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Vates Special Report: SSC-Khatumo Defeat Somaliland Forces in Las Anod

Security Analysis
Sep 2023

Executive Summary

On Aug 25 2023, SSC-Khatumo/Harti militias launched a coordinated offensive against Somaliland forces in the vicinity of Las Anod, Sool region, overrunning the key Gojacadde garrison and pushing Somaliland forces back 96km to Oog, effectively removing Somaliland's military presence and authority from most of Sool region. The defeat represents a major blow to Somaliland's territorial claims over the disputed SSC (Sool, Sanaag, Cayn) regions.

The conflict originated in late Dec 2022 following the assassination of opposition politician Abdifatah Abdullahi 'Hadrawi Sangub' and subsequent violent suppression of protests by Somaliland security forces. This triggered an unprecedented unification of historically divided Dhulbahante clan elders, who declared their intent to end Somaliland's authority over their territory. Despite Somaliland's superior firepower, including heavy artillery, tanks, and APCs, SSC-Khatumo forces achieved victory through improved command cohesion, defections from Garxajis clan soldiers, and a surge in Harti militia manpower.

This report analyses the background to the conflict, the evolution of hostilities, the decisive Aug 25 offensive, and assesses near, medium, and long-term implications for stability in Las Anod and the wider Horn of Africa region.

