Reconciling The African Union and the Future of Somalia

by Martha Heggs

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Meaningful peace in Somalia has never been fully realised, and reconciliation requires support at local, rather than state level. The government in Somalia lacks centralised control, and a 'bottom-up' approach to reconciliation is better suited to Somalia's regional complexity. This paper seeks to address the ways in which the AU can adapt their policy towards their peace-keeping mission in Somalia in order to be more efficient, Somali-led, and productive of sustainable peace.

The African Union (AU) has been present in Somalia for nearly two decades. Involvement began in 2007 with the peace-keeping African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), then the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) in 2022, and finally the AU's current, UN-backed, 2025 African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Its initial involvement in 2007 occurred in the wake of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) being deposed and replaced with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). A radicalised break-away of the ICU, the now infamous terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab, has been one of the largest, if not the largest security threat to Somalia. Other threats to stability include civil disputes rooted in clannism, territorial disagreements, and corruption within its present fractured government - the Federal Republic of Somalia (FGS).

I will first provide a brief history of Somalia from the 1990s to the present day, followed by an analysis of how Somalia's autonomous regions have approached peace-building. I will then analyse the AU's 2063 Agenda and the limitations it poses on its mission in Somalia. Finally, I will propose how the AU can amend it agenda and approach to reconciliation that gives greater agency to local actors.

Somalia's History of Conflict

Somalia's contemporary history has been characterised by conflict at state, sub-state and local levels, and therefore needs reconciliation at not one, but all of those levels. In 1991, Somali military dictator Siad Barre was removed from power and exiled from Ethiopia. He was infamous for tribal politics, and his concept of 'Greater Somalia' that led to several conflicts such as the Ogaden War with Ethiopia (Bach, 2022). Ever since, Somalia has had three new governments, including the TFG backed by the US and Ethiopia in the hopes that there would be no renewed claim to the Ogaden region. Ethiopia forcefully imposed the TFG due to its belief that it would make Somalia a weak neighbour, and thus a smaller territorial threat to Ethiopia (Cocodia, 2021) - a highly unpopular move among Somalis.

At the same time as the installation of the TFG, the overthrown ICU was a growing stable form of government in the South of Somalia (Cocodia, 2021). It was largely successful in its ability to unite a splintered populace by shared values and religion, provide medical and educational services,

create a non-warlord controlled militia, and adjudicate matters according to Islamic law (Ibrahim, 2018). This success was short-lived when Somali president Yusuf claimed the ICU were linked to terrorist activities, a tag which inevitably caught the attention of the US (Hull & Svensson, 2008). When the ICU were removed from power by Ethiopian and American-backed forces, a break-away unit of the ICU formed Al-Shabaab. In 2007, the AU deployed UN-backed AMISOM with the aim "to support a national reconciliation congress" (AMISOM, 2025).

Present Day Somalia

US, UN and AU interventions may have contained Al-Shabaab's influence, but the organisation remains a prominent threat. In May 2025, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) released a security situation report on Somalia, estimating that in 2023 Al-Shabaab had between 7,000 and 12,000 militants. But in March 2025, Al-Shabaab released a "video purportedly showing hundreds of newly trained militants" (EUAA, 2025, p. 1.2.2). The same report describes the targets of Al-Shabaab attacks to include those who are believed to support the FGS including the AU's peace-keeping forces, business people, NGOs, aid workers or journalists (EUAA, p. 3.1.3) . Though Al-Shabaab is associated with religious extremism, its targets are more related with discontent for the FGS, and the involvement of foreign forces. On the 1ˢᵗ January 2024, Al-Shabaab called for the Somalis "to join in defending their land from Ethiopia and other foreigners" (EUAA, 2025, p. 3.1.3).

As the problem of funding stagnates and Al-Shabaab continue to directly target AUSSOM personnel, the AU should look to how it can more efficiently build peace with less direct and costly involvement - in terms of both money and lives. Two Somali regions set precedent for this.

Somali Success Stories: Somaliland and Puntland

The two autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland have had a history of territorial disputes over the regions of Sanaag and Sool. In October 2025, the two administrations agreed to cooperate over an anti-terrorist mission in Sanaag, and a maritime operation aimed at curbing piracy. This is just one instance of how authorities in the regions of Somaliland and Puntland are attempting to improve cooperation by prioritising immediate safety threats over political differences to protect their citizens. Even though the Sanaag anti-terrorist mission may be later undermined by political fallout over historical disputes (AllAfrica, 2025), there is evidence to be optimistic about the proactive approach to resolving regional conflict taken by Somaliland and Puntland.

