

# TENSIONS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA... A NEW BATTLEGROUND BETWEEN EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA

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Tensions in the Horn of Africa escalated after Egypt sent military aid with soldiers on two planes to Somalia, a few days after Cairo and Mogadishu signed a protocol for military cooperation in mid-August 2024<sup>1</sup>, as well as the African Union's announcement of the participation of Egyptian forces in the African Union Mission in Support and Stabilization in Somalia (AMISOM), which is scheduled to begin its work in early 2025.<sup>2</sup> These steps came after Ankara and Mogadishu concluded a defense cooperation agreement in February 2024, under which Turkey will undertake the task of building and rehabilitating the Somali naval forces, and Ankara also obtained the right to explore for oil and gas off the coast of Somalia.<sup>3</sup>

These rapid developments occurred in response to the signing of a memorandum of understanding by Ethiopia and the Somaliland region in early 2024, under which Addis Ababa obtained the right to build a military naval base with a length of 20 kilometers on the Somali coast and the right to use the port of Berbera, in exchange for recognizing the independence of the "Somaliland" entity, and granting it a share of the ownership of the Ethiopian airline.<sup>4</sup>

The Mogadishu government saw in the agreement between Addis Ababa and Somaliland a dangerous development that threatened the unity of Somalia. In contrast, Cairo saw it as a change in the balance of power in the Horn of Africa that allows Ethiopia access to the Red Sea, which threatens freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal and encircles Egypt from the south when it is added to the Renaissance Dam and controls the Nile waters. At the same time, Djibouti and Eritrea shared concerns about Abiy Ahmed's ambitions for regional hegemony.

For its part, Ethiopia considered that sending Egyptian troops to Somalia meant tampering with its backyard, and violating the custom that troops from East African countries contribute to the African Union missions in Somalia; it sounded the alarm as Egyptian forces approached the Ethiopian border, and threatened Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed not to tolerate any "threat to the sovereignty and dignity of his country".<sup>5</sup>

These successive developments raise questions about the roots of tension between the countries mentioned above, its causes and repercussions on Somalia and the stability of the Horn of Africa, and the likelihood of a regional war in the region.

### **The Roots of the Crisis: From the Greater Somalia Project to Fragmentation**

Somalia is still grappling with the consequences of European colonialism. The British wrested control of “Northern Somalia” from Egypt in 1884, then encouraged the Italians to occupy central and southern Somalia to prevent the establishment of a French empire stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west of Africa to the Indian Ocean in the east. This geopolitical game ended in the 20th century with the fragmentation of Somali territories into five entities: French Somaliland (which later became Djibouti), British Somaliland (now known as Somaliland), Italian Somaliland (the rest of present-day Somalia), while Britain granted Ethiopia control over western Somalia, known as Ogaden, and Kenya annexed vast Somali regions in its northeastern part through an agreement with Britain.<sup>6</sup>

This fragmentation has resulted in a unitary tendency to form a Greater Somalia, which is reflected in the five-star flag of Somalia. Indeed, Italian Somaliland and British Somalia were united following their independence in 1960. The fledgling state of Somalia launched a war against Ethiopia in 1977 to retake the Ogaden region, controlling 90 percent of its territory, still the Soviet Union and Cuba intervened militarily to support Ethiopia, defeating Somalia. In the same year, French Somalia declared its independence under the name of Djibouti. Hence, the Greater Somalia project collapsed, and there was a failed military coup attempt against the ruling regime of Siad Barre in Somalia against the background of blaming him for the reasons for defeat in the war, followed by the outbreak of an armed rebellion supported by Ethiopia. The Uprising ended with the collapse of the ruling regime and the disintegration of the state itself by 1991 to line up Somalis behind their clan affiliations.

British Somalia, the majority of which is the Isaac tribe, unilaterally declared independence under the name “Somaliland” in 1991 as its inhabitants were alienated from the experience of unity, in which they suffered political and economic marginalization, and repression that amounted to the destruction of their capital, Hargeisa, in 1988. Somaliland leaders said that with the secession decision they had regained the sovereignty they had voluntarily ceded to form the federal state of Somalia.

The non-recognizable Somaliland entity enjoys bilateral relations with countries such as Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey, with consular services offices in Hargeisa. Ethiopia provides various types of assistance, such as military training, scholarships, and financial transaction services through Ethiopian banks.<sup>7</sup> Hargeisa aspires to recognize independence to enjoy sovereign privileges, including the right to sign trade and military agreements and join international institutions.

## **Foreign Interference Reinforces Somali State Fragility**

Ethiopia and Kenya are wary of forming strong Somali governments that could adopt the “Greater Somalia” project again. Addis Ababa reserved veto power over political and military developments inside Somalia following the collapse of the state in 1991. So, when the Islamic Courts gained control of Mogadishu in 2006 and appeared to be on their way to stabilizing the country, the Ethiopian army rushed to invade Somalia with a U.S. green light under the banner of counterterrorism and to support the then-interim government in the cities of Jowhar and Baidoa.

