Security and stabilization in Somalia

learning from local approaches

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From South Africa to Sudan and Burundi to Côte d’Ivoire, negotiations over security arrangements have been critical to successful stabilization and peacebuilding. Although different in each case, the central lesson is the importance of treating security processes seriously and not simply as technical addendums to political agreements.

Hard-won lessons from across Africa show that peace processes must include negotiations on credible security mechanisms if they are to be effective. This is essential to manage and mitigate conflict, and to create a stable environment for post-conflict recovery. Effective security mechanisms are best realized through close attention to the necessary sequencing of security transitions and where possible through negotiation, mediation and consensus building.

Negotiating jointly managed security structures that will de-escalate violence, restore public security and build confidence between belligerents is integral to indigenous Somali peace processes. A starting point for security sector policy in Somalia should be to understand the ways in which Somalis themselves mediate conflict, negotiate ceasefires and manage security.

Over the past two decades, however, international actors have ignored local approaches, applying instead external blueprints for rule of law programmes to strengthen the capacity of the state and establish a monopoly over violence. This article examines what lessons can be learned from Somali approaches to security governance.

Best security practice
The experienced mediator Julian Hottinger has highlighted the importance of getting the approach right: introducing security arrangements into negotiations in a way that will do more good than harm, and that ensures they can be implemented. Unfortunately, as the Abuja negotiations on Darfur illustrate, not all international mediation efforts recognize the strategic significance of security arrangements. Too often they are simply seen as technical mechanisms to secure the political strategy for a peace process. This ignores the reality that security arrangements are critical elements of the overall political strategy and are fundamental to the effectiveness of a peace process.

Hottinger has stated that, in the past, mediators used to think that if violence could be stopped disarmament could be started and society simply brought out of conflict. Today such a strategy is no longer an option as warring parties demand a ‘total vision’ of their future before they are willing to put down arms: an idea of how their future together will look, which guarantees the survival of each side. Quick fix approaches to security negotiations or a failure to address the totality of security arrangements process are therefore strategies for failure. Yet both of these approaches characterize international mediation efforts in Somalia.

Experience from successful peace processes emphasizes the importance of a negotiated, phased and sequential approach to building security. The first phase involves establishing an effective ceasefire, because a cessation of hostilities is a prerequisite for establishing the political and public space for credible and representative negotiations. A commitment by the warring parties to a ceasefire is a demonstration of a serious intent to negotiate.

A ceasefire itself is a process that involves a series of steps, from a tentative cessation of hostilities through to a more comprehensive, formal ceasefire agreement. Without a serious ceasefire there is little reason to expect a peace process will be sustained.

The second, transitional phase is vital. It involves parties engaging in a series of confidence-building measures, and gradually compromising on their own security perspectives as they move towards joint responsibility for the management of the ceasefire and interim security forces. This helps build confidence between the parties and is a bridge to the third phase.
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The third phase involves negotiating a final ‘status of forces’ agreement, which is the security component of a comprehensive peace settlement. Without a transitional confidence-building phase, the parties are effectively being asked to sign a ceasefire that leads immediately to a final disposition of military and security capacities, in which the winner takes all. Few belligerents could accept such an arrangement outside of surrender. In most cases failure to invest in the transitional phase leads directly to the collapse of the ceasefire and critically undermines the peace process.

No conflict is the same. Each context requires a different approach so the basic template outlined above must be tailored to the realities on the ground. However, as has been emphasized by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD DAC), establishing security – particularly in fragile, conflict or post-conflict situations – requires a clear focus on security governance.

Security governance
There are three basic components of good security governance that need to be addressed: 1) building a set of capable and responsive security institutions that are subject to effective oversight; 2) establishing legitimate security governing principles and norms; and 3) building an effective legal framework.

In circumstances of ongoing insecurity these basic principles of democratic (and legitimate) security governance can often be perceived as a secondary issue by international actors. The focus instead – as in the case of Somalia – is placed almost entirely on the apparent need to simply, and immediately, deliver military and police capacity. As OECD DAC again points out, such an approach is unlikely to be legitimate and therefore will not ensure sustainability in the long run. In this regard, delivering effective security is also about enabling a dialogue on the causes of insecurity, and establishing frameworks for negotiation between factions on appropriate and collaborative mechanisms to restore public safety and order.

Among the many effective local peace processes in Somalia, one particularly illustrative example of how Somali-led processes have incorporated these key elements of good security governance into effective security sector practice stands out. This is to be found in the ceasefire arrangements negotiated by the Bakaaro Market business and community leaders and the insurgents in Mogadishu in 2008.

Recognizing that the externally-funded TFG police and the police commander himself lacked legitimacy, stakeholders in Bakaaro created a new community-based force, including members of the TFG police, to monitor and implement the ceasefire and carry out local policing. Significantly they placed this new police force under the joint control of the parties. In effect they were creating an integrated and more responsive police force and placing it under a more representative, and therefore legitimate, governance mechanism. Such an arrangement could only have emerged through genuine negotiation based on a recognition of the mutual needs and actual realities of establishing effective security by the parties.

