

The Conflict over Lasanod: Long-term and Immediate Factors, and Prospects for Settlement

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Abstract

There is not just one reason for the conflict. Rather, a combination of factors has led to the armed uprising in Lasanod that started at the end of December 2022 and is still continuing at the time of writing (June 2023). It is very likely, indeed, that very serious military clashes between the Somaliland army (which is strongly backed by members of the Isaaq clan family and hardly includes any members of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans anymore) and Harti forces (which is a clan coalition including fighters from the Dhulbahante, Warsangeli, Majeerteen and other clans) will take place in the near future. This report will first outline the long-term and structural factors involved in the conflict. It then covers some immediate factors that led to the armed uprising in Lasanod. In addition, the report discusses three turning points that, together with the long-term and immediate factors, led to the current war over Lasanod beginning on 6 February. The penultimate section of the report gives an overview over the current (February-May) situation including mediation efforts. At the end, the report outlines three scenarios for the near future (i.e. the coming months) and discusses the prospects for settling the conflict through political means, which is likely to take longer.

Introduction

Fighting over Lasanod started on 6 February 2023 at around 6 am EAT, when the Somaliland army positioned to the north of the town began shelling it and its civilian population, belonging mainly to the Dhulbahante clan.¹ According to local hospital records, 164 people were injured and 34 killed on the first day alone. The casualties included civilians, like a mother and her six children, who were killed by a mortar fired by the Somaliland army hitting their house. By 20 May 2023, the five hospitals in Lasanod had recorded 2311 injured and 373 killed among the local population. This, according to the same records, included around 350 civilians injured and at least 42 killed, as well as ten health workers, including nurses and staff of the Red Crescent. The civilian casualties were mainly caused by the Somaliland army shelling Lasanod; but some individuals were also hit by stray bullets, and at least one person was killed by a sniper. Clearly, among all casualties (persons injured or killed) mentioned above the majority were fighters (see below). Yet, it needs to be kept in mind that those defending Lasanod today belong to two groups: trained soldiers who defected from the Somaliland army or took leave from other armies in the region; and civilians who just took up arms when the violence escalated.

The total number of casualties in this conflict is considerably higher than

*those ca. 2700 recorded by hospitals in Lasanod. Casualties among some of the forces allied to those defending Lasanod are not always recorded by the town's hospitals. Also, the seriously injured were often transferred to hospitals in Kalabaydh, south of Lasanod, or Garowe, the capital of Puntland (in north-easter Somalia) or flown to the Somali capital Mogadishu. Some of them died in these hospitals or on the way. Moreover, the number of casualties suffered by the Somaliland forces could not be established systematically by the author for lack of reliable information. It can be assumed that around 2000 Somaliland fighters have been injured or killed in the conflict by end of May 2023. It is likely that, over the past three and a half months, a total of around 5000 individuals have fallen victim to this conflict. Additionally, according to UN estimates, close to 200,000 persons have been displaced since the fighting started in early February 2023, which is more than 90 percent of Lasanod's population. The displacement happened during the long dry season (Somali *jilaal*), which had devastating effects on the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), as well as on the rural population between Taleh and Buuhoodle, who had to receive their displaced relatives. Due to the conflict, international organizations are continuing to have great difficulties in accessing those in need in the countryside. Thus, a humanitarian crisis has accompanied the conflict from its start in*

February. Since ca. 60,000 IDPs have crossed the border into Ethiopia, this crisis has also acquired an international dimension (The Guardian 2023). In combination, the human costs of the crisis over Lasanod make it the most devastating conflict in Somalia at this time (June 2023).

Attempts to mediate between the government of Somaliland and the leadership of the forces defending Lasanod by the European Union, the USA, Ethiopia, other members of the international community, and elders and delegates from southern Somalia (mandated by the government in Mogadishu) have all failed so far. Both sides are currently preparing for more military engagement. It is very likely that, during the coming months (from May onward), major clashes between the Somaliland army and the forces opposing it in and around Lasanod will occur. This could produce an unprecedented number of casualties and lead to considerable destabilization in northern Somalia. Urgent measures to advance a political solution are needed.

This report is based on the one hand, on the author's long-term research in the regions contested between Somaliland and Puntland, including longer stays in Lasanod, Buuhoodle, Badhan, Erigabo, Hargeysa, Garowe and other locations over the past twenty years. The author first visited Lasanod in 2002, since when he has returned frequently to the contested areas,

¹ In Somali society, clans are based on descent in the father's line. Besides patrilineal descent (Somali: *tol*), which often establishes a person's primary solidarity, bilateral connections through the patriline of the mother, who, due to clan exogamy, generally belongs to a different descent group than the father, and affinal ties also provide Somali individuals with

systematic chances to forge connections and alliances. In everyday life, additional factors like co-residence, belonging to the same Sufi congregation or Salafi school of Islam also defines a person's position and agency (Luling 2002; Jama Mohamed 2004; Ahmed Sh. Ibrahim 2018; Gaas 2018). When violence escalates, however, very often clan-belonging

temporarily becomes the most relevant orientation for many Somalis (Hoehne 2022a).

sometimes spending months there (Hoehne 2011 and 2015). The report is also based on updates via phone (whatsapp); from mid-January until early May 2023, the author spoke daily with contacts in Lasanod and occasionally with contacts in Garowe, Buuhoodle, Aynabo, Erigabo and Hargeysa. More than sixty conversations were held (ranging from a few minutes to more than one hour) and documented in handwritten notes. Finally, the report is based on ten days of field research in Lasanod (four days), Buuhoodle (one day) and Garowe (five days) between 5 and 14 May 2023, during which the author conducted 32 recorded interviews with 45 individuals, plus numerous informal conversations. The interview partners were political and military leaders, medical doctors, business-people, intellectuals and young people. Additionally, damage inflicted on Lasanod by the Somaliland army was photographed.

Long-term and structural factors involved in the current uprising

In the following, I will briefly touch on eight structural factors that laid the ground for the current crisis in Lasanod.

1. During the 1980s, the Isaaq rebelled against the dictatorship of Mohamed Siyad Barre. In 1981 they founded the Somali National Movement (SNM), initially a small movement driven by former Somali military officers. It was only in the late 1980s, after the Somali government's atrocities

against Isaaq civilians had intensified, that it became a popular movement. At the same time, many Dhulbahante supported the Somali government, while the Warsangeli were partly distanced from the regime, though not supporting the rebels against it either. In the late 1980s the Dhulbahante received arms from the Somali government to fight the Isaaq-driven SNM on a 'tribal' basis; the majority of Dhulbahante, except for a small group headed by Garaad Abdiqani Garaad Jama (Dhulbahante/Baharasame), engaged in this fighting.

2. When the Somali government broke down in January 1991, people in the north wanted to end the violence. Various clans (including the Dhulbahante and various parts of the Isaaq) entered into peace agreements in early 1991. At this stage, not even the Isaaq, who mainly supported the SNM rebel movement, were unanimously in favour of secession. SNM leaders had previously reached out to rebels of the United Somali Congress (USC), backed by members of the Hawiye clan-family, and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), then backed mainly by members of the Ogadeen clan, with whom they had forged an alliance in 1990 to topple the dictatorship. Their joint plan had been to establish a new government for Somalia. But after the dictator Mohamed Siyad Barre fled Mogadishu, the situation in the city broke down, and militias belonging mainly to the USC started looting the capital and persecuting the fallen dictator's patrilineal relatives. USC militias committed massacres of members of the Darood clan-family (Kapteijns 2013),² and eventually,

in April 1991, the SPM and other Darood militias forged an alliance against the USC, and a new civil war began in southern Somalia (Bakonyi 2009: 447-448). Against this backdrop, establishing a new and joint Somali government was not an option any more for the SNM. Thus, the rebels in the north concentrated on peacebuilding in their region, to which representatives of the non-Isaaq clans in north-western Somalia agreed. However, while the general clan conference in Bur'oo was being held in May 1991, armed Isaaq groups threatened to kill the delegates unless they signed a declaration of Somaliland's independence within the borders of the former British Protectorate of Somaliland.³ Most non-Isaaq at the Bur'oo meeting had not planned to secede from Somalia. Some, like Garad Saleban Garad Mohamed (Dhulbahante) or Suldan Abdisalaan Suldan Mahamoud (Warsangeli) and his close associates, had sensed that the Bur'oo conference would take a direction they could not support. They therefore refrained from attending or left shortly after the conference began. Others, who stayed, subscribed to the final declaration under duress. The Bur'oo declaration was signed by some Dhulbahante and Warsangeli leaders, but apart from Garaad Abdiqani, the signatories from the Harti clans were 'backbenchers' (e.g., for the Warsangeli, Ismail Suldan Mahamoud, the Suldan's brother signed).

3. The hasty declaration of the independence of Somaliland did not lead to international recognition. The UN under General Secretary Boutros

² The Darood clan-family has many clans, including the Marehan (to which the dictator Mohamed Siyad Barre belonged), the Ogadeen (backing the SPM) and the various Harti clans mentioned in footnote 4 below.

³ The Somali territories in the Horn of Africa had been divided between France (Djibouti), Ethiopia (Somali Region of Ethiopia), Britain (Somaliland and northern Kenya) and Italy (Somalia Italiana). On 26th June, the British

Protectorate of Somaliland gained independence. On 1st July 1960 the Italian-administered territories became independent. On the same day, Somaliland and (Italian) Somalia united to form the Somali Republic.

Ghali was strongly opposed to it. The first five years of Somaliland's existence were characterized by violence between various Isaaq groups fighting over the control of resources such the port of Berbera and Hargeysa airport. From 1993 to 1995 there was a massive fight between the Gerhajis (a coalition of Habar Yoonis and Idagalle) and the Somaliland government, which was mainly supported by Habar Awal and Habar Je'lo concerning question of power-sharing (Gilkes 1993; Bryden 1996, Balthasar 2013). Some political leaders also saw it as a fight between secessionists and unionists, with prominent Gerhajis leaders joining the government of USC leader and self-declared Somali president Mohamed Farah Aidid in Mogadishu.

