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THIS YEAR IN THE HORN OF AFRICA LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN ETHIOPIA, ERITREA, SOMALIA, SOMALILAND AND DJIBOUTI

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This briefing was written by Micheal Woldemariam and Ken Menkhaus, the Co-Directors of Studies for the Rift Valley Institute's Horn of Africa Field Course, which will be taking place in Kenya from 23 to 28 July 2023. Michael and Ken will be joined by a team of leading specialists to explore the contemporary complexities of the region as well as the gamut of social, economic, political and security trends, drawing on deep history and local knowledge to inform debate and discussion. The course is designed for policy-makers, diplomats, investors, development workers, researchers, activists and journalists—for new arrivals to the region and those already working there who wish to deepen their understanding.

FROM WAR TO PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

The last twelve months have been a critical period for Ethiopia. The breakdown of the so-called 'humanitarian truce' between Federal and Tigrayan authorities in August 2022 marked the onset of another round of bloody fighting that shook the country and the region. These developments were not unexpected. The pause in hostilities in the country's north had begun to crumble earlier in the summer, as disputes over the flow of humanitarian aid into Tigray and the structure of a potential mediation process escalated. The parties had also used the gap in fighting to recruit and rearm. Tigray's Central Command accused Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) of shelling its units in the vicinity of Dedebit on 15 August. By 24 August full-blown hostilities had erupted in the south-western quadrant of the Amhara-Tigray border.

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From there, clashes quickly spread to other parts of Tigray's borderlands, while the ENDF renewed airstrikes across the region.

This stage of fighting was to be decisive. The Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) had occupied Kobo in the early days of hostilities, but the coalition of ENDF, Amhara forces, and Eritrean troops sought to seize the initiative with major offensives on Tigrayan positions from the west. These early efforts failed to break Tigrayan lines but were a harbinger of things to come. By the third week of September coalition offensives recommenced with the main thrust attempting to advance from Eritrean territory toward Shire. After weeks of large-scale fighting—some sources suggest close to a million troops were arrayed across the frontlines—coalition forces managed to occupy Shire and two other important towns in the north. On the southwestern front TDF forces were also compelled to retreat from several strategic points. These fast-moving developments raised the specter of yet another Federal-Amhara-Eritrean advance on Mekelle, a TDF return to asymmetric warfare, and increasingly bleak set of humanitarian circumstances for the Tigrayan people.

Fortunately, dynamics moved in a different direction. As the war escalated the Tigrayan leadership appeared to back away from some of its earlier preconditions around talks, while envoys from Africa, the US, and Europe worked feverishly to revive mediation. After an initial failed launch, talks began in Pretoria in late October. By 2 November the Federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) reached a cessation of hostilities agreement that not only halted large-scale violence but outlined the parameters of a lasting peace. The deal was complex, but the crux of the settlement was the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of Tigrayan forces in exchange for the TPLF's political rehabilitation, humanitarian access to Tigray, and the departure of non-ENDF forces from the region. Implementation of the deal was to be overseen by the AU High Level Panel that had mediated talks and an AU monitoring mechanism.

CONSOLIDATING AGREEMENTS, MULTIPLYING CHALLENGES

The Federal government and Tigrayan authorities moved quickly to consolidate the cessation of hostilities and end what by this point was the deadliest active conflict in the world. Given the brutality of the war and deep mistrust between its main participants, this turn of events was remarkable. Some of the most challenging provisions of the deal have been implemented in short order: the handover of TDF heavy weapons, the deployment of the ENDF to federal facilities across the region, the re-legalization of the TPLF, and the constitution of an interim administration. All of this has played out against the optics of political rapprochement between PM Abiy's Prosperity Party and the TPLF, including the regular exchange of well-

publicized high-level visits between Addis and Mekelle and the steady drumbeat of public messages of reconciliation.

Yet challenges to lasting peace in Tigray remain. Amhara and Eritrean forces retain a presence in Western and Southern Tigray and the region's northern borderlands, a reality made more complex by the disputed nature of Tigray's frontiers and a lack of buy-in from the Eritrean leadership and some Amhara with respect to the Pretoria settlement. In many of these territories reports of violence and displacement of civilians continue. Partly as a result, the TDF's full DDR remains slow, despite the aggressive schedule originally agreed to in Pretoria. Humanitarian conditions in northern Ethiopia also remain poor, made worse by allegations of aid diversion and the donor's decision to suspend food aid to Tigray in May 2023 and the entire country a month later. Meanwhile, political conditions within Tigray are unsettled, with reports of tension among TPLF leadership and broader societal disquiet about slow-to-materialize peace dividends.

