

The turbulent waters of the Horn of Africa

Shaul Shay

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

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Ethiopia and Somalia have agreed to end their dispute over Ethiopia's plans to build a port in Somaliland which Somalia considers as part of its territory. Somalia and Ethiopia announced on January 11, 2025, they would restore full diplomatic relations following a visit by Somalia's president to Addis Ababa. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed "agreed to restore and enhance their bilateral relations through full diplomatic relations in their respective capitals," they said in a joint statement. The meeting marks a crucial step in the rapprochement fostered by the Ankara Declaration, a Turkish-mediated agreement signed in December 2024.¹

Somalia continues to grapple with a prolonged civil war against Al Shabaab and other terrorist organizations. The government in Mogadishu is having difficulty governing all parts of the country and the security forces at its disposal need external assistance in order to meet the country's security challenges. Ethiopia was one of the main countries in the African UN-backed African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)), that assisted the Somali government in Mogadishu in the war against al-Shabaab. The conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia added another challenge to the difficult situation of the government in Mogadishu and weakened the regime's ability to deal with the Al Shabab terror organization.

The "Somaliland " dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia

Ethiopia lost its ports when Eritrea seceded in the early 1990s. With more than 100 million people, it is the most populous landlocked country in the world. Last year, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described access to the sea as an existential issue.²

While Ethiopia currently uses the Port of Djibouti, its extensive needs cannot be fully met by this sole outlet. As a result, Addis Ababa has supported Somaliland's secession from Somalia viewing Somaliland as its backyard base in the Red Sea and a critical regional gateway.³

The dispute began in January 2024 when Ethiopia signed an agreement with Somaliland, a breakaway region of Somalia, to lease a stretch of coastline for a port and military base in exchange for recognition of Somaliland's independence, although this was never confirmed by Addis Ababa. Somalia viewed this as a breach of its sovereignty, sparking a fierce diplomatic and military row.

In the immediate aftermath of the deal, Somalia's president stepped up the rhetoric saying: "we will defend our country, we will defend it by all means necessary and seek the support of any ally willing to help us." He also called on youths "to prepare for the defense of our country" and described Ethiopia as his country's "enemy".⁴

Tensions had peaked in April 2024 with the expulsion of Ethiopia's ambassador to Somalia.⁵ On August 30, 2024, Ethiopia sent an ambassador to Somaliland. This step marks an open recognition of Somaliland's independence, following a long-standing relationship between the two sides. As a result, tension escalated to the brink of war between the two countries. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has stressed Ethiopia's need for coastal access, but he said that the country is not interested in going to war over it.⁶

Somaliland

Somaliland, a former British protectorate, declared itself independent from Somalia in 1991 but is not recognized by the African Union or the United Nations as an independent state.⁷

Somaliland is located along the Gulf of Aden near the entrance to the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a major sea lane. Its coastline has made it and neighboring Eritrea and Djibouti attractive partners for foreign governments looking for sea access and a maritime presence in the region.⁸

Somaliland has all the trappings of a country, including a working political system, regular elections, a police force and its own currency. Over the decades it has also escaped much of the chaos and violence that have hit Somalia.

Democratic elections were held in Somaliland this year (2024), and the issue of international recognition of Somaliland's independence was at the center of the elections. The new President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi in his inaugural address, pledged to intensify

efforts to gain international recognition for Somaliland and implement the agreement with Ethiopia. "We have an agreement, a bilateral agreement on the bases of an MoU, it is standing, It's between Somaliland and Ethiopia. What Ethiopia does with Somalia, that's a completely different just a different story. As far as we are concerned, we have a binding MoU and we are pursuing it."⁹

The exact wording of the deal signed by the leaders of Ethiopia and Somaliland has not been made public, which is a problem as there are differing versions of what the two sides agreed in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).¹⁰

On the day of the signing, Somaliland's President said the agreement included a section stating that Ethiopia would recognize Somaliland as an independent country at some point in the future. Ethiopia has not confirmed this. Instead, in its attempt to clarify what was in the MoU, the government on January 3, 2024 said the deal included "provisions... to make an in-depth assessment towards taking a position regarding the efforts of Somaliland to gain recognition").¹¹

