



The ISIR Digest

2024

*Outlook on Peace and Conflict
Prospects in the Horn of Africa*

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The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) is an independent, nonpartisan organization that uses research to inform its policy advocacy work. It undertakes impartial policy research, training and analysis to organizations and decision-makers in the horn of African region who are working toward innovative thinking to stimulate formulation of sound public policies leading to positive outcomes in the fields of peace & security, good governance, safeguarding human rights and democracy.

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1. Introduction

In 2023, the Horn of Africa, a region of strategic significance along the Red Sea and adjacent to the Middle East, faced substantial socio-political and security challenges. Its critical role in international trade and security is emphasized by its geographical position.

In Somaliland, the Las Anod conflict serves as a stark example of the intricate territorial and political disputes defining the region. These conflicts, mirroring broader challenges in nation-building and identity politics, underscore the complex intertwining of national and identity issues in the Horn of Africa. The persistence of such conflicts not only poses significant challenges to regional stability but also brings into sharp relief the need for nuanced, multifactorial approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in this diverse and historically complex region.

In Somalia, significant yet challenging counter-terrorism operations were conducted against groups like Al-Shabaab. The Federal Government of Somalia continues to face obstacles in terms of economic development, a factor that notably increases the risk of the allure of extremism, especially among the youth. This situation underscores the critical importance of integrating security strategies with governance improvements and economic development initiatives.

Ethiopia faced its own internal tensions and regional disputes, shedding light on profound ethnic and political rifts. The conflict involving the FANO militia and the Ethiopian federal army in the Amhara region adds to the instability. This is compounded by the situation in the Oromo region, where Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's federal army is engaged in armed confrontation with the Oromo Liberation Army. These conflicts have far-reaching implications for regional stability, influencing migration, trade, and related geopolitical dynamics.

Meanwhile, Sudan's escalating crisis, marked by continued conflict between the RSF and SAF, has led to widespread destruction and a rising death toll. Despite the Jeddah Declaration aiming for a ceasefire, effective action remains elusive, worsening the critical situation. This unrest poses a significant threat to neighboring countries, including South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

The outcome of the talks in Jeddah remains uncertain. Recent diplomatic efforts by countries like Kenya and Ethiopia have yielded limited success, presenting obstacles to the anticipated peace process. The ongoing conflict, coupled with challenges in implementing humanitarian agreements, indicates a continued state of turmoil.

With 2024 on the horizon, closely monitoring hotspots for potential conflicts becomes critical. It's essential to prioritize and implement measures to prevent escalation and guide the region back to a state of stability.

2. The 2024 Outlook for Peace in Somaliland: Security Challenges Ahead?

The escalating conflict in the Sool region between Somaliland and SSC-Khatumo is a concerning development with potential for far-reaching consequences. Somaliland's preparations for a counter-offensive to reassert control and SSC-Khatumo's defensive strategies and troop movements indicate a heightened risk of direct confrontation. SSC-Khatumo's ambition to establish an autonomous region under the federal government of Somalia, despite further complicates the situation.

The extension of SSC-Khatumo's military to the Sanaag region, as declared by their military leader Abdi Madoobe, has already led to protests and confrontations in Erigavo, escalating tensions not just in Sanaag but across Somaliland. The response from Somaliland's military, including troop reorganization, points to a serious military

escalation. Another fracture for a potential conflict concerns the safety of prisoners of war captured by SSC-Khatumo, particularly after Somaliland's setback on August 25. While prisoner exchange is long overdue it also raises fears about the treatment of these prisoners, if Somaliland intensifies military actions in the region.

The conflict's potential to extend beyond local borders could transform it into a broader regional issue, attracting involvement from regional and international actors. This could lead to increased violence and casualties. Additionally, the instability could provide an opportunity for extremist groups like the Al-Shabaab and ISIS to exploit the situation. These groups might use the chaos to establish a foothold in the region, posing a risk of prolonged and widespread conflict across Somaliland and neighboring areas.

As we approach 2024, closely monitoring this conflict-prone hotspot is imperative, emphasizing the need for effective measures to avert escalation and ensure return to stability.

