

Relations between Somali Regional State and Somaliland, 2010 - 2019

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This research memo provides a snapshot analysis of evolving relations between Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (hereafter: SRS) and the neighbouring, self-declared Republic of Somaliland (hereafter: Somaliland). This relation has significant geopolitical relevance given security dynamics in the Somali inhabited territories of the region as well as ongoing efforts to facilitate Ethiopian access to the Gulf of Aden via the [Berbera corridor](#). Relations between the SRS and Somaliland are informed both by historical events as much as recent political shifts in Ethiopia, in particular the downfall of former SRS president Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley' in August 2018. The SRS is one of Ethiopia's ethnically defined regional states. It is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Somalis and shares a long border with Somaliland.

Introduction

Present and past interactions between the SRS and Somaliland have evolved at the intersection of *cross-border trading* and *domestic politics* in both countries as well as in relation to the *kinship relations* between the Issaq and Ogaadeen clan families. These three dynamics are closely intertwined and shape each other.

Cross-border trading: The bulk of the livestock that Somaliland exports via its [Berbera port](#) originates from SRS. *Khat* and vegetables are other commodities transiting SRS for export to Somaliland. In return [electronics](#), food stuffs, textiles, household items, construction materials and other consumer goods are imported, either to be sold in SRS or further inland. For decades the federal Ethiopian government has struggled to generate more revenue from the massive export of livestock to Somaliland. Although [some customs reforms have taken place](#) over the years, Ethiopian trade policy in its Somali lowlands has been impractical and punitive, designating much of cross-border trading as 'contraband'. [Road construction](#) on the Ethiopian side of the Berbera corridor and the creation of a [Berbera Economic Free Zone](#) in December 2019 are the latest signs of an increasing formalization of cross-border trade between Ethiopia/SRS and Somaliland.

Domestic politics: The rise of Abdi Iley to the SRS presidency in 2010 gradually reconfigured relations with Somaliland. The establishment of a [political marketplace](#) that benefited himself, his patrons in the federal government as well as his supporters in SRS affected trading and clan relations with Somaliland. Much of the rents that the Abdi Iley regime generated and distributed to followers was generated by interference in and domination of the flourishing cross-border trade with Somaliland (see below). Moreover, Abdi Iley

positioned himself as a [strongman](#) and defender of Ogaadeen clan interests, putting him at odds with Issaq dominated Somaliland.

Kinship relations: The Issaq clan family dominates trading along the Berbera corridor, from Gashamo district in SRS to the border town of Tog'wajale and on to Berbera port. Issaq communities straddle the SRS-Somaliland border in a territory that British colonialists referred to as the Haud and Reserved Area and which included Jigjiga. The Issaq, in particular the Habar Awal clan lineages, share close ties and regional political sentiments that span the border. Cross-border [population movement](#) between SRS and Somaliland have occurred in times of conflict and drought. Further south, within SRS the Issaq are neighbours with the Ogaadeen clan family (part of Absaame -> Darood), which dominates SRS demographically. The Issaq and Ogaadeen share maternal blood relations, cultural and economic ties with the Ogaadeen being main livestock producers and Issaq dominating livestock marketing.

Proxy war and cohabitation

Relations between SRS and Somaliland evolved on the backdrop of 20th century interactions between members of the Ogaadeen and Issaq lineages. Apart from localized conflicts, often over land and resources, and between lower level lineages, the two big clan families and neighbours were mostly at peace during the second half of the 20th century. This changed in 1984 when a [proxy war between Ethiopia and Somalia](#) erupted. Ethiopia backed the Issaq led Somali National Movement (SNM) while the Somali government in Mogadishu armed the Ogaadeen. The SNM had its biggest training camp in Aware in today's SRS recruiting Issaq from both sides of the border and with the consent of Ethiopian commanders. Many former SNM fighters from the Ethiopian side later moved to current day Somaliland where they took up prominent positions as the 'liberators' from oppressive Siyad Barre rule. They continue to have a stake in SRS politics, in particular when they feel that their relatives on the Ethiopian side are under threat.