Armed clashes between Somali and Ethiopian forces

Somalia accused Ethiopian forces of a deadly attack on its troops in a border region on December 23, 2024, just days after the two countries signed an accord aimed at resolving months of tension. The Somali foreign ministry said in a statement that Ethiopian troops had attacked its forces stationed at an airstrip in the border town of Doolow in Somalia's Jubaland state. The Ethiopian troops are part of its mission against Al Shabaab Islamist insurgents.¹²

The incident threatened to undermine a deal brokered by Turkey to end a nearly year-long dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia. Somalia's Foreign Minister Ali Mohamed Omar travelled to Addis Ababa to meet his Ethiopian counterpart Mesganu Arega, the day after the deadly clashes in the border area of Doolow, to try to keep a fragile peace between the two countries.¹³

The "Ankara Declaration"

Turkey has intervened diplomatically - bringing Ethiopian and Somali delegates together for talks in its capital, Ankara. Ethiopia and Somalia's foreign ministers did turn up in the Turkish capital on July 1, 2024, but they refused to sit down for one-to-one discussions. The two sides have agreed to reconvene in September 2024.¹⁴

The dispute appeared to be resolved when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud met in Ankara on December 12, 2024, and signed a deal that is expected to offer land-locked Ethiopia an alternative sea access in Somalia.

The text of the agreement, published by Turkey, states that the parties agreed "to put aside differences of opinion and contentious issues, and to move resolutely forward in cooperation towards common prosperity." Following the 'Ankara Declaration', Somalia and Ethiopia will begin technical talks for sustainable sea access to Addis Ababa via Somalia's coastline. Talks will start by February 2025, facilitated by Turkey, and a formal deal is expected in four months, and it will include commercial arrangements such as leases and contracts.¹⁵

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met separately with Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Ankara before announcing the deal. President Erdogan said he believed the agreement would ensure Ethiopia's long-desired access to the sea.¹⁶

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud welcomed Türkiye's assistance in the implementation of these commitments and pledged to resolve any differences concerning their interpretation and application through dialogue and in a peaceful manner with Türkiye's support, as needed. They expressed their appreciation to the President of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for this initiative and his ongoing commitment to the process.¹⁷

The commercial corridor

Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed has often emphasized that access to the sea is a vital national interest of Ethiopia. The establishment of a commercial corridor between Ethiopia and Somalia that allows Ethiopia access to the sea was part of the Ankara declaration.

The Ankara declaration expects Somalia to develop a trade corridor connecting Ethiopia to a Somali port, replacing the Berbera-Addis route. This port will most likely be Mogadishu.

However, building such a corridor is a challenging project in a country like Somalia. There are 3 main obstacles in establishing the commercial corridor:

The lack of trust and historical hostile sentiments complicate the relations between Ethiopia and Somalia.

The establishment of a project of this magnitude requires financial funding and engineering and management resources for the construction of roads and possibly railways between the port and Ethiopia and the development of the port in order to be able to respond to the huge volume of goods that will pass through it.

The security of the corridor and the port. Al -Shabaab (the East African branch of Al Qaeda) has a significant presence in Somalia and will require the Somali government to set up a robust buffer zone around the potential corridor. Ethiopian troops, along with the support of AUSSOM, with the Somali federal forces and local clan militias can protect the trade corridor from potential al-Shabaab incursions.

The implementation of the commercial corridor is a major obstacle to the long-term viability of the agreement.

From ATMIS to AUSSOM

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) gave its green light last year (2024) to the creation of a new AU mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Fourteen out of Fifteen council members adopted a resolution, with only the United States abstaining due to concerns about financing. The resolution adopted included the possibility of using a mechanism created by the UNSC the previous year for an AU force with UN backing and financed up to 75 percent by the UN.¹⁸

The peacekeeping force is intended to replace the UN-backed African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). AUSSOM officially began its operations in Somalia on January 1, 2025.

Bilateral agreements between Somalia and other African countries signed in November 2024 provided some 11,000 troops to AUSSOM from partner countries.