2.1. From Administrative Disputes to Clan Warfare: The Dilemma of Community Arming

At the Somaliland Economic Forum on October 14, 2023, President Muse Bihi backed self-organized clan militias in Buhodle district against SSC forces in what he termed as the Civil Defense Forces. His stated goal was to prevent SSC from gaining a foothold. However, this strategy presents significant challenges to Somaliland's security framework. Encouraging clans to arm themselves poses the risks of exacerbating hostilities and complicating efforts to restore peace and order. The historical context of disarmament in Somaliland post the civil wars of 1992-1997 underscores the complexities involved in demobilizing armed groups.

Recent developments in the Ainabo district of Somaliland, particularly in Buqdharkayn village, signal a worrying shift in the nature of conflict. On October 8, SSC militiamen attacked Buqdharkayn, resulting in casualties and injuries among the villagers. The Habar Je'lo sub clan mobilized militiamen and have since engaged in armed clashes with the

Dhulbahante with both SSC and Somaliland armies getting involved. This escalation, transitioning from an administrative dispute to a clan-based conflict, presents serious threat to peace and stability and also threatens to spread unrest into neighboring Somalia and Ethiopia.

Government Support to clan militias raises concerns beyond immediate clan conflicts. It poses a longer-term threat to governance structures, as armed groups may independently exert power, leading to a broader militarization of society. This situation could undermine government authority and potentially pave the way for lawlessness, signaling governmental weakness and jeopardizing the rule of law.

2.2 Somaliland's Electoral Crossroads: Will 2024 Break the Delay Cycle?

Since the landmark agreement brokered by traditional elders on August 27 2023, progress in preparing for the 2024 combined elections has been notably slow. Despite more than three months having passed, the only significant development is the adoption of the electoral law by the House of Representatives (HoR). Yet, this critical law awaits further action: it needs approval by the Guurti, the president's endorsement, and formal enactment.

To ensure the on-time execution of the 2024 combined elections, several key actions are imperative: the ratification of the electoral law, the resolution of internal conflicts within the National Electoral Commission (NEC), and the formulation of a detailed roadmap to navigate the country towards the highly anticipated November 2024 elections.

Although Somaliland is known for its relative peace and autonomous from Somalia, deteriorating political stability might necessitate external intervention, undermining its aspirations for sovereignty and self-governance. The persistent extension of the president's term in Somaliland has led to significant challenges affecting political, economic, social, and security aspects. These contested term extensions pose the following risks:

1. A primary concern is the heightened risk of civil unrest. Internal dynamics within Somaliland, especially concerning clan

relationships, could be severely strained by additional electoral delays. The fragile equilibrium of clan politics and power-sharing arrangements might be disrupted, leading to internal disputes and tension. Such unrest might escalate to civil war, disrupting citizens' lives and compromising regional security.

2. Secondly, there is the risk of increased international scrutiny. Somaliland's democratic reputation, which has been a cornerstone of its quest for international recognition, will be questioned. Repeated election postponements erode the democratic process, potentially heralding the decline of democracy in the region. This could set a perilous precedent with broad implications for democratic governance across the Horn of Africa. Such widespread rebuke could lead to Somaliland's isolation, adversely affecting its diplomatic and economic relationships.
3. Economically, ongoing delays could precipitate financial instability. The costs of an elongated electoral process, combined with potential sanctions and dwindling international support, might push Somaliland towards economic hardship, impacting both its political landscape and the welfare of its citizens.
4. Furthermore, prolonged political instability could create opportunities for terrorist groups, posing threats to both Somaliland and the wider region. This situation highlights the global implications of Somaliland's internal political decisions.

2.3. The Fate of Somaliland's Electoral Commission: Dissolution Prospects in 2024

Recent developments within the National Electoral Commission (NEC) of Somaliland have exposed internal divisions, raising significant concerns about the Commission's capacity to oversee fair and impartial elections. These internal rifts are particularly disconcerting in the context of the forthcoming elections, casting doubts on the Commission's cohesiveness and neutrality. The situation is exacerbated by the tense political dynamics between the ruling Kulmiye party and the main opposition, Waddani. Intense criticisms and mutual accusations have

intensified suspicions of potential electoral manipulation. The internal debates within the NEC, combined with this fraught political climate, have fueled public skepticism regarding the integrity of the electoral process.

