

## AFRICA

# Regional Power Dynamics in the Horn of Africa: Emerging Axes of Influence

JUNE 3, 2024

In February 2024, Turkey and Somalia signed a defense and economic cooperation agreement that allegedly enables Ankara to protect Somalia's territorial waters and to construct, equip, and train the Somali navy. This accord, which once again draws attention to the troubled Horn of Africa, follows [a similar agreement](#) made in January 2024 between Ethiopia and the contentious area of Somaliland, which Somalia has considered as a [direct attack](#) on its sovereignty.

Somalia perceives its recent agreement with Turkey as a step to strengthen its defenses, while Turkey's priorities are twofold, governed by both a desire to be a greater world power in the region and its current struggles with an [energy crisis](#) and its need for more energy sources.

Nevertheless, the Turkey-Somalia Pact also has several regional ramifications that will affect the unstable Horn of Africa. Considering the reactions from other countries, these agreements carry the risk of escalating regional tensions and potentially reshaping diplomatic relations in the Horn of Africa.

## **From Humanitarian Assistance to Military Engagement: Turkey's Footprint in Somalia**

Somalia occupies a special position in international politics due to its proximity to key strategic locations such as the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea. The oil of Middle Eastern nations also passes through Somalia, making it a crucial geographic intersection for international trade. The country is regarded as a gateway to Africa, bordering Ethiopia and Kenya to the west and Djibouti to the northwest, and has the longest coastline on the African continent. Given the area's geopolitical significance, global and

regional actors have been actively involved in the politics of the Horn of Africa. The threat posed by terrorist organizations and piracy, along with Somalia's strategic location, have always been determining factors in relations with the country. Since 1991, tensions have risen and confrontations have resulted from ongoing disagreements over Somalia's borders and territory, one of which notably concerns Somaliland's self-proclaimed independence. Therefore, Turkey's approach in Somalia now as before focuses on security.

Soon after Turkey established itself as a significant humanitarian operator in Somalia with [its intervention in 2011](#) in the famine hitting the country, other Turkish security, diplomatic, and commercial concerns came into play. Turkey's interest in Somalia extends beyond humanitarian aid and economic relations. By helping resolve the country's political unrest, reestablish security, and deliver humanitarian aid, Turkey is advancing its intention of becoming an Islamic world leader in the region; furthermore, it is intent on finding alternative sources to deal with its ongoing energy crisis.

Currently, the prospects for achieving these goals seem favorable, for the government in Mogadishu, the authorities in Somaliland, and the regional administrations in Puntland have [in the previous years](#) sponsored negotiations to actively engage in conflict resolution and the reunification of Somalia. Moreover, Turkey's [trade volume](#) with Somalia has increased from 187.3 million USD in 2018 to 363 million USD in 2021. On September 30, 2017, Turkey opened [its largest military camp and training facility](#) outside its own country in Mogadishu at the cost of 50 million USD. While Djibouti has been picked by many major or middle-sized nations to host military sites in the region, Turkey has opted to fortify its position in Somalia. By choosing the failing state of Somalia, Turkey has become the country's steady ally and demonstrated to the world community its importance as a regional force.

The transition to a more militaristic presence could undermine the trust and goodwill that Turkey has previously earned among the local population through development assistance, healthcare, and education initiatives. It appears that Turkey is putting more emphasis on defense and security cooperation, which could potentially undermine Turkey's previous humanitarian endeavours and establish Ankara as a more aggressive player in the region. This shift is indicative of Turkey's larger strategic goals in the Horn of Africa, where it seeks to use

hard power strategies to increase its geopolitical influence. Given its current internal economic difficulties, Turkey may not have the resources to fulfil its commitments with Somalia. Facing these limitations, it is very likely that Qatar, a major financier and ally of Turkey will remain a source of support.

### **Increasing Tensions in the Horn of Africa**

By coming to a deal with Turkey, Somalia is attempting to demonstrate that it has maintained its sovereignty and independence. Its maritime agreement with Turkey in February 2024 has, however, exacerbated regional problems in the Horn of Africa. Tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia have been rising already due to the former's earlier maritime accord with Somaliland, Somalia's breakaway region. Ethiopia has been attempting to gain access to the sea ever since losing its Red Sea ports upon Eritrea's independence declaration in 1993. According to the Ethiopia-Somaliland pact, [Ethiopia gains access to the Red Sea](#) and in exchange pledges to recognize Somaliland's independence, even though Somalia refuses to recognize the breakaway state.

