

Forum: Disarmament and International Security Committee (GA1)

Issue: Confronting the emerging security vacuum in the Horn of Africa

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TOPIC INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa is a region located in the eastern part of Africa, which is of great strategic importance. It primarily consists of Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Its geographical position makes it an intersection between Africa, the Middle East and Asia, making it one of the most critical geopolitical areas in the world.¹

The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, two territories that border the Horn of Africa, serve as critical international maritime routes connecting Europe and Asia through the Suez Canal. Humanitarian supplies, commercial, and millions of barrels of oil must pass through these waterways annually. This has, as a result, led to instability in the region, something that creates consequences that extend far beyond the region, affecting trade globally, energy security, and international relations.

Despite its strategic importance, the Horn of Africa has experienced decades of internal conflicts, waves of terrorism, interstate tensions, competition between external powers, and instability caused by weak governance. The above factors have contributed to the creation of a regional security vacuum, worsened by weak and sometimes corrupt governments that struggle to provide security and basic services. This has had a major humanitarian impact, with millions of people displaced by conflict and insecurity, creating severe food, health, and economic challenges across the region.

The security vacuum in the Horn of Africa has become more and more apparent in the last thirty years as the governments of the region have been unable to maintain control over their respective territories. The disintegration of the state institutions in Somalia in 1991 was one of the most dramatic watershed moments in contemporary history in the Horn. It signalled the beginning of a new period in the region's history where chaos and anarchy provided an environment for the rapid spread of armed groups, criminal cartels, and extremism. Since that time, however, state institutions have been continually destroyed by political transitions, civil war, ethnic conflict, and underdevelopment.

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Horn of Africa." Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Horn-of-Africa>.

The scope of the problem surpasses that of the Horn of Africa. Regional terrorists have proven themselves at executing cross-border operations against neighboring nations and piracy along the Somali coast, which has projected a threat to one of the world's most heavily trafficked maritime trade routes.

In addition, long interstate conflicts have internally displaced millions of civilians, ultimately generating significant economic and humanitarian strains on neighboring states and the global community. Responding to the security vacuum has therefore become an international security issue as much as a regional one. The security vacuum in the Horn of Africa highlights the urgent need for diplomacy as a means of preventing instability from escalating into wider regional and international conflict. In an era of political instability, rediscovering diplomacy is essential to promoting cooperation, strengthening regional security, and achieving lasting peace.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Security Vacuum

“Security Vacuum is a situation where inadequate security measures create an environment of heightened vulnerability.”²

Horn of Africa

“Horn of Africa, region of eastern Africa, the easternmost extension of African land. Its location along the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean has made the Horn of Africa an important crossroads for trade, migration, and the spread of religious and cultural traditions between Africa and Southwest Asia.”³

Non-State Armed Groups

“In international relations, violent non-state actors (VNSAs), also known as non-state armed actors or non-state armed groups (NSAGs), are individuals or groups that are wholly or partly independent of governments and which threaten or use violence to achieve their goals.”⁴

Counterterrorism

“Counterterrorism, also spelled counter-terrorism and sometimes referred to as anti-terrorism, encompasses the laws, policies, and operational measures used to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism. These efforts involve a range of tactics and strategies employed by governments,

² Power Vacuum: Definition, Conceptual Context & Why It Matters - TRT World Research Centre, researchcentre.trtworld.com/dictionary/power-vacuum/.

³ Horn of Africa | Countries, Map, & Meaning | Britannica, www.britannica.com/place/Horn-of-Africa.