Following regime change in Ethiopia and the establishment of Somaliland in 1991 enmity between the two clan families died down. Former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and Somaliland president Mohamed Ibrahim Egal had agreed on an open-border trade arrangement that allowed Issaq traders to import and sell commodities within SRS's (former) refugee town of [Hartisheikh](#). Ethiopia and Somaliland have also been cooperating in security and intelligence matters. The border was easy to cross and many Somaliland registered trucks carried commodities, mainly foodstuffs, into Ethiopia.

Between 1995 and 1998 Abdul Majid Hussein, an Issaq, headed the ruling Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) in charge of SRS. The Ogaadeen complained of marginalization at the hands of the government and non-Ogaadeen clans including the Issaq. The Ethiopian government eventually hardened its border and customs policy towards Somaliland after Egal's death in 2002. It restricted and regulated cross-border trade between the two countries. But at the community level, overall relations between the Issaq and Ogaadeen clan families remained friendly.

The Abdi 'Iley' years

Since the creation of the SRS competition between the Ogaadeen and non-Ogaadeen constituencies had [defined its politics](#). When former head of security Abdi Iley became president in 2010, regional dynamics took a decisive turn towards Ogaadeen parochialism. Before Abdi Iley's ascent to power the rebel [Ogaden National Liberation Front \(ONLF\)](#) had been the most vocal group in claiming to represent the Ogaadeen, accusing the federal government of deliberate marginalization of their clan. Abdi Iley positioned himself as a pro-

government defender of Ogaadeen interests, using cash and coercion to force Ogaadeeni to abandon the ONLF and instead support his agenda.

Over the years he branded himself as a spokesman of Ogaadeen (and Darood more broadly) interests not only within SRS, but across the Somali inhabited territories. Abdi Iley's pro-Ethiopian Somali nationalism did not benefit the Issaq and other numerically smaller kinship groups. He marginalized the Issaq who had once controlled some of the highest positions in the SRS and federal government. During his presidency (2010-2018) only one Issaq, Ahmed Mohamed Koorre, who headed the Bureau of Sports and Youth, held an appointment at regional level. The Issaq had little to no influence within the ruling Ethiopian Somali Democratic Party (ESDP, formerly SPDP). Abdi Iley oversaw the creation of more than 10 new districts within the Ogaadeen dominated areas of the SRS. With each new district the Ogaadeen gained political weight in regional politics. Conversely, the Issaq received Darroor district (part of Jarar administrative zone) and were dislocated from Aware district, which they had shared with members of the (Ogaadeen) Reer Issaq sub-clan.

Abdi Iley's security forces, in particular the *liyu* police, were involved in managing cross-border trade with Somaliland. The [Ethiopian side of the Tog'wajale border town](#), which is located some 65 km east of Jigjiga, was under strict *liyu* police control. Their presence and interference in cross-border trading disrupted cross-border interactions, making the lives of Somaliland electronics and Ethiopian contraband traders difficult. At times *liyu* police crossed into Somaliland and on two occasions, its forces attacked civilians near Salahley and Tog'wajale. *Liyu* police disruption of trade between SRS and Somaliland was particularly notorious at the Magaalo Qaran checkpoint, which is half-way between Jigjiga and the Somaliland border. *Liyu* policemen regularly harassed passengers and small-scale traders at the checkpoint. These aggressions included forcing passengers to strip off their clothes, throwing away their luggage and carry-ons, sexually harassing female travelers and beating or arbitrarily arresting passengers. Leading Somaliland politicians blamed the SRS for the continuous harassment of Issaq traders at the checkpoint. For example, UCID party chairman Faisal Ali 'Waraabe' expressed his concern about *liyu* police harassment in an interview with BBC Somali service.

Formally a regional police force, in reality *liyu* policemen were predominantly recruited among the Ogaadeen. In addition to fighting ONLF and furthering Abdi Iley's security agenda, the *liyu* police at times sided with particular Ogaadeen clan lineages. From the Issaq viewpoint the special police was little more than a government sanctioned Ogaadeen clan militia. Confrontation between *liyu* police and the Issaq community came to a head in Raqda *kebele* of Gashamo district in [March 2012](#). Revenge killings between *liyu* police and local villagers led to the summary execution of 10 Issaq villagers at the hands of the police. In response Issaq elders and representatives in the diaspora demanded that the Ethiopian government hold the perpetrators accountable. A UK delegation of Issaq representatives met with the Ethiopian ambassador and later on sent a delegation to SRS, which met with Abdi Iley who assured them that similar actions would not recur.