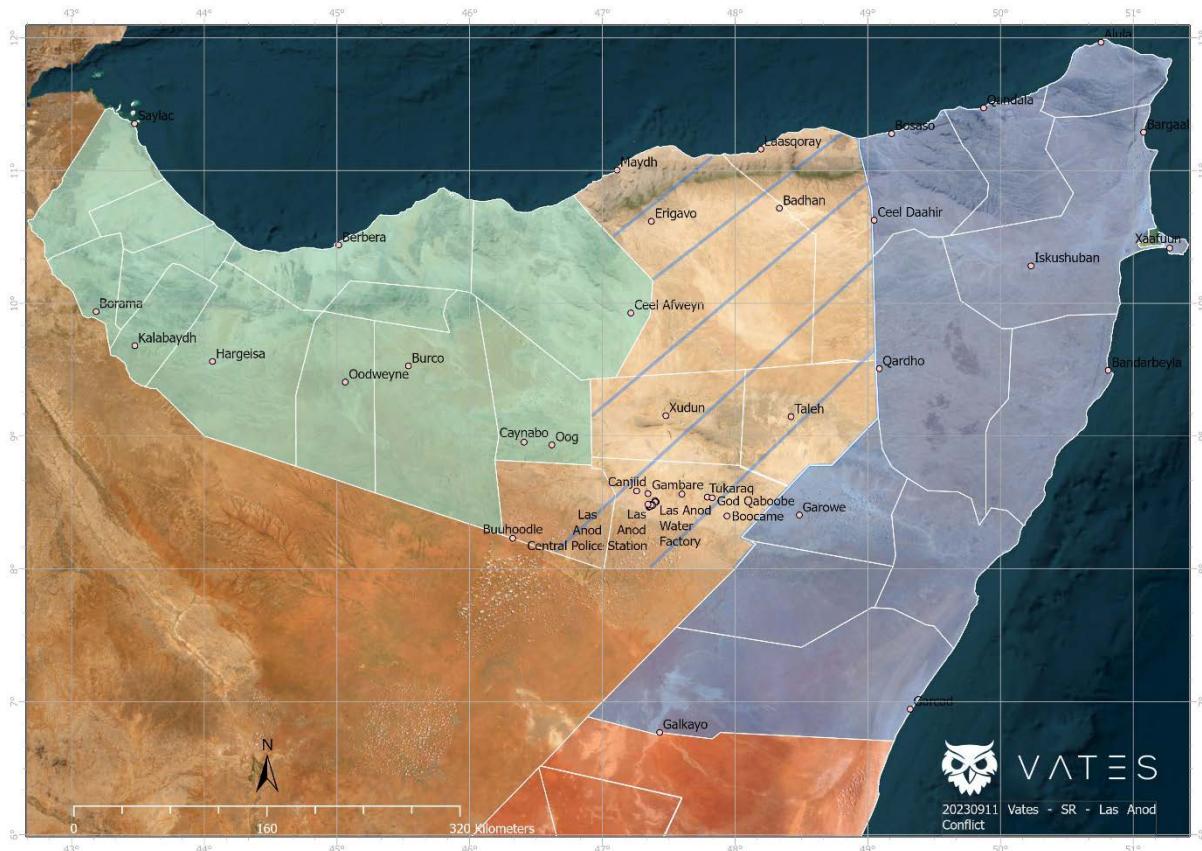


Figure 1 Map of northern Somalia. Source: Vates internal

Background: underlying Tensions in Las Anod

Insecurity in Las Anod has roots in several years of underlying tensions and growing frustrations among the Darood/Harti/Dhulbahante community over Isaaq dominance in key government and security positions in Las Anod,

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a city which is the Dhulbahante base of its wider home region of Sool. Locals claim that at least 119 Dhulbahante have been killed in Las Anod with no one held accountable since Somaliland took control in 2017. A series of unsolved targeted shootings primarily targeting the Dhulbahante community in 2021 reignited tensions, heightening mistrust in Somaliland authorities – with the narrative among locals that the Isaaq clan/Somaliland administration may have had a hand in the killings.

On Sep 16 2021, Somaliland announced a ministerial committee to investigate the security situation. Subsequently, the administration initiated mass deportations of southern Somalis, mostly from the Digil and Mirifle/Rahanweyn clan, from Sool and Sanaag regions in Oct 2021. Thousands were deported in night raids. Somaliland defended the evictions citing security concerns, but this was largely considered a temporary distraction from underlying issues. Former FGS Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble condemned the evictions as "shameful." The mass evictions diverted attention momentarily but failed to address underlying issues, with killings continuing.

Historical Context: Inter- and Intra-Clan Dynamics

Prior to recent events, the Dhulbahante experienced longstanding political divisions between sub-clans. This saw factions play off both Somaliland and Puntland in northern Somalia, achieving political seats in both regions. While this enabled political influence in different parliaments, it weakened clan unity, viewed by neighbours as indecisive regarding political stake – whether pro-Somaliland, pro-Independence (Khatumo), or pro-federal Somalia. Divisions played out between three main sub-clans: Bahararsame (seen as pro-independence), Jama Siyaad (somewhat pro-Somaliland), and Ugaadhyahan (divided between Somaliland and Puntland support).

Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (SSC) regions have been disputed territory since Somalia's states formed. In 2003, Puntland occupied Las Anod after mediating a conflict between Dhulbahante subclans, until late 2007 when Dhulbahante militia loyal to Somaliland took control. Somaliland's takeover was partly due to internal strife amongst Puntland's Dhulbahante leadership and accusations of mismanagement. This led to months of fighting between pro- and anti-Somaliland subclans. Puntland withdrew to Tukaraq (75km west of Garowe), which Somaliland captured in 2018. Efforts to secure SSC autonomy continued, including the temporary Khatumo state administration, until Somaliland regained Las Anod control in 2017.

Initial Trigger: Dec 2022 – Jan 2023

Protests erupted in Las Anod between Dec 27-29 2022 after Waddani opposition party official Abdifatah Abdullahi 'Hadrawi Sangub' (Darood/Harti/Dhulbahante/Baharsame) was killed by gunmen near Al-Huda Mosque on Dec 26. We assessed the killing was likely undertaken by individuals linked to but not operating under the direction of al-Shabaab – militants essentially operating as guns for hire – although actions by other political spoilers cannot be ruled out.

Peaceful protests quickly escalated after Somaliland security forces used live fire to disperse crowds. By Jan 01, at least 20 were killed in clashes. On Jan 03, Somaliland President Muse Bihi called for calm while cautioning Puntland and FGS against aggravating the situation. On Jan 04, Somaliland forces shot dead a civilian, igniting a response from local militia which resulted in Isaaq forces abandoning two technicals and withdrawing to the town outskirts. Somaliland deployed Dhulbahante Brigadier Gen. Mahad Cambashe (Jama Siyaad) to maintain security.

On Jan 08, a 33-member committee of Dhulbahante elders organised by Garaad Jama Garaad Ismail issued a 12-point statement calling for withdrawal of all Somaliland forces, declaring Las Anod would resolve its political and security issues independently. Abdirisaq Hassan Falaalug was appointed committee spokesperson. On Jan 09, Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni stated the people of Sool have a right to decide their future independently.