4. During this time, when Somaliland was a nascent and instable political entity, the Dhulbahante countered important clan conferences held in Boroma (1993) and Hargeysa (1996-97) to build peace in Somaliland among warring Isaaq clans by holding their own meetings in Boo'ame, a town in the eastern Sool region, at which structures for the self-administration of the clan were established (Hoehne 2015: 51-55). Throughout the 1990s, most Dhulbahante and Warsangeli preferred to stay out of Somaliland politics and to wait for Somalia to come back again. When in early 1998 it became clear that Somalia would not become stable any time soon, the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli, together with the Majeerteen and others, established the Puntland State of Somalia in north-eastern Somalia. Puntland was consciously designed as, first, a clan-based

administration mainly for the patrilineal descendants of Harti, an ancestor in the larger Darod clan-family,⁴ and second, as counterweight to Somaliland. Puntland, which constituted itself as part of a future federal Somalia, claimed the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli-inhabited regions in southern Togdheer, Sool and eastern Sanaag as part of its state territory. Because Somaliland, which claimed independence from Somalia, saw these regions as part of its own state territory based on British-Italian border agreements in around 1894 (Hoehne 2010: 99), a conflict between the two regional administrations in northern Somalia was bound to happen. The regions contested between them thus became a new frontline between Somali unionists (mainly Darood and Harti) and Somaliland separatists (mainly Isaaq).⁵

5. From the early 2000s onward, Somaliland became politically and economically more viable. It received increasing external support, especially because the new constitution (2001) changed the political system from one based on power-sharing between clans to a multi-party-system based potentially on free and fair elections (Cabdiraxmaan 2005; Bradbury 2008; Walls 2014). The more Somaliland became viable, however, the more those who hoped Somalia would come back refused to engage in Somaliland's political system.

6. In addition, the multi-party system, in combination with elections based on one-person-one-vote, slowly but surely facilitated the takeover of the political system by the demographic majority, the Isaaq, who constituted

roughly two thirds of the population of Somaliland (Hansen and Bradbury 2007; Hoehne 2019). During the first stable government in Somaliland under President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal (1997-2002), all clans, including non-Isaaq ones, were included in the government under proportional representation, to which all groups could agree. But the national parties introduced in Somaliland in 2002, whose number was limited to three to avoid the proliferation of sub-clan parties, were soon dominated by the Isaaq. Nonetheless Dahir Rayle Kahin, who by clan was a Gadabursi (a clan belonging to the Dir clan family), won the first presidential elections in 2003. Previously, he had been Vice-President. After President Egal's unexpected death in May 2002, Kahin took over, leading the president's party to win the elections. In the next two presidential elections in 2010 and 2017, however, the presidential candidates were all Isaaq. Consequently, elections became increasingly an intra-Isaaq affair. Elected Isaaq presidents had to satisfy the demands of their powerful supporters and balance power within the Isaaq clan family. They gave cabinet positions and the command of the army and the police force mainly to members of their own clan or allied Isaaq clans. Today (2023), Isaaq have far more power than their demographic share in Somaliland would suggest (Ingiriis 2023). Besides, the presidential elections are regularly delayed, which frustrates not only non-Isaaq, but also the Isaaq-dominated opposition. The current president, Muse Bihi (Isaaq/Habar Awal/Sa'ad Muse), has been overstaying his presidency since November 2022, based on a

⁴ Harti consist of Majeerteen, Dhulbahante, Wasangeli, Deshiishe, Geesigule, Kaskekabe, Libangashe. In addition, some other Darood like Leylkase, Awrtable, Ciise Darood and

some minorities are also involved in Puntland. ⁵ This was clear when I first was in the area in 2002. In Lasanod people I met celebrated the Dervish uprising as anti-colonial, pro-Somali

movement. In Buuhoodle in 2004, I saw the Somali flag hoisted in town. Hardly anyone I met back then mentioned that he or she would support the secession of Somaliland.

prolongation of his term of office by the Upper House of Parliament (Somali *guurti*), which is chaired by Saleban Gaal (Isaaq/Habar Je'lo/Suulo Madow) and which itself has never been elected, in contrast to provisions in the Somaliland constitution of 2001.

7. Over the past twenty years, Somaliland has been advancing politically but also economically. While the Isaaq territories in central Somaliland had been devastated in the civil war of the 1980s, and an intra-Isaaq war raged in Hargeysa, Bur'oo and Berbera until 1995, the Isaaq heartlands began to prosper in the early 2000s. Hargeysa developed into a proper capital city with malls, hotels, universities and serious traffic. Bur'oo grew strongly from around 2010 onward, being a hub for livestock trade from the wider region including Ethiopia's Somali Region. Berbera gained much through investments in its deep-sea port beginning in 2016. The port has enormous importance for land-locked Ethiopia and generates a considerable part of the state revenue of Somaliland (Hagmann and Stepputat 2023). Simultaneously, economic and infrastructural development stagnated in the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited areas, which constitute roughly 30% of the territory of Somaliland, as well as the lands of the eastern Isaaq clans between Elafweyn and Erigabo, the latter town being divided between the Isaaq and Harti clans.⁶ These areas had not been devastated by war, except for Erigabo and surroundings, where the SNM (i.e., Isaaq) and the

government (supported by the local Harti) fought each other bitterly between 1988 and 1991. However, the territory east of Bur'oo had already been marginal, rural hinterlands during the dictatorship of Mohamed Siyad Barre (1969-1991), and it remains marginal today. Between 2002, when I first went to Lasanod and Erigabo, and 2015, the year of one of my regular visits to these towns, not much had changed in either of them. An important reason why the areas inhabited by Dhulbahante and Warsangeli between Buuhoodle, Lasanod, Erigabo and Badhan remained underdeveloped was that the UN, most external governments and the governments in Hargeysa (Somaliland) and Garowe (Puntland) forbade development organizations from going there as these areas were considered 'unsettled'. It needs to be noted that Sanaag and Sool are also partly inhabited by Isaaq from the Habar Je'lo and Habar Yonis clans. While Isaaq inhabit a small part of Sool, up to Oog, the Sanaag region is shared between Harti and Isaaq clans, and Erigabo is equably inhabited by members of both groups. Also the Isaaq in Sool and Sanaag are economically marginalised. Yet, politically, they are fully integrated in Somaliland. Meanwhile, the massive engagement of development organizations in central Somaliland produced, besides the project-related resources, incomes through rent and job opportunities for many. In contrast, the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited areas remained devoid of development, with a lack of

well-paid job opportunities, education, clean water etc. as long-term burdens on local communities. Due to the politically contested status of the regions between Somaliland and Puntland, even the diaspora shied away from making any larger investments there for many years. This only changed recently, when from 2015 onward some individuals residing in Lasanod in particular agreed to engage more constructively with the Somaliland administration controlling the town (see below). As a result, some community-driven development projects were implemented, such as the water and electricity plants, both of which had been started earlier but had not really gained any traction (Norman 2022).

8. The conflict between Puntland and Somaliland over the Warsangeli- and Dhulbahante-inhabited areas escalated militarily from December 2002 onward. On 7 December 2002, President Dahir Rayale Kahin visited Lasanod to support the holding of local government elections in mid-December, only to be attacked by forces loyal to Puntland and chased out of town. This marked the beginning of military confrontations between Somaliland and Puntland forces in the area, very often staffed by members of the Dhulbahante sub-clans. When clashes between the two forces happened, it usually led to the Dhulbahante killing or injuring their fellow clan-brothers. This meant that the fighting between the two regional administrations subsequently triggered intra-Dhulbahante conflicts,

⁶ There are also non-Isaaq-inhabited territories in the far west of Somaliland, in the Awdal region, occupied by the Gadabursi and Ise. Their lands are also marginalized though the main city in the region, Boroma, developed early on due to close cooperation by some Gadabursi politicians and the government in

Hargeysa from the mid-1990s onward. In 1998, the first ever university in the whole north was opened in Amuud, a place near Boroma. For years, students from all over Somaliland entered this university to obtain a higher education. Politically the Gadabursi and Ise are positioned between Somaliland

and Djibouti. Many do not whole-heartedly support Somaliland's independence, yet, due to their geographical position and the fact that they were demobilized and integrated into Somaliland early on, Gadabursi and Ise resistance against Somaliland politics today is weak.

including blood-feuds (Somali *aargoosi*) that sometimes continued long after the military clashes had ended. This constitutes a massive problem for local communities, since feuds not only cost lives but also negatively affect trade and investments. In December 2003, Puntland police forces took control of Lasanod, officially under the pretext to intervene into a very violent feud between two Dhulbahante sub-clans that had escalated shortly before. These forces established a first 'external' administration which was accepted by most local residents, who saw the Puntland policemen from the Majeerteen clan as fellow Harti. However, the Puntland administration remained weak, and in October 2007 a change of administration occurred when Somaliland forces entered Lasanod after the town had been vacated by the other side. The reasons for this change of occupation were first, that the Dhulbahante were internally split, with some of their clan politicians seeking benefits from Hargeysa rather than Garowe. Second, Ethiopia, the regionally dominant power with good relations with both Somaliland and Puntland, became worried that, under the Puntland administration in Lasanod, the arms trafficking between northern Somalia and eastern Ethiopia was not being properly controlled, and Ethiopian rebels from the Ogaden clan organized in the Ogaden National Liberation Front would be able to benefit from this. The Ethiopian government therefore gave the green light to the takeover of Lasanod by Somaliland forces (Hoehne 2007). From October 2007 to December 2022, Lasanod thus was formally under Somaliland control. The results of this were twofold: on the one hand, those remaining in Lasanod worked with Somaliland for the town's development. After the first two years of military administration, which were a

time of insecurity and instability in town, with frequent and often not resolved assassinations of local elites (see below), some stability was created when President Silanyo came to power and took, in cooperation with (often religiously conservative) civil society activists from the Dhulbahante clan a constructive approach to development in Lasanod. Indeed, over the years, moderate progress was made regarding higher education, health care and road-building. Also, more ambitious diaspora-driven investments were made in Lasanod. On the other hand, however, after Somaliland took over, a large part of the town's population left and did not return. All high-ranking Dhulbahante traditional leaders (Somali *isimo*) left except one. Only Garaad Jama Garaad Ismail, who represented the Jama Siyad sub-clan of Dhulbahante with a strong presence in Lasanod and northwest of it up to Yagori, remained in town. This meant that divisions among the Dhulbahante, which had already existed before, now deepened. Those who took a pragmatic approach to cooperating with Somaliland were opposed by those who saw Somaliland as an enemy. In 2009 the latter established an armed movement called Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (SSC). This term covered all Dhulbahante-inhabited lands from Buuhoodle (referred to as Cayn) to Lasanod and its surroundings (in Sool region) to south Erigabo (in Sanaag region). The SSC movement had strong backing in the Dhulbahante diaspora and among some of the clan's traditional leaders. It operated mainly in the Hawd region south and south-west of Lasanod. Its leader, Saleban Haglo-Toosiye, originated from Buuhoodle, though he had spent many years in the USA before returning to lead the movement. The SSC's aim was to free the Dhulbahante-lands from Somaliland

