
Solidifying the Somali State: Puntland's Position and Key Priorities

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Introduction

This document is a transcript of a meeting held at Chatham House on 24 October 2014, which examined Puntland's relationship with Somalia, and how this may change over the next three years.

There have been a number of positive developments from Puntland in recent years. Transport infrastructure is improving, the management of rich marine resources is strengthening, and transparency in governance is establishing a greater degree of trust among the electorate. Such developments, however, have been assuaged by Puntland's relations with its neighbours. An unresolved territorial dispute with Somaliland, as well as a freeze in relations with the Somali federal government until a recent agreement with Mogadishu halted plans to create a new federal state encroaching on Puntland's borders, means that reconciliation and regional dialogue remains a key policy priority for the new government. At this meeting, President Ali outlined the government's priorities, reflected on the current status of relations with both Mogadishu and Hargeisa, and discussed Puntland's place in Somalia after the 2016 national elections.

The presentation was on the record. To encourage as full a discussion as possible, the question and answer session was held under the Chatham House rule, and therefore is not included in this transcript.

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HE Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas

I would like to thank Chatham House for convening this gathering.

The last time I had the honour of addressing this institution, it was February 2012 and I was the prime minister of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. We had just attended the first London Conference, and we were racing against time to complete the transitional tasks that would allow Somalia to move out of its transitional limbo status. I spent most of my time during that trip convincing the world that we would complete the tasks in the short remaining six months, that we would defy the odds, that we would succeed.

We did succeed. We adopted a provisional federal constitution. We created a new, leaner, better parliament. We succeeded in handing over to a new non-transitional federal government of Somalia, and the world has taken notice. Today, Somalia is back on the map as a country, recognized by governments, such as this one, and institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. We are proud.

Today I'm back here as the President of Puntland State of Somalia, the first federal state in this brave new country, and I'm going to talk to you about some of the challenges we are having in bringing the vision of a federal Somalia into reality.

Puntland State of Somalia was established in 1998 as a federal entity of a future united Somalia. On 1 August this year, we celebrated our 16th anniversary. This is perhaps the first awkward reality of today's Somalia, which is that our federal state predates the national government, like an older brother.

In 1998 Somalia's civil war had already been raging for seven years. Nine reconciliation conferences had already failed. The goal of Puntland's founders was not to split away from the nation, but to find a system of governance that would allow the relatively peaceful northeastern region of Somalia to rebuild and move forward out of the chaos.

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Another goal was to propose a system of governance that would uphold national unity and, at the same time, persuade our brothers in Somaliland to reconsider their secession decision and rejoin the union. I'll come back to this later.

Finally, the founders of Puntland were looking for a way to restore the trust that had been lost in the years of war – how could we Somalis learn to trust each other again? Puntland believes regional autonomy, expressed in a federal system, will allow Somalia to avoid the mistakes of the Siad Barre era, to never go back to centralized dictatorship.

Puntland was formed as a result of a bottom-up, participatory peacemaking process. We used a highly consultative approach to bring together our communities, to resolve our conflicts and to share resources. We think the Puntland approach has proven effective, and we would advocate it for other parts of the country. The legacy of civil war can only be addressed and overcome through processes that encourage consultation, collaboration and trust building – on the local as well as the national level.

In parallel to creating itself, Puntland has taken an enthusiastic and supportive role in the rebuilding of the national government. Throughout the 2000s Puntland was consistently involved in the national reconciliation efforts. The first president of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia was a former Puntland president.

Puntland also played an active role in the 2011–12 end-of-transition process, during my tenure as prime minister. Puntland was especially interested in ensuring that the provisional constitution articulated the federalist vision that would guarantee clear protections for the autonomy of the federal states.

As you know, the constitutional process in Somalia is not complete – there are significant negotiations that remain, including many of the critical provisions on federalism and the resource and responsibility sharing arrangements between the centre and the federal units. However, these negotiations cannot be fully undertaken until the new federal units in Somalia are actually created, a process that is ongoing. From a political perspective, we are engaged in the tricky exercise of laying the foundations and building the walls of the house we are already living in.

Let me turn to our work in Puntland. After 24 years of civil war, and even after 16 years of statehood, the road ahead to rebuilding the Somali nation is a long one. First, the institutions of governance need to be rebuilt, and these need to be effective. Second, the rule of law and the principles of fairness and equity need to be restored to a society that has seen decades of injustice and impunity. And third, the Somali people need to be raised up, given services, given jobs.

We understand federalism to mean that it is our responsibility to deliver to the people of Puntland. The federal government sitting in Mogadishu is too far away from the communities, districts and regions that make up the federal states to be able to reasonably and capably assess needs and deliver services on the ground.

Accordingly, in the last 10 months since I took office, my administration has focused on strengthening institutions, restoring fairness and equity, and on making day-to-day life better for the 3 million Puntland residents.

We are undertaking a civil service reform, introducing merit-based hiring for public staff. This has introduced a competitive examination into the hiring process that has resulted in more women winning director posts in the ministries. All appointments will go through the labour ministry, civil service

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commission, and ministries combined committees for hiring. With these new processes, we are hoping to demonstrate that every Puntlander has the opportunity to gain positions based on their own intelligence and hard work. This represents a paradigm shift that has been much needed in Puntland, as well as all of Somalia.

