



THE ETHIOPIA–SOMALILAND MOU, ONE YEAR ON: PROSPECTS, PITFALLS, AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

William N. Robinson | February 2025



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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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The Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU, One Year On: Prospects, Pitfalls, and Security Implications

William N Robinson



Map credits: The Economist, December 2024

1. Timeline

- Jan 2024:** The MoU is signed by Somaliland and Ethiopia's executives
- Feb 2024:** Somalia signs defence, economic pact with Türkiye, emphasising naval development
- Jun 2024:** Somalia announces expulsion of Ethiopian troops at the end of the ATMIS mandate
- Jul/Aug 2024:** Türkiye unsuccessfully attempts talks for Somalia-Ethiopia reconciliation
- Aug 2024:** Egypt sends materiel to Somalia after Mogadishu–Cairo military pact
- Aug 2024:** Ethiopia declares Egyptian presence in the Horn to be 'destabilizing' and a 'national security threat'
- Sept 2024:** Egypt sends heavy weaponry to Somalia
- Oct 2024:** Egypt pursues a regional bloc to pressure Ethiopia, signing a tripartite security pact with Eritrea and Somalia
- Nov 2024:** Somaliland's opposition wins presidential election
- Dec 2024:** Türkiye successfully mediates Somalia-Ethiopia talks
- Jan 2025:** AUSSOM succeeds ATMIS, Hassan Sheikh rallies support from former ATMIS contributors
- Jan 2025:** Ethiopia and Somalia restore diplomatic ties

2. Executive Summary

On 1 January 2024, Somaliland's president Muse Bihi Abdi announced a memorandum of understanding with Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed, avowing Ethiopian access to a naval facility on Somaliland's coast in exchange for formal recognition of its statehood. For Abiy and Muse Bihi, the MoU appeared to consummate their respective manifest destinies—Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access and Somaliland's quest for international recognition. Conversely, for the Horn of Africa, the agreement sharply escalated territorial disputes and geopolitical competition, upending the fragile political modus vivendi of a region situated at the crossroads of global trade and strategic interests.

In an [interview](#) with the *Addis Standard*, Muse Bihi said:

'A memorandum of understanding has been agreed upon, wherein Somaliland will lease a naval base to Ethiopia's navy. Moreover, Ethiopia will become the first nation to formally recognise Somaliland, with both events occurring concurrently, while additional cooperation encompasses various areas such as the economy, security, and climate change.'

The accord's technical details were markedly murky, with a British diplomat

[referring](#) to the quasi-legal document as a 'Memorandum of Misunderstanding,' as Ethiopian and Somaliland officials offered different accounts of its contents. Officials within Abiy's orbit had initially claimed that the agreement granted Ethiopia access to a coastal facility for both commercial and military purposes, whereas Somaliland maintained that it was [limited to a naval base](#), and continued use of the UAE-administered Berbera port for trade.

The reaction from Somalia and its Arab League allies—primarily Egypt—was incendiary, while militant non-state actors, including al-Shabaab and the expanding Somali branch of the Islamic State, exploited the fallout.

One year on, the fundamentally irreconcilable ontological positions of the MoU's key stakeholders have not changed. Two months after being elected, Somaliland's Cirro administration retains the previous government's pursuit for international recognition, Addis Ababa is determined to secure unimpeded access to the Red Sea, and Somalia's federal government stands resolute in its defence of its perceived territorial sovereignty.

This commentary analyses how the MoU has reshaped the regional order,

assessing its domestic and regional ramifications, the challenges to peace and security, and the prospects for de-escalation and cooperation. Against this backdrop, this analysis locates the strategic intransigence—and potential avenues for compromise—among Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Somalia, while demonstrating how peacebuilding efforts can gain traction amidst a regional order defined by *realpolitik* and geopolitical hedging.