occupation. However, militarily the movement was weak, and its leaders did not manage to mobilize the majority of Dhulbahante. Some rather hoped that Puntland would take decisive steps to re-capture Lasanod. Some battles between SSC units and the Somaliland army happened around Widhwidh in 2010 and a place called Kalshaale in early 2011. In several clashes, dozens were killed and up to a hundred injured on the side of the SSC, which still today is remembered as the Kalshaale massacre (Hoehne 2015: 95). In 2012, the Dhulbahante established, the Khaatumo State of Somalia, which they hoped would gain recognition as a federal member state under the federal government in Mogadishu. Accordingly it distanced itself from Somaliland and Puntland. The latter had disappointed many Dhulbahante since it had not taken steps to free Lasanod from what many considered its occupation by Somaliland. The Khaatumo State initially had massive support among Dhulbahante both within and outside the region. All the traditional leaders supported it except Garaad Saleban Garaad Mohamed, who was close to Puntland. However, neither could the Khaatumo state win militarily against its enemies. In order to defeat it, Puntland and Somaliland even briefly cooperated. Nor did political negotiations between the senior Dhulbahante politician Al Khalif Galaydh and his (former classmate) President Silanyo lead to lasting peace. When Ali Khalif Galaysh took over the chairmanship of Khaatumo in 2015, with the consent of Garad Jama Garad Ali (Dhulbahante/Baharasame), he was tasked with beginning negotiations with the Somaliland administration. However, during the two years of talking, Ali Khalif Galaydh lost contact with other Dhulbahante leaders. The agreement he and Silanyo entered into

in October 2017 was initially stillborn, because important *isimo* rejected it, as did Muse Bihi, who won Somaliland's presidency in elections in November 2017. This also marks the preliminary end of the Khatuumo State of Somalia. From early 2018 onward, the Somaliland government under Muse Bihi, a former military officer under Mohamed Siyad Barre and a leader of the SNM, expanded militarily into the Sool region. Somaliland's army captured Tukaraq, a strategic position along the tarmac road between Lasanod and Garowe. Muse Bihi's forces even advanced close to Garowe, to a place called Yo'adda, which marks the old colonial boundary. However, international pressure to avoid military clashes with Puntland convinced the Bihi government to withdraw again and take up positions in Tukaraq. As a result of the prolonged military wrangling between Puntland, Somaliland, the SSC and Khaatumo militias, the Dhulbahante remained divided between these various actors until end of 2022.

Immediate factors involved in the uprising

The long-term and structural factors mentioned above produced a situation in which, for decades, the Dhulbahante chose not to be clearly part of Somaliland, though there was also no alternative political position which received support from the vast majority of the clan's members. Ideologically, almost all Dhulbahante rejected the secession of Somaliland: they wanted Somalia back and never stopped defining themselves as its citizens. Yet in everyday life they were divided, and their elites in particular went to Hargeysa, Garowe or Mogadishu to earn salaries, power and influence. Some even changed sides

multiple times (Hoehne 2010: 112). Others, conversely, tried to establish their own regional administrations. I argue that it was the long-term and structural factors mentioned above that provided the undercurrent for the current crisis. Additionally, there are at least six immediate factors which led the situation in and around Lasanod to escalate from late December 2022 onward.

1. One factor in between the long-term/structural and immediate categories is the series of assassinations that happened in Lasanod from late 2009. The first victim was Osman Abdi Yusuf 'Afdhilo', Isaaq/Habar Je'lo by clan, and the Somaliland army's commander in the town. He was popular with people in Lasanod, as he facilitated communication between local residents and the administration. He was assassinated together with several of his soldiers by a remote-controlled roadside bomb (Hoehne 2015: 98). In the following years, dozens of planned killings (Somali *dil qorsheysan*) occurred. The residents of Lasanod speak of 80-120 people killed. The vast majority of the victims were either local Dhulbahante working for the Somaliland administration in the town or the region or, more recently, members of parties involved in Somaliland politics. The killings and attempted killings happened in waves, with attacks roughly on a monthly basis until 2012. Subsequently, the frequency of the killings decreased, only to increase again over the past few years, particularly between 2020 and 2022. The assassinations created substantial insecurity in Lasanod. People in responsible positions refrained from going to mosques to pray or from staying out after sunset. Several rumours spread through town about who was behind the assassinations. Some said it was Al Shabaab, the Islamic terrorist organization that was and is mainly active in

southern Somalia. Others argued that Dhulbahante were killing each other in revenge killings. Finally, many believed that the Somaliland administration was behind these killings. The reason for this in their eyes was that, although between 2007 and 2022 Somaliland had a very strong military and police presence in town, in most cases the authorities failed to find out who was responsible for specific killings. Some suspects were arrested but not brought before a court and were eventually released again. In other cases, Somaliland's security forces were observed close to somewhere where a killing took place shortly afterwards, though no suspect would be apprehended. This was considered very suspicious by residents of Lasanod, who argued that it was a sign that the killer came from within the security forces. Locals would also argue that the Somaliland authorities were using the killings to stir up conflicts between the various Dhulbahante sub-clans by deliberately accusing of murder those whose extended families had previously been involved in a blood feud, without providing any further evidence. Finally, many would emphasize that particularly those who had been assassinated in the past two years (until December 2022) had criticized the Somaliland authorities just before they were killed. Tensions in Lasanod over the assassinations rose constantly. After the killing of Abirisaq 'Ardoofe', a member of the city council, on 11 September 2021, demonstrators took to the street, though the local authorities, in cooperation with religious and traditional leaders, most importantly Garad Jama Garad Ismail, managed to calm the situation down. A committee was formed by a respected sheikh to improve relations between the local residents and the Somaliland administration in town. Soon afterwards, however, the committee was

dissolved by the Somaliland authorities.

2. The relationship between local intellectuals and business-people who were ready to work for the development of Lasanod and the Somaliland authorities became strained under the government of President Muse Bihi (2017-). Under President Ahmed Silanyo (2010-2017) some constructive working relationships had been established between educators, business-people and the religious and traditional authorities in Lasanod, (keeping in mind that many former residents of the town had left after its takeover by Somaliland forces in October 2007). As a result, the first university in the town, *Jamacadda Nugaal*, received land and funding and a new university building was constructed until 2012. Lasanod General Hospital was rehabilitated and enlarged. Local government buildings, a prison and a court building were built from scratch. Several roads in the town were paved, a change from previously, when only one tarmac road ran through Lasanod, the others remaining untarred. Some of these projects received direct funding from the government in Hargeysa, and others were paid for via the Somalia Stability Fund (SSF) with money donated by certain European states and the USA. These investments stabilized the cooperation between the Somaliland authorities and the inhabitants of Lasanod. Moreover, local business-people and their partners in the diaspora have started important development projects over the past decade, which intensified from 2015 onward. The water and electricity plants and the “American Village” outside Lasanod were the most important of these projects. The water plant eventually drew shares from a large part of the town’s population as a community-driven project to provide clean water for Lasanod residents for the first time

ever (the ‘hard’ and ‘bitter’ water of Lasanod had been a persistent issue earlier). These investments showed that local residents, including their relatives abroad, had started to trust the Somaliland administration. However, this trust was undermined when, under President Muse Bihi, the assassinations surged again, and business-people started experiencing obstacles to their projects. The relations between local business-people and other elites and the Somaliland administration worsened still further when, after the killing of Abdirisak ‘Ardoofe’, in October 2021 the government in Hargeysa decided to expel ‘foreigners’ from southern Somalia from Lasanod. However, these ‘foreigners’ had for the most part been living in town for many years and had become part of the local community, as fellow Somalis. Many local residents saw the decision to expel them as a dubious manoeuvre by Muse Bihi’s government to find a scapegoat for the assassinations in Lasanod without really investigating the killings. Moreover, even after the operation to expel the southerners, the assassinations continued. Finally, in November 2021 Muse Bihi appointed a new governor of Sool region, Abdikarim Aadan Haji Diriye, an Isaaq/Habar Yonis. He and the newly appointed police commander for Lasanod, a Dhulbahante/Baharsame, were seen by many Lasanod elites as harsh, impolite and as standing in the way of local progress. Cooperation between the local residents and the Somaliland administration in town therefore declined. Some suspected that Muse Bihi had deliberately brought in the new governor and police chief to ‘punish’ Lasanod residents for the fact that, in the parliamentary elections end of May 2021, most people in town had voted for the opposition party, Waddani. The result of the above developments was that the

government in Hargeysa lost its grip on civil society in Lasanod.

3. Another factor that influenced the escalation of conflict in Lasanod over the second half of 2022 was the rivalry between *qaad* dealers in town. For many years, Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’ (Dhulbahante/Jama Siyad/Reer Koshin) had been in charge of these imports in Lasanod, together with some associates. During Abdullahi Farmajo’s rule as President of Somalia (2017-2022), imports of *mira*, a specific type of *qaad*, from Kenya were halted due to a political conflict between Somalia and Kenya. Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’ and his associates, who had brought *mira* to Lasanod, had to switch to another type of *qaad* brought in from Ethiopia. When Hasaan Sheikh Mahamoud was elected President of Somalia in May 2022, he resumed the *mira* trade with Kenya, though new import and trading licenses had to be acquired from his government. In this context, in September 2022 a shootout occurred at Lasanod airstrip between rival *qaad* dealers, including Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’. The Somaliland forces used this as an excuse to take control of the airstrip. Soon afterwards, Muse Bihi and the governor of Sool rearranged imports of *qaad* into Lasanod, and Abdiasis Aaden Habane ‘Sisto’ (Isaaq/Habar Awal/Sa’ad Muse) and others close to Muse Bihi were brought into the *qaad* business in the town. This appalled Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’, who had previously been close to the Somaliland government and had invested considerably in hotels, fuel stations and other infrastructure not only in Lasanod but also in Hargeysa. From November 2022 onwards, Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’ and his supporters increasingly opposed the Somaliland administration. This was significant, since as a *qaad* dealer Mohamed ‘Jabutaawi’ not only had considerable economic

resources at his disposal, but also a private sub-clan army safeguarding his business.