Turning Point: Intra-Dhulbahante Cooperation

On Jan 23, supreme elder Garaad Jama Garaad Ali (Bahararsame) was welcomed in Las Anod after 15 years, by crowds waving Somali and Khatumo flags. He declared: "This land belongs to Dhulbahante, and the Isaaq does not

co-own it with us. The decisions of our land and destiny will not be dictated by Hargeisa." He warned fighting would be long if Isaaq did not withdraw and stressed the region would not secede from Somalia.

Between Jan 28 and Feb 06, Dhulbahante elders converged for meetings at Hotel Hamdi to determine the clan's future. On Feb 06, elders were expected to announce its decision to demand for self-determination. However, at approx. 0530hrs, Somaliland forces attacked Dhulbahante militia providing security at Hotel Hamdi, then launched "indiscriminate" attacks with heavy weapons, mortars, and artillery from positions outside Las Anod, hitting civilian areas including the hospital. In the ensuing fighting, at least 35 Dhulbahante militia and 100 Somaliland soldiers were killed. That evening, Brigadier Gen. Mahad Cambashe announced he was taking a neutral stance to join the Dhulbahante, along with his men.

The Feb 06 meeting marked a turning point – a rare show of unity becoming a symbol of combined defiance of Isaaq dominance. Garaad Jama Garaad Ali called on civilians to take up arms to defend themselves. On Feb 08, Dhulbahante militia captured Golbalka district administration area, pushing Somaliland forces back.

Iner-Clan Support Threatens Somaliland

Fighting continued in late Feb and Mar with a key development: Darood/Harti/Warsangeli clan militia with technicals from Sanaag became directly involved alongside the Dhulbahante. Other Harti subclans also began sending militia forces. Reports indicated the Isaaq/Habar Jeclo community may be unwilling to support Somaliland due to potential conflict spill-over into their areas.

President Bihi's attempt to send mediating elders backfired when the Isaaq/Garhajis clan refused participation, expressing distrust that Bihi would accept negotiated agreements and calling for force relocation outside Las Anod.¹

On Feb 21, multiple flanks of Somaliland forces using APCs and heavy weapons attempted to enter Las Anod but were pushed back with heavy losses. On Feb 25, Dhulbahante militia captured Guul Wade military camp and vehicles. On Mar 01, Medicines Sans Frontières (MSF) confirmed the Las Anod General Hospital it supports was hit by artillery and mortar fire for the fourth time in three weeks on Feb 28. It remarked the hospital continues to be targeted despite repeated calls for respect of medical and humanitarian space of health facilities and for the protection of patients and medical providers. On Mar 02, Ethiopian intelligence officers visited Hargeisa encouraging ceasefire and withdrawal; on Mar 04, the delegation held talks with Dhulbahante elders in Garowe.

UN Population Fund reported on Feb 17 that at least 170 were killed and 500+ injured, with 185,282 displaced. UNHCR stated on Mar 07 that 100,000 fled to Ethiopia's Somali Regional State. These figures likely represent only Dhulbahante casualties; similar or slightly higher numbers were reported for Somaliland forces.

Force Strength Assessment (Mid-2023)

SSC-Khatumo/Harti Forces: Approx. 4,000-5,000 Dhulbahante fighters with 300 technicals; 400 Warsangeli with 20 technicals; 500 Majeerteen/Omar Mahmoud with 17 technicals; 420 Majeerteen/Osman Mahmoud with 20



Figure 2 Destruction of the Las Anod General Hospital. Mar 01, 2023.

Source: @UNFPA_Somalia

¹The Garxajis clan (Habar Yonis and Cidagale sub-clans) issued a statement refusing to participate in Bihi's mediation delegation, saying it did not trust that Bihi would accept any negotiated agreements. The Isaaq/Ayuub sub-clan similarly refused participation.

technicals; 350 Majeerteen/Isse Mahmoud with 20 technicals. Some technicals mounted with DShK, but forces primarily armed with small arms (AK-47s), lacking PKMs, RPGs and medium weapons systems.

