

Egypt's Proposed Deployment to Somalia: A blessing or Disaster in the making?

By Abdullahi A. Nor
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Background

Egypt's interest in deploying forces to Somalia can be viewed through the lens of its broader geopolitical strategy in the Horn of Africa. The region is critical due to its proximity to the Red Sea, a vital maritime route for global trade, including oil shipments. By establishing a military presence in Somalia, Egypt could potentially strengthen its influence in the region, which would be strategically advantageous.

Another underlying motivation could be related to the Nile water dispute with Ethiopia. By positioning forces near the Ethiopian border, Egypt may seek to exert pressure on Ethiopia regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) negotiations. This presence could be perceived as a form of leverage or a deterrent against Ethiopian actions that could threaten Egypt's water security.

The Somali government's decision to allow Egyptian forces could be seen as an attempt to diversify its security partnerships, particularly after the withdrawal of ATMIS. However, this decision also raises questions about the impact on Somali sovereignty, as it might lead to the country becoming a battleground for regional power struggles. Somalia is in a delicate position, needing to balance its relationships with neighboring countries. Ethiopia views the instability in Somalia as a direct threat to its national security.



Accepting Egyptian forces could strain Somalia's ties with Ethiopia, a key player in its security; while Ethiopia's primary presence is its interest of preventing Al Shabab infiltration into its country, the deployment of Egyptian forces in Somalia, could destabilize the already fragile political and security environment in Somalia and the region.

Ethiopia's Concerns of Egyptian Forces near Ethiopia's Border and the GERD Dispute

Ethiopia has been deeply involved in Somalia's security landscape for years, particularly in combating Al-Shabaab and supporting regional administrations among many like South West State and Jubaland. Ethiopia's military presence has been a stabilizing force in these regions, and its exclusion from post-ATMIS plans could undermine these efforts, potentially allowing extremist groups to regain strength.

The GERD, a massive hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile, has been a source of intense dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Ethiopia views the dam as essential for its economic development and energy needs, while Egypt fears it will significantly reduce its share of Nile water, which is vital for its agriculture and population.

The deployment of Egyptian forces close to Ethiopia's border could be seen as a provocative move, potentially escalating tensions between the two countries. Ethiopia might perceive this as a direct threat, leading to a hardening of its stance in the GERD negotiations and possibly provoking military posturing or even clashes. If Egyptian forces are deployed and Ethiopian troops are withdrawn, it could diminish Ethiopia's influence in Somalia. This shift might destabilize the region where Ethiopian forces have been key in combating Al Shabab extremist and maintaining security, creating a power vacuum that could be exploited by Al-Shabaab or other militant groups in the making.

Egypt's Alignment with U.S. and Israeli Interests:

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's rise to power in Egypt, following the 2013 military coup, is often linked to support from the U.S. and Israel. His regime has been criticized for prioritizing the strategic interests of these countries, particularly in maintaining stability in the region and countering Islamist movements, which align with the broader U.S. and Israeli agendas.

Sisi's government has also been heavily criticized for its role in the Gaza blockade and its policies towards the Palestinian territories. This has led to widespread resentment among many in the Muslim world, who view Egypt's actions as complicit in the suffering of the Palestinian people. This perception could influence how Egypt's involvement in Somalia is received, potentially reducing its ability to gain support from local populations or Muslim-majority countries.

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Implications for U.S. and Israeli Strategies:

The U.S. and Israel might view an Egyptian military presence in Somalia as a way to extend their strategic footprint in the Horn of Africa. This region is crucial for global security, given its proximity to the Middle East, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Peninsula. However, this involvement could also draw them deeper into the complex web of regional conflicts and rivalries.

The deployment of Egyptian forces, perceived as aligned with U.S. and Israeli interests, could provoke backlash from local populations and neighboring countries. This could further complicate efforts to stabilize Somalia and might lead to increased anti-Western sentiment in the region, fueling insurgency and instability.