⁴ Violent Non-State Actor - Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violent_non-state_actor.

law-enforcement agencies, intelligence services and, in some contexts, private-sector organisations.”⁵

Proxy Conflict

“A proxy war is a form of military conflict in which one or more third parties directly or indirectly support one or more state or nonstate combatants in an effort to influence the conflict’s outcome and thereby to advance their own strategic interests or to undermine those of their opponents. Third parties in a proxy war do not participate in the actual fighting to any significant extent, if at all. Proxy wars enable major powers to avoid confrontation with each other as they compete for influence and resources. Direct means of support by third parties consist of military aid and training, economic assistance, and sometimes limited military operations with surrogate forces. Indirect means of support have included blockades, sanctions, trade embargoes, and other strategies designed to thwart a rival’s ambitions.”⁶

Peacekeeping Operations

“Peacekeeping refers to the efforts made to maintain or restore peace in conflict-affected areas, often through the deployment of international forces. This practice involves promoting intercultural dialogue and addressing social and human sciences issues to foster stability. Peacekeeping aims to protect civilians, support political processes, and facilitate humanitarian assistance in regions experiencing violence or unrest.”⁷

Piracy

“Piracy is any robbery or other violent action, for private ends and without authorization by public authority, committed on the seas or in the air outside the normal jurisdiction of any state.”⁸

Humanitarian Crisis

“A humanitarian crisis is defined as any circumstance where humanitarian needs are sufficiently large and complex to require significant external assistance and resources, and where a multi-sectoral response is needed. An emergency is a situation that threatens the lives and well-being of large numbers of a population and requires extraordinary action to ensure their survival, care, and protection.”⁹

⁵Counterterrorism. Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counterterrorism.

⁶ Proxy War | Definition, History, Examples, & Risks | Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/proxy-war

⁷ What Is Peacekeeping? Meaning, Definition., www.unesco.org/en/query-list/p/peacekeeping.

⁸ Piracy | Definition, History, Examples, Golden Age, Famous Pirates, & Facts | Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/piracy-international-law.

⁹ Humanitarian Crisis | Ungei, www.ungei.org/gender-transformative-education-glossary/intersectionality/humanitarian-crisis

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History of the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is an underpopulated but strategically important area of East Africa comprising the nations of Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, with weak but still influential ties to other countries in the region, such as Kenya and Sudan. The Horn is at the crossroads of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, making it arguably one of the most crucial strategic regions in the world. These bodies of water connect the three continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia and also house the crucial paths of the world's international trade routes for goods, fuels, and humanitarian aid.

Consequently, regional instability has a global effect. New security challenges of the Horn of Africa are a direct product of its history. The current borders of Africa were transferred by the colonial rulers in a manner that disregarded the pre-existing identity lines of the ethnic, political, and cultural differences. Apart from the inability of the Horn of Africa states to create solid state institutions, the region was swarmed with unstable governments that led to internal conflicts, territorial issues, and state failure. An important turning point in Somalia came in 1991 with the fall of the Siad Barre regime. The collapse of centralized institutions created a security vacuum. In the absence of a central state, warlords, criminal gangs, and extremists were given increased flexibility to act, resulting in prolonged insecurity. The consequences were severe: UNHCR estimates that approximately 250,000 Somalis died during the 1992-93 emergency, while conflict and drought forced large numbers of people to flee their homes.¹⁰

Political and Security Landscape

Overall, the Horn of Africa continues to be unstable due to causes that include its fragile states, civil war, political competition, and weakness of states. Most governments have been unable to gain control of their territory, provide public service and respond to security challenges. Somalia retains a focus on regional security. Even though there has been an extensive and ongoing post-intervention state-building effort for many years, the collapse of the state in Somalia perpetuates violence and insecurity, often marked by non-state armed groups. The dominant non-state armed group operating in and originating from Somalia is called 'Al-Shabaab'. It has also carried out operations in Kenya. The strength of Ethiopia in the regional context is linked to its population, military, and political capacity. Ethiopia has a history of intervening in Somalia to fight extremists and secure its own security interests. Kenya's strategic position on the passage to the coast of the Horn of Africa makes it a significant player in regional security efforts, having contributed forces to the African Union (AU) security missions as well as running counterinsurgency programs, in addition to being a victim of

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Somalia Emergency." UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/somalia-emergency>.