A key point of contention within the NEC dates back to July 17 2023, when five members of the commission declared that elections for political parties would precede the presidential election. This announcement sparked significant backlash, with the opposition condemning the decision for ignoring the diverse perspectives of both the opposition and the public, accusing these members of bias towards the government. Recently, these government-appointed members have called for the president to dismiss the commissioner nominated by Waddani, escalating the dispute. This issue now awaits a confidence vote in parliament upon the resumption of sessions. Such conflicts risk further delays and could erode the Commission's already dwindling trust, a consequence of prolonged electoral conflicts and postponements.

In this challenging context, the prospect of replacing current NEC members presents its own complexities. The qualifications and preparedness of potential successors are uncertain, as is the timeframe needed for such a transition. With the 2024 elections approaching this new development underscores the urgency and complexity of ensuring a fair and credible electoral process in Somaliland.

3. The Federal Government of Somalia's Key Challenges in Economy, Politics, and Security in 2024

In 2024, Somalia confronts a range of challenges including economic issues, political disputes, and security threats. The federal government is managing complex situations such as electoral conflicts in Puntland and a military campaign against insurgents, all amidst the impending withdrawal of the African Union Transitional Mission.

On a positive note, Somalia is on the brink of achieving a significant milestone in debt relief and is working towards completing its integration into the East African Economic Community after its membership was admitted during the 23rd ordinary summit of the heads of state held in Arusha, Tanzania. The following sections provide an overview of these key issues, marking Somalia's progress and obstacles in its pursuit of stability and growth.

3.1. Puntland Electoral Crisis

Puntland's political situation remains unstable due to disagreements over the electoral process. The government advocates for a "one-person, one-vote" system to enhance democracy, while opposition groups prefer traditional clan-based representation. This dispute reflects broader challenges in Somalia's electoral reforms, balancing democratic aspirations with political and security realities.

3.2. Somalia's Accession to the East African Economic Community

Somalia's entry into the East African Community (EAC) offers opportunities for market access, investment, and economic growth. The nation's long coastline could greatly contribute to the region's blue economy. However, integrating Somalia into the EAC also brings challenges, particularly concerning security, with the looming withdrawal of the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and the need for regional stability.

3.3. The Federal Government, its Military Campaign and ATMIS Withdrawal

Somalia's government, aided by clan militias, has made progress against the Al-Shabaab militant group, although the challenges of maintaining gains and managing power vacuums still remain. The planned withdrawal of ATMIS forces by December 2024 raises concerns about Somalia's readiness to manage its security autonomously, highlighting the need for a strong, unified national army and strategic planning to counter ongoing threats. While the UN Security Council's decision in December 2023 to lift the 31-year arms embargo on Somalia marks a significant shift in international policy towards the country, there will be still major challenges before Somalia is able to purchase military hardware's.

3.4. Debt Relief in Somalia: Toward Economic Stability

For over three decades, Somalia has faced prolonged conflict, undermining the rule of law, institutions, and social structures. Despite these challenges, efforts at various levels have led to the establishment of federal political structures, including the Federal Government of Somalia and the Federal Member States.

Amid political, economic, and institutional challenges, there has been significant progress in rebuilding state capabilities vital for debt relief. Despite challenges like food shortages and a struggling agricultural sector, Somalia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has steadily improved, demonstrating economic resilience. However, the fragile economy is burdened with a \$5.2 billion national debt, consuming 96% of its GDP.

This situation necessitates urgent discussions with the World Bank and IMF under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. This was initiated in March 2020; the debt relief qualification process has been fast tracked and marks a significant turning point. The Somali government aims to reach the HIPC completion point by December 2023, expecting debt relief and better relations with creditors. This would allow the government to focus on economic growth and initiate reforms in the security sector as well as institutional reforms.

4. Ethiopia's Pursuit of Red Sea Access in 2024: A Path to Conflict?

Ethiopia, a nation of approximately 120 million people, is geopolitically disadvantaged due to its landlocked status. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's public assertion of Ethiopia's right to access the Red Sea has sparked a significant regional discourse. This declaration, while emphasizing Ethiopia's aspirations, has also heightened tensions with neighboring countries like Eritrea, Somalia, Somaliland, and Djibouti, each unequivocally defending their territorial integrity.