Regional and International Reactions

Sudan, which is also involved in the GERD dispute, might view Egypt's deployment in Somalia with concern, particularly if it escalates tensions with Ethiopia. Sudan's own stability is precarious, and it could be drawn into the conflict if regional tensions increase.

Other Horn of Africa countries, such as Djibouti and Eritrea, might react differently depending on their current relations with Egypt and Ethiopia. Djibouti, with its strategic location and military bases, might be particularly concerned about any shifts in the balance of power in the region.

Somalia's Fragile Stability and the Future of ATMIS

The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) has played a critical role in supporting the Somali government's efforts to rebuild state institutions and counteract extremist groups. As ATMIS phases out, there is a significant concern about the capacity of Somali security forces to maintain stability without continued international support. The withdrawal of ATMIS, coupled with the exclusion of Ethiopian forces and the introduction of Egyptian troops, could create a security vacuum in certain regions. This vacuum could be exploited by Al-Shabaab or other militant groups, leading to a resurgence of violence and further destabilizing the country.

Somalia's Strategic Choices:

The Somali government must carefully navigate the influence of external powers to avoid becoming a proxy battleground for regional and international rivalries. Balancing relations with Ethiopia, Egypt, and other stakeholders is crucial to maintaining stability and protecting Somali sovereignty.

President Hassan's Government has signed defense agreements with at least seven countries that have conflicting interests in the horn that includes Ethiopia, Turkey, UAE, USA, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Surprisingly none of these agreements were presented to the Parliament. President Hassan runs the country like mad house.

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The 1995 Egyptian Intervention and its Legacy

In 1995 Egypt and Libya allegedly supplied weapons to the United Somali Congress (USC) militia of the Hawiye clan, a move that exacerbated the already volatile situation in Somalia. The weapons helped fuel a campaign of violence against the South West State populations leading to mass displacement, territorial occupation, and widespread suffering. The USC militia was able to dominate and control key areas, displacing other clans and leaving lasting animosities. The communities in these regions, particularly in South West and also Gedo felt the brunt of the violence. Entire communities were driven from their homes, and land occupations were solidified through force.

Ethiopian intervention at that time is viewed as the saving grace for these communities. Ethiopia's timely involvement halted the USC militia advances and restored some semblance of order, preventing the complete annihilation of South West FMS populations. For the last 15 years, Ethiopian non-ATMIS forces have played a crucial role in maintaining security in these areas, particularly by keeping Al-Shabaab at bay.

Ethiopian non-ATMIS forces have been stationed in the under listed critical districts and regions, acting as a bulwark against Al-Shabaab:

1. Gedo Region
2. Berdaale
3. Xudur
4. Waajid
5. Qansax Dheere
6. Diinsoor

In the event Ethiopia decides to withdraw its forces to the border, these six districts and regions, and potentially even more, could quickly be taken over by Al Shabab. For the past 15 years, the Ethiopian Defense Forces have been the only barrier standing between Al Shabab and the people of the South West State in this geographic area. The residents of these six districts and regions have been confined to their areas, with no hope of traveling by land due to Al Shabab forces encircling them. Air travel has been the only means of reaching these places, and the situation has rarely changed over the past 15 years.

Current Resistance to Egyptian Troop Deployment

The proposal to deploy Egyptian forces to Somalia, especially in regions bordering Ethiopia, has understandably triggered concerns and protests. Demonstrations in South West FMS and Gedo region reflect deep-seated fears rooted in the 1995 intervention. For these communities, Egyptian military presence is not seen as a neutral or stabilizing force but rather as a potential threat that could revive the dark memories of clan violence and displacements.

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Many in these regions see Egypt's renewed interest in Somalia as part of a broader geopolitical strategy, not necessarily as a force for stabilization. They fear that Egyptian troops, given their historical involvement, might reignite old tensions, and undermining the fragile peace in the region.