Local Somali security strategies
The missing element from a successful negotiated strategy to end conflict in Somalia has been any serious attention to such negotiated security arrangements as described above. Many other examples of effective local Somali strategies for security stabilization and negotiation can be found in Interpeace's Peace Mapping study, which is outlined in more detail elsewhere in this publication (see section 2, p. 49).

The arguments put forward in this paper draw heavily on the lessons of these case studies.

Local Somali processes demonstrate an indigenous demand for security and law and order, and a capacity, in the absence of a state, to control and manage conflict. Ending or de-escalating violence, establishing public security, and instituting a judicial system are clear goals in most local Somali peace processes.

Effective technical mechanisms used in local Somali peace processes include cessation of hostilities (colaad joojin); disengagement of forces (kala rarid / kala fogeyn) and ceasefires (xabbad joojin); the creation of buffer zones and greenlines between warring parties (baadisoc); the exchange of prisoners; and the cantonment of militia.

Local peace processes illustrate the rich traditions of mediation, reconciliation and consensus building that exist in Somali society. Consensus decision making is a key principle of Somali peacemaking. As the parties in conflict have the power to reject any settlement that they are not happy with, only decisions reached by consensus carry real authority.
Consequently a common feature of all Somali-led processes is an incremental approach. This mirrors global best practice, with an emphasis on joint and transitional security responsibilities. Local Somali-led processes are also functional and pragmatic, focusing on threat reduction as a means to manage and reduce conflict. And they avoid final status ‘winner takes all’ agreements.

Security, peace and the state

In Somalia, simplistic assumptions about the relationship between statebuilding and peacebuilding have led international actors to neglect key elements of the latter, notably the challenges of negotiating meaningful transitional security arrangements. Instead, the international community has assumed that the revived state will address these questions.

Bitter experience has made many Somalis both sceptical and fearful of the state. This is exacerbated by attempts to re-establish the state monopoly on force without negotiation or consensus. Moreover by leaping from a preliminary ceasefire straight to direct assistance to re-establish state security capacities, the international community removes from the Somalis the vital consensus and confidence building stage of joint responsibility and management for security, which lie at the heart of Somali approaches to peacebuilding.

Despite the clear commitment made by Somali participants in the 2004 National Reconciliation Conference in Kenya to establish a government that is transitional and a state that is decentralized, international support for security arrangements in Somalia has in fact been neither transitional nor decentralized. Instead international security assistance to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has been explicitly state-centric. This is exemplified by the ‘National Security and Stabilization Plan’ (NSSP), which was developed after the formation of the TFG in negotiations with international donors.

Without reference to the need for consensus, for the transitional tasks of government, or the decentralized federated polity established by the Transitional Charter, the NSSP simply established a range of top down national security structures, including a National Security Council appointed by the president. Such an approach establishes a ‘winner takes all’ situation in which the opposition equates disarmament to surrender. When the opposition fails to disarm, the ‘winner’ – ie the internationally recognized president and government – can only respond in one way: through the use of force, as former President Abdullahi Yusuf unsuccessfully attempted to do.

Ways forward

For Abdullahi Yusuf’s successor, President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, there was an opportunity to recast the mould and embrace a consensus-based, decentralized and incremental approach to security arrangements. And for the international community there was an opportunity to re-think the strategy that equates statebuilding with peacebuilding.

Some efforts were made in this regard. In early 2008 a team of international security sector experts made a series of recommendations to the International Contract Group on Somalia, on security governance. These involved 1) ensuring that security arrangements were integrated into negotiations to discussions aimed at developing a political consensus; 2) emphasizing national rather than government ownership of the security sector and a decentralized approach; and 3) situating stabilization and the security sector within a transitional context and adopting a phased approach; and 4) building legitimacy based on the rule of law.

Elements of this approach were incorporated into the Joint Security Committee (JSC) established in 2008 during the political dialogue between the Somali TFG and opposition in Djibouti. The JSC was a collaboration between the TFG and the Alliance for the Restoration of Somalia (ARS), supported by international partners to coordinate efforts in support of national security sector institutions. The JSC called for the creation of a range of transitional joint security structures and processes in which all armed groups and Somali communities could join structures to develop peace and reconciliation in Somalia.

The spreading insurgency over much of south central Somalia during 2009 – a consequence, in part, of recent international security strategies in Somalia – has been seized upon by those policymakers reluctant to rethink the approach to security sector governance as a justification for the use of force to build and defend the state. Consequently, while valid, many of the recommendations of the JSC and the international security experts remain unimplemented.

Repeated failures in internationally-sponsored peace and security strategies in Somalia suggest that it is time for a change. The convergence of local Somali-led experiences of managing security and international best practice point to a way forward that could bear fruit.

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