We are undertaking similar reforms in the security sector. We are moving away from a clan-based fighting force to a smaller, more professional, better-trained army without a clan character. Again, we wish to have young men and women fighting for their state and their nation, not for their clan.

This is how we will rebuild the institutions of Somalia – by having clear, transparent and fair rules as their foundations. This is what it means to restore the rule of law.

In the justice sector itself, we have a lot of work to do. Last month, 12 judges and two prosecutors were fired in Puntland. Why? Because of corruption; because they were selling their public offices for private gain. We cannot permit that to happen, because then the institutions we are trying to build will crumble before our eyes.

We have been reforming our public financial management as well, restructuring our revenue collection rules and systems, to increase transparency and at the same time, reduce corruption, malfeasance and waste. We cannot afford to lose resources to corruption when our people are still suffering crushing poverty.

In Puntland, we have been investing in our people. We've doubled investments in health and education. We are also putting massive efforts into clean water programmes. However, my biggest focus is on providing employment opportunities for our youth.

To generate jobs, we have two immediate priorities. The first is infrastructure development, which includes restoring and building new roads connecting the towns, and also investing in our airports and ports. In addition to contributions from our diaspora, we have secured infrastructure investments from Italy and China for the Bossaso Airport, and from Kuwait for the Garowe Airport. We are in discussions on expansion of Bossaso Port, a strategic gateway linking the Middle East to south-central Somalia and Ethiopia. Improved infrastructure will provide a positive boost to our second priority, which is to strengthen our agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors. We need to move beyond exporting live animals towards basic meat-processing, which will allow greater economic benefit and create more jobs. Same on the fisheries, although we have the additional challenge of fighting against the illegal fishing vessels that have preyed on Somali waters for the past two decades.

These are the examples of the work we have been doing in Puntland, seeking to move our nation and people forward. Even though Puntland has existed for 16 years, our institutions are still young and still need strengthening. Our infrastructure need investments, our people need jobs. The work that needs to be done in all of Somalia must start from the ground, and this is our understanding of federalism.

Let me say a few words about Puntland's relationship with the federal government. I recently had a productive series of meeting with the Prime Minister of Somalia, Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed, and we discussed some of the recent tensions and misunderstandings between Mogadishu and Puntland.

It is important to understand that the introduction of federalism is a significant change from the political order in Somalia prior to the civil war. There used to be a highly centralized system, and an all-powerful

central committee ran the entire country from Mogadishu. We cannot return to that system, as we all know it ended in a terrible civil war and years of suffering.

However, there are still some people in Mogadishu who do not want to give up this dream of centralized power, who are still hung up on the past.

But the reality of today's Somalia is different. We have moved on, certainly in Puntland. And we are focused not only on the power-sharing aspects of a federal system, but, more importantly, on the responsibility-sharing.

Puntland is equally responsible for rebuilding the institutions, for restoring the rule of law, for lifting our people up, as I described above. There is plenty of work to be done in Somalia, and under our current provisional federal constitution, we are all equally responsible for most of it.

The only areas that fall under the exclusive power of the federal government are national defence, monetary policy, immigration and naturalization, and foreign policy. Puntland will not be trying to vote at the UN General Assembly!

Which brings us to Somaliland, which does wish, one day, to get a vote at the UN, a radically different position from Puntland. We believe in a united federal Somalia – we do not want to go back to the centralized, brutal system of the past, and we believe a robust federalism will help us avoid that.

Somaliland believes secession is the only way to avoid the horrible past, and have invested significant resources on seeking international recognition, as well as rebuilding their institutions and people.

The territorial dispute arises because of a disagreement on where Somaliland's and Puntland's borders lie.

We cannot accept the argument that Somaliland was a former British colony and therefore retains the colonial borders, as we believe the act of union in 1960 and the referendum of 1961 ended that, solidifying the merger between the north and south parts of Somalia. Therefore, if there is to be a separation today, an amicable divorce, there needs to be a referendum for all of Somalia.

We also strongly believe that the people who live in the disputed land between Somaliland and Puntland do not want to leave Somalia. So an alternative would be to ask the people who live in this disputed area: do you wish to secede with Somaliland, or do you wish to stay with Somalia? That opportunity should be given to those who live there.

Puntland has always traditionally acted as the bridge linking northern and southern Somalia, not only geographically, but also culturally. We would like to see Somaliland stay with Somalia. In proposing a federal system, we had hoped that this would provide an acceptable political alternative for Somaliland. We still hope this is the case.

However, more urgently, we are concerned about finding a solution to this dispute because the instability in these disputed areas has allowed elements of Al-Shabaab to find refuge in the Galgala mountains. This is a serious security challenge for both Puntland and Somaliland, and we are working together collaboratively to address this.

As I mentioned at the beginning, last time I was here I was working on convincing the sceptics that Somalia would defy the odds. That is still my general message – yes, we have tremendous challenges;

political, security and economic ones. But we also have the will to keep building, step by step, inch by inch.

What we are trying to achieve on the political front – to introduce a federal system – is something other nations have spent centuries on. We wish to do it in a decade. And of course there will be resistance, as there always is to all types of progress. However, we strongly believe this is the right direction for a Somalia that will be stable, prosperous and reconciled with its past.

I'm going to stop here as I am sure there are plenty of questions, and we will have an opportunity for some discussion.

Thank you.