4. Those traditional leaders and intellectuals who had left Lasanod in October 2007, when Somaliland forces took over Lasanod, together with their supporters in the diaspora, had been thinking about reviving the idea of an autonomous Dhulbahante administration coming directly under the federal government of Somalia in Mogadishu ever since the attempts of the last Khaatumo chairman, Ali Khalif Galaydh, to negotiate with President Silanyo of Somaliland had failed in their eyes. Already in 2017, they had started to invest in the establishment of new armed forces in the area of Buuhoodle, and also in the Nugaal valley north of Lasanod. Abdi Madoobe (Dhulbahante/Ahmed Garad/Ali Geri), a businessman with some connection with the Islamic Courts (Somali *maxakiimta*), a conservative political-Islamic movement in southern Somalia (2005-2006), was tasked with building a well-trained SSC force in the Hawd region. Faysal Falaaluq (Dhulbahante/Naaleeye Ahmed/Reer Jibril) was supposed to do the same in the Nugaal valley. These endeavours were mainly financed by the diaspora and some businesspeople in the area, and they had a low profile. The fact that some armed resistance was being built up became more widely known when newly trained SSC fighters under

the command of Abdi Madoobe prevented the holding of local government and parliamentary elections in Buuhoodle in early 2021. Those few who wanted to vote had to register and vote elsewhere.

5. In the second half of 2022, those highest traditional leaders of the Dhulbahante who opposed Somaliland sought to overcome internal differences at two meetings in Widhwidh in the Sool region in July 2022 and in Jigjiga in the Somali Region of Ethiopia in December 2022. According to traditional leaders interviewed on the initiative on the phone in March and April and during my recent stay in Lasanod in May 2023, the aim was to forge unity among the clan and to develop a common stand in opposition to Somaliland. It is important to note that, until the end of 2022, the thirteen *isimo* of the Dhulbahante and Fiqishiini⁷ were partly divided over the question of how to position themselves regarding the political future of their clan. The two meetings in Widhwidh and Jigjiga facilitated a common understanding among the majority of them. The most important decision taken at the Jigjiga meeting was to dissolve the institutions of the Khaatumo State of Somalia and form a new council, led by the *isimo*, fostering the liberation of Dhulbahante lands from Somaliland.⁸

6. On 26 December 2022, Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi 'Hadrawi', a

young party official of Somaliland's largest opposition party, Waddani, who hailed from the Dhulbahante clan, was assassinated in Lasanod. On 27 December, a group of mainly young people started demonstrating against the insecurity in the town. The Somaliland police and members of the Rapid Reaction Unit (RRU), a special force that is strongly supported by the UK (Declassified UK 2023), were deployed to disperse the demonstrations, which nonetheless continued over several days. The Somaliland security forces opened fire on the demonstrators, killing around fifteen and injuring more between 27 December 2022 and early January 2023. Those civilians, mainly the young, who had confronted the Somaliland forces in the early days of the uprising are now known as heroes and are collectively referred to as '*jamaahiirta*'. Their sacrifice of dozens killed and injured provides a moral basis for the ongoing struggle.

Turning Point

Three turning points can be identified at which the political dynamics unfolding in and around Lasanod accelerated, and decisive steps were taken which led to the further escalation of violence.

I. On 4 January 2023, Mohamud Ali 'Saadle', a local businessman related to Mohamed 'Jabutaawi', was shot by Somaliland forces during a

⁷ 1. Garad Jama Garad Ali (Baharsame), 2. Garad Jama Gara Ismail (Jama Siyad), 3. Garad Abdullahi Garad Saleban (Ugaadhyahan), 4. Garad Abdirisq Garad Sofe (Ahmed Garad/Ali Geri), 5. Garad Saleban Burale (Yahye), 6. Suldan Said (Khalid), 7. Garad Mohamed Garad Abshir (Barkad), 8. Ugas Mahamoud Ugas Abdullahi Ise (Hassan Ugas), 9. Boqor Abdullahi Ahmed 'Dabagooye' (Hayaag), 10. Garad Abdisalaan Hassan (Omar Wa'ays), 11. Garaad Mukhtar Garad Ali Burale

(Qayaad), 12. Abdikarim Ali Nur representing the young son of Garad Mashkare (Wa'ays Abdulle), 13. Suldan Mustafe Awseed (Fiqishiini).

⁸ The original decisions read: 1. *In Nidaamkii Khaatumo ee mudo dhaafka ahaa lagu wareejiyo isimada si KMG ah meeshana laga saaro ilaa laga xoreeyo Caasimada Laascaanood.* 2. *In Heshiis rasmiya laga gaadhay khilaafkii iyo mad madowgii u dhaxeeyey Madaxdii Khaatumo, isimada iyo Siyaasiyiintii Khaatumo.*

3. *In Nidaamka Khaatumo ee lahaa Madaxweyne, ku xigeen iyo baarlamaan meesha laga saaro iyadoo loo weecinayo dhanka xoraynta iyo ciidanka Isla markaana la dhiso gudi Ka shaqeenaya xoraynta deegaanada Maqan.* See: <https://www.facebook.com/cabaasmadani129/posts/shirkajigjiga-kusoo-idlaaday-hadafkiisa-muxu-ahaa-mala-gaadhayse-mustafe-cag-jar/3400163770304578/>

police operation in town (Norman 2023). Subsequently, the Somaliland forces prevented the relatives from collecting the body, causing massive outrage among the local population. Eventually members of the Red Crescent were allowed to pick up the body for burial. But by that time, the many Lasanod residents had already taken up arms, among them the private army of the biggest local *qaad*-dealer, Mohamed 'Jabutaawi'. When they began to attack the Somaliland forces in town, the Somaliland administration took the decision to withdraw its units from the town; this happened in 5 January. Somaliland forces then took up positions to the east and northeast of Lasanod. At the same time, a delegation of Somaliland emissaries headed by Mohamed Kahin (Isaaq/Habar Jelo/Reer Dahir), the Minister of Interior, and including also Nuuh Tani (Isaaq/Habar Awal/Sa'ad Muse), the commander-in-chief of the Somaliland army, were sent to Lasanod by the government in Hargeysa. They took up positions in Hotel Hamdi in the east of the town, together with the soldiers guarding them.

2. Once the Somaliland forces had left Lasanod, Garad Jama Garad Ismail, who had stayed in the town right throughout these years, summoned a council to discuss the current situation. He also called upon the other Dhulbahante *isimo* to return to town to join the debates about the political future of Dhulbahante. Also the members of the Fiqishiini clan, who reside in the area around Adhi'adeeye, were called

upon to join these debates and integrate into the council and other emerging institutions of clan-self-governance.⁹ The council called *guddiga 33ka* (Council of 33)¹⁰ published its initial positions on 8 January. Its most important decision was to demand that the Somaliland forces leave Dhulbahante- and Fiqishiini-inhabited territory.¹¹ Over the next two weeks, the highest-ranking Dhulbahante clan leaders came to town one by one, accompanied by armed guards from their respective sub-clans, some of whom were formally part of the Somaliland army. Looking back, it is clear that most of them brought considerable amounts of arms and ammunition with them. The Somaliland administration, including the emissaries in Hotel Hamdi, seemed not to have understood this. Probably, Somaliland officials had already lost their local intelligence contacts earlier, when Muse Bihi had irritated those local elites who previously, under President Silanyo, had been willing to cooperate with Somaliland.

3. After weeks of discussions, it was planned that the decision of *guddiga 33ka* would be announced on 6 February 2023. Tensions rose enormously at the end of January and beginning of February. It was clear that the decision of the council would not be well received by Muse Bihi's government. Meanwhile, Dhulbahante received massive moral support from Somalis everywhere for the 'blue revolution' (waving the Somali flag, blue with a white star in the middle) initiated in Lasanod (which essentially

stood for Somali unity). On 6 February, at around 6 am EAT, the violence escalated. Some argued that Dhulbahante fighters attacked the Somaliland emissaries and their guards in Hotel Hamdi. Others stressed that the Somaliland forces in Hotel Hamdi started to attack Dhulbahante fighters in the east of Lasanod and tried to pave the way for units of the Somaliland army coming from the east to enter and recapture the town. While the first clashes between the Somaliland army and Dhulbahante fighters happened in the east of town, the Somaliland army positioned at a base in the northeast, at a place called Gooja'ade, started shelling Lasanod. Within a few hours, dozens of people in Lasanod had been killed and more than 160 wounded, many of the casualties civilians. Looking back, it is clear that the fighting, especially the bombardment of Lasanod by Somaliland forces, was the decisive turning point in the crisis over Lasanod. The bombardment showed Dhulbahante in the area and in the diaspora how far Muse Bihi and his government would go to impose their will on the members of the clan. In the 32 years since the unilateral declaration of independence, the Somaliland army had never resorted to using heavy artillery against a town it claims as part of its (contested) state territory. Even if there is a huge difference in degree, the bombardment of Lasanod by the Somaliland army inspired local residents and their supporters to compare it with the bombardment of Hargeysa and Burco by the Somali army in May and June

⁹ In the following, whenever I use the term 'Dhulbahante' for those behind the uprising, fighting the Somaliland army or seeking to establish their own administration, I also include the Fiqishiini. Both are united in the current endeavor. For the sake of convenience, however, I do not always write 'Dhulbahante and Fiqishiini'. It is clear that Fiqishiini, who

originally are Hawiye/Habar Gedir, are a tiny minority in the SSC regions; their political position is very close to that of the one of the Dhulbahante factions surrounding them.

¹⁰ The positions in *guddiga 33ka* were divided among the three major branches of Dhulbahante (Mahamoud Garad, Farah Garad and Baho Nugaaleed) plus several seats for

Fiqishiini, who originally were Hawiye, yet had become close to Dhulbahante due to centuries of co-residence in the area around Adhi'adeeye, northwest of Lasanod.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=567271362116811>

1988. The latter led to a general uprising by Isaaq supporting the SNM, which, until early 1988, had not yet enjoyed the unanimous support of all Isaaq (Prunier 1990/91). The bombardment on 6 February 2023, which continued, at various intensities, until early March, and occasionally still flares up today (June 2023), united the Dhulbahante. It can thus be argued that Muse Bihi and his government completed the task that Dhulbahante leaders had taken on in the years before. It seems clear that the Somaliland government and its emissaries in Lasanod, including Mohamed Kahin and Nuuh Tani, had totally miscalculated the political and military build-up in town in January 2023. Under the eyes of these emissaries, the local population armed itself, and new fighters, with weapons and ammunition, came into town. The idea that it was possible to dominate the Dhulbahante by a mixture of co-optation and force, which had worked in earlier years since 2007, may have misled Muse Bihi, Mohamed Kahin, Nuuh Tani and others involved in the affair. On 6 February they awoke to a very different reality in Lasanod.