In April 2025, Puntland Defence forces were pictured next to an Arabic Sheebab province sign demonstrating that the regional authorities, with international assistance from the US and UAE, were able to regain the territory from Islamic State members during Operation Hillac (Levy, 2025). However, Puntland authorities claimed that "We have been talking to the Americans about this

offensive for months — about air support, medical supplies, intelligence sharing, military supplies — but none of it has happened." (Houreld, 2025). Furthermore, Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni, claimed that supplies from the UAE and regional neighbours were "not nearly enough" (Houreld, 2025). Despite this, Puntland forces were reported to have killed more than 150 Islamic State members (Houreld, 2025). *The Conversation* lauded how "it shows how local and substate forces can be more effective at fighting armed nonstate groups than the federal authorities, despite limited resources" (Levy, 2025). There is a general Somali anxiety about how foreign support such as weaponry can be misused and misdirected, which results from historical experiences where aid was diverted to warlords, militias and elites (Balthasar, 2019). Despite a complex negotiation between a need for external support, potential misuse of resources, and a need for autonomous action, the region of Puntland has been largely successful in countering the Islamic State.

Somaliland is an example of how a state gradually built its capacity to govern. Somaliland "established a series of bottom-up initiatives with other key local stakeholders that included traditional leaders, religious figures, poets, business people and the military" (Cocodia, 2021, p. 124) to develop processes of reconciliation at local then regional level. This is what built a natural foundation in which to establish a stable government enabled by an absence of strict deadlines or agendas (Odowa, 2019: Abdi & Ramsbotham, 2018). In the Sanaag region, reconciliation processes were facilitated, resourced and funded locally with women playing a large role in meeting requirements for food, resources and moral support (Abdi & Ramsbotham, 2018). The traditional Somali Jilib-Aro technique focuses on restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation (Hersi, 2023). It is important that the foundations of peace in Somalia are reflective of, and entwined with core traditional values and practices in order to unite its fractured populace.

A Problematic AU Agenda

The AU committed to seven 'Aspirations' in its Goals and Priority Areas of Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015). The three 'Aspirations' I will examine are:

1. An Integrated Continent politically united and based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of African Renaissance
2. An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, Respect for Human Rights, Justice and the Rule of Law
3. A Peaceful and Secure Africa

These three aspirations are difficult to harmonise, especially in Somalia. The AU has failed to establish stable peace despite three consecutive missions over nearly two decades of intervention, with no sign of decisive progress in the near future as the problem of financing stagnates (AU, 2025). Al-Shabaab poses a great security threat to Somalia, but their attacks are at least partly incensed by foreign intervention and the belief that the Somali government is compliant under foreign powers (UK

Government, 2025). The AU's current position as a foreign, intervening actor must be adapted to facilitating local, Somali-led solutions. While Al-Shabaab remains a core threat to international security, the AU should also examine its own responsibility for Somalia's instability. I propose the AU take a reconciliatory approach, and change its position as an *intervener* into an *enabler* by granting greater autonomy to Somalia.

Recommendations

The AU has optimistically set 2063 as the end-date for this goal. It is a mistake to give any deadline on peace and security. Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (HSM) has equally fallen into the trap of making unrealistic time promises, declaring that he "plans in August 2023 to liberate the country from the militant group Al-Shabaab within five months", however, "in November, [revising] the timeframe to late 2024, a date subsequently amended again to April 2025" (RUSI, 2024). It is questionable whether deadlines in this context to spur action, and likely that they are prone to induce rushed decisions. Peace-making must be seen as continuous process seldomly concluded after a peace-deal. Modelled on the success in Somaliland, the imposition of 'bottom-up' initiatives ought to have the flexibility to evolve without pre-determined agendas or timelines.