Addis Ababa saw the impossibility of coexistence with the Islamic courts as a direct threat to its national security in light of the courts’ support for armed groups opposed to the Ethiopian government and its demand to retake the Ogaden region. At the same time, Washington feared the establishment of a safe haven for al-Qaeda elements inside Somalia in light of the ties between the organization and some leaders of the Islamic courts, and their use of Somalia as a rear base to prepare the logistics of the attack on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998.

The Ethiopian intervention turned into a multilateral, regional intervention through the formation of the African Union Peace Support Mission (AMISOM) in 2007, consisting of troops from Burundi and Uganda, followed by Djibouti and Sierra Leone, while Kenya launched Operation Protect the Nation in 2011 to build a buffer zone inside the territory of Somalia. When it was burdened with the financial cost, Nairobi joined AMISOM in 2012, while Ethiopian forces joined AMISOM in 2014 while keeping part of its forces inside Somalia, outside AMISOM.<sup>8</sup>

After the Ethiopian intervention, the Islamic courts split into several components, including the Shabab al-Mujahideen movement, which in 2012 pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (the Djibouti wing) led by Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who welcomed negotiations with Ethiopia, culminating in his appointment as president of Somalia in 2009.

AMISOM and its successor, ATMIS, have served since 2022 as a fighting force rather than a peacekeeping force, with the goals of confronting al-Shabaab and gradually handing over security responsibilities to Somali government forces. The countries participating in AMISOM have benefited militarily and financially from cooperation with the United States in

the global war on terrorism, as the United States has provided about \$2 billion since 2007 to the countries contributing to the AMISOM mission<sup>9</sup>; they have also gained the mantle of legitimacy for their presence in Somalia by working under the umbrella of the African Union.

Nairobi and Addis Ababa have benefited from perpetuating the fragility of the political situation inside Somalia; where in 2012, the government in Mogadishu formed a federal system in which the government in Mogadishu disputes powers with the federal regions, particularly concerning control of resources and revenues. The Somali army was formed by integrating some former officers from the Siad Barre era with clan militias. Thus, the army continued to face fundamental challenges, most notably the soldiers' loyalty to the clan over allegiance to the government, and the frequent desertions.

To resolve these dilemmas, the EU has set up a capacity-building mission for the army and security services and has committed €2.4 billion in financial contributions to the African Union Transitional Missions in Somalia from 2007 to 2024.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, the EU declared the Horn of Africa a geostrategic priority, with about 20% of EU trade, including energy supplies, making maritime security along the shores of the Horn of Africa paramount. The United States has also sent military advisers, provided air cover against al-Shabaab, and directly supervised the training and qualification of the Somali army's Danab "Lightning" counterterrorism forces.

Turkey, which began to engage in Somalia in 2011 with the visit of then-Prime Minister Erdogan to Mogadishu, has strengthened its image as a global actor and obtained economic gains such as winning contracts to develop and manage Mogadishu International Airport and seaport, and oil and gas exploration off the coast of Somalia. It also contributed to the training of the Somali security forces by building the TURKSOM military academy, which employs about 200 Turkish officers and soldiers.

For its part, the UAE has deeply entered the file of Somalia to use it as a logistical base to secure the UAE's military activity in the Yemen war, and has paid the salaries of several brigades of the Somali army, and provided them with training, and Emirati companies have taken over the development and operation of the ports of Bosaso in Puntland and Berbera in Somaliland.<sup>11</sup>

Somali military and security forces have been trained by the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, and Egypt, and the goals of each country have varied: U.S. efforts have focused on counterterrorism capabilities, and others have concentrated on state-building efforts. As a result, training according to different approaches led to the establishment of fragmented, multi-loyalty forces. The Somali government continued to rely on external support, covering two-thirds of the annual budget, and could not afford salaries, equipment, training, and army infrastructure, thus becoming home to the influence of multiple conflicting states with their interests, further complicating and fragmenting the security situation and making AMISOM indispensable to the government's survival in Mogadishu.

### **What does Ethiopia want?**

Ethiopia is the second most populous African country with 129 million people<sup>12</sup>, and Ethiopians constitute the second-largest African immigrant group in the United States<sup>13</sup> which provides them with a presence in American decision-making circles. Ethiopia is an important security partner in the Horn of Africa for Washington and the European Union and has good relations with China and Russia. Moscow has accounted for half of total arms sales to Ethiopia over the past two decades.<sup>14</sup> Addis Ababa hosts the headquarters of the African Union and wields strong influence at the continental level.

