

Wajid district

an ‘island of peace’

This article describes how peace was maintained in one district of south central Somalia through a unique collaboration involving a decentralized local authority and community elders, business leaders and women’s groups. Stability was maintained and humanitarian access sustained for over a decade as Wajid handled its interaction with different Somali political groups and a succession of different authorities, some of them the product of internationally-led peace processes.

For many years Wajid district has been described as an ‘island of peace’ in the sea of conflict in south central Somalia. A district of Bakol region, the residents of Wajid are from the Digil Mirifle (or Rahanweyn) clan family, belonging to the sub-clans of Jirroon, Hadame, Leysaan, Harin, Moalim-weyne, Garwale and Ashraf.

Soon after the collapse of the central government in 1991, Wajid district was taken over by militia backing Ali Mahdi’s United Somali Congress (USC). After consulting with community elders, delegates of Ali Mahdi appointed a district commissioner – or mayor – of Wajid who was a ‘son of Wajid’, having been born, educated and resident there. In mid-1991 the mayor joined other civilians fleeing across the Ethiopian border to escape attack by Marehan militia who were fighting against the USC. The lesson from this was seen to be to avoid taking sides in other clans’ conflicts.

In April 1992 he returned to Wajid as mayor. This was a devastating period of war-induced famine in the region when many civilians died, mostly children and women. International humanitarian assistance came on the scene in 1992 and after the establishment of the UN peacekeeping mission (UNOSOM) Wajid district assembly elected a new mayor.

There were new authorities to contend with in 1994, when General Mohamed Farah Aideed’s wing of the USC attacked

and took control of Bay and Bakol regions. In 1996 the Rahanweyn began to fight back and the Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA) was established in Bay region.

The era of Rahanweyn Resistance Army

The formation of the RRA divided the community and resulted in bloody fighting among Wajid’s residents. One sub-clan, the Jirroon, supported Aideed’s USC-SNA while other sub-clans in the district stood by the RRA. Wajid was completely destroyed and burned by the RRA forces, civilians were killed and others forced to flee.

In April 1998 the original mayor was re-appointed and began to take steps to reconcile the community. Elders collected funds for the process from pastoralists and businesspeople and travelled from village to village until all components of the community were on board. An agreement was signed by all the elders on the following four points:

1. Restoration of justice and forgiveness of each other
2. Safe-guarding security and co-existence
3. Removal of all roadblocks from the district and execution of anyone who blocks roads in and out of Wajid, whatever clan he was from
4. Execution of anyone who kills anyone else within the district territory

The agreement held for just over a year. In May 1999 the RRA, with support from Ethiopian troops, evicted the USC forces and took control of Bay and Bakol regions. This was the fifth change of leadership in eight years.

The era of the Transitional National Government

The 1990 Arta peace process, designed to form a national government, had a destabilizing effect in Wajid. The RRA leadership split into two opposing factions over whether or not

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to participate. The local administration and the community leaders decided to take a stand against getting involved in any more armed conflicts in the Wajid area.

The split in the RRA worsened with one side aligned to the Arta government and other aligned to Ethiopia, each of them trying to establish their own administration and seeking the support of Wajid.

The community was divided once again along clan lines, each supporting different wings of the RRA: only the Jirroon sub-clan were unanimous in supporting Wajid as a neutral space.

Given this fragmentation within the Wajid community, another approach was taken by the local administration: talking to supporters from both sides and asking them not to fight inside Wajid and to ensure everyone could enter and leave the district safely. Everyone accepted this proposal.

More remarkably, Wajid provides a rare example of a grassroots community helping a larger political organization to reconcile its differences. The local administration engaged the help of community elders and women's groups to reconcile the two factions of the RRA, welcoming and accommodating the leadership of both sides, and finally convincing them to reconcile. Over 200 community elders from each of the Digil and Mirifle sub-clans participated in the reconciliation process, led by the *Malaaq* (titled elder) of the Jirroon sub-clan, Malaaq Ali Barre.

The era of the Transitional Federal Government

After the peace process led by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development in Kenya (2002-04) the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was established. It included RRA representation and for a short time was based in Baidoa.

The Wajid authorities agreed to accept the TFG army in the area, but it proved to be an undisciplined force and TFG soldiers started to misbehave, participating in killing

and robbery. From 2007 the TFG forces were relocated to Mogadishu with the help of Ethiopian troops. Thereafter the local administration and Wajid's community leaders resumed their efforts to maintain Wajid as a neutral space.

Factors contributing to Wajid's success

Equitable management of resources When humanitarian organizations decided to be based in Wajid district in 2002, the local authorities took precautionary steps to safeguard them and to avoid any internal conflicts. They agreed a set of ground rules to ensure an equitable spread of benefits. These included the fair regulation of rents, staff recruitment and tendering, all of which had potential to fuel hostilities between clans.

Special arrangements were agreed for airport security and Wajid's District Committee took responsibility for the distribution of aid. This was carried out at the local level by the community elders and other stakeholders. Such arrangements produced a positive correlation between security and resources. It allowed the Wajid community to use security as a positive resource and to host whoever wanted to invest and work in the district, with corresponding benefits to the local community.

Community ownership Responsibility was delegated to the district committee, with final decisions taken consultatively. This demonstrated to locals the community ownership of the district authority and appears to have encouraged all concerned to put aside personal interests and follow whatever seemed to be in the public interest for the Wajid.

Participatory decision-making Extensive consultation has also helped to consolidate peace in Wajid district. Whenever a concrete decision was needed to move ahead – particularly for security – the practice was to consult all levels of the community, especially the elders and businesspeople.

All the district committee members and the community elders would sign final decisions, which meant that it was much harder for spoilers to criticize them. In the case of local security, there was a time when all the community elders and district committee members sat together and signed a clan-based agreement that authorized the killing of militias who put roadblocks in the area and no one could claim *dijya* (blood compensation).

Wajid now falls within the area of control of Al Shabaab forces in south central Somalia, its eighth administration since 1991.

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