.3 LIMITATIONS OF POLITICALLY LED PEACE INITIATIVES AND THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL DIALOGUE

The recent peace efforts in Sanaag reveal significant structural limitations arising from the increasing dominance of politically led initiatives and the gradual erosion of traditional

¹⁹ Traditional elders. (2025, November 9). *Focus group discussion on community-led versus government-led peace processes*. Erigavo District.

²⁰ World Bank, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2022

mechanisms of dialogue. Historically, reconciliation in the region relied on direct, community-centered engagement led by traditional elders who possessed the authority, legitimacy, and cultural grounding to negotiate durable settlements. Contemporary processes, however, reflect a shift toward state-driven frameworks that often operate at a distance from affected communities. Additionally, Isaaq elders observed that the government's six-point plan, while conceived with the intention of restoring stability, lacks the inclusive, face-to-face deliberations that characterized successful past reconciliations in Sanaag.²¹ The absence of direct interaction between key stakeholders has, in their assessment, weakened interpersonal trust and slowed progress. Despite these shortcomings, they noted that local communities have taken independent steps to prevent the escalation of violence, by forming reconciliation committees and cooperating with security actors to maintain peace and order on the ground.

The Warsangali elders, however, emphasized that both historical and current peace initiatives have relied heavily on fragmented, clan-specific consultations.²² They described earlier processes as engagements conducted “behind separate walls,” where clans were addressed individually rather than collectively. This approach, they argued, limited transparency, created asymmetrical information, and fostered suspicion among communities. For them, sustainable peace requires integrated, multi-clan dialogue platforms capable of rebuilding trust and generating shared ownership over political and social agreements. They identified APD as a credible actor capable of convening such inclusive forums. Moreover, elders from both communities noted that the overall peace-building process in Sanaag cannot be considered genuinely bottom-up, as key priorities, frameworks, and decision-making structures are largely shaped by political authorities and external actors rather than emerging organically from community-led deliberations. Overall, the perspectives of both elder groups point to a broader structural challenge: Peace processes that prioritize political design over traditional deliberation risk overlooking the interpersonal, community-driven foundations of long-term stability. Hence, restoring inclusive, collectively convened dialogue mechanisms is essential for securing a lasting and widely accepted peace in Sanaag.

²¹Traditional Elder. (2025, November 10). *Interview on inclusive clan participation and fragmentation of peace consultations*. Erigavo District.

²²Community Elder. (2025, November 10). *Interview on deferred governance commitments and state failure in Sanaag*. Erigavo District.

4.4 GOVERNANCE FAILURES, ADMINISTRATIVE FRAGMENTATION, AND BARRIERS TO MOBILITY.

Governance-related grievances emerged as a central driver of instability in Sanaag, with both Isaaq and Warsangali elders identifying the erosion of state authority and the proliferation of fragmented administrations as significant sources of tension. For Isaaq elders, one of the most visible manifestations of governance failure is the barriers to movement experienced by community members.²³ They reported that Isaaq drivers traveling beyond Yubbe toward Bosaso frequently encounter restrictions and harassment—conditions they interpret as a violation of earlier peace agreements and a threat to their personal security. However, Harti-Darood communities continue to move freely across areas under Somaliland jurisdiction. This unequal treatment has reinforced perceptions of discrimination as it undermines inter-clan trust but also signals the weakness of state institutions in protecting the rights of all citizens. Isaaq elders also expressed concern over the presence of competing political administrations operating within the region, including authorities aligned with SSC and Puntland. The existence of these overlapping governance structures complicates dialogue, introduces conflicting political agendas, and contributes to an environment where no single authority is perceived as legitimate or capable of enforcing agreements. This administrative fragmentation, they argued, fuels suspicion and limits the potential for coordinated peacebuilding.