Internally, Ethiopia grapples with considerable conflicts. The Tigray Interim Administration's accusation of Abiy's non-adherence to the Pretoria agreement with the TPLF underscores deep-rooted political rifts. Similarly, the Amhara region's reluctance to cede territory and the intensifying OLA insurgency highlight Ethiopia's internal fragmentation. These conflicts, combined with the Somali region's border disputes with Oromia, have resulted in significant humanitarian crises.

Complicating matters further is the deteriorating relationship between Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, especially after the peace deal with the TPLF. The ensuing military build-up along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border signals a breakdown in earlier agreements, particularly regarding the use of the Assab port, and raises the specter of renewed conflict.

Amidst this backdrop, Ethiopia faces daunting economic and social challenges. The country is experiencing severe deflation, high unemployment, and a lack of social cohesion, factors that critically undermine its military capabilities and overall stability. The prolonged conflicts, especially with Tigray, have not only exhausted Ethiopia's military resources but also necessitated international mediation.

The strategic ambition to secure the Zeila port, located in a geopolitically sensitive area bordering Somaliland's Awdal region, further complicates Ethiopia's position. The potential of such a move to provoke counterclaims from Somaliland and Somalia, particularly regarding the Somali Western Region (Ogadenia), underscores the intricate regional dynamics at play.

Given these multifaceted challenges, Ethiopia's path forward appears to hinge on a nuanced diplomatic strategy aligned with international maritime law. A military approach to securing port access seems impractical and counterproductive, potentially exacerbating regional instability. Thus, Ethiopia's pursuit of its Red Sea aspirations must be carefully balanced with the need for regional cooperation and adherence to international norms to avoid plunging the Horn of Africa into further uncertainty.

5. Is the Horn of Africa at Risk of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Spillover in 2024?

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has led to international divisions, affecting the Horn of Africa, where different countries have taken varied stances. Kenya, with President William Ruto labeling Hamas as a terrorist organization, supports Israel, while Somalia and Djibouti have condemned Israel's actions in Gaza. Somalia's Prime Minister Hamze Barre criticized Israel and showed support for Hamas. Uganda, traditionally an ally of Israel, now advocates for a two-state solution and opposes Israel's actions. Conflict laden Sudan, initially aligning with Israel, has withdrawn support, advocating for Palestinian independence. Zambia supports Israel and criticized Hamas.

Israel's trade through the Red Sea, vital for its maritime trade, is also a factor. Israel's agreement with the UAE could pressure the Horn of Africa nations to align with its Gaza policy, potentially straining UAE relations with these countries. The longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict might pose risks exacerbating tensions in the Horn of Africa in 2024 threatening regional stability, and could escalate to further conflicts. It's crucial for leaders to work towards enhanced collaboration among Horn of Africa nations to address security, economic, and political challenges, promoting regional peace and development.

6. Recommendations:

The following policy recommendations are offered to address the political and security challenges in the Horn of Africa in 2024.

- Somaliland should resolve internal conflicts by engaging in dialogue with SSC-Khatumo and urgently strengthen political stability by finalizing electoral laws. The National Electoral Commission must ensure timely and credible elections in 2024.
- Somalia's Security Strategy Post-ATMIS: The Federal Government should develop a strategic plan for security after ATMIS withdrawal, focusing on the immediate risks posed by insurgent groups like Al-Shabaab and ensuring sustained security gains.
- For Somalia to achieve economic stability, it must avoid political instability and exert more effort towards debt relief and integration into the East African Economic Community.
- The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia should address internal conflicts and promote social cohesion to stabilize the nation and facilitate economic growth, while seeking a diplomatic approach in its pursuit of Red Sea Access in accordance with international maritime law.
- Regional bodies such as IGAD and the AU should encourage Horn of Africa nations to adopt a balanced stance and contribute to a peaceful resolution to protect regional stability and prevent ongoing conflict from escalating further.
- The UN agencies, donor nations, and regional bodies like IGAD and the African Union should be prepared to respond to humanitarian aid needs, especially in areas affected by conflict and political instability."

7. Timelines of Political and Security Events in the Horn of Africa (October November and December 2023)



ABOUT THE ISIR DIGEST

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) produces a bi-monthly newsletter titled "ISIR Digest." This publication focuses on offering in-depth analysis and perspective on the latest political and security developments in from the Horn of Africa region. It is designed to serve a range of stakeholders in the peace and security sectors, including diplomatic missions, development partners, and policy and research institutions.

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