First, this commentary delineates the MoU's structural and geopolitical impetus within each theatre: in Somaliland, where the agreement engendered divisions along clan lines; in Somalia, where the fallout imperilled the future of the African Union's

al-Shabaab deterrence mission; and in the Red Sea, where it has drawn in actors such as the United States, Israel, and Yemen's Ansarullah. Second, this paper assesses Türkiye's role in navigating Ethiopian and Somali brinkmanship. Third, it evaluates the sustainability and long-term prospects of Somaliland and Ethiopia's existential questions within the incumbent geopolitical zeitgeist, while also considering Eritrea's role within the evolving regional order. Finally, this paper outlines pathways for Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Somalia to advance their economic and political ambitions without further jeopardising regional peace and security, before examining diplomatic channels available to key foreign and multilateral stakeholders.

3. Somaliland

3.1 Sool, Sanaag, and Awdal

The MoU intensified Somaliland's political divisions, particularly among [Harti clans](#) in its Sool, Sanaag, and in Awdal region.

In Awdal, members of the Dir clan have long voiced grievances over marginalisation by the dominant Isaaq clan within Somaliland's political order. Concurrently, in the east, the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli clans have largely opposed integration

into Somaliland, instead [advocating](#) for closer ties with Mogadishu or the neighbouring semi-autonomous region, Puntland. These outlying communities perceived the agreement as a move that would further alienate them within Somaliland's political architecture, privileging Ethiopian interests over their own. Moreover, critics alleged that president Muse Bihi leveraged the MoU as a [strategic ploy](#), using it to reignite nationalist appeal amid his flagging

domestic political prospects.

In December 2022, the assassination of a Dhulbahante politician in Laascaanood, the administrative capital of Sool, sparked local protests. The government's violent crackdown on demonstrators displaced over 150,000 people, prompting SSC-Khaatumo—a Sool-based political movement—to launch a full-blown insurgency. In October 2023, Mogadishu had recognised SSC-Khaatumo as an interim administration—although the entity has thus far [refrained](#) from integrating into Somalia's federal system. SSC-Khaatumo now controls much of Sool and Sanaag, resulting in a fragile settlement that [besmirches](#) Somaliland's credibility as a bastion of stability in an otherwise volatile neighbourhood.

In a September 2024 [interview](#) with *the Economist*, Dhulbahante traditional leader, Garad Jama Garad Ali, declared, *'Right now it is hard to imagine the region returning to Somaliland, except by force...'* while the movement's vice president, Mohamed Abdi Ismail, [claimed](#) that the Dhulbahante have chosen "unity" with Somalia over "secession" with Somaliland. Concurrently, elders in Lughaya, Awdal (one of the initially proposed sites for Ethiopia's military base) vocally opposed the MoU, urging the Isaaq clan to confine their political

ambitions to their own territories. In a notable act of dissent, Somaliland's Defence Minister—Abdiqani Mohamud Ateye, an Awdal native—resigned in protest over the agreement.

The ensuing diplomatic crisis—marked by the Somali federal government blocking an Ethiopian delegation from entering Somaliland's airspace, Hassan Sheikh's entourage being [denied entry](#) to the February African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, and [IGAD expressing caution](#)—shifted Somaliland's internal consensus on the MoU, with trust in the Muse Bihi administration rapidly eroding, even within the Isaaq heartland. Moreover, the postponement of the November 2022 elections, coupled with mounting frustrations over economic stagnation and unresolved conflicts in Sool and Sanaag, contributed to widespread [scepticism](#), with many viewing the agreement as a cynical political manoeuvre.

3.2 Elections

Despite delays, the presidential election went ahead. In November 2024, the WADDANI party leader, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Cirro", secured the presidency with [64 percent of the vote](#), defeating incumbent Muse Bihi Abdi of the Kulmiye party. Despite low voter turnout—owing to the lack of polling in much of conflict-stricken Sool and Sanaag—independent

observers commended the National Electoral Commission and the Supreme Court's leadership and independence throughout the electoral process.