The current situation

Dynamics of war

Fighting over Lasanod is still continuing in June 2023. Over the four months, several important battles have taken place. Without any question, 6 February was a decisive day. The Somaliland forces had assumed that they could take Lasanod in one day. The main fighting happened around Hotel Hamdi in the east, an area just on the outskirts of Lasanod, literally between 2.5 and 3 km from the city centre. On the 6th, the Somaliland emissaries and their guards were driven out of town. Interestingly, Brigadier Mahad Ambashe (Dhulbahante/Jama Siyad/Reer

Warsame) remained in town with his Somaliland forces, holding a position in the north-west of Lasanod, with some two hundred soldiers from his sub-clan, who were still part of the Somaliland army when the war started, under his command. Most other Dhulbahante commanders and their forces had left the Somaliland army on or before 6 February. These included Abdirashid 'Foolhawiye' (Baharasame), Mahamoud 'Forten' (Nuur Ahmed) Siigale (Nuur Ahmed), Ina Du'aale Deeq (Naaleeye Ahmed), and several others, who took with them approximately 4000 trained troops and their equipment, including so-called 'technicals' (pick-up trucks with heavy machine guns mounted on the back). However, Mahad Ambashe and his forces did not move: they still had not defected from the Somaliland army, but also they did not join the fighting in early February.

On the first day of the fighting, which included a bombardment of the town by the Somaliland army, 164 persons were injured and 34 killed, among them numerous civilians, according to local hospital records. Tens of thousands of civilians fled Lasanod, many seeking refuge with relatives in the countryside. However, in the middle of the long dry season, the resources to accommodate IDPs were scarce among the countryside dwellers. Others fled to Garowe, the capital of Puntland ca. 130 kilometres east of Lasanod. An emergency committee (Somali *guddiga guurmadka*) was set up there by the mayor, with the vice-mayor as chairman. The committee was in charge of housing those refugees who had no place to go and who lacked the money to rent somewhere, and of providing medical aid to the injured, as well as food to the injured and the carers accompanying them (given the limited capacity of hospitals in the region, follow-up care is

normally in the hands of relatives of the injured). To support IDPs from Lasanod, the government of Puntland also accepted that those coming from Lasanod would quickly establish some businesses in Garowe, without bureaucratic hurdles. Some 60,000 residents of Lasanod also fled into Ethiopia, where a refugee camp was established near Marqan in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, supported by the UN and the Ethiopian government.

During the first weeks of fighting over Lasanod, the remaining residents in town, not only the fighters (trained soldiers or armed civilians), but also some elderly men guarding their homes, women and men working as nurses and doctors in hospitals, those working for the Red Crescent (Somali *Bisha Cas*), and women working as *qaad*-sellers, suffered from a shortage of water. This occurred after the Somaliland forces at Gooja'ade cut the town's water supply. The water plant in Lasanod had recently been opened near Gooja'ade. It pumped groundwater from some 400 meters deep, filtered it and provided it to the town through a pipe system. The plant was owned by the community, and many residents of Lasanod had a share in it. One of the board members of the plant told me during an interview in Lasanod in early May 2023 that it is unclear, which damage had been done by the Somaliland forces to the plant. Yet, the fact that the plant stopped working already caused damage to its complex filter system. To replace those filters alone would cost close to a million USD. With the water supply cut, those remaining in town had to drink from the private water catchments (Somali *berked*) attached to their houses. Most of these had run dry by mid-February, and water had to be brought into town by trucks coming from the south (Hawd and Somali

Region of Ethiopia). Temporarily, the prices for water in Lasanod multiplied from less than 2 USD per 200 litres before the war to between 6 and 8 USD in the second half of February. Given that most businesses in Lasanod closed on 6 February and literally all the town's former residents had lost their jobs – with the medical and humanitarian staff in town continuing their work on a voluntary basis – the increase in the price of water put a heavy burden on the remaining local residents and those supporting them.

On several days during February, heavy military engagements took place between Dhulbahante forces defending and the Somaliland army attacking Lasanod. Throughout February, the latter fired indiscriminately at the town on a daily basis with grenades, artillery and rifles. In the first two weeks of the war, ca. seventy people died and some four hundred were injured on the Dhulbahante side alone. While the majority of the casualties were fighters, some civilians were hit by stray bullets or by the daily shelling throughout February. The number of casualties on the Somaliland side was not shared with the author, though social media reported the deaths of several high-ranking officers in the Somaliland army.

On 21 February the Somaliland troops set out to enter the town, attacking from the southeast and the east. During the attack, the shelling of Lasanod from Somaliland positions in Gooja'ade intensified. Civilian infrastructure, including several hospitals, was hit, though the attack was repelled.

On that day, Lasanod hospitals counted 59 injured and seven killed, mainly fighters. On 25 February, the local Dhulbahante forces launched an attack on General Mahad Ambashe and those of his forces who were still included in the Somaliland army, and who were positioned in the northwest of the town. These forces had not participated actively in the fighting, but they were a considerable threat to those defending Lasanod. The Dhulbahante *isimo* had warned Mahad Ambashe the day before either to join the uprising of his people or leave the town. He did neither, and thus a fierce battle took place on 25 February between 9 and 11 am EAT in which close patrilineal relatives fought each other. Eventually, Mahad Ambashe fled with a small number of followers, leaving behind considerable equipment, technicals and even two tanks, at least one of which was fully functioning. On this day alone, 302 fighters were wounded and 51 killed according to Lasanod hospitals' records (these numbers included fighters on both sides, who all were Dhulbahante). This burdened the hospitals in Lasanod beyond their limits. The director of Manhal Hospital told the author by phone the following day that "Yesterday has been hell."¹² The eviction of Mahad Ambashe and his troops from Lasanod was a serious blow for Somaliland. In reaction, the Somaliland army was withdrawn from all its positions in eastern Sool, most significantly from around Tukaraq. The troops were sent to Gooja'ade as reinforcements. Thus, by winning the battle against those of their patrilineal

cousins who were still loyal to Somaliland, the fighters defending Lasanod had not only secured their town from within, but also freed, in their view, much of Sool.

Until end of February, the fighting was between Dhulbahante and the Somaliland army. Among the Dhulbahante fighters were professional soldiers who had defected from the Somaliland army, while others had taken leave from the Puntland army or from the Somali National Army in southern Somalia. However, the vast majority were those who had defected from Somaliland, plus many volunteers, who were ordinary inhabitants of Lasanod and the surrounding countryside who had taken up arms to defend their clan homeland (Somali *deegaan*). Also a small unit of fighters belonging to the Gabooye minority group allied with the Dhulbahante in the Hawd region joined the forces defending Lasanod under the name of the *shiish wanaag* ('good sharpshooters').

The fighting throughout February had produced considerable casualties among the Dhulbahante. Some individuals from other Harti clans had already arrived early on, when the war over Lasanod started. Yet, it was only after the forces of Mahad Ambashe had been evicted from Lasanod and the city was free of any Somaliland army that larger armed units belonging to various Harti clans and sub-clans started to arrive around Lasanod. Among them were fighters belonging to Majeerteen/Omar Mahamoud, Majeerteen/Ise Mahamoud, Majeerteen/Bi'idyanhan,

¹² Altogether, the five hospitals in Lasanod (General Hospital, Manhal, Gargar, Al Hayat and Fayow) have a little over two hundred beds. There are only between five and eight surgeons in town. Emergency wards are poorly equipped. Many critically injured in the

fighting over Lasanod are transported through the countryside to Garowe and sometimes flown to Mogadishu. Given that the Somaliland army is still in control of the first kilometers of the tarmac road east of Lasanod, transporting the injured by car via rough

roads takes between four and six hours, instead of one and a half along the tarmac road. In February, several injured persons died along the way.

Majeerteen/Ali Saleban, Deshiishe and Warsangeli. The arrival of the various units from other Harti groups changed the dynamics of the conflict. From early March 2023 onward, the conflict was between Harti fighters, of whom the majority were still Dhulbahante, and the Somaliland army, which also included soldiers from non-Isaaq clans, e.g. from Ise and Gadabursi in the far west of Somaliland, but hardly any Dhulbahante or Warsangeli soldiers any more. While it is difficult to establish how many fighters have been positioned on each side since March 2023, my rough estimate is that some 7-8000 Harti fighters, some 80 percent of whom are Dhulbahante, are engaged in defending Lasanod. However, the number may fluctuate since, as a Dhulbahante commander in Lasanod told me: 'On battle day every Dhulbahante man in the area grabs a gun and joins the fight.' From a source in the Somaliland military I heard that 28 *guuto* (battalions) are stationed around Lasanod. A *guuto* would comprise between 200 and 400 fighters. Those stationed near Lasanod consist of 200-300 fighters, which would mean that some 6000-8000 soldiers are amassed around Lasanod between Maraga (east), Gooja'ade (north) and near Hargaga (northwest), plus maybe 1000-2000 armed policemen.

On 28 February, heavy fighting took place to the northwest of Lasanod, near a place called Dhuyu' Hunsho that was held by Harti forces, including units commanded by Abdi Madoobe. Simultaneously, the Somaliland army resorted to heavy shelling of Lasanod. As usually, fighting including shelling started early, around 6 am EAT. Around 8:30 am EAT, a building belonging to the General Hospital that hosted the hospital's blood bank was hit by artillery and extensively damaged. Three nurses and five patients were slightly injured by

splinters and stones flying around, according to a doctor working at the hospital. On this day, the Lasanod hospitals counted 118 wounded and eight dead, the majority of whom were fighters.

In the first three weeks of March, no serious fighting took place around Lasanod, except some occasional exchange of fire across the front lines, mostly towards the northeast. Somaliland troops at Gooja'ade sporadically launched grenades or artillery at eastern Lasanod. Some houses were damaged. In total some 22 fighters were injured, according to Lasanod hospital statistics. On 18 March, heavy fighting took place again. It is likely that a Harti unit, probably Majeerteen/Ise Mahamoud, started an attack on Somaliland forces in Maraga, east of Lasanod. Other units then joined them, and after Maraga had been captured, the Harti forces advanced toward Gooja'ade. However, some miscommunication between the Harti units happened which gave the Somaliland army time to re-order and to launch a counterattack. After hours of fighting, the Somaliland army was back in Maraga, and both sides had suffered heavy casualties. Lasanod hospitals counted 330 injured and 47 dead on this day alone, mainly fighters. The number of casualties on the Somaliland side was not made official.

