

Somalia: What to Expect of the London Conference and Beyond

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An African Union peacekeeper stands on the front line outside of Mogadishu. (Enough / Laura Heaton)

The February 23 “London Conference”—with representatives from over 50 countries, the U.N., key regional organizations, the Somali Transitional Federal Government, and most of the largest Somali regional administrations and movements—is the subject of considerable anxiety, skepticism, and hope among Somalis. It is widely seen as a critical moment in Somalia’s long 20-year crisis, a meeting that could shape the direction of the country in the coming years, for better or for worse.

What should we expect of the London Conference?

There will be few surprises emerging from the meeting itself. Leaks of draft documents for the conference have been widely circulated and give a good idea of what the conveners hope to accomplish. These outcomes have already been the subject of considerable

pre-conference diplomacy. The meeting will produce general agreements on a wide range of topics, from humanitarian relief to piracy to counter-terrorism, but the core objectives are threefold: (1) to broaden and deepen a consensus among external actors on Somalia policy in general and especially on the position that Somalia's political transition must be concluded by August 2012. This includes bringing important new actors such as Turkey and Qatar into the fold; (2) to establish or reaffirm general principles about the process by which the transition will end in coming months; and (3) to drum up external financial support for the post-transition administration and the expanded African Union peacekeeping force.

What to expect after the London Conference?

Anyone expecting the conference to generate specific details on the *process* by which Somalia completes its transition in coming months will likely be disappointed. Yet this is what most concerns Somalis, who correctly understand that the details of the selection process for a constituent assembly and other questions of representation will largely determine who is in and out of power come August 2012. These are issues that are also likely to produce spoilers and rejectionists if mishandled. It is unclear at this time if donor states, the TFG, and the U.N. have already quietly developed a plan of action to address the details of the accelerated transition, or if these matters have been left unresolved because no one knows how to manage them or even who has the authority to decide. In either case, they are not publicly known, and the uncertainty about the end of transition process fuels Somali fears and conspiracy theories.

What is certain is that the next few months will produce a messy, contentious scramble to accelerate the end of the transition in Somalia. Advocates of completing the transition quickly will be racing against the clock, forced to rush decisions and processes. That will work against a stated aim of the London Conference conveners to work toward a more inclusive and transparent transition process. Somalia has a long history of rushed reconciliation and power-sharing agreements, and the results have generally not been good.

What to expect of the end of the transition?

All of this current activity to accelerate the completion of the transition obscures an important question: transition to what end? Will the end of the Transitional Federal Government actually change anything? Will its successor behave any differently than the weak and corrupt TFG? If not, then this is not in fact a transition—it will be a distinction without a difference, a rehatting of a caretaker or interim government with different names and faces but the same frustrating outcome.

Some make the argument that a new set of leaders and a more streamlined, legitimate set of institutions, combined with more coherent external policies, will improve

governmental performance and allow Somalis to advance progress on rebuilding their political system and expanding the effective reach of the government. That is an attractive ambition, and a reasonable approach. But there is little evidence to suggest that a successor administration to the TFG will behave any differently or more effectively. Changes in political leadership and decision-making structures will have limited effect if no effort is made to weaken the political cartels and networks that work behind the scenes in Somalia to divert funds and stymie effective rule of law.

A successor to the TFG will inherit an unenviable situation—a countryside still largely under the control of the jihadist group al-Shabaab; profound levels of insecurity for government officials in Mogadishu; a large foreign peacekeeping force as the government's only guarantor of security; multiple armed militias operating in areas liberated from Shabaab that do not necessarily respect the authority of the government; an engrained culture of corruption surrounding government assets and revenues; tepid support from much of the Somali population; enormous challenges of governance and basic service provision; very modest government budgets; a population badly divided over basic political questions about the structure and nature of the state; profound underdevelopment; and constant interventions by external actors from the region and beyond. It will take a Herculean effort by the successor to the TFG to manage these challenges and expand the inclusivity, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the government.

The next year in Somalia constitutes a narrow but very real window of opportunity for the country to emerge from over 20 years of war and state collapse. The results of the London Conference are not nearly as important as the intense follow-up work that will be required of the international community and the Somali people. The next step—hammering out the critical details for the process by which the political transition is accelerated and completed—must somehow combine haste with transparency and inclusivity if it is to be seen as legitimate by the Somali people. International actors responsible for handling these decisions must be committed to making these deliberations part of an open dialogue and consultation with Somalis, even at the cost of minor delays. Both the process of selecting a constituent assembly and the actual quality of representation in that assembly must be seen as legitimate in the eyes of most Somalis. That should be the yardstick by which international support to Somalia is measured in coming months, not the meeting of arbitrary deadlines.

The U.S. government can and should play an assertive oversight role in this regard. The Department of State's Somalia team, in close coordination with other diplomatic missions, must closely monitor the process by which critical end-of-transition decisions are made and insist on transparency and inclusivity at every step. Back-room deals and decisions driven by expediency and deadline-induced panic have been the norm over the past two decades of diplomacy in Somalia and have consistently produced failure. Somalis have a right, and will insist on the right, to know how and by whom decisions are being made that will shape the future of their country.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