Ethiopian forces have been the primary buffer between Al-Shabaab and the civilian populations in districts like Gedo, Berdaale, Xudur, Waajid, Qansax Dheere, and Diinsoor. Should Ethiopia withdraw its troops due to political disagreements or as part of post-ATMIS planning, there is a real risk that Al-Shabaab could quickly overrun these areas. This would result in a humanitarian disaster, as communities would be left defenseless against an emboldened militant group that has long targeted them.

In light of the above scenarios, one can understand why the people are demonstrating against President Hassan's decision to send Egyptian Defense Forces (EDF) back to their country. Al-Shabaab has labeled the populations in these regions, particularly those aligned with Ethiopian forces, as infidels, making them prime targets for violence. Should Ethiopian troops leave, these communities would face almost certain reprisals. Al-Shabaab's presence in Somalia is not merely a military threat; it represents an existential danger to many communities who are viewed as traitors or enemies of their extremist agenda.

It is a reality that most of the people who currently live in the areas mentioned will be slaughtered by Al Shabab's killing machine as the whole communities are labeled by Al Shabab as infidels. The only option for survival for many would be to follow the retreating Ethiopian forces into Ethiopia, leading to a new wave of refugees and further destabilizing the border regions. Without the protection of Ethiopian forces, there is a high likelihood that entire Districts could be massacred or forced to flee, as Al-Shabaab has demonstrated little tolerance for those they perceive as aligned with foreign powers.

Sure, increased violence would likely result in mass displacement, with communities fleeing to safer areas or becoming internally displaced within Somalia. The international community, which has long been involved in Somalia's stabilization efforts through financial support, military aid, and peacekeeping missions, must take an active role in addressing this looming crisis. There are several steps that the global community can take to prevent the situation from deteriorating:-

1. Diplomatic pressure from the international community, including the African Union, the United Nations, and major powers like the U.S. and the European Union, may need to step up diplomatic efforts to mediate between Egypt and Ethiopia, while also ensuring that Somalia's stability is not compromised.
2. Diplomatic pressure must be applied to President Hassan's government to reconsider the decision to exclude Ethiopian forces, particularly in areas where they are crucial for maintaining security.
3. Any potential deployment of Egyptian forces should be scrutinized carefully to ensure that it does not exacerbate existing tensions or reignite clan-based conflicts.

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There should be guarantees that Egyptian troops will focus solely on stabilization and counter-terrorism, with no hidden geopolitical agendas.

In the event the international community that sustains Somalia fails to stop President Hassan's insane policy in the next weeks sure this scenario, God forbid, is what we expect – back to the drawing board.

The Arrival of two Egyptian Military Planes Raised Eye Barrows

The arrival of two Egyptian military planes loaded with weapons and ammunition at Mogadishu Airport has sparked significant concern and controversy. The shipment has raised alarms among local officials and military personnel, who fear that the weapons might be used to arm clan-based militias, potentially exacerbating tensions and conflicts within Somalia.

The concerns stem from the belief that the 500-strong militia reportedly being armed with these weapons is linked to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's clan. The Somali army has expressed worries that the selection process for these recruits was based solely on clan affiliations, rather than on national security needs. This has led to fears that the weapons could be used to reinforce clan loyalties rather than contribute to the broader stability of Somalia.

The shipment has drawn strong criticism from opposition politicians, including former presidents, prime ministers, and clan elders. They view the delivery as an attempt by President Hassan to arm a private, clan-based army, reminiscent of the 1995 Egyptian intervention that fueled clan conflicts in Somalia. The opposition fears that this move could reignite old animosities and destabilize the country further.

Secret Meetings and Alleged Creepy Plans

The controversy is further fueled by reports of secret meetings held in May 27, 2022 at Villa Somalia and later June 27, 2022 in Djibouti. These meetings, involving President Hassan and key figures from various clans, allegedly discussed plans to restructure SWS FMS boundaries to benefit specific clans. The proposal to incorporate Gedo Region into South West Federal Member State (FMS) and to cede Lower Shebelle to Banadir Region has been particularly contentious, with Rahanweyn figures seeing it as a land grab by the Hawiye clan. The sudden termination of the Djibouti meeting suggests that the plan was met with significant resistance, particularly from the Rahanweyn representatives, who realized the implications for their land and power.