The Warsangali elders on the other hand offered a complementary but more critical perspective, framing governance deficits as the foundational cause of long-standing conflict in the region. They emphasized that state institutions have historically failed to establish effective administrative structures in Sanaag, resulting in a vacuum that has been filled by multiple authorities with limited accountability.²⁴ According to this view, political marginalization, inequitable service delivery, and the lack of visible state investment have eroded the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of many Harti-Darood communities. They described suspended development, inconsistent representation, and perceived exclusion from decision-making processes as key indicators of governance breakdown.

²³ Community Elder. (2025, November 10). *Interview on deferred governance commitments and state failure in Sanaag. Erigavo District.*

²⁴ Community Elder. (2025, November 10). *Interview on deferred governance commitments and state failure in Sanaag. Erigavo District.*

Elders also reported abuses committed by government-linked militias, including looting and the destruction of property.²⁵ Such incidents were cited as evidence of administrative collapse and inadequate oversight, reinforcing community perceptions that state institutions neither protect civilians nor uphold the rule of law. Taken together, these perspectives reveal that governance failures manifested through illegal barriers to movement, administrative fragmentation, and perceptions of political exclusion, constitutes a critical driver of mistrust and instability in Sanaag. Addressing these issues requires strengthening state legitimacy, ensuring equitable access and mobility, and establishing a coherent, accountable administrative presence capable of rebuilding public confidence across all communities in the region.

4.5 POLITICAL VISITS AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTES FUEL INSTABILITY IN CONTESTED AREAS

Longstanding territorial disputes over Sool and Sanaag continue to generate instability across northern Somalia, with overlapping claims by Somaliland, Puntland, and the Federal Government of Somalia causing a persistent climate of political tension. In these contested spaces, high-level political visits, typically routine in more stable contexts, have taken a symbolic significance. Rather than being viewed as administrative engagements, such appearances are interpreted as deliberate assertions of territorial authority. Consequently, these acts often provoke political or military responses from rival administrations and creating more tension in an already volatile environment.²⁶ The events surrounding the Somalia Prime Minister's visit to Las Anod in April 2025 exemplify this dynamic. Situated at the heart of the Sool dispute, Las Anod has long been emblematic of the competing claims that define relations between Somaliland and Puntland.²⁷ Somaliland interpreted the Prime Minister's visit as a direct challenge to its territorial jurisdiction and an attempt to undermine its political legitimacy in the region. This reaction reflects a broader pattern in which symbolic political gestures, whether official visits, public statements, or the establishment of alternative administrative structures, are perceived as encroachments on disputed territory.

²⁵ Isaaq Traditional Elders. (2025, November). *Focus group consultation on the political nature of the 2024 Erigavo conflict. Erigavo District.*

²⁶ Rift Valley Institute. (2023). *Conflict dynamics in northern Somalia: Sool, Sanaag and Togdheer.* Nairobi: RVI; International Crisis Group. (2023). *Somalia's Las Anod conflict: Drivers and implications for regional stability.* Brussels: ICG.

²⁷ Anadolu Agency. (2025, April 13). *Somali premier pays historic visit to LasAnod.* Anadolu Agency.

The impact of these symbolic confrontations extends well beyond political elites. For local communities in Sool and Sanaag, the repeated cycle of high-profile visits and retaliatory measures has produced long-term social and economic consequences.²⁸ Heightened political competition has contributed to chronic underdevelopment, reflected in limited infrastructure investment, inconsistent provision of public services, and restricted access to economic opportunities. Moreover, the constant interplay of political symbolism and territorial claims has intensified local tensions, placing communities under pressure to align with competing authorities and undermining traditional mechanisms of coexistence.

Overall, the persistent entanglement of political gestures with unresolved territorial disputes serves as a key driver of instability in Sool and Sanaag. As long as high-level visits continue to be interpreted through the lens of territorial assertion, these areas will remain vulnerable to political friction, weak governance, and development stagnation. Addressing the underlying territorial contestations through negotiated and mutually recognized mechanisms is therefore essential to reducing tensions and fostering durable stability in the region.