The first rains fell in and around Lasanod, mainly toward the south, in mid-March. It remained sporadic, yet it helped to alleviate the water shortage in Lasanod. More heavy rains started at the end of April marking the beginning of the 'big rainy season' (Somali *gu*). Clearly, the rain also had military-strategic impacts. If the countryside around Lasanod became muddy, heavy vehicles would have problems moving around, and infantry attacks would become decisive. Ramadan began on 22 April. Lasanod experienced some days of calm, in

which the town was not shelled. In the following days, various Harti units, partly heavily armed (e.g., Majeerteen/Bi'iidyahan), arrived to reinforce the troops defending Lasanod. Very intense clashes on various fronts happened on 26 March. Around 9 am Somaliland forces attacked from three sides, from the east, northeast and northwest. The fighting continued all day, which for a change was not accompanied by heavy shelling. In the afternoon the fighting was concentrated on the area northeast of Lasanod. The hospitals in town counted 130 injured and 21 dead fighters. The Somaliland forces were thought to have sustained very heavy casualties on that day. The fighting did not lead to any change of strategic positions. The next few days were relatively calm, with only sporadic exchanges of fire across the front lines. On 31 March, Somaliland attacked Harti positions at Dhuyu' Hunsho, but were repelled. On the same day a young woman was killed by an artillery shell hitting her house. On 1 April, fighting erupted on all the frontlines, and Lasanod was shelled. Casualty figures of 223 injured and 36 dead were counted in the hospitals of the town, many, but not all, fighters. Ramadan ended on 20 April, followed by several days of Eid celebrations. On 25 April clashes erupted again when Somaliland forces attacked Harti positions at Dhuyu' Hunsho. The fighting spread from there to the northeast and east and Lasanod was shelled, some shells landing near the General Hospital. On that occasion only eighteen injured persons and one killed fighter were brought to the town's hospitals.

Over the coming three and a half weeks, the fighting stalled, though no official stalemate had been reached. Very sporadic exchanges of fire took place across the frontlines in the east

and north-east. Yet it was clear that, after Eid, both sides would try hard to reach their conflicting aims of freeing Lasanod or recapturing it. During an interview in Lasanod on 8 May 2023, Garad Jama Garad Ali mentioned that 'we waited now for three months for Muse Bihi to withdraw his forces. He did not. Now we will take active steps to free our land.' It was therefore to be expected that the Harti forces would change from a defensive to an offensive mode of operation. Consequently, on 16 May, a new frontline was opened some forty kilometres northwest of Lasanod, near a place called Tuulo Samakaab. Harti forces advanced from a place called Dhaban Saar, some twenty kilometres south of Tuulo Samakaab. The latter is a village on the tarmac road between Lasanod and Yagoori and is strategically relevant, since the supply line of the Somaliland forces north of Lasanod runs through it. The Harti forces set out to cut this supply line. Tuulo Samakaab is in the heartland of the Dhulbahante/Jama Siyaad/Reer Warsame, the lineage to which Mahad Ambashe belongs. He and his remaining forces, in cooperation with large numbers of other Somaliland soldiers, were positioned there and engaged the advancing Harti forces. A bloody battle ensued which left scores of fighters on both sides dead or wounded. Lasanod hospitals counted 176 wounded and 29 dead fighters. A source in the Somaliland army mentioned some 150 wounded and 23 dead, though confirmation through hospital files from Aynabo or Bur'oo could not be obtained. On 18 May, more fighting happened around Tuulo Samakaab and also east of Lasanod. On that day, the Somaliland forces launched a heavy attack on

Lasanod from the east and advanced briefly to the outskirts of the town, around the eastern control point, and even near Hotel Hamdi. A massive defensive effort was mobilized from within Lasanod, and the attack was repelled. Many fighters were injured or killed on both sides: Lasanod hospitals counted 204 injured and 43 dead fighters on that day. From the following day until the conclusion of this report in early June 2023, no more heavy engagements between the two sides have taken place.

An administration in the making

Since the beginning of the war over Lasanod, Dhulbahante leaders have not only been organizing the defence of Lasanod, they have also been trying to build up a working administration of what they call SSC-Khaatumo. In agreement with their followers, they are promoting the idea that SSC-Khaatumo could become a new federal state of Somalia. When I visited Lasanod on 6-9 May 2023, I saw the administrative structure in the making. The civilian administration consisted of *guddiga isimada* (the council of the highest-ranking traditional authorities), *guddiga 33ka* (the council of 33 elected men from various Dhulbahante branches, plus Fiqishiini) and *guddiga degaanka* (the council of the area, which consists of the mayor, the vice-mayor and others working for them). The highest traditional authorities of the Dhulbahante and Fiqishiini meet on a daily basis to discuss the directions of the movement. They are concerned mainly with positioning SSC-Khaatumo within Somalia's federal political framework. The *isimo* also are in charge of discussing a ceasefire and options for peace talks with emissaries

from Somaliland, southern Somalia or Ethiopia and representatives of the international community including the USA and the EU. Moreover, the highest-ranking Dhulbahante leaders are discussing the political dynamics of the SSC-Khaatumo movement with *isimo* from allied clans, and also with politicians in Puntland. The idea is to establish their own administration. However, this would have implications for Puntland, which has so far included the Dhulbahante areas. Leaders in Puntland emphasize that they support whatever the will of the Dhulbahante is, since basically they all agree on the aim of re-establishing a united Somalia. Recently, at the end of May, a delegation of Dhulbahante traditional leaders went to Mogadishu to discuss political issues there. Finally, the *isimo* are in direct communication with the leading military commanders of the Harti forces and, together with the council of military commanders, take the strategic decisions.

The council of 33¹³ is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the SSC-Khaatumo movement. Its main tasks are securing the finances of the forces and running the hospitals and other critical infrastructure, like electricity. The council is structured into sub-committees, e.g., for financial affairs or health matters. Its members are in contact with Dhulbahante and Fiqishiini business-people and diaspora communities inside and outside the area to obtain funding. The mayor and his team are in charge of security in Lasanod. In early May they set up a police force to control the town and prevent problems like alcohol smuggling and its consumption, which are illegal and caused some problems a few weeks before.

¹³ There was a plan to enlarge the *guddiga 33ka* to a council of 45 members. The aim was

to incorporate several important additional representatives of the local community. This

change would not alter the tasks of the council.

Besides the civilian administration in the making, a joint military command of the Harti forces defending Lasanod was established. It included senior officers from all the clan units involved. The overall commander is Said Shoodhe, a senior Dhulbahante officer who, before the war, served as vice-commander of the Puntland army. His vice-commander is a Majeerteen officer. The main task of the military command is to integrate the various forces, some of which are well trained, while others are 'nomadic fighters' or inhabitants of Lasanod who recently took up a gun. Besides, the coordination between the trained units from different clans is not always easy.

National and International Dimensions and Mediation Efforts

Early on, the conflict over Lasanod attracted national and international attention. On 31 December, after the first civilian demonstrators had been shot by Somaliland police and the RRU in Lasanod, the Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud issued a statement, asking 'the Somaliland government to solve the situation in a peaceful manner and desist from using live ammunition against the demonstrators' (Somaliland.Com 2022). This statement was not well received by most Dhulbahante, since it assigned the role of force in relation to such matters to Somaliland, which, in the eyes of many local residents, was a party to the conflict, not an actor that could solve or mediate the crisis. The next Somali politician to take a stand on the matter was Puntland's president Said Deni. At a press conference in Garowe on 3 January 2023, he

mentioned that the leaders of the people in Lasanod needed to come up with a united position regarding the political future of their clan. He added verbally that, 'If Somaliland does not accept the calls of the people of Las Anod [sic], who demand that Somaliland leaves the town and the entire Sool region, Puntland is ready to take all possible actions' (Hiiraan Online 2023). This statement spoke to the sentiments of a large part of the population of Puntland, who as Harti showed solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Lasanod and the wider SSC regions, and who were hoping a united Somalia would re-emerge.

The government of Puntland adopted a new stance regarding the current Dhulbahante uprising, compared with the situation in the years before. When Lasanod came under Somaliland control in 2007, Puntland refrained from re-capturing the town. When the SSC forces and Somaliland army clashed in Kalshaale in 2010-2011, Puntland's President Abdurahman Faroole (2009-2014) engaged in some mediation. Yet, when Khaatumo was established in 2012, the Puntland administration took a hostile position towards it. Khaatumo was seen as threat to the integrity of Puntland. Clashes between Khaatumo and Puntland forces ensued in 2013 and 2014 (Hoehne 2015: 107, 113-114). In 2023, however, the Dhulbahante struggle for political autonomy from Somaliland was supported. Intellectuals and politicians in Garowe with whom I spoke during my visit in early May mentioned that the change in attitude toward the Dhulbahante's endeavours to establish their own administration was brought about by the clan's unity. Before, the Dhulbahante had always been divided.

This meant that supporting parts of the clan against Somaliland would have meant that fighting erupted within Dhulbahante. But now, in early 2023, the Dhulbahante came together and took a clear decision on their future. The ensuing fighting with the Somaliland army helped to fuse the clan members. Thus, Puntland now has a partner to work with. My view is also that Puntland leaders have learned from their past mistakes. During the Khaatumo period (2012-2015), especially during the first year, the Dhulbahante were also quite united, except for Garad Saleban Garad Mohamed (Uhaadhayahan), who had preferred to stay with Puntland. Yet, back then Puntland did not see this as chance to work with Khaatumo against Somaliland and its secessionist ambitions. Now, the chance was realized, probably also because Puntland is in constant conflict with the federal government in Mogadishu over issues of power and resource-sharing and the political way forward. Against this backdrop, cooperation between Puntland and SSC-Khaatumo in the north can help to put more pressure on the federal government in the south. In general, the government in Garowe decided not to become officially involved militarily, but it tolerated assistance to the Dhulbahante cause by the Puntland population. It also turned a blind eye to soldiers and officers of the Puntland army taking leave to join the fighting over Lasanod as Harti brothers.¹⁴ During the recent local government elections in Puntland on 25 May 2023, the government in Garowe accepted that elections could not be held in the Dhulbahante territories. The position of Garowe is that Lasanod needs to be freed before the political future of the

¹⁴ A term frequently used during conversations with people in Garowe was 'hiil walaal',

meaning roughly 'brothers in arms (from the Somali nouns *walaal* – brother, sister – and *hiil*

– partisanship, partiality).

Dhulbahante can be contemplated. If they want to establish their own administration, the government in Garowe will support them; if there is a way to stay together as Puntland, this can also be discussed.