As long as Ethiopia remains the seat of the AU, they cannot act as an impartial intervener. They will always be perceived by Al-Shabaab as unjust interveners. Somali perceptions of the AU's might be transformed by an acknowledgement of the AU's own involvement in Somalia's violent past as an interventionist presence. If the AU is to become a reconciliatory authority in the region, they must reconcile themselves with Somalia first. This brief recommends, in reference to the AU's stated goals:

Reduce Ethiopian Presence

1. ***An Integrated Continent Politically united and based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of African Renaissance***

In reviewing Cocodia's suggestions for Somali reform, Solomon criticises the idea of a Pan-African solution as "moot" because "like Asian, European or states in the Americas, African polities also pursue their national interests and do not think in Pan-African way" (Solomon, 2025). If the AU is to build trust with the people and leaders in Somalia, they have to recognise Somali uniqueness outside of Pan African ideals. This would involve adjusting the AU's second aspiration to 'An Integrated Continent Politically united and based on *the merits of African diversity*, and the vision of African Renaissance'. Former Tanzanian diplomat Liberata Mulamula recently said at a high-level panel on African-led Peace initiatives that "peacekeeping works best when politically grounded, locally owned and contextually adapted" (AUSSOM, 2025). To AUSSOM's credit, they have been successful in providing free medical care and providing aid in Bay, Bakool and Gedo regions

(AUSSOM, 2025). The main limitation however, is that provisions are Ethiopian-led, which is in direct contest with the words of Mulamula. The presence of Ethiopians incenses not only Al-Shabaab, but has entrenched further instability between HSM and Somaliland. If peace in Africa is to remain an aspiration for 2063, then rivalry between African countries needs to be addressed outside of Somalia, not within it.

The AU should consider making a statement acknowledging its own involvement in the fracturing of Somalia, and state its willingness to take accountability. In addition to facilitating reconciliation at local levels, the AU (and by extension Ethiopia), should seek reconciliation with Somalia themselves in order to gain legitimacy.

Forgo Democracy (for now).

2. *An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, Respect for Human Rights, Justice and the Rule of Law*

A historical pattern emerges where an assumption is made that democracy is a prerequisite for peace, and that Islamic rule is authoritarian in nature (Gani, 2022). Cocodia observes that "beyond Africa, places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, East Timor and Iraq are vivid reminders of the enormous problems in forcing democracy immediately after conflict" (Cocodia, 2021, p. 118). A move to democracy requires a strong foundation that would prevent the country splitting into factionalism. It would be unwise to rush democratisation. Instead, good governance should be homegrown, and reflective of the country's own values – neither 'Pan-African' nor Western. This paper suggests a small amendment to the wording of this aspiration to remove democracy as a prerequisite, at least until more stability is established, and recognise that Somali governance will look very different to governance elsewhere in Africa. The AU should emphasise Sunni Islam and Shariah law as uniting values of a population that is nearly 100% Sunni Muslim (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025).

The AU could help as a mediator to ensure discussions focus on restorative justice, but have no input on the decisions made themselves. The AU's administrative power could help enforce consistent guidelines, provide expertise on policy scrutiny, and ensure the representation of diverse contributors such as women, and local actors.

Work towards Reconciliation

3. *A Peaceful and Secure Africa*

While 'reconciliation' is within AUSSOM's vocabulary and vision for peace in Somalia, their words do not currently match their actions. Taking the UN's State-Building and Reconciliation Support Program (SRSP) a step further, the AU can use its uniquely African position to adopt a more

'bottom-up' approach inspired by The Jilib-Aro model of reconciliation that uses traditional elders and communities in conflict-resolution. By starting with local problems, the AU can enable and empower Somali actors to build a stable political foundation with greater social capital. It is paramount that this process is not rushed by impossible deadlines or fixed agendas.

We propose amending the aspiration to the following wording: 'An Ongoing Commitment to a Peaceful and Secure Africa and its Legacy'. This would mean the reallocation of AU military troops focusing on territorial regain, to soft-man-power focused on teaching and enabling negotiation. The establishment of a taskforce that monitors the progress of reconciliation and regional cooperation should be constituted of local and regional actors that would report back to a centralised peace-consolidatory force. It would aim to ensure the continuation of regional cooperation, diverse representation, consensus building, and policy scrutiny.

Conclusions

The AU's peace-building missions in Somalia have been undermined by uncoordinated action between Somalia, its autonomous regions, African neighbours, and multilateral organisations in addition to the muddying waters of Ethiopian politics. Previous top-down approaches that assumed the quick imposition of democracy would bring freedom to Somali people proved ineffective. But if the AU is serious in its mission not only for a stable Somalia, but a peaceful and stable Africa, then recognition and empowerment of local actors needs to be actualised. The AU can help to empower Somalia to lead its own peace by facilitating reconciliation, enabling homegrown governance that isn't necessarily democratic, and reducing the involvement of Ethiopian troops in order to rebuild trust.

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