Dynamics across the rest of Ethiopia are also concerning. In Oromia PM Abiy has sought to pivot toward negotiation with Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), but May 2023 talks in Zanzibar failed to yield an agreement and a subsequent uptick in hostilities has been reported. The situation has deteriorated even more precipitously in Amhara. The common front that the PM had built with Amhara political forces in prosecuting the Tigray war has all but collapsed, as Addis sought to distance itself from, and assert control over, this formerly aligned constellation of actors. The critical turning point came in April 2023, when a federal plan to integrate regional militia into the federal security architecture and the assassination of the head of Amhara Prosperity Party triggered a federal crackdown across the region and on Amhara political networks around the country.

Political uncertainty across Ethiopia continues to color its ties with the broader region and its Western partners. Although keen to rebuild the regional standing that was at its apex when the PM won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, ongoing domestic volatility continues to undercut Ethiopia's capacity to project influence in a manner commensurate with its size and historic regional weight. The resulting vacuum has been most keenly felt to the country's east and west, amid the collapse of state authority in Sudan and continuing political and security crises in Somalia. Into the breach have stepped the Kenyans, who under the Kenyatta and Ruto administrations have sought to demonstrate greater levels of leadership on a host of regional questions. For their part, Western capitals hope to capitalize on the Pretoria agreement and rehabilitate ties with Addis but are not fully aligned on how quickly to proceed down this diplomatic track. At stake are USD billions in development assistance and debt relief that Ethiopia desperately requires to stabilize its economy.

ERITREA'S EVOLVING REGIONAL POSITION

The cessation of hostilities agreement in Ethiopia has had several implications for Eritrea. Although careful to avoid vocally opposing the agreement, the country's leadership was not a party to the Pretoria talks and views the agreement with suspicion. Asmara had hoped to militarily vanquish the TPLF, and while the cessation of the hostilities left its nemesis badly bruised it preserved the TPLF as a political force, left it in control of regional institutions, and allowed it to move politically closer to the federal government. The agreement also required Eritrea's withdrawal from Tigray and disengagement from Ethiopia's internal politics, the very levers the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) had utilized to protect its interests in its large southern neighbor.

This has all meant that Asmara's position in Ethiopia has become an increasingly complex matter. From the Eritrean leadership's perspective, the landmark rehabilitation of ties between the two countries in 2018 was to be the pillar of a new regional order, a view later underscored by the joint military efforts of the Eritrean and Ethiopian armies against the TPLF. But the course of the war, and the manner of its conclusion, appears to have blunted this ambition. Differences over PM Abiy's pivot on Tigray and handling of the Amhara file appear to have widened the gap between the two sides. Although a serious rupture is unlikely for the time being, it is apparent the bilateral relationship has cooled. Added to the mix is the position of the federal government's new partners in Mekelle, who situate Asmara as a core spoiler in northern Ethiopia and allege its troops remain in Tigray and continue to target civilians. Importantly, this view is mostly shared by Ethiopia's Western partners, whose relations with Eritrea reached new lows during the Tigray war.

Faced with these headwinds President Isaias has gone on the diplomatic offensive. Within the region he has responded to entreaties from President Ruto of Kenya regarding Eritrea's reentry into IGAD. Globally, the Eritrean president has doubled down on deepening Great Power competition—an aspect of PFDJ foreign policy behaviour apparent for several years—by vigorously backing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and publicly excoriating the Western alliance during May 2023 visits to Moscow and Beijing. During this travel, the Eritrean President insisted that the arrival of a 'new world order' was imminent and that he would work with Russia and China in hastening it. What this means in practice remains to be seen.

Against this backdrop, domestic conditions in Eritrea remain unchanged. The austere model of autocratic governance persists; the economy remains troubled; and there is little clarity around the perennial question of what a post-Isaias future might look like.

