

Commentary

The Ethiopia- Somaliland MoU and its Controversies

March, 2024



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SOMALIA

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1. Introduction

On December 29, 2023, the presidents of Somalia and Somaliland met in Djibouti and agreed to resume the dialog, signaling a potential thaw in relations between the two countries. In a dramatic turn of events, 2 days later, Somaliland’s President Muse Bihi Abdi signed an MoU with the Ethiopian Prime Minister, giving the latter access to the Red Sea in exchange for recognition for Somaliland and a stake in Ethiopian airlines, per the press statements. The details of the MoU have not been made public.

On January 01, 2024, the January MoU signed by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the leader of Somaliland—a self-declared independent region within Somalia—escalated political tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia. The Somali government and its citizens perceive the MoU as a revival of Ethiopia’s long-standing expansionist ambitions, an issue that Somalia hoped had subsided, as expressed by the Somali President. Somali and international critics warn that the agreement threatens Somalia’s sovereignty and jeopardizes the broad stability of the Horn of Africa. The MoU, which potentially involves Ethiopia recognizing Somaliland’s independence in exchange for strategic land, sea access, and a naval base, also aligns with Al-Shabaab’s narrative that Somalia’s adversaries seek to fragment the country and exploit its resources.

The signing of the MoU was met with mixed reactions. In Ethiopia, widespread jubilation arose as people celebrated the historic victory of gaining access to the sea. However, in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, protests erupted against the MoU. The Somali government termed the MoU null and void, claiming that it breached Somalia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Somalia retaliated by exerting diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia to halt the agreement, further escalating tensions.

2. Al-Shabaab’s Response and Potential Exploitation

For Al-Shabaab, a group that thrives on exploiting political grievances and socioeconomic disparities, the Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU presents a new opportunity to appeal to the Somali public. The extremist group has consistently positioned itself as a defender of Somali interests against external forces, and the MoU feeds into their narrative of foreign interference and encroachment. Unfortunately, this narrative has the potential to resonate with most people.

Al-Shabaab rapidly capitalized on the situation. The group’s leader released audio clips vowing to protect the Somali seas from what they referred to as the “historic enemy.” By framing the MoU as a threat to Somalia’s land and seas, Al-Shabaab seeks to galvanize public support; this was evident in the 1st week of January, when the videos of the famous poet Nageeye Khaliif—who recently defected to Al-Shabaab— were widely shared on social media. The poet also made a Facebook post in which he shared his new telegram channel with his followers. In <24 hours, 50,000 people joined his channel.

The agreement has the potential to divert attention and resources away from counterterrorism efforts, allowing Al-Shabaab to regroup and expand their influence. The Somali government reiterated its commitment to fighting Al-Shabaab while defending the territorial integrity of Somalia. The Somali President termed the group “enemy number one” and “enemy number two.” Despite the Somali government’s commitment to continue efforts to combat Al-Shabaab, Ethiopian social media influencers spread the narrative that the Somali government wants to collude with Al-Shabaab. The United States, a key ally for the Somali government in the fight against Al-Shabaab, has expressed concern that the MoU could derail the progress made in combating the extremist group. The US government said it is “troubled by the deal” which “threatens to disrupt the fight against Al-Shabaab.”

3. Historical Context and Recruitment Strategies

Al-Shabaab has a history of exploiting grievances and external interventions to recruit and radicalize individuals. It gained prominence in 2006 following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, which was seen as an occupation by many Somalis. The group capitalized on this sentiment and positioned itself as a resistance movement against foreign forces.

The Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU provides Al-Shabaab with a fresh opportunity to appeal to the Somali public by portraying themselves as the defenders of Somali interests against perceived external threats. By tapping into the frustration and anger surrounding the agreement, the group aims to attract support and recruit new members who feel compelled to join the fight against, what they perceive as, foreign interference.

The Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU has triggered several controversies and heightened tensions in the region. Al-Shabaab, an extremist group with a history of exploiting grievances, sees this agreement as an opportunity to appeal to the Somali public. By framing themselves as protectors of Somali integrity and dignity, they exploit the discontent and recruit new members. Ethiopia's relentless efforts to gain access to the Red Sea may give the group an opportunity to bolster their efforts to cross to Ethiopia. The group has been trying to establish its presence in Ethiopia.

With Somalia and Ethiopia already dealing with internal security challenges, the MoU can derail the relationship between these two nations and let extremist groups reposition themselves and attract new recruits. If Ethiopia's aggression loses the trust of the Somali people, the extremist group will have easy access to Ethiopia. With Al-Shabaab recruiting >1,000 since the MoU signed, according to analysts, the government of Somalia has offered twofold strategy—affirming the Somali public that the government is ready to defend its seas. The public does not take diplomatic pressure as substantive and concrete steps to thwart Ethiopia's aggression. The expulsion of

Ethiopia's ambassador from the country could be a possible solution. However, the government has to deny the claims of colluding with Al-Shabaab for attacking Ethiopia. While it is a noble and bold idea to explore entry points for talks with Al-Shabaab to bring them into the table for a political dialog, it should not be conceived that it will come under the expense of offloading the war to other rather stable regions.

4. Recommendation

For Somalia

Sustain robust diplomatic engagement to challenge Ethiopia's MoU through regional bodies such as the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), while leveraging the United Nations and key international partners to reaffirm Somalia's territorial integrity. Diplomatic efforts should emphasize national unity, acknowledging diverse aspirations within Somalia, and fostering inclusive governance frameworks that offer Somaliland significant autonomy within a unified Somalia, thereby ensuring peace, stability, and the protection of Somalia's sovereignty

For Somaliland

Somaliland must acknowledge that not all communities within its territory support secession, and a lasting solution requires a pragmatic, inclusive approach. Engaging in constructive dialog can help forge a governance framework that grants broad autonomy while preserving national unity. Simultaneously, Somaliland should explore alternative economic partnerships to enhance its development without worsening regional tensions or undermining Somalia's sovereignty.

For Ethiopia

Ethiopia's aspirations for sea access must be pursued through diplomatic and mutually beneficial agreements, not at the expense of another nation's sovereignty. As a landlocked

country, Ethiopia has legitimate economic interests in securing maritime trade routes, but demanding territorial waters, a naval base, and a commercial port from another sovereign state constitutes an act of aggression that risks destabilizing the region. A sustainable approach lies in fostering regional trade partnerships that create shared economic opportunities without fueling geopolitical tensions. Ethiopia should commit to peaceful negotiations, uphold international norms, and avoid actions that could be perceived as territorial expansionism, ensuring long-term regional stability and cooperation.

International Community

The international community must move beyond the symbolic affirmations of Somalia's territorial integrity and take concrete steps to discourage actions that undermine its sovereignty, unity, and stability. Diplomatic efforts should focus on facilitating constructive dialog between Somalia, Somaliland, and Ethiopia to seek a peaceful resolution while firmly upholding Somalia's non-negotiable sovereignty and territorial integrity. Proactive engagement, including mediation, can de-escalate tensions and foster a sustainable, regionally accepted solution.



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