Somaliland Forces: Approx. 3-4,000 men converged at Gojacadde, reinforced with approx. 1,200 from Tukaraq. Armed with small arms, heavy artillery, tanks, ZSU "Shilka," APCs, anti-aircraft systems. Somaliland significantly outpowered SSC-Khatumo in firepower but was outnumbered in manpower.

The Aug 25 Offensive: Fall of Gojacadde

On Aug 25 at approx. 0430hrs, SSC-Khatumo/Harti militias attacked Somaliland forces near Maraage (8km northeast of Las Anod), overrunning the position and capturing approx. ten technicals and prisoners. Fighting continued at Gojacadde (5km northeast), with Somaliland forces retreating and abandoning wounded soldiers at the medical facility. Somaliland also vacated Xargaga base (10km northwest). SSC-Khatumo forces pushed Somaliland back 96km to Oog, Caynabo district.

ICRC collected 42 bodies, transported 110 wounded, and visited 300+ detainees on Aug 31. Captured Somaliland personnel include Gen Faisal Abdi Bootaan (12th Brigade Commander) and Brigadier Axmed Ibraahim Cigaal 'Gadhka Yogolka' (Gojacadde artillery commander). SSC-Khatumo captured hundreds of vehicles including tanks and evidence of foreign-donated equipment.²

Three factors enabled SSC-Khatumo's breakthrough: First, strengthened chain of command following appointment of new SSC-Khatumo President Abdiqadir Ahmed aw-Ali 'Firdhiye,' enabling coordinated tactical strikes. Second, defections from Garxajis soldiers stationed at Gojacadde, with sources indicating defectors provided information on Somaliland frontline weaknesses. Third, a surge in Harti militia manpower ahead of the offensive.

Allegations of Al-Shabaab Involvement

Diplomatic and security sources confirm Somaliland officials continue to make unsubstantiated claims of al-Shabaab involvement, claiming up to 600 al-Shabaab militants were positioned around Las Anod after allegedly being pushed out of Hiraan. Reports from our source networks indicate individuals with links to al-Shabaab may have perpetrated some of the targeted attacks in Las Anod during the time period when Somaliland controlled Las Anod – directed by individuals outside the group or acting as guns for hire. However, allegations of al-Shabaab fighters joining Dhulbahante/Harti militia against Somaliland are



Figure 3 Somaliland army tank captured by SSC militia. Source: Radio Daljir.



Figure 4 Weapons seized from Somaliland army. Source: Radio Daljir.

²SSC-Khatumo captured evidence of foreign-donated equipment in Somaliland army possession, including 120mm mortar rounds and a U.S. military Humvee, allegedly showing materiel originated from Djibouti.

almost certainly false and in no way aligned with reality on the ground.³ Somaliland also circulated a fabricated al-Shabaab statement claiming responsibility for Feb 06 attacks. Al-Shabaab denied the allegations.⁴ We assess these claims are very likely attempts to deflect from Somaliland's actions in the Las Anod conflict – assessed by many as human rights abuses – while labelling clan militias as terrorists to justify the military campaign and denigrate communities seeking to rejoin Somalia.

International Response

The Aug 27 joint statement by international partners condemning escalation and calling for "immediate and unconditional ceasefire" appeared to misjudge the situation.⁵ SSC-Khatumo is seeking to document POW interrogations, allowing ICRC access and calling for NGOs to come to Las Anod – likely to encourage documentation as it is attempting to build a case for alleged war crimes against Somaliland officials. This is not only about accountability but its attempt to prove legitimacy as a nascent state. However, international acknowledgement is unlikely to come quickly.

Assessment

Near Term Threats: Somaliland's war rhetoric is escalating with approx. 3-400 soldiers mobilised to Oog for a new offensive. On Sep 05, Chief of Defence Maj Gen Nuh Ismail Tani and Interior Minister Mohamed Kahin Ahmed told forces to prepare for "a tough operation." Sources indicate Somaliland may have received materiel resupply from Djibouti. SSC militias have established defensive positions within 5km of Oog.