SOMALIA MUDDLES THROUGH, BUT BATTERED AND BRUISED

For Somalia, the past 18 months have been an ongoing exercise in crisis management. Somalia entered 2022 having survived a dangerously turbulent 2021. A combination of factors – an armed standoff between the opposition and the-then President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo over his attempt to extend the government’s term in office; political paralysis borne of a deep division between the President and his Prime Minister; and openly hostile relations between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and several Federal Member States (FMS) – had pushed the country to the precipice of war. But the crisis was defused, and the President and his supporters agreed to an indirect election process of the upper and lower houses of Parliament, based, as in previous elections, on the ‘4,5 formula’ of fixed clan proportional representation, with MPs elected by clan-based electoral colleges composed of elders and civil society representatives. Clans held internal elections for the Lower House in late 2021 and into 2022. In May 2022, Somalia’s newly formed Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament voted on candidates for the presidency, and in a run-off former President Hassan Sheikh Mohamed (HSM) (2012-17) resoundingly defeated incumbent Farmaajo. Farmaajo accepted the results, an uneventful transfer of power occurred, Hassan Sheikh named a Prime Minister and a cabinet, and Somalia’s election crisis was averted.

The entire electoral process was deeply flawed, however, and left the Somali citizenry and political elites disillusioned. Heavy and inappropriate influence was exerted in the election process by the presidents of federal member states, the SFG President, and a handful of other influential individuals. Whereas in previous indirect elections money was used to influence elections, in 2022 those with control of militia firepower were more influential in determining results for parliament. As a result, the 2022 indirect elections were less inclusive than in 2012 and 2017 and were instead tightly controlled by a small group of rival elites. As one analysis concluded, ‘few would contend that the electoral cycle was a particularly positive contribution to the development of democratic institutions and the rule of law in Somalia’.²

Despite the flawed process, some positive political developments have occurred over the past year. HSM’s promise for more conciliatory, less combative politics, and a reduction in tensions between the FGS and FMS has helped to revive the National Consultative Council (NCC), where heads of the FMS and the FGS leadership meet to address important political issues. Dialogue, not direct intervention and threat of use of force, currently defines relations between the FGS and FMS. HSM’s administration has also had success managing and in some cases improving relations with neighboring states.

2 Omar Mahmood, “[A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia](#),” (Brussels: Crisis Group, Africa Q&A, May 31 2022)

One of the most important and controversial political developments has been a series of agreements reached in the NCC since December 2022. On paper, these agreements appear dramatic. They include an integrated judicial model, control of all levels of elections to a federal election committee, the ceding of control of airports and seaports to the FGS, abolition of the position of Prime Minister (and a shift to a presidential rather than a dual executive governmental model), a call for direct elections, and a limit of two political parties running for office. Collectively, they increase the power of the FGS, and increase the authority of the President within the FGS.

After years of paralysis, stand-offs, and lack of progress on finalization of the constitution, this sudden surge in political agreements appears to some to be a break-through. But many are skeptical. Observers question whether the political will or interest exists to implement the agreements and point out that Puntland's absence from the NCC deliberations risks making the accords stillborn.

Others criticize the agreements as unconstitutional, arguing that the NCC, as an informal consultative body between FMS and the FGS, has no legal standing to make decisions reserved for the parliament and/or the constitution itself. They note that most of the presidents of the FMS hold office through questionable processes and cannot speak for the entire country. Still other critics condemn the slide toward centralization of power in the hands of the President, which they argue was a root cause of the Somali civil war in 1991 and will, if allowed to continue, make the government less representative, more authoritarian, and more vulnerable to armed rejectionism.

Meanwhile, the new Somali government has faced a series of other political problems. The most serious occurred in December 2022, when mounting tensions between the FGS and Puntland culminated in Puntland's President Deni announcing that Puntland would act as an independent government until the Puntland Federal Constitution is finalized. Deni has since refused to participate in NCC meetings. This impasse reflects both fundamental tensions over the unresolved division of power between the FGS and FMS, and a personal feud between HSM and Deni, whose bid for the FGS Presidency failed. The year 2023 thus began with the most functional FMS operating entirely outside of the political settlement.