Moreover, Muse Bihi abstained from vote manipulation and facilitated a peaceful transition of power.

4. Somalia

4.1 Al-Shabaab, ATMIS & AUSSOM

In the months following Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's election as Somalia's president in May 2022, significant strides were made in countering al-Shabaab, the jihadist movement that had consolidated power after Ethiopia's botched invasion two decades ago. Declaring a ["total war"](#) against the militant group, Hassan Sheikh's administration successfully liberated a dozen towns.

Following the MoU, this progress quickly unraveled. The fragile regional juncture allowed al-Shabaab to retrench, exploiting the extent to which the MoU had fuelled ultra-nationalist and irredentist anti-Ethiopian sentiments—bolstering its appeal and [recruitment efforts](#) both within Somalia and among the diaspora. Projecting power from its strongholds in central and southern Somalia, the group escalated its attacks—including [high-casualty assaults](#) on Gulf troops in February 2024, a crowded café in July, and Lido Beach in August—while Mogadishu's

ability to counter the group swiftly receded.

The MoU not only tacitly abetted al-Shabaab's expanding regional footprint but also diminished the capacity of the African Union-led mission designed to deter the group. In June 2024, plans for a successor to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—to which Addis Ababa was a principal contributor, with 8,000–10,000 troops deployed under its mandate—were in jeopardy after an enraged Hassan Sheikh [threatened](#) to expel all Ethiopian cadres from Somali territory. Somalia then formed a tripartite military alliance with Egypt and Eritrea—Ethiopia's perennial adversaries—and issued a joint [statement](#) pledging to "confront various internal and external challenges." In response, an Ethiopian general openly suggested arming groups hostile to the Somali government, while ATMIS' other stakeholders [urged](#) both parties to prevent further security vacuums that al-Shabaab could exploit.

Türkiye, seeking to protect its interests in both Ethiopia and Somalia, facilitated dialogue between President Hassan Sheikh and prime minister Abiy, ultimately averting a crisis for ATMIS' successor, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). While [speaking to VOA](#), Somalia's foreign minister, Ali Omar Balcad, asserted that the obstacles created by the MoU, which had threatened Ethiopia's participation in AUSSOM, had been ironed out—at least for the time being.

4.2 Abnaa ul-Calipha

A jihadist movement that has received comparatively less scrutiny against the backdrop of the MoU is Abnaa ul-Calipha, the rapidly expanding Somali branch of the Islamic State, headquartered in the mountainous regions of Puntland, near Bosaso. Identified by International Crisis Group's Omar Mahmood as a [likely new bastion](#) for the regional jihadist movement following the decapitation of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the group has successfully integrated into the global Salafist network, propagating its rigid dogma to attract recruits and consolidate power. Exploiting the nascent uncertainty and infighting among stakeholders in al-Shabaab deterrence efforts, Abnaa ul-Calipha has gained a tactical edge.

Its leader, Abdulqadir Mumin, has risen to prominence within the Islamic State's global hierarchy, heightening concerns about the group's ability to rival al-Shabaab, attract foreign recruits, and further destabilize the region.

4.3 Egypt

Egypt has capitalized on the regional discord, masquerading as a concerned arbiter of international norms on behalf of its Arab League partner, Somalia, to advance its own interests: limiting Ethiopia's economic footprint, and [balancing](#) its power in relation to the Nile—particularly concerning the construction and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Relying on the Nile for almost all its water supply, Egypt views the dam as an [existential threat](#), once threatening to bomb it.

The geopolitical competition for the Nile is a prisoner's dilemma. Yet, despite not having deployed troops beyond its borders in decades, possessing limited familiarity with Somalia's political context, and grappling with economic malaise, Egypt dispatched military personnel and materiel to Somalia on two occasions in late 2024.

Cairo's concern is not Somalia's territorial integrity. On the contrary, in 2019, Egypt courted Somaliland with a bilateral [proposition](#) almost identical to

the MoU, proposing the establishment of a Red Sea military base in exchange

for international recognition—an offer that Somaliland rejected.