We assess near-term potential for resumed fighting on the eastern Las Anod/Oog front. While Somaliland may achieve some wins and fighting may become protracted – with earlier Isaaq divisions seeking to coalesce around perceived existential threat – we assess it is highly unlikely Somaliland will regain positions closer to Las Anod including Xaraga and Gojacadde. With fighting on Harti-dominated lands and buoyed by victory, motivation to defend remains high. Concerns also exist of potential al-Shabaab attacks on Las Anod to destabilise the administration. Furthermore, rising Somaliland nationalism risks retaliatory attacks on Dhulbahante in Somaliland controlled territories.

Medium Term Outlook: The conflict is highly likely to become protracted intercommunal conflict. Technically, Harti subclans remain disadvantaged in firepower but outnumber Somaliland in manpower with high motivation fighting on clan lands. Harti subclans have majority territorial control, access to supply chains, and ability to exploit clan outreach and wage insurgency. As conflict extends, logistics will become increasingly difficult for Isaaq forces lacking clan influence or support networks in the region.

Reports indicate ongoing defections of Harti subclan members from Somaliland forces. Both sides' determination to emerge victorious – representing what appears an existential crisis for both parties – is the primary reason we assess this conflict in Sool region will likely continue into the medium to long term.

Long Term Implications: The fall of Gojacade and removal of Somaliland forces represents a major blow to Somaliland's territorial claims and secession ambitions. While Somaliland initially sought to present the defeat as

³On Feb 25, Dhulbahante militia attacked the Guul Wade camp located on the northwest side of Las Anod and seized military vehicles including tanks and armoured vehicles. The attack followed Somaliland officer Mahad Cambashe exiting his Guul Wade military camp with five vehicles, reportedly travelling back towards Hargeisa late evening of Feb 24. Somaliland Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed "anti-peace and terrorist groups" attacked Somaliland military forces.

⁴On Feb 09, al-Shabaab issued a statement denying allegations made by Somaliland Minister of Foreign Affairs, stating "the Al-Shabaab Mujahideen movement does not accept that its name is used as an excuse to destroy the lives, wealth and honour of the people of Las Anod, and the apostate government that calls itself Somaliland wants to use these false accusations to get help from the world's infidels, to support the massacre."

⁵ With Somaliland funding on lobbies in its quest for international recognition, sources also cite concerns regarding international energy exploration plans and a perception that some governments may be shielding the Somaliland administration from wider international censure in order to protect commercial interests.

tactical withdrawal, this is almost certainly not the case given battlefield losses and impact on territorial claims. The defeat likely surprised many in Hargeisa who are often shielded by government propaganda.

The Dhulbahante have historic internal divisions with a likelihood these tensions may resurface in the medium to long term as political stakes and rivalries play out. While SSC-Khatumo stated it does not intend to attack other regions and will work for internal security and cooperation with neighbouring clans, the durability of current unity remains uncertain. Questions remain regarding SSC-Khatumo's path forward – whether seeking integration with federal Somalia, formal recognition as a federal member state, or maintaining current ambiguous status. Constitutionally, no less than two regions coming together is required for the establishment of a federal member state, effectively and practically requiring neighbouring regions to come together to agree on a joint administration. At this time as it stands, SSC Khatumo cannot fulfil this. This would require agreement with Sanaag and its dominant Warsengeli community, and dealing with difficult questions over clan diverse Erigavo (Warsengeli and Isaaq predominantly). While Puntland supported the Dhulbahante that helped secure its victory in Las Anod, the political ramifications of state formation to political stakes in Somalia's federal parliament risks placing Puntland at odds with SSC-Khatumo, its politicisation conversely may drive Puntland and Somaliland to cooperate, and risks provoking instability in Northern Somalia in the medium to long term.

Conclusion

The Aug 25 victory represents SSC-Khatumo achieving its primary objective of removing Somaliland's military and authority from most of Sool. Somaliland experienced a major defeat – losing tens of fighters, 374 POWs, tanks, technicals, and military materiel. While Somaliland has stated intent to avenge the loss, the conflict dynamics favour SSC-Khatumo's defensive position.

The conflict has also exposed deep fissures within Somaliland's political structure, including divisions among Isaaq clans and questions regarding the viability of its territorial claims. The coming months will prove critical in determining whether the conflict remains localised or expands to threaten wider regional stability. International engagement that accurately assesses the situation and addresses root causes, rather than simply calling for ceasefire while ignoring underlying grievances, will be essential for any lasting resolution. **End**