POLITICAL ATTENTION SHIFTS TO THE FMS

For much of the past decade, the main Somali political dramas have been centered on Mogadishu and the FGS. This past year has seen a shift, with more of the top political developments, both positive and negative, occurring in federal member states. HSM has devoted considerable energy to managing and improving relations

with FMS, in part because some FMS leaders—in SW State, Hirshabelle, and Galmudug— were close to outgoing President Farmaajo and needed to be won over. HSM’s administration has sought to facilitate political dialogue and reconciliation in troubled SW State, where tensions between the state government and opposition spilled over in armed violence. Talks in SW State have been blocked in part by SW State President Laftaagreen’s reluctance to hold elections. In Hirshabelle, managing the rift between Abgal and Hawadle clans has been a high priority as part of the offensive there against al-Shabaab (see below). Improved relations between the FGS and Jubaland were more tactical than substantive, but nonetheless helped get the NCC back on track.

Puntland dominated news out of the federal member states. Its withdrawal from the NCC and declaration of temporary autonomy was a major setback for HSM’s efforts to revive NCC cooperation. And Puntland’s decision to move forward with voter registration and one-person-one-vote elections for local councils in May 2023 was historic – the first direct elections to be held in Somalia (outside of Somaliland) since the 1960s.

Finally, political tensions have been stirred across all of the FMS by moves by FMS administrations to extend their term in office by an additional year.

THE MULTI-PRONGED OFFENSIVES AGAINST AL SHABAAB

One of the biggest stories out of Somalia this year has been the offensive launched against the jihadist group al-Shabaab, which controls much of the countryside in central and southern Somalia. The attacks to drive al-Shabaab out of some towns and territory started in Hirshabelle, and were led by local clan militias, known as ma’cawisley, who were angered by the group’s taxation and forced recruitment of their young men. This spontaneous uprising spread to other clans and was joined by the Somali National Army, special forces, and Ethiopian National Defense Forces. Other external counter-insurgency actors provided support as well. The offensive has been a top priority of the HSM administration and has shaped many of the government’s policies on other matters.

The offensive has put al-Shabaab on its heels—the group has lost considerable territory in parts of Galmudug and Hirshabelle. The bigger loss has arguably been reputational—al-Shabaab is now having to defend itself against a popular uprising, undercutting its narrative that it represents Somali Muslim resistance to an apostate government and foreign occupiers (ATMIS).

But the offensive has not been without concerns and debates. Many worry that liberated territory will fall back into al-Shabaab’s hands, as regional governments

lack the capacity to hold and govern territory. Others oppose the deputizing of clan-based paramilitaries, warning that once mobilized they increase the risk of inter-clan conflict. Still others warn that al-Shabaab will adapt and increase asymmetrical warfare—assassinations, kidnappings, and terror bombings—in response. Some express concern that victories over al-Shabaab could result in powerful clans re-asserting land-grabbing and dominance of marginalized communities. Not all communities in Somalia are equally committed to the offensive, which has sparked tensions over ‘free riders’ in the campaign. A debate about whether, under what circumstances, and how to negotiate with al-Shabaab continues as well.

CRISIS IN LAS ANOD

Armed conflict in Las Anod has been one of the biggest and most complex recent political crises in Somalia.

In December 2022, armed conflict broke out in Las Anod between the Somaliland security forces and Dolbahante clan militias answering to one of several local authorities. That conflict has produced significant numbers of casualties and displacement and has morphed into a national crisis. Las Anod is the seat of Sool region, part of a wider area claimed by multiple political authorities – Somaliland, Puntland, the self-declared Khatumo state that claims autonomy from both Puntland and Somaliland, and the FGS. Allegiances and alliances in the local community have swung, often opportunistically, from one competing authority to the next.

The current clashes were triggered by a political assassination that many local residents claimed was conducted by Somaliland. It was the latest in a series of assassinations in the area. The conflict has since spiraled out of control, despite mediation efforts by Ethiopia and other actors, and despite mounting pressure on Somaliland President Musa Bihi to suspend military operations. Competing narratives are sharply divergent, and clan interests are a significant factor. Though the conflict has not, to date, drawn Puntland forces directly into the fighting, the risk of wider conflict is real, and jihadi activity in the conflict is an additional though disputed concern. The contested and ambiguous status of the Sool/Sanaag /Cayn regions of northern Somalia—for years left as a ‘frozen conflict’—is now an active and potentially intractable one, posing difficult challenges for all of the major political stakeholders. In the short-term, lack of humanitarian access to the thousands of internally displaced in the area has been a major concern.