Al-Shabaab-motivated attacks. Since 2008, ACLED has recorded 832 political violence events involving Al-Shabaab in Kenya, resulting in at least 2,235 reported fatalities, demonstrating the group's ability to extend insecurity beyond Somalia's borders.¹¹ Djibouti has several foreign military bases and is a major place for international cooperation on maritime security and counterterrorism.

Presence of Non-State Armed Groups

One of the greatest operational challenges are Non-State armed groups. Such groups, like Al-Shabaab, are based in areas that mostly have poor governance, difficult terrain, and weak or non-existent states. In these areas, governments may lack functioning police forces, courts, border controls, and administrative institutions, leaving large territories without effective state authority and allowing armed groups to operate with limited government interference. Their capability to launch attacks outside of borders shows the difficulty in securing control. While counterterrorism operations have proven successful in incapacitating some extremist groups, military intervention alone cannot take on the conditions facilitating the recruitment and functioning of these groups.

Limited Security Capacity

Dozens of national governments in the region have weak military, policing, and border security capacities. Inability of institutions to effectively secure territory, combat international crime, and counter threats is an obstacle to establishing security. In Somalia, the security transition process can be attributed to a lack of resources, a lack of training, and attacks by armed groups. The situation in the other states of the region is similar, where the states are unable to exert authority over sparsely populated areas.

Cross-Border Security Threats

Many of the security challenges in the Horn of Africa are not contained within national borders. Armed groups, illicit networks, and criminals have a transnational reach that links Somalia with Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Djibouti. The proliferation of weaponry has aggravated conflicts by encouraging armed groups to arm themselves.

Political Challenges

Weak Governance and State Fragility

Most of the states in the Horn of Africa lack strong institutions of governance. Corruption, lack of state services, and political fragmentation have eroded public confidence in their governments.

¹¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). "What's Next for the Fight against Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia." ACLED, Aug. 2024.
<https://acleddata.com/report/whats-next-for-the-fight-against-al-shabaab-in-kenya-and-somalia>

Weak governance provides the space for armed groups and criminal organizations to spread and widen their influence. Border issues and race for resources and national interests have often troubled state relations. Examples include Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Somalia and Somaliland conflicts, and the struggle for access to the Red Sea, which once again prove the fragile nature of regional politics. In 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a memorandum of understanding concerning Ethiopian access to a sea outlet, creating diplomatic tensions with Somalia, which considers Somaliland part of its territory.¹²

External influence and proxy conflicts

Influencing the Horn of Africa has become a significant matter of state interest among the various world powers. The region has attracted foreign security, military, and economic interest. Ideological rivalry has resulted in proxy conflicts.. Maintaining local dominance and national independence has been and remains a huge challenge in the entire continent of Africa.

Limited State Capacities

Most of the states in the Horn are financially strapped and cannot afford state institutions or infrastructure, development or security replacement and modernization. Governments have relied heavily on external help to sustain security activities. Somalia, for example, has heavily depended on external support to rebuild its military, improve governance, and address its humanitarian needs.

Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Emergencies

Peacekeeping operations require a lot of resources in terms of finances and logistics. Such resources must be sourced from somewhere, and therefore, a guarantee of budgets, equipment, and personnel can sometimes be lacking. This can reduce peacekeeping effectiveness and/or delay progress to organized national security agencies. The region has suffered under the effects of conflict and insecurity. Millions of people have been displaced, with UNHCR reporting that 26.3 million people were forcibly displaced across the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region by the end of 2024.¹³ They faced not only the lack of basic livelihood needs, such as food, but also limited access to basic services. A humanitarian emergency arises when human suffering becomes so widespread that a significant amount of international resources and aid is needed to address it. When such emergencies occur, huge amounts of international resources are committed to operations to address the crisis from donor countries and agencies. Internal reasons for stability, economic development, full employment,