4.6 THE IMPACT OF THE POLITICAL DISPUTE FROM SOOL TO THE SANAAG REGION

The political and military crisis that began in Las Anod in early 2023 has had cascading effects across the wider Eastern regions of Somaliland, extending well beyond Sool and significantly causing instability in Sanaag.²⁹ (ACAPS, 2023) The confrontation between the Somaliland Armed Forces and SSC-Khatumo militias that are aligned with the Federal Government of Somalia revived a longstanding territorial and political dispute, transforming local grievances into a broader regional challenge. The roots of this conflict lie in the unresolved contestation between Somaliland and Puntland over Sool, a dispute dating back to 2007 and shaped by overlapping historical, cultural, and clan affiliations. These disputes have rendered the region chronically fragile, with recurrent cycles of violence producing substantial casualties and social disruption.

²⁸ International Crisis Group. (2023). *Somaliland: The politics of territorial disputes in Sool and Sanaag*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

²⁹ ACAPS. (2023). *Somalia: Key crises to watch in 2023 (thematic report)*.

The decisive moment came on 6 February 2023, when traditional elders in Las Anod declared the region's political separation from Somaliland and demanded the withdrawal of Somaliland forces to Oog.³⁰ This announcement marked a turning point, as it redefined the confrontation from a localized dispute into a direct challenge to Somaliland's territorial claims. The refusal of SSC-Khatumo to accept Somaliland's administrative presence escalated the situation rapidly. Months of intense fighting culminated in the defeat and retreat of Somaliland's forces towards Oog on 25 August 2023, although the withdrawal itself triggered further clashes with local communities along the contested axes of movement.³¹ As Somaliland's military presence contracted, new fault lines emerged among neighboring clans and sub-clans. Notably, clashes between sections of the Habar Jeclo and Dhulbahante occurred in Qorilugud, revealing how shifts in military control created localized struggles over land, security, and political alignment. These confrontations demonstrated that the conflict's impact extended beyond the principal disputes, destabilizing long-standing community relations and amplifying tensions between groups with historically fluid boundaries of cooperation and competition.

Furthermore, the spill over into Sanaag became increasingly evident in late 2024. The political vacuum created by the redeployment of Somaliland forces, combined with heightened Dhulbahante mobilization under SSC-Khatumo, created new arenas of confrontation in the region. Erigavo, the capital of Sanaag, witnessed clashes between Somaliland security forces and Dhulbahante groups supportive of SSC-Khatumo. Though limited in scale, these incidents signaled a widening territorial contestation and raised concerns about Sanaag's vulnerability to the broader political struggle unfolding in Sool.³² (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025). Therefore, Sanaag's complexity lies in its demographic composition and its geographic centrality to competing political visions. SSC-Khatumo asserts claims over Sool, Sanaag, and Togdheer on the basis of Dhulbahante presence, even though Isaaq communities – particularly the Habar Yoonis and Habar Jeclo – constitute the majority in most parts of Sanaag.³³ (European

³⁰ Somaliland Chronicle. (2023, June 4). *Newest anti-Somaliland front: Las Anod war*. Somaliland Chronicle.

³¹ United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia. (2023). *Situation report on developments in northern Somalia*. Mogadishu: UNSOM.

³² European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Somalia: Security situation — Sool, Sanaag and SSC-Khatumo analysis: Sanaag*

³³ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Somalia: Security situation — Sool, Sanaag and SSC-Khatumo analysis: Sanaag*

Union Agency for Asylum, 2025) These overlapping claims, when combined with the intensified political activism following the Las Anod conflict, risk transforming the region into a new theater of confrontation. As the political dispute reconfigures alliances and territorial expectations, Sanaag faces increasing uncertainty, particularly in areas where administrative authority is contested or where communities maintain social and economic ties to both Puntland and Somaliland.

