

Afar-Somali Conflict

Addressing Root Causes, Promoting Reconciliation, Strengthening Peace

One of the founding principles of the Afro Asia Institute for Strategic Studies (AAISS) is to shine a spotlight on often-missed context and sequence of events surrounding tensions and challenges across the African continent. This principle is in part in response to externally-driven and funded initiatives that often times stop short of delving into historical background and identifying root causes, and in the process end up recommending "solutions" that amplify grievances leading to further instability. It is within this framework that the AAISS committed its resources to organizing a roundtable discussion on the Afar-Somali conflict in Ethiopia under the theme of **"Addressing Root Causes, Promoting Reconciliation, Strengthening Peace"**.

The Afar and the Somalis are two of the many ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Both communities are Muslim pastoralists. The conflict between them, spanning decades, is rooted in historical tensions and is often understood as land and resource-based. Recently, however, it has been exacerbated by emergent geopolitical dynamics causing this local tension to morph into a complex web of proxy influences that threaten regional stability.

AAISS's decision to undertake the task of bringing both sides to the table is rooted in the belief that **sustainable solutions must originate from within the affected communities themselves through dialogue**. It is also our strong belief that the warring sides have much more to gain from peaceful coexistence than from conflict, which seems to be flamed by interest groups in locations that are nowhere near the affected communities themselves.

By setting up a neutral stage for both communities to come together and reflect on grievances and challenges, the AAISS platform, which will take place on July 11, 2024, aims to facilitate constructive and honest discussions on critical issues that concern both sides.

The event will bring together experts from both Afar and Somali backgrounds with the clear and stated objective of promoting understanding and reconciliation in order to create an environment that is conducive to the process of deepening regional peace, ensuring social justice, and promoting equitable development.

AAISS seeks to facilitate **a candid dialogue that transcends political posturing**. It also plans to produce a policy paper as an outcome of the dialogue that will be distributed to all stakeholders.

All discussions will be informed by historical context, acknowledging past injustices and the many missed opportunities for dialogue, while also looking forward with a commitment to forging a durable path towards lasting peace. We also believe that by convening this event in Nairobi, away from the hotspots, the immediate pressures and historical biases of the conflict zone will be minimized, and participants can engage more openly in finding common ground.

It is important to point out that although the African Union (AU) & the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have the specific responsibility of anticipating and preventing disputes and conflicts, Africans often find that they are either sleeping at the wheel or, sadly, steered in the wrong direction owing to a tragic fact of he who pays the piper calls the tune.

It is important to emphasize that our approach is not just about mediating between conflicting parties but about catalyzing a broader paradigm shift in how regional conflicts are addressed. By elevating the voices of local constituent communities and integrating their perspectives into the pertinent policy discourse, AAISS aims to foster a new sense of ownership over any of the region's peace processes. Empowering local actors to become full architects of their own futures is fundamental to sustainable and enduring peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, AAISS recognizes the interconnected nature of conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

The Afar-Somali conflict is not an isolated case but intersects with regional dynamics involving neighboring countries and international interests. By addressing these complexities holistically, the roundtable discussions aspire to ripple positive effects beyond Ethiopia and Djibouti, contributing to a more stable Horn of Africa.

By providing a platform for meaningful engagement and advocating for locally-driven solutions, AAISS endeavors to chart a new course towards reconciliation and enduring peace. The path to any sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa begins with listening, understanding, and acting collectively to maintain peaceful coexistence.

A few skeptics have questioned the AAISS's capacity, neutrality and ability to broker such deliberations. What motivates us, however, is the overwhelming majority that have reached out to us both publicly and privately with positive feedback, volunteering key context and information that they believe will help the process of promoting understanding and peace.

The encouragement from near and far underscores the pressing need for independent platforms such as the AAISS that are ready and able to confront contentious issues head-on, and that embody **African solutions for African problems, in theory and practice**.