While Turkey has maintained cordial ties with Ethiopia to this point, the animosity between Somalia and Ethiopia raises special concerns. Increased diplomatic and military difficulties could result from Turkey's backing Somalia, which would give Mogadishu more confidence to oppose the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement. The stability of the regional economy could potentially be impacted by disagreements or wars over marine and economic zones, particularly between Ethiopia and Somalia.

Should conflict arise between the two states, Turkey must remain impartial and carefully determine its course of action. In addition, conflict could negatively impact the work of regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU), which have been working for years on peacebuilding and improving the region's economy and security.

### **Reactions to the Agreements from Egypt and the Gulf States**

Geopolitical tensions in the Horn of Africa are shaping themselves into two primary axes of influence: the Ethiopia-the UAE (United Arab Emirates)-Somaliland axis and the

Somali-Turkey-Qatar-Egypt axis. Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt stand behind Somalia as it works to bolster its independence and thwart Ethiopia's regional aspirations.

Egypt reacted strongly to the Somaliland-Ethiopia agreement with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi viewing the pact as a violation of Somalia's territorial integrity. Accordingly, in his call to Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, El-Sisi expressed his [strong support](#) for Somalia's sovereignty and stability. This was not only a gesture of solidarity but also a strategic move in the complex geopolitical environment of the Horn of Africa. Indeed, Egypt, which has an ongoing dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam ([GERD](#)), is seeking to maintain the regional balance of power.

While Ethiopia sees GERD as a crucial development project for its own interests, for Egypt it is a major threat to its water security. Since 2011, negotiations on the dam have often stalled and little progress has been made, exacerbating the existing regional tensions. Egypt's strong position against the Somaliland-Ethiopia deal underscores Cairo's strategic intention to maintain its influence in the Horn of Africa. This approach is part of a [broader strategy to secure Egypt's interests](#) in the face of contentious GERD negotiations and shifting alliances in the region.

Turkey and Qatar provide significant military and financial support for Somalia, but Egypt's support is motivated by its disagreement with Ethiopia regarding the GERD and the desire to maintain a balanced power in the region to preserve its own interest.

However, it should be noted that Turkey also has strong relations with Ethiopia, which it supported during the Tigray crisis, selling it [Turkish drones](#). Moreover, Turkey's relations with the UAE have improved since 2020 with [the latter's commitments on investments](#); thus, Turkey does not wish to damage its interests or undermine its relationships.

The UAE, on the other hand, supports the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement. In addition to its investments in Somaliland through the Dubai-based company DP World initiatives in the port of Berbera, the UAE is also considering establishing a military base in the region. By doing so, the UAE is trying to maintain the balance of power to counteract the close relationship between Turkey and Qatar in Somalia. The UAE also hopes to gain crucial maritime access through Somaliland.

## The Role of the US and Europe in Current Issues in the Horn of Africa

Following the current crisis over conflicting agreements and attempts to threaten the territorial integrity of Somalia, the US has voiced serious concerns about the escalating tensions in the Horn of Africa and urged the involved parties to use common sense and work together [to find diplomatic and cooperative solutions](#). The US and the EU have long been involved in counterterrorism and peacebuilding activities in the region, in addition to diplomatic initiatives. The European Union gave the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) [€70 million](#) in April 2024 in addition, the Somali army received the direct aid of €40 million. Indeed, the EU is one of the major contributors to ATMIS, with a total contribution of €2.7 billion.

Considering the territorial integrity and legitimate sovereignty of the nations, the US and EU should take the lead in starting an inclusive dialogue with all parties involved, including Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland. As in the past, Turkey, noteworthy for its recent actions in the area and its maritime pact with Somalia, could mediate. The US and the EU could work with the AU, IGAD, and other regional organizations even if [Somalia has rejected the African Union's request for mediation](#). In the ongoing struggle against the persistent terrorist threat in the region, the US and the EU should maintain their cooperation with neighboring nations. However, both sides ought to do more to provide humanitarian assistance in addressing the food crisis that is linked to climate change in the region. To safeguard their interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, the US and the EU must endeavor to stabilize the region and, at this delicate moment, settle difficulties diplomatically to prevent their escalating into conflicts.

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