Until it was withdrawn on December 31, 2024, UN-backed African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) had up to 12,000 troops. ATMIS and Ethiopian troops have played a decisive role in keeping al-Shabaab at bay in central and southern Somalia, including the capital Mogadishu.¹⁹

Ethiopian troops have been stationed in Somalia since 2006, either through bilateral agreements or African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions, to spearhead the fight against jihadi groups, especially al-Shabaab.²⁰

Somalia officially requested Ethiopia to withdraw its army from its territory unless Addis Ababa cancelled its MoU with Somaliland. Somalia also said that Ethiopian troops would not take part in AUSSOM due to strained relations between the two countries. The withdrawal request has become a major obstacle to the formation of the new AU peacekeeping mission to Somalia (AUSSOM), since Ethiopia was the largest troop contributor to African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions in Somalia.²¹

Ethiopian Defense Minister Aisha Mohammed led a high-level visit to Somalia on January 2, 2025, meeting President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and delivered a message from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. “The discussions reaffirmed the commitment of both countries to work together to ensure peace and stability in Somalia and the region,” a statement from the Ethiopian foreign ministry read. “The two countries agreed to collaborate on the AUSSOM mission and strengthen bilateral ties,” it added, referring to the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia.

Ethiopia on January 3, 2025, announced that it will collaborate with the new African Union force against Islamist Al-Shabaab insurgents in Somalia.²²

The Egypt – Somalia alliance

In the last year, Egypt became Somalia's strategic ally. The relations between Egypt and Somalia stems from 3 main Egyptian interests:

Egypt's strategic goal to be the dominant country in Africa in general and the Horn of Africa in particular.

The conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia regarding the Renaissance Dam built by Ethiopia.

The strategic and economic importance of Bab El Mandeb straits and the Red Sea which requires more Egyptian presence in this sensitive region.

The relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia deteriorated in 2011 when Ethiopia began building the Grand Renaissance Ethiopian Dam, a major hydroelectric project on the Blue Nile River, which Egypt opposed because the Nile River is the country's primary source of fresh water, accounting for about 95% of its water needs.²³

Ethiopia claims that historical colonial agreements are outdated and do not reflect current realities, and it advocates for equitable utilization of water resources. Ethiopia also argues that

it has needs to expand energy access to ensure economic growth and bring its population out of poverty. All attempts to reach agreements between the countries regarding the dam failed and Ethiopia, despite Egypt's opposition, implemented the project.

As part of the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia and Egypt's commitment to its Somali ally, Egypt sided with Somalia in its conflict with Ethiopia. Egypt has expressed its opposition to the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement and Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs Badr Abdelatty emphasized on January 11, 2025, that no military or naval presence of any non-littoral state in the Red Sea would be accepted.²⁴

Mile stones in the relations between Egypt and Somalia

President El-Sisi stressed that Cairo has always supported Mogadishu from the vantage point that Somalia's security and stability are closely linked to Egypt's national security.

On August 14, 2024, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi met in Cairo and signed a military cooperation protocol and defense pact.

On August 27, 2024, Egypt sent two military aircrafts with about 300 Egyptian special forces troops, arms and ammunition to Mogadishu, following a defense pact signed between the states.²⁵

On September 22, 2024, an Egyptian military cargo ship arrived in Mogadishu, delivering what media reports describe as “the largest shipment of military aid” to Somalia since the United Nations lifted its arms embargo on the country in December 2023. The shipment included heavy artillery, anti-tank weapons, and armored vehicles, marking a significant boost to Somalia’s defense capabilities.²⁶

The Asmara summit, on October 10, 2024, the presidents of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, and the of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud, met in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. During this meeting, the Presidents held extensive consultations on vital regional and international issues at a tripartite summit. The Three Heads of State underlined the imperative of adhering to the basic principles and pillars of international law as the indispensable basis for regional stability and cooperation: especially unequivocal respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the countries of the region; confronting interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region under any pretext or justification; coordinating joint efforts to achieve regional stability; and

creating a conducive climate for joint and sustainable development. They agreed to develop and deepen cooperation and coordination between the three countries in order to enhance the capabilities of the Somali state institutions to confront various internal and external challenges, and to enable the Somali National Federal Army to confront terrorism in all its forms, protect its land and sea borders, and maintain its territorial integrity.²⁷