¹² United Nations Security Council. Letter dated 26 January 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council. United Nations, 26 Jan. 2024, S/2024/102. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036795>

¹³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Regional Bureau for East and Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes Region: 2024 End-year Population Trends at a Glance. UNHCR, 27 May 2025. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/116569>

and lack of economic opportunity contribute to instability and recruitment to extremists. Education, infrastructure, health, and economic development should be invested in for long-term development and stability.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Somalia

Somalia is the country most directly affected by the regional security vacuum due to the continued threat of Al-Shabaab and weak state institutions. It seeks international support to strengthen its security forces, combat terrorism, and restore stability.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a major regional power with significant military influence and has participated in operations against extremist groups in Somalia. Its priorities include preventing terrorism, securing access to the Red Sea, and maintaining regional stability. Ethiopia supports stronger regional security cooperation and counterterrorism efforts.

Sudan

Since the outbreak of civil conflict in 2023, Sudan has become a source of regional instability, displacement and arms trafficking. Its main priority is restoring internal stability and reducing the humanitarian crisis.

Kenya

Kenya has played an active role in regional security and has contributed troops to African Union missions in Somalia. It has also been targeted by Al-Shabaab attacks. Kenya is in favor of stronger border security, intelligence sharing, and regional counterterrorism cooperation.

Djibouti

Djibouti's strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait makes it a key hub for maritime security and foreign military cooperation. It supports international efforts against piracy and terrorism.

African Union (AU)

The African Union has led regional peacekeeping efforts through the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and promotes African-led solutions to regional conflicts. It supports stronger cooperation, peacekeeping, and security sector reform.

United States of America (USA)

The United States considers the Horn of Africa strategically important due to terrorism and the security of international trade routes. It provides military training, humanitarian assistance, and intelligence support to regional partners.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
26 February 1885	Conclusion of the Berlin Conference, accelerating the colonial partition of Africa, and shaping the future borders of the Horn of Africa
24 May 1993	Eritrean independence was officially recognized following a UN-supervised referendum
6 May 1998	Outbreak of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War after clashes in the border town of Badme
26 January 1991	Collapse of Siad Barre's government
2006	Rise of Al-Shabaab following the defeat of the Islamic Courts Union by Ethiopian forces
15 April 2023	Outbreak of the Sudan conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)
1 January 2024	Ethiopia and Somaliland sign a memorandum giving Ethiopia access to the Red Sea

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2713 (2023)

Resolution 2713 adjusted the long-standing arms embargo on Somalia to support the country's security transition while maintaining controls on weapons that could reach armed groups. It also emphasized the gradual transfer of security responsibilities from international peacekeepers to the Somali National Army.¹⁴

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2662 (2022)

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council. Resolution 2713 (2023). United Nations Digital Library, 1 Dec. 2023, S/RES/2713. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4039027>

Resolution 2662 renewed sanctions on Al-Shabaab and extended measures aimed at disrupting terrorist financing and illegal arms trafficking. It reaffirmed the international community's commitment to supporting Somalia's counterterrorism efforts while protecting civilians and was adopted on 17 November 2022 by a vote of 11-0-4. The resolution also emphasized the importance of improving governance, reconciliation, humanitarian assistance, and the capacity of Somali security institutions in addressing the root causes of instability.¹⁵

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1816 (2008)

Resolution 1816 authorized states cooperating with Somalia to enter Somali territorial waters to combat piracy and armed robbery at sea. It marked the beginning of coordinated international naval operations to protect one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes.¹⁶

African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) Establishment (2007)

AMISOM was established by the African Union to support the Somali government, protect key infrastructure, and combat Al-Shabaab. The mission helped improve security in several areas of Somalia, but also faced challenges related to funding, logistics, and the gradual transfer of responsibilities to Somali forces.¹⁷

African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) Establishment (2022)