5. Red Sea security

The MoU reveals an obscure geopolitical nexus with Israel's assault on Gaza, as Zaydi Shia Islamist group Ansarullah—or the Houthi movement—has [explicitly tied its attacks](#) on commercial vessels in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the crisis in Palestine, alongside intermittent strikes on targets inside Israel. Despite a U.S. and U.K.–led multinational task force's efforts to restore the status quo ante, Ansarullah's resilience continues to hold the critical trade route to ransom.

The byproducts of the Red Sea's instability have thrust the Horn's strategic significance to the forefront. Somaliland's notional stability, strategic position along the Gulf of Aden, and willingness to engage in transactional diplomacy to expedite its bid for international recognition has drawn the attention of the United States.

At this stage, the prospect of recognition from the Trump administration relies on conjecture—although the [Project 2025 manifesto](#) advocates for Somaliland's official recognition, which suggests that it could be on the White

House's radar. Trump's penchant for transactional foreign policy has fueled speculation that Hargeisa could secure economic and strategic investment from Washington in exchange for tactical use of Somaliland as a staging ground for operations targeting Ansarullah strongholds, including al-Hudaydah, Taiz, and Sana'a. This could also incentivise a shift in trade routes, such as offering subsidies for companies willing to reroute trade through safer corridors and negotiate [preferential terms](#) for cargo handling at Berbera. In this context, Somaliland could be viewed as a 'stable alternative' to counter Iranian influence and China's presence in Djibouti.

Eric Navarro, director of the *Middle East Forum's* Red Sea Security Initiative, [wrote](#) in January 2025,

“U.S. strategists should calibrate their approach to the reality of [Ansarullah's support front] and the group's ability to resist existing pressure such as sanctions and symbolic military strikes. Instead, policymakers must explore solutions such as alternative trade routes and security measures to remove Houthi leverage and

ability to attack... One such solution lies in Somaliland."

The United Kingdom has also identified Somaliland's strategic imperative. In Westminster, former Defence Secretary Sir Gavin Williamson has [sponsored a bill](#) advocating for the

formal recognition of the Republic of Somaliland and the establishment of full diplomatic relations, echoing Navarro's discourse regarding Somaliland's stability and the value of partnership vis-à-vis Red Sea security.

6. Türkiye: mediating Somalia–Ethiopia brinkmanship

Over the past decade, Türkiye has steadily [expanded](#) its regional footprint, integrating economic investment, security cooperation, and humanitarian aid to cultivate trust and strategic partnerships, particularly in Ethiopia and Somalia. As brinkmanship between the two states escalated—culminating in Egypt's deployment of troops to Somalia, and threatening the future of ATMIS—Ankara stepped in as a mediator, steering the confrontation toward dialogue.

After a year of sabre-rattling, Ankara brokered a rapprochement between Somalia and Ethiopia following three rounds of negotiations, leading to the restoration of ties in mid-January 2025. Both parties issued a joint statement pledging to "leave behind differences and contentious issues," and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hailed the conciliation as ["historic."](#)

In the meantime, the Horn of Africa neighbours will ostensibly pursue "mutually beneficial commercial arrangements" to ensure Ethiopia's access to the sea "under Somalia's sovereignty" as they prepare to reconvene for [technical talks](#) in February.

"The MoU is retracted," [stated](#) a Somali government official, though the rapprochement itself makes no mention of Abiy and Muse Bihi's agreement, and Ethiopia has yet to confirm its cancellation. Moreover, Ethiopia's fixation on securing unimpeded sea access has not dissipated; rather, Eritrea has replaced Somaliland as the new object of [Abiy's interest](#).

6.1 Eritrea

"Abiy remains undeterred by international pressure and is resolute in pursuing the MoU by any means necessary," [says Abel Abate Demissie](#), an Ethiopian analyst at *Chatham House*.