Amazingly the secret meeting held in May 27, 2022 at Villa Somalia took place 12 days after President Hassan was elected and before he took the Oath of Office. Participants were namely President Hassan (Hawiye), Hon. Abdullahi Adan Ahmed (Rahanweyne), Minister Abdiqadir Mohamed Nur Jama (Rahanweyn), Yusuf Hassan (Rahanweyn), Hon Ahmed Fiqi (Hawiye) , Mohamed Ali Sanbolooshe (Hawiye) , Hon. Hassan Ma'alin (Hawiye) and Senator Salah Ahmed Jama (Dir).

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The Agenda of the meeting was to establish a one hundred year coalition between Hawiye, Rahanweyn and Dir clans with the sole aim to isolate the Darood clan – very divisive and tribally oriented President whose thought process is stuck in the period of the civil wars.

June 27, 2022 meeting in Djibouti under the facade of technical committee is where the sinister plot of President Hassan gets exposed. The Agenda of this meeting was redrawing the boundaries of South West State (SWS) by incorporating Gedo Region into SWS and in return SWS to cede the fertile region of lower shabeele to Banadir Region. Present at this meeting were the above mentioned individuals plus Mukhtar Rabow (Ex Deputy of Al Shabab) plus two traditional elders. The meeting was quickly called off after the Rahanweyn representatives found out the unholy gist of the secret meetings.

President Hassan didn't stop there. He attempted to outmaneuver the Rahanweyn representatives by trying to bribe the sitting President of Southwest State (SWS FMS). On June 1, 2022, he flew to Baidoa to pitch his controversial plan. He proposed restructuring the boundaries of Southwest State, promising full support for the president's reelection in return. President Hassan claimed to be the protector of the Southwest people's interests, highlighting that, under his leadership, Rahanweyn individuals were given representation in Banadir Region—appointing two police Station commanders, two district commissioners, and the accountant for the region of Banadir. However, once more his illogical scheme was rightfully rejected by the President of SWS.

President Hassan then traveled to Kismayo under the pretext of mediating between the Gedo Administration and President Ahmed Islam (Madobe). During his stay, he spent considerable time engaging in casual discussions with the leadership of Jubaland, focusing on topics with little political significance. However, at the conclusion of his visit, he held a serious meeting with President Ahmed Islam (Madobe), where he requested the addition of ten Hawiye MPs to the Jubaland Parliament and the appointment of a Hawiye Deputy President. President Ahmed Islam refused to accept these demands. This episode highlights how President Hassan appears to be driven by clan interests and a desire for wealth.

Conclusion

Ethiopia and Somalia have a long history of strained relations marked by territorial disputes and differing interests. In recent decades, the emergence of Al Shabab and other militant groups in Somalia has added a new dimension to the tension between the two countries. Ethiopia views the instability in Somalia as a direct threat to its national security, prompting it to intervene militarily on multiple occasions to combat these groups and prevent their spread into Ethiopian territory.

The potential deployment of Egyptian forces in Somalia, in the context of ongoing tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile, introduces new complexities into an already volatile region. Although Somalia's decision to exclude Ethiopian forces after ATMIS could destabilize key areas, undermining years of efforts to combat Al-Shabaab. Somalia is at a critical juncture, where its strategic decisions will have far-reaching consequences for its own stability and for the

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broader region. The international community must engage in careful diplomacy to prevent the escalation of conflicts and support Somalia in navigating this challenging period.

To navigate this challenging landscape, a multifaceted approach is essential—one that prioritizes diplomatic mediation, strengthens Somali governance and security institutions, and respects the historical and social dynamics of Somali communities. The international community must act decisively to support Somalia in building a stable and sovereign state, free from the shadows of past interventions and external power struggles. By addressing both the historical grievances and the current geopolitical realities, Somalia can work towards a future where security and stability are maintained through inclusive and transparent governance, reducing the need for external military interventions that may do more harm than good.

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