ATMIS replaced AMISOM in 2022 to gradually transfer security responsibilities to the Somali National Security Forces. It was authorized by the African Union Peace and Security Council on 8 March 2022 and began operations on 1 April 2022. Its mandate focused on combating Al-Shabaab, protecting population centres and supply routes, and strengthening Somali security institutions to enable the eventual transfer of full security responsibility to Somalia.¹⁸

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

African Union Peace Operations

AMISOM and later ATMIS were established to support Somalia in combating Al-Shabaab and strengthening national security. They improved security in many areas but faced funding shortages and difficulties transferring responsibilities to Somali forces. Partially effective.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council. Resolution 2662 (2022). United Nations Digital Library, 17 Nov. 2022, S/RES/2662. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4003020>

¹⁶ United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1816 (2008). United Nations Digital Library, 2 June 2008, S/RES/1816. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/627179>

¹⁷ African Union Peace and Security Council. Communiqué of the 69th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Situation in Somalia and the Deployment of an AU Peace Support Mission in Somalia. African Union, 19 Jan. 2007. <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/communiqueeng-69th.pdf>

¹⁸ African Union Peace and Security Council. Communiqué of the 1068th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Situation in Somalia. African Union, 8 Mar. 2022. <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/eng.-final-rev1.-communique-for-the-1068th-meeting-on-atmis-mandate-8-march-2022-1-.pdf>

Mediation and Peacebuilding Efforts

IGAD has promoted dialogue and mediated conflicts between regional states. While it has supported peace efforts, political disagreements have limited its success. Moderately effective.

Security Coordination

IGAD has encouraged cooperation on border security and intelligence sharing. However, inconsistent implementation has reduced its effectiveness. Partially effective.

International Training and Assistance Programs

International partners have trained and equipped regional security forces to combat terrorism. These programs strengthened military capabilities but did not eliminate extremist groups. Partially effective.

Intelligence-Sharing Initiatives

Regional governments have expanded intelligence sharing to prevent terrorist attacks. Cooperation has improved security but remains limited by trust and capacity issues.

Humanitarian and Development Programs

International organizations have funded projects to rebuild infrastructure and restore public services. Progress has been made, but insecurity continues to limit long-term success.

Community Resilience Initiatives

Programs promoting education, employment, and local governance aim to reduce extremist recruitment. They have produced positive local results but remain limited in scale.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Regional Security Cooperation

Cooperation among regional organizations, including IGAD, the East African Community (EAC), COMESA, and the Nile Basin Initiative on border management, border security, information sharing, and joint operations should be deepened. Better regional coordination could facilitate more effective responses to challenges emerging at borders. Regular joint meetings and

coordinated regional strategies could help ensure that these efforts are implemented consistently.

Enhancing State Capacity

Governments in the region should strengthen their institutions through security sector reform, better management of borders, and anti-corruption measures. Better institutions would help fill the security vacuum and increase public confidence in the government. This could include training security personnel and improving the resources available to local authorities.

Countering Extremist Recruitment

Extended access to education and jobs can make such organizations less attractive. Governments can lead initiatives to prevent radicalisation. Community-based programmes could also identify vulnerable young people and provide them with alternative opportunities.

Improving Maritime Security

Regional states should enhance naval cooperation, including by partnering with private maritime security companies where appropriate, and improve coast guard resources to guard against piracy in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. More naval patrols would secure international shipping lanes.

Expanding Humanitarian Assistance

Demand from the international community for humanitarian aid to displaced populations should be accompanied by initiatives for food security and other public services. By meeting their immediate humanitarian needs, instability can be reduced in the long term. Aid should also support the rebuilding of essential infrastructure so that affected communities can become more self-sufficient.

Promoting Political Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

The UN, A.U., and IGAD should continue to facilitate mediation and inclusive peace talks by appointing neutral mediators and providing platforms for conflicting parties to negotiate peaceful agreements. Political dialogue between all parties to a conflict is imperative for the resolution of conflicts and securing peace and stability in the Horn region.

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