SOMALILAND’S TROUBLES

Somaliland has generally enjoyed a reputation as a relatively peaceful and stable corner of the eastern Horn of Africa, but has experienced one of its most turbulent years since it declared independence in 1991. Part of the troubles are a longer-term

slide from a vibrant democracy toward authoritarian practices by the government, mainly in the form of crackdowns on media and opposition groups. Legal/constitutional disputes over the eligibility of some political parties to run in the upcoming elections have fueled tensions further. A lengthy delay in presidential elections, originally slated for 2022, has also been a source of protests and unrest.

The armed conflict in Las Anod has dominated Somaliland politics. President Bihi's refusal to withdraw Somaliland forces from the Las Anod area as a pre-condition for talks has come under criticism both from Somaliland opposition and external actors. Accusations of civilian casualties and human rights violations by Somaliland forces in Las Anod have damaged Somaliland's reputation and raise questions of whether relations with the populations in parts of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn are irreparably damaged. That in turn raises the question of whether Somaliland will be able to maintain a claim on those regions. Some political leaders among the Dolbahante clan are aggressively advocating for an independent 'SC Khatumo state' that is part of Somalia but independent from both Puntland and Somaliland.

SOMALIA'S ONGOING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

A prolonged drought, reflected in four consecutive rainy season failures through 2022, has pushed Somalia to the brink of famine conditions again. 8.3 million people—about half of the population—face acute food insecurity, and excess mortality rates could reach as high as those in the 2011 famine that claimed 260,000 lives. Conflict, disease, economic distress in rural areas, and large-scale displacement contribute to the crisis. Some relief has arrived in the main rainy season (April-June) of 2023, but in some drought-stricken areas exceptionally heavy precipitation has resulted in severe flooding and displacement of 250,000 residents along parts of the Shabelle river. Climate change is blamed for the increasingly erratic and extreme weather patterns in the eastern Horn.

DJIBOUTI: PLUS C'EST LA MEME CHOSE

Politics in Djibouti remains locked in a largely unchanging dispensation. President Ismail Omar Guellah, head of state since 1999, presides over a nominal democracy but one that in practice is a one-party state. In 2022, opposition parties again boycotted local elections, claiming that free and fair elections were not possible in current circumstances. In consequence, the coalition of parties backing the President, the Union for the Presidential Majority (UPM), won 219 of 220 local and regional council seats up for election. The absence of a credible opposition or free press has produced conditions of low accountability and high levels of corruption in the government.

Djibouti's diplomatic standing in the wider region took a hit during the height of the Abiy-Isaias-Farmaajo alliance, but the loosening of the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia alliance over the past year has reduced the prospect of Djibouti's regional isolation.

The major external interests in Djibouti remain unchanged. It is viewed as a critical micro-state in the geo-politics of the Red Sea, with growing number of external actors – the US, China, Gulf States, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia, among them – jockeying for influence, port management contracts, and naval bases.

SUDAN STRESS TESTS THE HORN

The outbreak of civil war in Sudan in mid-April 2023 had the potential to trigger yet more instability in the Horn. Some of the most significant risks were around the regionalization of the conflict and the intervention of neighboring countries. But despite maintaining important equities in Sudan, there is little evidence that Ethiopia or Eritrea have sought to take sides in this rapidly metastasizing war, and available reports tend to implicate countries to Sudan's north and west, as well as those in the Gulf. Still, if the war continues, this restraint could be tested.

Far more apparent at this juncture is the humanitarian spillover of the Sudan crisis, particularly in Ethiopia which has become an important exit point for many fleeing the violence and an early staging ground for evacuation operations undertaken by Western governments. State collapse in Sudan also has implications for the security of Ethiopia's western frontier, where armed groups have traditionally sought to access illicit cross-border flows in arms and other contraband. On this score, exceedingly volatile conditions in Amhara and Western Tigray loom particularly large.

Amid the tumult, the region has struggled to craft a response to the worsening crisis. Spearheaded by Presidents Ruto, Guelleh, and Kiir, IGAD sought to play an early and active role in mediating between the SAF and RSF. But these efforts initially yielded little, with the joint diplomatic efforts of the Saudi Arabia and the US taking primacy. An IGAD Heads of State meeting in June again sought to create momentum for a regional role in talks, this time by adding Ethiopia to the quartet of Horn countries that would seek to mediate and selecting President Ruto as chair of the initiative. The Sudanese Armed Forces have since rejected Kenya's leadership role, however, raising real questions about the viability of this potential negotiating track.