Addis Ababa, led by Abiy Ahmed, has ambitions to reach the sea, which is only 60 kilometers from its border<sup>15</sup>; acquiring a port and a naval base means getting rid of dependence on Djibouti's ports, which drain about one and a half billion dollars a year in fees on Ethiopian goods.<sup>16</sup> It allows the import of weapons and goods needs without being subject to Djibouti's approval, contributes to diversifying ports of entry without relying on a single country that may be subject to political fluctuations in the future, facilitates Ethiopia's integration with global markets, as well as the development of naval forces that can be active in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the western Indian Ocean, making Addis Ababa more able to deploy its troops abroad and play a more significant role in the Horn of Africa and its regional surroundings, as well as realizing its dream of getting rid of the feeling of encirclement by its neighbors by confining it within the heights and plateaus of Abyssinia.

Ethiopia has concluded a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, recognizing its independence following the strengthening of its relationship with the United Arab Emirates, which has expressed willingness to provide funding for the development of roads linking the

port of Berbera in Somaliland with Ethiopian territory. The Ethiopian move came after DP World's involvement in the development of the port of Berbera following its acquisition in 2016 of the right to develop and manage the port for thirty years.<sup>17</sup> Ethiopia will thus overcome the obstacle of foreign companies' reluctance to engage in contracts and projects with the non-recognizable Somaliland entity.

Ethiopia is betting on Abu Dhabi's ability to adapt Cairo's position, as well as the advantage of completing the construction of the largest part of the Renaissance Dam, which gives it a considerable influence card on Egypt in the Nile water file, which coincides with Sudan's preoccupation with its internal war, which prevents sending Egyptian forces across its territory to the Ethiopian border. Therefore, Addis Ababa turned to obtain a seaport after being assured of the completion of the Renaissance Dam project.

### **Repercussions and Potential for Confrontation**

The Ethiopian memorandum of understanding with Somaliland has raised the concerns of several neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa, as the Government of Mogadishu considered the move a consecration of plans to fragment Somalia and feared its consequences for the secession of other Somali regions.<sup>18</sup>

Eritrea, which is at ease with the Ethiopian government over its support for Amhara and Oromo rebel fighters against Addis Ababa, fears the regional balance of power could change with Ethiopia's access to the sea. Since its independence from Ethiopia in 1991, it has ensured that Ethiopia remains a landlocked country to curtail its regional role. Djibouti fears losing duty revenues on Ethiopian goods, which account for the bulk of state revenues.

On the other hand, Egypt's ineffective stance towards the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam encouraged Ethiopia to demand a naval outlet and a naval military base that could threaten shipping in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which required it to move quickly to curb Ethiopian ambitions. Cairo used the Ethiopian memorandum of understanding with Somaliland to establish a foothold for the Egyptian army near the Ethiopian border, in conjunction with intensive visits between presidents, foreign ministers, and intelligence chiefs in Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, as part of Cairo's efforts to form an anti-Addis Ababa axis in the region.

The option of direct confrontation between Egypt and Ethiopia is expensive, especially in light of the long logistical supply lines from Egypt to Somalia, the difficult economic situation in

Egypt, the ruggedness of Ethiopian territory, as well as the presence of other countries with strategic interests in the region such as Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as well as the presence of forces from the United States, China, France, Italy and Japan in Djibouti near Somalia. It is in the interest of these countries to maintain a degree of stability in Ethiopia and Somalia, and therefore, it is likely that they will seek mediation between Ethiopia and Egypt to prevent fighting between them, while Egypt may be satisfied with the message of the presence of troops from its army near Ethiopia's borders in an attempt to push Addis Ababa to seriously negotiate the outstanding files and stop the policy of imposing a fait accompli.

In practice, Cairo and its allies could support rebel movements inside Ethiopia in two of the country's most populous regions, Oromia and Amhara, where the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) has been fighting government forces since 2019. The Amharic militia Vanu is fighting government forces<sup>19</sup>, while tension still lurks in the Tigray regions against the Abiy Ahmed government, which could distract the Ethiopian government from escalating beyond its borders.

On the other hand, Addis Ababa has many cards and allies inside Somalia, as they can be urged to target and disturb the Egyptian presence to raise its cost, knowing that successive African Union missions have lost about 3,500 soldiers since the beginning of their intervention in Somalia.<sup>20</sup> There are also between five and ten thousand al-Shabaab fighters fighting Somali government forces and their foreign allies, according to estimates by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.<sup>21</sup> These factors threaten the Egyptian military presence, which has not been accustomed to suffering heavy losses away from its land since the era of Egyptian involvement in the Yemen war under the late President Abdel Nasser.

Any new conflict in Somalia would exacerbate tensions in a region suffering from internal wars in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, in a vital region close to international maritime trade routes between East and West, through which oil and gas shipping lines from the Gulf to Europe pass, and threaten to turn the Horn of Africa into the new Balkans that no one has an interest in igniting.

***(Note: This publication was translated from its original Arabic version into English by Al Sharq Strategic Research intern Fatimah Gad.)***



## Endnotes

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