By the end of 2024, the cumulative effect of the Sool conflict had produced a climate of heightened insecurity across Eastern Somaliland. The volatility of the political landscape—shaped by Somaliland’s effort to retain territorial integrity, Puntland’s competing claims, and SSC-Khatumo’s pursuit of autonomy continues to threaten the stability of Sanaag. Given the region’s strategic importance, deep inter-clan linkages, and history of coexistence, any further escalation has the potential to destabilize not only Sanaag but also the broader Eastern corridor, including Togdheer.

The political dispute originating in Sool has thus generated a far-reaching impact that now shapes the security dynamics of Sanaag. The region’s exposure to shifting territorial claims, militarized movements, and inter-communal tensions underscores the fragility of peace in eastern Somaliland. Without a negotiated settlement addressing the root causes of the Sool conflict, Sanaag remains at risk of being drawn deeper into a protracted and region-wide political crisis.

4.7 FOUNDATIONAL GAPS IN THE INCLUSIVITY AND ENFORCEMENT OF THE ERIGAVO PEACE ACCORD

The Erigavo Peace Agreement contains major structural weaknesses that limit its credibility, inclusiveness, and potential for long-term stability. A central gap is the absence of the Dhulbahante community, one of the region’s largest clans and a primary stakeholder in the conflict. Peace settlements that omit key actors tend to lack broad acceptance, creating conditions in which unresolved grievances can resurface and undermine implementation.³⁴

³⁴ Cite Caaqil Darwiish, S. C. X. (2025, November 11). *Interview on Dhulbahante participation, unresolved grievances, and compensation requirements. Erigavo District*

Thus the exclusion of the Dhulbahante is a fatal omission that essentially undermines the ability of the peace agreement to achieve broader peace.

Equally critical is the lack of sufficient government authority to enforce the agreement's provisions. Without clear institutional leadership, operational security presence, and administrative commitment, the agreement remains aspirational. Communities perceive this weak state involvement as a sign that violations may go unaddressed, further diminishing trust in the process.

An additional layer of complexity arises from the lack of alignment among key actors, including the Elders' Peace Committee, government institutions, and the communities most affected by the conflict. Varied political interests and differing views on the agreement's terms, objectives, and responsibilities hinder the development of a unified peace framework. As a result, the agreement operates within a fragmented political landscape, leaving it open to conflicting interpretations and uneven implementation. Taken together, these issues illustrate the overall vulnerability of the peace process and highlight the necessity for a more inclusive, empowered, and coordinated approach.

4.8 EFFECTS OF MINING ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCE COMPETITION IN THE SANAAG REGION

Competition over natural resources has become a significant driver of conflict in the Sanaag region, where communities rely heavily on grazing, water sources, and the extraction of frankincense and myrrh for their livelihoods.³⁵ Beyond these traditional resources, Sanaag also holds extensive, largely untapped mineral and gold deposits, including a wide range of gemstones such as diopside, citrine, garnet, amethyst, emerald, and sapphire.³⁶ The discovery of gold in 2019 across areas such as Shidan, Waqdarya, Laba Oodo, Cirshiide, Gambadhe, and Maydh intensified local interest in mining, particularly among artisanal miners who utilize basic extraction methods. As mineral discoveries expanded, disputes emerged in successive phases. Initially, tensions arose between local communities and those residing near newly

³⁵ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Sanaag: Regional security situation and trends (Section on causes and incidents)*

³⁶. Republic of Somaliland Parliament. (2024). *Country profile 2024*

identified gold sites over access and ownership claims. These disagreements were followed by conflicts between communities and artisanal miners operating in contested areas.³⁷ In recent years, disputes have escalated further as local miners mobilize communities against foreign large-scale mining companies, portraying external actors as threats to their economic opportunities. The absence of a coherent policy framework governing mining activities, combined with limited state presence and regulatory oversight in Sanaag, has allowed competition over mineral resources to intensify without formal mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Furthermore, the governance vacuum around mining regulation has also created openings for extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State to expand their influence in the Northeastern parts of Sanaag.³⁸ These groups have engaged directly in gold extraction and illicit trade, using proceeds to acquire weapons and sustain their operations. Their presence has sparked armed confrontations with communities and contributed to insecurity across remote areas.³⁹ Moreover, economic hardships, lack of regulation, political marginalization, and exposure to extremist networks have pushed some individuals from Sanaag and broader Somaliland into recruitment pipelines for Al-Shabaab or ISIS in Somalia and Yemen.