The assumption that Türkiye's mediation in the Ethiopia–Somalia rapprochement will inevitably result in the annulment of the MoU—and, by extension, broader regional de-escalation—overlooks the ontological stakes for Ethiopia, specifically the importance of sea access to its macroeconomic calculus. Rooted in a decaying federal system where non-state actors—particularly the Amhara Fano coalition, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—have little trust in state institutions and negligible incentive to pursue political cooperation, Abiy has framed sea access as the silver bullet for Ethiopia's

deepening political fragmentation.

Abiy's ambitions for sea access extend beyond commercial prerogatives (which the Türkiye-brokered rapport ostensibly promises)—Ethiopia interpreted the MoU as a gateway to direct sea access under its own management, paving the way for a naval base on Somaliland's coast. With that option effectively off the table, Abiy's irredentist rhetoric now takes a more tangible form as he shifts his focus to Assab or Massawa—Eritrea's Red Sea ports, which Ethiopia lost control of following [Eritrea's secession](#) in 1993. "The MoU was just an appetiser... Assab is the main meal," an Anonymous Source [told the economist](#).

7. The MoU in 2025: Somaliland's existential questions

The Horn of Africa is the only region on earth to have experienced multiple cases of secession over the past three decades. While Somaliland continues its pursuit of international recognition, the African Union holds steadfast in its opposition, adhering to a policy that [rejects](#) the recognition of "self-determination entities." This stance reflects the AU's deep-seated [commitment](#) to preserving the territorial integrity of its member states, driven by concerns that legitimizing

secession could set a precedent for further fragmentation across a continent rife with internal grievances and political crises. Somaliland, however, views the AU's approach as selective, invoking the principle of *uti possidetis*—which underpins the AU's practice of converting colonial borders into international boundaries—on the grounds that Somaliland existed as a distinct entity under British rule. The AU differentiates Somaliland's case from those of Eritrea and South

Sudan, where secession was bilaterally negotiated between parent and breakaway states—an outcome that seems unattainable for Somaliland due to Mogadishu's intransigence.

The Cirro administration's newly appointed minister for foreign affairs, Abdirahman Dahir Adan, has [spoken out](#) against the former administration's lack of transparency surrounding the MoU, asserting his opposition to it on the basis of ["contradictory"](#) statements from Ethiopia and former president Muse Bihi:

"What Ethiopia was saying and what the president was saying were different. He said he swapped it [sea access] with recognition. They were saying we'll consider recognition after we get access...we do not have anywhere where [Ethiopia] said they will recognise Somaliland...We'll knock every door to get recognition, but we'll not go to hell in search of recognition... the interest of the people of Somaliland, and the interest of the other country must align."

Western governments, having invested heavily in Somalia's state-building efforts, remain unwilling to recognise Somaliland before the AU does. Meanwhile, African governments—many of which contend with their own secessionist movements—are [wary of the consequences](#), should they upend

the status quo. Like Türkiye, the UAE is well placed within this discourse, leveraging extensive investments across the Horn—most notably Dubai-based DP World's \$442 million investment in Berbera port—and maintains tutelage over state and non-state actors, including Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. In late January 2025, Somaliland's president Cirro visited Abu Dhabi for high-profile discussions on [upgrading diplomatic ties](#)—potentially setting the stage to court Abu Dhabi as a future partner in its bid to expedite international recognition.

Ultimately, Somaliland's aspirations hinge on a negotiated political settlement with the Federal Government of Somalia, requiring mutual acquiescence on either secession or unity. The diametrical opposition between Hargeisa and Mogadishu offers a bleak prognosis, as bilateral engagements have stalled due to the absence of structured frameworks, [diplomatic foot-dragging](#), and a lack of robust third-party mediation. Somalia, for its part, remains dogged on Somaliland's sovereignty, offering no roadmap for concessions while rigidly adhering to its ["One Somalia"](#) policy.