The government in Mogadishu took a rather passive stance toward the Dhulbahante uprising in the first months of 2023. President Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud spoke out several times against the killing of civilians in Lasanod by the Somaliland army. In a speech on 6 January 2023,¹⁵ he also emphasized that Somali unity was not to be discussed. At the same time, he indicated to the government of Somaliland that it was in charge of settling the conflict peacefully. This appalled many Dhulbahante, who asked themselves why the Somali president was not standing openly at the side of the people in Lasanod who, in essence, were fighting for Somali unity. In my view, it is clear that Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud is facing several challenges at the moment. On the one hand, he is engaged in fighting Al Shabaab in central Somalia, a fight that will be continued in southern Somalia and for which he has international backing. However, after some initial success in the central regions, where the fight against Al Shabaab had already started in mid-2022, the endeavour stalled recently (Hiraal 2023). Besides, Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud needs to balance the various clan interests in his government. He himself is Hawiye, and some of his constituency might not be in favour of creating an additional Darood/Harti-dominated federal state in the north, besides Jubbaland and Puntland, which already exist as Darood-dominated federal states, though balanced by Hawiye-dominated

federal states in Hiirshabelle and Galmudug. Moreover, the Isaaq have a considerable representation in the government in Mogadishu. While most Isaaq support Somaliland as a separate political entity, some decided to join the Somali government, either because they are genuine unionists, or because they wanted to have influence in Mogadishu and thus safeguard Somaliland interests there. The Isaaq in the Somali government are accepted as part of the larger Dir clan-family because the leaders in the south wish to demonstrate their unionist position, which would integrate all Somali clans. During the crisis in Lasanod, some Isaaq parliamentarians in Mogadishu exercised pressure on the Somali president not to get involved. However, in March a delegation of elders from southern Somalia engaged in mediating between the Dhulbahante and the Somaliland government with the support of Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud. The elders went to Garowe, Lasanod and Hargeysa, and were well received by the Dhulbahante *isimo*. However, when the elders went to Hargeysa, Muse Bihi refused to meet them for official talks about a ceasefire, wishing to delegate the talks to Isaaq traditional leaders instead. Yet, as mentioned above, the Isaaq clan-leaders (Somali *saladiin*) did not have the power to decide on the withdrawal of Somaliland forces from around Lasanod, which, however, was a precondition from the Dhulbahante side for peace talks to start. The elders from the south insisted on meeting the Somaliland president, but this did not happen; eventually they left Hargeysa without results. In mid-April, President Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud appointed a special representative for talks with

Somaliland, Abdikarim Hussein Guled, who was the first president of the Galmudug State of Somalia. The idea was that the crisis over Lasanod could be settled as part of these talks between Mogadishu and Hargeysa. The Dhulbahante leaders immediately rejected this effort. Any diplomatic approach that did not put them at the same level as the government in Hargeysa was unacceptable for them. End of May 2023, a delegation of Dhulhanate *isimo* went to Mogadishu, probably to negotiate about their political options in setting up their own administration as a new federal state.

The government of Somaliland started to make public statements about the situation in Lasanod in mid-January. Dr Essa Kayd, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Somaliland, addressed the international community on 12 January 2023, giving a briefing on the situation in Lasanod and mentioning that the government of Somaliland was engaged in deescalating the situation. To that end, a delegation of ministers headed by Interior Minister Mohamed Kahin had been sent to Lasanod by President Muse Bihi. The commander-in-chief of the Somaliland army, Nuuh Tani, was also part of the delegation. The problem with this effort by the Somaliland government to de-escalate the tensions in Lasanod was that no effective line of communication was established between Mohamed Kahin and his team, who took up residence in Hotel Hamdi in the east of Lasanod, and the representatives of the local population, including *guddiga 33ka* and the *isimo* who arrived in town throughout January. During whatsapp-conversations I had with interlocutors in Lasanod in the second half of January, I heard that the

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=873404667334041>

Somaliland ministers and Nuuh Tani were holding separate meetings, probably with parts of the local and regional administration, including General Mahad Ambashe, the governor of Sool and others. Simultaneously, *guddiga 33ka* and others met and discussed matters with elements of the local society, including business-people, religious leaders, educators and others. Both sides were obviously talking past each other, and while the Somaliland side may have been hoping for the reintegration of Lasanod under Somaliland's rule, the other side – and this was already clearly communicated in mid-January among many Dhulbahante in the area and abroad – did not seriously consider a return to the *status quo ante*.

At the end of January, Muse Bihi had accused terrorists of being behind the uprising in Lasanod, without presenting convincing evidence. This was dismissed with contempt by the Dhulbahante. Once the war started, the Somaliland government and its supporters launched various narratives that partly contradicted each other. They argued that 'Al Shabaab', the 'Puntland Army' or even the 'Somali National Army' (SNA) were behind the fighting against the Somaliland army (Abdifatah 2023: 9-10). It remained unclear, however, why Al Shabaab, the Puntland army and the SNA should be fighting on the same side while the SNA was simultaneously rolling back Al Shabaab in central Somalia, and Puntland had defended itself in bloody clashes against Al Shabaab intrusions for many years. Somaliland supporters especially accused Abdi Madoobe, the SSC commander from Buuhoodle, of being part of Al Shabaab. However, he had resided for more than a decade in Buuhoodle before entering the war over Lasanod. Buuhoodle is right on the border with Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian security

forces cooperate very closely with local residents in Buuhoodle. It is improbable that the Ethiopians, who have been fighting Al Shabaab in southern Somalia since 2006, would have tolerated a wanted Al Shabaab commander to build up a militia in the borderlands between Buuhoodle and the Somali Region of Ethiopia. During an interview I had with Abdi Madoobe in Buuhoodle on 9 May 2023, he mentioned that Al Shabaab had killed a close relative of his in Barawa, where he used to live until 2009, which was the reason why he and his family left from there.

In mid-February, a delegation of Isaaq *saladiin* travelled to Yogoori, some sixty kilometres northeast of Lasanod, where they hoped to arrange a meeting with their counterparts from the Dhulbahante clan. One problem was that the mandate of the Isaaq traditional leaders was not absolutely clear. The Dhulbahante *isimo* stated that, before peace talks could start, Muse Bihi would have to withdraw his forces from around Lasanod. Initially, the idea was that a withdrawal of at least thirty kilometres to the northwest, maybe to Adhi'adeeye, would be a sign of Muse Bihi's good will in wanting to initiate peace talks. However, it then became clear that the majority of Dhulbahante, and particularly those residing northwest of Lasanod, would only accept a withdrawal of the Somaliland forces to Oog, which would mean their vacating all Dhulbahante lands. However, the Isaaq *saladiin* had no mandate to order the withdrawal of the Somaliland army, which was a matter for President Muse Bihi. The elders simply had a mandate to start talks. While the traditional leaders of the two sides did not meet in person, since coming to Lasanod was too dangerous for the Isaaq *saladiin*, and meeting somewhere else was not an option for the Dhulbahante leaders as

long as fighting over Lasanod was ongoing, they had several phone and zoom conversations, as the author of this report heard from one Habar Je'lo Suldan involved in the mediation effort. The problem was, according to the Isaaq side, that to withdraw the Somaliland army from Lasanod before peace talks could start would mean that the army had been defeated without a fight and that, even if the peace talks should fail, the Somaliland army could hardly return to the strategically important positions it had vacated. During the time when the Isaaq *saladiin* were staying in Yagoori and then Ainabo, hoping that some way could be found to deescalate the conflict, the heavy battles mentioned above happened at the end of February. This made the attempts to settle the conflict by 'traditional means' futile. However, another problem became visible with regard to this (failed) mediation effort. Politics among the Dhulbahante, in the SSC region, was largely based on a traditional system in which power was shared between various sub-clans and lineages proportionally, based on consensus. Each group was represented by a traditional leader, who together formed the council of *isimo*. This meant, on the one hand, that the leaders could only take decisions that indeed reflected the will of the majority of Dhulbahante. On the other hand, it also meant that the *isimo* were the 'government' of the clan. The Isaaq *saladiin*, in contrast, were not the government of their people. Their people, the Isaaq, were governed by the government of Somaliland in Hargeysa, headed by Muse Bihi. Thus, the attempts to mediate between the two sides were bound to fail not only because the demands of the Dhulbahante would mean the defeat of the Somaliland army without a fight, but also because in this affair two different political

systems were clashing, one being inspired by European traditions of centralized statehood, with a president on top who only accepted other presidents as negotiation partners,¹⁶ the other based on Somali traditions of (sub-)clan representation and consensus building with the *isimo* as the highest power, at the same level, in their view, as presidents.

The international community took notice of the conflict escalating in and around Lasanod somewhat later, only when the fighting started on 6 February 2023. Then, however, the EU, the UN, the USA and others started discussing the matter within days. Over the second half of February, the author of this report had online conversations with EU and US diplomats and with World Bank staff concerned with the causes of the conflict and its further implications. It became clear that these members of the international community did not believe that Al Shabaab was involved or that the crisis in Lasanod was being steered by outside actors, whether Somalia's ex-President Farmajo or China.¹⁷ Still, some of the mentioned international actors held on to the idea (at least throughout February) that the government of Somaliland was not only a party to the conflict, but ultimately was in charge of coming up with an overall settlement. This, however, was out of tune with the perspective of the Dhulbahante *isimo*, who, once the war had started, quickly established themselves as the clan's foreign and other policy leaders. They accordingly saw themselves to be on an equal

footing with the Somaliland government and announced that their aim was to establish a separate administration called SSC-Khaatumo. As Somali unionists, they only accepted the suzerainty of the government in Mogadishu, albeit the current Somali president so far has not yet shown enthusiasm to seize this opportunity to foster Somali unity and thwart the prospects of Somaliland to finally separate from Somalia.

The instability caused by the Dhulbahante uprising in the SSC regions was a concern for the World Bank and other development agencies, who, over the past decade or so, had become used to implementing ever larger projects in Somaliland, which of course, technically speaking and regarding the planned volume, included the SSC regions. This was the case even though, as stated above, very little of the development aid earmarked for Somaliland as a whole ever reached the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited regions.

Another mediation initiative had been undertaken by the Ethiopian government in early March. A delegation of military officers met with the Dhulbahante *isimo* in Garowe and afterwards met with Muse Bihi and his government in Hargeysa. Yet, it remained unclear what had been agreed among the mediators and their Somali counterparts. A planned follow-up meeting in Addis Ababa later in March did not happen. Both sides, the Dhulbahante leaders and the government in Hargeysa, accused each other of having spoiled the effort. Thus in contrast to the situations in 2007, when

Somaliland took over Lasanod, and in early 2018, when Muse Bihi advanced beyond Tukaraq, close to Garowe, neither Ethiopia nor other members of the international community have been able to end the crisis over Lasanod thus far. Notably, during the periods of external mediation, especially the efforts of the Ethiopian delegation and the delegation of elders from southern Somalia, the fighting over Lasanod has halted for the most part. Both sides obviously respected the attempts to mediate. They most likely also used the suspension of hostilities as a time to treat their wounded, reinforce their troops and acquire more weapons and ammunition.