Although Sanaag has served as a transit corridor for foreign fighters moving toward Puntland, Somaliland's relative political stability has helped shield it from large-scale attacks.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, unregulated mining, coupled with weak governance structures, continues to fuel resource-based competition, security risks, and emerging conflict across the region.

4.9 ELECTIONS AND THE WARSANGALI POWER-SHARING IN SANAAG

Warsangali clan remains politically dissatisfied with region's political dispensation and for a long time now, have been demanding power-sharing within Somaliland. Their main complaint

³⁷ NAI Somalia. (2020). *Sanaag's gold rush contributes to clan conflict*

³⁸ Horn Tribune. (2026, January 16). *UN Panel of Experts report confirms Al-Shabaab's expanding presence in eastern Somaliland, including the Sool and Sanaag regions.*

³⁹ SahanPost. (2025). *The hidden gold rush: How power, conflict, and foreign interests shape the mineral exploitation of Sanaag.*

⁴⁰ Commissie voor de Gravensteengroep/CGVS. (2017). *Country information: Security situation in Somaliland and Puntland*

involves lack of Somaliland governance and services in Warsengeli areas such as Eastern Erigavo.

Such challenges have undermined the ability of the Somaliland authorities to hold elections in in Eastern Sanaag leaving only the 2005 model as the only viable option. The 2005 model refers to the regional seat allocation formula established during Somaliland's 2005 parliamentary elections, which distributes representation based on historical regional boundaries and has since served as the default compromise in the absence of updated census data or an agreed alternative. The situation is further complicated by the context in the North Eastern State. The selection model (*Isxambaar*) for Warsangali MPs is a major point of contention. The process known as *Isxambaar*, a customary mechanism that emphasizes consensus, legitimacy, and communal responsibility. Rather than relying on formal elections, the *Isxambaar* process begins with consultation among the clan's elders, respected leaders, and scholars, who gather to deliberate on potential candidates for leadership positions, whether as sultans (*garaads*), peace committee leaders, or political representatives.

The process is deeply rooted in Somali customary law (*xeer*) and local traditions, ensuring that the chosen leader has broad approval within the clan. During the selection, elders weigh factors such as lineage, personal reputation, wisdom, and ability to mediate disputes. Once consensus is reached, the endorsement is publicly announced, signaling that the candidate has the legitimacy and backing of the clan.

Some support it to ensure Warsangali representation in Somaliland's statehood, while others are fundamentally against it as it violates the electoral process. A third view supports a quota (*saamiqaybsi*) for Eastern Sool and Sanaag. This approach recognizes that these areas face unique challenges to participation, including security constraints, contested territorial claims, and the lack of effective administrative control by the Somaliland government. The quota system is designed to ensure that communities in these peripheral and politically sensitive regions are not excluded from decision-making processes due to logistical or political barriers.

Under the *saamiqaybsi* model, a fixed number of parliamentary or local council seats would be reserved for representatives from these regions, regardless of whether full elections can be held. This guarantees that local voices, including those of minority clans and marginalized groups,

are incorporated into governance structures, even if standard electoral procedures cannot be implemented due to security or territorial disputes.

In view of the above dynamics, the Warsangali Clan is aligned both with Puntland and the North-East Administration, although a minority of the people supports Somaliland's statehood.