Tensions between the *liyu* police and Issaq communities both within and beyond the SRS continued, however. In June 2016 the police force [killed 21 villagers](#) and detained several more in Jamac Dubbad, some 30 km southeast of Gashamo after a dispute between a *liyu* policeman and an Issaq trader. This event had the potential to trigger full blown inter-clan conflict between the Issaq and Ogaaden. Dozens of Issaq sultans and traditional leaders gathered in Hargeisa's KAAH hotel in the aftermath of the attack. They agreed that their clansmen in the border area should retaliate against the *liyu* police, even if it meant attacking Ethiopian federal defense forces. In the end escalation was avoided as Somaliland's political elite convinced the elders to back off from confrontation with Abdi Iley's *liyu* police. They feared that conflict would disrupt and distract from the Somaliland presidential election, which had been postponed from March to November 2017. Similarly, on the Ogaadeen side

the ONLF leadership opposed conflict with the Issaq, which would mean a de facto rapprochement between the ONLF and its arch enemy, the Abdi Iley regime.

Détente and unfinished business

The downfall of Abdi Iley in August 2018 led to an immediate improvement of cross-border trading between SRS and Somaliland. Restrictions and harassments at the border stopped and trade flows smoothed after his deposal. The harassment of Somaliland traders at Magaalo Qaran checkpoint stopped. Most of the *liyu* police stationed at the border were replaced with military or other police forces. Incoming president Mustafa Mohammed Omar favoured free trading with neighbouring Somaliland. An Ogaadeen himself, the new president has pursued an inclusive political agenda that starkly differs from his predecessor. Issaq political leaders and traditional authorities were re-invited to join the political process at regional level. Hence, they attended the ruling party's Addis Ababa conference in August 2018, which led to the nomination of the new president. The latter has restored diplomatic and political channels with Issaq and Somaliland representatives. For example, in early September 2018 he met with a delegation of Somaliland elders in Jigjiga.

Some unfinished business of the Abdi Iley years remains. It is rumoured that Abdi Iley and his cronies [wired large sums of money](#) out of the country with the tacit consent or active help of Dahabshiil and/or other Somaliland based financial services. The SRS government has approached the Somaliland government for assistance in tracking and reclaiming some of these funds. In December 2019 the Somaliland government arrested and extradited [Mukthar Subane](#), Abdi Iley's former spy chief and a key person in his security structure. He is expected to face trial in Ethiopia.

Despite the current détente between SRS and Somaliland and, in extension, between Ogaadeen and Issaq, two stumbling blocks remain. They have the potential to reactivate community tensions and conflict if no compromise and inclusive political settlement can be reached. In the short term many Issaq in SRS have concerns that the 2020 federal and regional elections will be based on the region's current 93 districts, of which some 41 were created during Abdi Iley's tenure. The Issaq control only one district, which does not reflect their demographic size in the SRS. The political marginalization of the Issaq within SRS – should it be continued under the new president – is likely to give rise to deepening resentment both in SRS and in Somaliland. There is thus a need for political and institutional reform in SRS that includes a recalibration of the political quota and power-sharing arrangement among the region's major clan groups.

In the mid- to long term, trade relations between SRS and Somaliland are likely to change. Current efforts to establish a free economic zone and dry-port in Berbera, allowing Ethiopia to import goods directly from Berbera, will affect the political economy of cross-border trading. The Berbera trade and transport corridor will create new winners and losers and thus has the potential to disrupt community relations. Moreover, on the Ethiopian side the federal government and SRS do not always pursue the same objectives and the former can adjust customs policy according to its own priorities.

This research memo is part of the Conflict Research Programme's Small Grants project 'Transition times: political reform in Ethiopia's Somali regional state and its regional implications'.

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Suggested citation: Abdi, M. M. and T. Hagmann. 2020. 'Relations between Somali Regional State and Somaliland, 2010-2019', Conflict Research Programme, London: LSE.

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