8. Paths Forward

For each of the MoU's stakeholders, ontological intransigence is a zero-sum game. However, a middle ground—one that safeguards fragile economies and stability while being shaped by diplomacy—is attainable.

- **Ethiopia** must sustain immediate and proactive engagement with Türkiye and Somalia to prevent new divisions from taking root. At this juncture, Abiy must seek an off-ramp for the MoU and revive discussions on alternatives for sea access. This will most likely require investment in regional partnerships—including a reassessment of its trade pact with Djibouti—with strict adherence to norms of peace and security, so as to not impinge Eritrea's territorial integrity.
- Somalia has stated that it has no objection to Ethiopia and Somaliland expanding commercial ties. With this in mind, **Ethiopia** should prioritise the economic dimensions of the agreement, as they are both less contentious and more readily implementable. This entails enhancing transport infrastructure to better connect Berbera Port with Ethiopian markets and finalizing the bilateral trade agreement that was under discussion prior to the MoU.
- **Somalia** should prioritise consolidating its federal system by finalising key elements such as the constitution, the practical implementation of its national security architecture, and fostering pluralist cooperation to enhance the effectiveness of al-Shabaab deterrence. These foundational steps must take precedence over seeking external alignment with regional powers like Egypt to pressure subnational actors in ways that ultimately serve Cairo's strategic interests rather than Somalia's long-term stability.
- **Somalia** must acquiesce to the reality that Somaliland has functioned as a de facto independent entity for over three decades. The priority for both Mogadishu and Hargeisa should be to return to the negotiating table with renewed commitment and a reimagined [framework for dialogue](#). This can be achieved by structuring talks around concrete zones of cooperation—such as revenue-sharing mechanisms for air traffic fees—and identifying shared commercial interests that offer mutual economic benefits, fostering a more pragmatic and constructive engagement.

- **Somaliland's** priority should be de-escalating conflicts in Sool and Sanaag, and resolving power-sharing disputes in its western regions. These crises continue to fetter opportunities for state-building, institutional capacity, and national cohesion. President Cirro is well-placed to lead these efforts, and his administration should prioritize traditional conflict resolution methods, humanitarian diplomacy, and a national reconciliation process that ensures equitable power-sharing strategies.
- **Somaliland** should privilege economic diplomacy, focusing on strategic partnerships and investments. By attracting foreign investment, expanding trade, and securing backing for key sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and telecommunications, it can not only bolster its economic resilience but also enhance its credibility as a viable and self-sustaining entity, strengthening its case for international recognition.
- Foreign actors—principally **the UAE** and Türkiye—view the Horn of Africa as an opportunity rather than a “problem to be solved”, as many of their European counterparts do. This approach has earned them the trust of key regional players. However, it is imperative that their engagement focuses on mediation and economic investment that does not come at the expense of other sovereign actors. Crucially, they must uphold the principles of the UN and AU charters to prevent further destabilization and unravelling of the regional order. In areas where the UAE hesitates to put pressure on Ethiopia—given the breadth of crucial equities embedded in their bilateral relationship—Türkiye must take initiative, leveraging its momentum following the Addis Ababa and Mogadishu reconciliation process.
- **The UN** and **the EU** should maintain close collaboration with the AU, recognising its central role in regional stability. As the primary financial contributor to AU peacekeeping missions, the EU, alongside other multilateral actors, should continue supporting decentralized approaches to peacekeeping and conflict mediation. Sustaining local initiatives such as AUSSOM will help ensure that peace efforts remain contextually grounded and responsive to regional dynamics.
- **The AU** should demonstrate strong leadership in preserving regional stability by upholding the sovereignty of its member states while engaging constructively

in the Somaliland recognition discourse. This includes holding a tougher line on non-interference, particularly with regard to Egypt. It should also prioritize close collaboration with regional actors, particularly on initiatives like AUSSOM.

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