The Cairo summit, on January 10, 2025, Egypt's Minister of foreign affairs with his Eritrean counterpart Osman Saleh and Somali counterpart Ahmed Moalim Fiqi forged an alliance in October 2024. All participants have troubled relations with Ethiopia and common strategic interests in the region. Egypt's foreign minister, Badr Abdelatty, said the trio (Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia) had discussed the presence of non-Red Sea countries (Ethiopia) gaining access to the strategic waterway, telling reporters: "It is completely unacceptable to allow any military or naval presence by non-littoral states."²⁸

On January 10, 2025, Egypt's Minister of Defense and Military Production Abdel Mageed Saqr discussed regional and international developments and their implications on Africa's security with Somali counterpart Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur and his delegation during their visit to Egypt. Nur welcomed Egypt's participation in the African Union Mission in Somalia and highlighted the importance of cooperation between the Egyptian and Somali armed forces across various fields.²⁹

On January 23, 2025, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi and his Somali counterpart Hassan Sheikh Mohamud signed a joint political declaration to elevate the bilateral relationship between Egypt and Somalia to a strategic partnership.

President El-Sisi noted that the joint political declaration covers several areas, including political, military, cultural, and economic cooperation. Under the partnership, annual political consultations will be held at the summit level to track the progress of the Egypt-Somalia relationship and identify avenues for enhanced cooperation across various sectors. According to President El-Sisi, Egypt and Somalia agreed to continue implementing the military cooperation protocol signed in Cairo in August 2024. The meeting in Cairo marked the fourth between El-Sisi and Sheikh Mohamud in a year amid the recent strengthening of Egypt-Somalia relations.³⁰

Egypt is sending in January 2025, troops to Somalia as a part of the new African Union (AU) mission (AUSSOM). Reportedly, Egypt already has troops stationed in Somalia, though it remains unclear whether these troops will be integrated into the deployment for the new

mission. Speaking at the December 27, 2024, UNSC meeting, Tesfaye Yilma, Ethiopia's permanent representative to the United Nations, issued a veiled warning against Egyptian involvement, saying, "Extra-regional actors that have no constructive role in the region, and in fighting terrorism in Somalia, should be advised to abandon their reckless pursuit."³¹

Summary

In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that stated Ethiopia would recognize Somaliland as an independent nation in exchange for access to the Red Sea. For Somalia, Somaliland is an integral part of its territory. The day after the MoU was signed, Somalia described the deal as an act of "aggression" and Somalia said that Ethiopia is the greatest risk to its unity and geopolitical interests.

As a response to the cooperation between Ethiopia and Somaliland, Mogadishu has sought to establish regional and international alliances:

Somalia signed with Türkiye in 2012 a defense agreement (military training and cooperation) that was upgraded to a defense and economic cooperation agreement on August 2, 2024. This agreement allows Türkiye to build its largest overseas base to protect Somali territorial waters for 10 years, in addition to commencing oil and gas exploration in three Somali maritime locations.

Somalia signed with Egypt a defense agreement on August 14, 2024. Key provisions of the agreement include enhancing the military and training capabilities of the Somali army, supporting Mogadishu in its fight against terrorism and separatist groups and establishing an Egyptian military presence as part of the AU peacekeeping mission to Somalia (AUSSOM) which is supposed to replace the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) by January 2025.

Egypt's decision to deploy troops and to join the AUSSOM in Somalia is in line with its strategic objectives to be a dominant power in the Horn of Africa. By deepening its commitment to Somalia through military presence, Cairo aims to counterbalance both Turkey and Ethiopia and exert pressure on Ethiopia.

Against the background of the lack of trust between the parties and long-standing historical hostility on the one hand and economic, political and social weakness in both countries on the other, it is difficult to predict what will happen in the near future and therefore we can only describe 3 possible scenarios for the ongoing regional conflict:

Political solution - the best scenario for all parties involved (Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia) is a political solution based on the "Ankara declaration".

The ongoing tension scenario - in this scenario, the parties were unable to settle their disputes through a political process, the tension between the parties continues, including violent incidents, but the conflict does not degenerate into a war.

Military local and regional confrontation scenario - local military clashes between Somalia and Ethiopia could lead to the cessation of talks between the two countries in Ankara and escalate into a war between the parties. A war between Ethiopia and Somalia could expand into a regional war if additional forces take advantage of it to advance their interests, including Turkey and Egypt.

Notes

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