5 FUTURE OUTLOOK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 FUTURE OUTLOOK

The future stability of Sanaag will largely depend on the region's ability to shift from a pattern of fragmented authority, sporadic inter-clan clashes, and unregulated resource competition toward a more cohesive and accountable governance environment. While recent reconciliation efforts have reduced open hostilities, particularly between Isaaq and Warsangali communities, the underlying triggers of inter-clan conflict such as disputed grazing areas, contested administrative claims, struggle for control of mineral-rich territories, and competing political affiliations remain active. Addressing these issues in a systematic and inclusive manner will be essential to reducing the recurrence of violence.

A key determinant of long-term peace will be the capacity of stakeholders to establish a harmonized mechanism for managing land and resource disputes. Clear mobility guarantees for pastoral communities, transparent allocation of grazing and settlement areas and regulated management of mineral and agricultural zones can reduce the competition that has historically fueled inter-clan tensions. If communities, traditional institutions, and government actors adopt unified approaches to these longstanding conflict drivers, the prospects for sustainable peace will strengthen considerably.

Durable stability will also hinge on revitalizing the role of traditional leadership and strengthening local peace committees. These structures have historically played an essential role in mediating disputes and preventing escalation. Empowering them through improved coordination, timely information-sharing and defined mandates can help ensure that localized disputes, especially those involving youth, resource access, or inter-clan grievances, are resolved before they develop into broader confrontations. When backed by community trust and institutional support, these actors can form the backbone of early warning and response

systems in Sanaag. At the same time, enhanced state presence, grounded in transparency, political neutrality, and consistent service delivery, will be crucial.

Many communities continue to rely on clan-based mobilization, informal power brokers, or external political alliances partly because of gaps in governance, justice delivery, and administrative accountability. Strengthening government legitimacy through equitable service delivery, impartial law enforcement, and locally grounded administrative structures can reduce these incentives and create a more reliable conflict-management environment.

Sanaag's path forward is further shaped by its significant economic potential, especially in livestock, agriculture, and mineral resources. However, unlocking this potential requires governance arrangements that ensure equitable benefit-sharing while preventing economic projects from exacerbating inter-clan competition. Inclusive decision-making, particularly around mining operations, land use, and investment opportunities, can provide economic incentives for cooperation rather than conflict.

Looking ahead, the region's ability to establish lasting peace will depend on balancing economic opportunities, political representation, and inclusive governance. Sustained support for evidence-based programming, genuine community participation, and multi-level dialogue can help steer Sanaag away from cyclical inter-clan violence and toward a more cooperative and stable future. If these elements are aligned—credible governance, empowered traditional institutions, regulated resource management, and inclusive political processes—Sanaag holds strong prospects for achieving long-term stability, improved social cohesion, and a resilient peace that benefits all its communities.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Ensure full clan inclusion:** The government must prioritize engaging the Dhulbahante clan to ensure their participation and return, as durable peace is unlikely to be realized unless they are actively involved.
2. **Adopt bottom-Up peace methodology:** Future peace processes should be shifted from the current top-down, government-led approach to a "genuine bottom-up approach" involving wider community participation for better sustainability and local buy-in.

3. **Improve governance and service delivery:** Somaliland must make effort to win the confidence of the Warsangali by extending governance and services to their areas. A key step is addressing the lack of government structures in Eastern Erigavo. Such a strategy will also enhance confidence-building measures with the Warsangali.
4. **Resolve the electoral model dispute:** A consensus must be reached on the most acceptable method (selection or ballot box) for electing Warsangali MPs. If *Isxambaar* is chosen, it should be clearly justified, but a return to open elections is desired by many voters.
5. **Power-sharing and representation:** The Warsangali community should be given representation and seats in all branches of the government, including executive positions, to address their demands for power-sharing and inclusion.
6. **Support Eastern regions quota:** Consider implementing a specific quota for Eastern Sool and Eastern Sanaag to ensure their representation in the government structure.
7. **Address awareness and education gaps:** Those working on peace, including the government and NGOs, should improve their role by seriously addressing the low level of awareness on peace and governance in the Eastern regions.
8. **Regulate and monitor media outlets:** Establish government regulation and monitoring for media houses to enforce professionalism and accountability, thereby mitigating the negative impact of fake news and propaganda on social cohesion and security.
9. **Increase women's political and development role:** Increase the role of women in political leadership and ensure their participation in peace processes. Implement women-specific development projects to support their economic activities.
10. **Reform NGO engagement:** Local NGOs need to improve their activity level, engagement in key peace conferences, and funding allocation to ensure they are contributing positively to political and economic stability.
11. **Limit traditional elder influence:** Political parties should limit the role of traditional elders to reduce their influence on selecting candidates and to increase the opportunity for qualified women and youth to gain positions of power.
12. **Establish direct dialogue on political principle:** Given that the conflict's biggest cause is the disputed political principle of Somaliland statehood, the peace agreement must