Forecast

Scenario 1: Wait and see

Both sides in the conflict over Lasanod face each other on very similar military footings. While Somaliland probably has a slight advantage when it comes to the number of technicals, artillery pieces and tanks, the Harti forces are now also well-equipped and probably have more men under arms, albeit not all well-trained. Both sides have claimed over the past three months that they would make decisive progress in capturing Lasanod or in driving the Somaliland army out of its positions. This did not happen. Both sides have suffered considerable losses. One possible scenario for the coming month could be that no massive fighting happens and a 'wait-and-see'

¹⁶ The 'hybrid political order' combing European and Somali traditions of politics, which existed in Somaliland in the past, particularly in the 1990s (Renders 2012), has become so imbalanced in the last decade with the European-style institutions (presidents, ministers,

party leaders) dominating over any traditional institutions (*gurti*, [sub-]clan elders), that in reality, there is hardly any hybrid order at work anymore in Somaliland – at least not at the level of national politics (see Hoehne 2018)

¹⁷ These were rumors spread by external analysts like Michael Rubin, who, essentially, spread the war propaganda fabricated by the government in Hargeysa spiced by some narratives popular among some strata of the American public (Rubin 2023).

approach is adopted. This, however, will most likely be of advantage to Somaliland, since it has a more stable economic basis than the Harti force. The latter is financed through donations by members of the Harti diaspora and business-people in the region. The Somaliland army, on the other hand, has a fixed budget based on state revenue produced largely through import-export taxes in Berbera and along the Berbera corridor. Many of the forces positioned around Lasanod today were there already before the war broke out, meaning: their expenses are included in the national budget on a yearly basis. It is likely that the Somaliland army can stay in its positions northeast and north of Lasanod for a long time without fighting, while the Harti forces are likely to fall apart if no decisive advance is made in the coming weeks. And that means that it is unlikely that the Dhulbahante leadership will accept such a standstill.

Scenario 2: More serious fighting

The Harti forces defending Lasanod have only been established recently. They are in need of maintenance, training and integration as an army. There is a risk that they may fall apart if they lose sight of their goal of freeing Lasanod from Somaliland occupation. Besides, within Lasanod as well, the situation of 'no war, no peace' cannot be accepted forever. The vast majority of the town's residents are still IDPs in the countryside, in Garowe or in refugee camps in Ethiopia. These people need to return, the town's economy must be restarted, and children and students have to go to school and university again, otherwise Lasanod is at risk of becoming a 'ghost town'. The Dhulbahante leaders have exposed themselves with their decision to go to war. They received immense moral support from Somalis all over

Somalia and abroad for their unionist stance. Now, they still have to exploit the momentum thus created. For all these reasons, it is very likely that the Harti forces will go on the offensive very soon. This was indicated already in the second half of May by the attempts to capture Tuulo Samakaab along the tarmac road between Bur'oo and Lasanod, a strategic point for cutting the Somaliland army positioned north of Lasanod off from any reinforcements. If all-out war happens between these two sides, the number of casualties will be massive, since both sides will mainly use infantry and technicals.

Scenario 3: Mediation and ceasefire

All mediation efforts so far have failed. The reason is indeed that the basic positions of both sides – the Dhulbahante and the Somaliland government – cannot be harmonized. The vast majority of all Dhulbahante wants the government in Hargeysa to withdraw its forces from around Lasanod and vacate the Dhulbahante territories. This being achieved as part of ceasefire negotiations essentially would mean defeating the Somaliland army without a fight. On the other hand, the Somaliland government agrees to negotiations only under the presumption that eventually the Dhulbahante will agree to remain part of Somaliland. This is unacceptable to most clan members, given the violence unleashed against Lasanod and its residents by Muse Bihi's government. Thus, there seems to be hardly anything to mediate at the moment. A ceasefire is unlikely as long as the Somaliland army is occupying Dhulbahante territory.

Yet, one possibility, albeit one which would require major diplomatic efforts, to achieve lasting peace in the region through negotiations would be for the federal government in Mogadishu, backed by its international allies,

to take a strong stand on the matter. It would have to work on a solution that supports the Dhulbahantes' aspirations to become part of Somalia and simultaneously respects the political and economic achievements in central (and western) Somaliland. Such a solution could be based on the idea of a transitional phase in which, apart from the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited territories (which would already be integrated into federal Somalia), the rest of Somaliland exists in a confederation with Somalia before the final status of the political relationship of both political entities is decided. It should be noted that indeed, a line separating the Harti from the Isaaq clans in the areas from around Buuhoodle to Erigabo and north of it, could be established. Nomads on both sides would know which land belongs to which group. The boundary between Harti and Isaaq would run roughly from Hararan (Somali Xadhadhan) west of Buuhoodle to Meygagle and Horufadi to the northeast (all in Togdheer region), to west of Gumays along the tarmac road to Bur'oo, and from there northeast to Lafweyne (all in Sool region) to the northeast, to a place called Kulaal, and from there northwest to Erigabo and from there east to Jidale, and from there finally straight to the north, until reaching the sea (all in Sanaag region). International actors would have to guarantee the transparent and peaceful implementation of any measures necessary for such a solution.

Conclusion

The uprising in Lasanod was not the result of long-term, rational planning. There were structural and long-term factors that made it very likely that, eventually, a clash between those

favouring Somali unity and those supporting Somaliland's secession would take place in the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited territories (Hoehne 2015: 159). However, these factors did not determine who exactly would fight and when. It could also have been the Somali National Army (SNA) fighting Somaliland's forces after the rest of Somalia, governed by Mogadishu, would have become completely stable, sometime in the future. A number of immediate factors made it more probable that the fighting would be between the Dhulbahante and Somaliland forces. Indeed, Dhulbahante leaders, but also, somewhat paradoxically, the Somaliland government under President Muse Bihi, have taken steps in recent years that have increased the tensions between the Somaliland administration and the Dhulbahante in Lasanod and beyond, who rejected being dominated by Somaliland. However, even these immediate factors did not all lead to a clearly predictable outcome. When the first demonstrations in Lasanod started, from the end of December 2022 onward, it was not yet clear that this would become a serious armed uprising. Demonstrations and police violence against locals had happened before. I have argued in this report that several turning-points (all in January 2023) turned the 'usual' unrest into an armed uprising. Even then, when the war started on 6 February, it was not clear that the Dhulbahante would prevail. But the ongoing attacks, particularly the indiscriminate shelling of Lasanod by the Somaliland army, not only forged Dhulbahante unity, it also created a strong sense of solidarity among the Harti which took the form of a massive military build-up on the side of those defending Lasanod. This was an outcome which could not have been planned beforehand by any actor before

December 2022.

It shows, in my view, that, despite some structural and immediate factors benefitting an uprising, its concrete timing and form were influenced by 'wildcards' played by the various actors involved, including the current Somaliland government. One wildcard concerned the tensions between Mohamed Jabutaawi and his private sub-clan army and the Somaliland administration. When Somaliland forces shot one of Mohamed Janutaawi's associates on 4 January, the civilian uprising became an armed uprising. Another wildcard was the fact that Somaliland let the Dhulbahante *isimo* into town accompanied by their own armed guards while Somaliland's emissaries were in Lasanod. In this way, the potential was created for Dhulbahante forces to confront Somaliland forces in early February.

Even before the dramatic events of early 2023, Muse Bihi's government had committed three grave mistakes, assuming its aim was to keep control of Lasanod. First, it alienated those groups in Lasanod, mainly civil-society activists, business-people and educators who were religiously conservative, who in the past, particularly during the presidency of Ahmed Silanyo, had been ready to work with Somaliland. Second, it took a military stance on issues and preferred military solutions over civilian negotiations. It advanced beyond Tukaraq in early 2018 and provoked Puntland, which provided the government in Garowe with a lesson to be learned and is likely one of the reasons (besides others mentioned in this report) why in recent months, the Puntland government was eager to informally support the Dhulbahante uprising. Muse Bihi's administration also sent in armed police and the RRU to end demonstrations violently in Lasanod at

the end of December 2022 and early in January 2023. It amassed its army around Lasanod in January 2023 and, worst of all, it started shelling the town on 6 February. This clearly united all Dhulbahante and soon also forged a strong Harti alliance against Somaliland, which is seen unanimously as the aggressor by the Harti today. Third, Muse Bihi refuses to accept traditional mediation, presenting himself instead as the sole decision-maker on behalf of the Somaliland government, even though his term of office has officially ended and his prolongation of it is viewed critically by many Isaaq, as well as by members of the international community who are normally supportive of Somaliland. On the other hand, the political system working in Lasanod and across the Dhulbahante- and Warsangeli-inhabited territories is based on Somali traditions of negotiations between (sub-)clan leaders and consensus-building. So far, in fact, Muse Bihi and the *isimo* in charge of the uprising in Lasanod have not spoken to each other once directly, a demonstration of the distance between them regarding their respective views on settling the conflict, as well as the respective political systems in which they operate.

As of today (June 2023), no peace is in sight between the Dhulbahante, supported by their Harti brothers and sisters, and the government of Somaliland employing its army to dominate what it considers its state territory, despite the fact that it never controlled it and has no sovereignty in the territories inhabited by the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli. What is at stake in Lasanod is more than just the question of who controls the town and its surroundings. Essentially, the conflict is over the unity of Somalia versus the secession of Somaliland within the colonial borders before 1 July 1960, when

the Somali Republic was created through the union of British- and Italian-administered Somali territories. While in the past the Dhulbahante were divided and regional powers, including Somaliland, played on these divisions, this time, since January 2023, the Dhulbahante have been united. This facilitates a more substantial level of involvement by the Puntland government, which has refrained from official military confrontations with Somaliland, but offers considerable military and humanitarian support through its population. The constellations in Somalia, with Puntland in political conflict with the government in Mogadishu, probably also made the uprising in Lasanod something the current government in Garowe hopes to profit from.

Settling the crisis over Lasanod will take time. Even if a situation emerges in which peace talks can start, the question remains: what will be the future of Somaliland? Will it be recognized as an independent state within the borders of the former British Protectorate, as its government and its supporters claim? In that case, why has no external power recognized Somaliland thus far, even though it is clearly more peaceful and democratic in the centre and the west than most other Somali territories in the Horn of Africa? If no external power has an interest in recognizing Somaliland, can any solution be found that respects the achievements reached in Somaliland between 1991 and the present (Hoehne 2022b), and simultaneously serves to build a stable, united Somalia, as essentially is the aim of, among others, Puntland and SSC-Khaatumo? Can there be a settlement that accepts the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli territories in northern Somalia as part of Somalia, while the Isaaq in central Somaliland can remain separate from Somalia as long as no new

status between Hargeysa and Mogadishu has been negotiated? These are complex questions that will have to be dealt with sooner rather than later to avoid the continued destabilization of northern Somalia at a time when progress in stabilizing central and southern Somalia is being made.

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