

## Who's sawing off the Horn of Africa?

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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Upon concluding an extensive tour of the Horn of Africa, the UN's Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. B. Lynn Pascoe, recently told a press conference in Addis Ababa that, "What many long time observers are telling me is that this is the best opportunity for peace that Somalia has had in the past 16 years." At the same time Ethiopia's President, Meles Zenawi, is calling on the United Nations to step up its support for AMISOM, the AU peacekeeping force, and to consider the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Somalia.

The reason for the Ethiopian government's request may be the fact that political tensions are on the rise in the Ogaden region, home to about four million ethnic Somalis. As a result of the Ethiopian military engagement in Somalia, groups based in the Ogaden are seeing it as an opportunity to put pressure on the government. Ethiopia cannot afford a repetition of the Ogaden War of 1977-78, and neither can it sustain its military presence in Somalia.



A recent article published in the Jamestown Foundation's newsletter, *Terrorism Focus*, details the growing destabilisation of Ethiopia as a consequence of its invasion of Somalia. The author, Andrew McGregor, points out that the Ogaden region, conquered by Ethiopia towards the end of the 19th century, access to oil reserves, and other multinational business and political interests are giving shape to a new phase of instability in the Ogaden. The leadership of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) is accusing the Ethiopia of merely seeking the pleasure of the USA by making Ethiopia an ally of the USA's "war on terror". Such statements highlights underlying tensions, and the fact that African observers should be paying closer attention to the destabilising effect US military support to Ethiopia is having on the region.

Although one wants to agree with Mr. Pascoe's positive prognosis, it should, however, be noted that the regional consequences of Ethiopia's US-backed invasion leaves many questions unanswered. First and foremost is whether the 1, 200 Ugandan troops, constituting the bulk of AMISOM will be enough to maintain, or enforce any lasting peace in Somalia. It furthermore remains to be seen whether Ethiopia's hopes of a speedy withdrawal from Somalia will be realised by calling on the UN to intervene. The UN will in all likelihood be reluctant to commit troops because of the Black Hawk down fiasco of the 1990s. It will be interesting to track the position of the USA on this issue, and whether it will use the rhetoric of combating terrorism to push for a UN intervention in Somalia.

Not only has the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia deepened divisions inside both countries, but leaders in the Somali diaspora have been arguing that Ethiopia is committing genocide against ethnic Somalis. The AU, and a possible UN intervention in Somalia, should know that Somali leaders maintain that peace will only return to Somalia once a complete Ethiopian withdrawal takes effect. This particular issue has furthermore caused tensions between Eritrea and Uganda, further widening the negative impact political conditions in Somalia has on the Horn of Africa. During March and April, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, held talks with his Eritrean counterpart, Isaias Afewerki. The talks focussed on the urgent need to bring stability to Mogadishu, yet, at the same time Eritrea urged Uganda to withdraw its troops from Somalia, warning it of "dire consequences" if they remained there.

An analysis of the Horn of Africa's political outlook in the short to medium term should include an assessment of geopolitical conditions in the Middle East. As part of Operation Enduring Freedom US naval vessels have engaged in several military strikes in Somalia. This shows that the Ethiopia-Somali axis is to some extent the "Southern front" of the larger Middle East theatre of war. US intervention in the Horn of Africa is brought about by the policy framework of the war on terror, as well as the need to safeguard shipping routes through the Suez Canal. This raises significant political questions that the AU has to confront, foremost among which is the impact foreign military aid (and political interference) has on the stability of African states.

It is increasingly evident that geopolitical conditions are impacting on the political outlook of Africa's Horn, and much North Africa's Sahel region. Although Somalia and Ethiopia may take centre stage as the locus of regional instability, US policy has for some time been biased towards the provision of military aid, logistical, and other forms of covert support to governments allied to its war on terror. Another factor that influences political conditions in the region concerns Ethiopia's long-term ambitions of becoming the most powerful country in the region, both militarily and as a net energy exporter. Evidence of this is to be found in its ambition to expand oil exports, and to construct five hydroelectric dams.

Afro-pessimists will be quick to point fingers and say that the AU is not up to the job of funding, and deploying a viable peacekeeping force in Somalia. In addition such people may argue that Ethiopia is correct in calling for UN intervention in Somalia. But, underlying the complex set of conditions in Africa's Horn, is the politics of unilateral action, access to resources, and continued efforts by several outside forces to shape the outcome of African conflicts to suit their strategic needs. Although the situation may be somewhat desperate, it can be taken as a lesson in the urgent need for African civil-society to support the AU to develop Africa's economic capacity to build its own states, and to fund its own peacekeeping missions. The moral of the story is that by allowing Ethiopia to act as a US ideological watchdog in the Horn of Africa, the African continent is beginning to feel the pinch of the geopolitics of 'command by remote control.'

African leaders cannot allow the continent to fall victim to the same fate the endangered rhino faces. To protect it from poachers, and for the sake of its own survival, rhino horns are either chopped off, or have holes drilled in them. Obviously Africa can't afford any more holes to be drilled into the Horn by internal conflict and outside interference. In order to protect the AU ideals of continental integration, regional cooperation, and a new Afro-centrism to guide African nations into the future, strong African leadership has to emerge on the conflict in the Horn of Africa. Africa's geopolitics in the 21st century has to be shaped by the interests of African nations, and in the case of Somalia by local voices that have gone unheard for far too long.

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