create room for a serious, formal dialogue to reach a political agreement that addresses this root cause of the conflict.

13. **Ensure neutrality and accountability in governance:** The government must address the perception that it is controlled by one clan and actively work to restructure local and regional authorities to be representative and impartial, ensuring that its authority is state-driven, not clan-driven.
14. **Investigate and regulate disarmament funds:** The process by which money was given to "gatekeepers" during the disarmament process needs transparency and regulation to ensure that resources intended for peace and development projects are used effectively and do not create new avenues for instability.
15. **Develop economic recovery plan for returnees:** The local and central government must establish an economic recovery strategy to support businesses and services in Ceerigaabo and encourage the safe and permanent return of the displaced population while addressing the economic challenges caused by the conflict.
16. **Strengthen inclusive peace dialogue and joint inter-clan platforms:** Establish regular, structured forums that bring together Isaaq and Harti-Darood leaders, women, youth, and local administrators to rebuild trust and address contested issues such as land access, grazing routes, and public resource rights. Establishment and promotion of joint problem-solving committees to reduce suspicion and enhance shared ownership of peace agreements will enhance durable peace. Additionally, actively include the Dhulbahante community in all peace-building forums to ensure the process is representative, address core grievances, strengthen legitimacy, and foster durable, inclusive peace in Sanaag.
17. **Enhance local governance capacity and administrative coordination:** Support integrated local administration mechanisms that bridge gaps between competing authorities. The Somaliland government should thus strengthen district-level capacities for service delivery, dispute management, and rule of law to increase public confidence in local governance.
18. **Address resource-based conflicts through clear policy frameworks:** The Government should prioritize the development and enforcement of land, grazing, and mining regulations applicable across Sanaag. They should introduce transparent licensing

systems for artisanal and large-scale mining to reduce competition and prevent exploitation as well as implement environmental and community-benefit guidelines to ensure local populations receive tangible economic gains from resource extraction.

19. **Improve security coordination and mobility guarantees.** The central and regional governments should facilitate agreements that ensure removal of travel barriers, free movement and safety for all communities across shared territories. They should also strengthen community-police cooperation to prevent militia mobilization, retaliatory violence, and politically driven attacks.
20. **Counter extremist influence in resource-rich areas:** The Government should establish local monitoring committees to oversee artisanal mining zones and detect extremist infiltration. At the same time, it should expand livelihood programs for unemployed youth in mining areas to reduce vulnerability to recruitment while supporting regional security collaboration to disrupt extremist financing networks linked to illicit mineral trade.
21. **Strengthen community-based peace mechanisms and resilience:** The Government should provide technical and financial support to local peace committees, traditional justice systems, and community reconciliation structures as well as build the capacity of women's and youth networks to participate actively in peace-building and early-warning efforts. It should also support community-driven initiatives focused on trauma healing, trust-building, and social cohesion.
22. **Expand evidence-based and locally led peace programming.** The Government should maintain regular conflict assessments, perception surveys, and mapping of evolving political and inter-clan dynamics in Sanaag. Additionally, it should promote genuine local ownership of peace initiatives by prioritizing participatory planning, inclusive dialogue, and sustained support for grassroots peace actors.

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