



**Ministero degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale**

Prodotto realizzato con il contributo del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale ai sensi dell'art. 23- bis del DPR 18/1967. Le posizioni contenute nel presente report sono espressione esclusivamente degli autori e non rappresentano necessariamente le posizioni del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

Relazione conclusiva del Progetto MAECI “Geopolitica ed economia degli spazi transfrontalieri nel Corno d’Africa

Responsabile di progetto: Luca Puddu, Università di Palermo

Componenti dell’unità di ricerca: Salvatore Mancuso, Università di Palermo; Sara Rigazio, Università di Palermo; Rosa Rossi, Università di Palermo.

Finalità

L’obiettivo del progetto era quello di fornire una nuova griglia interpretativa attraverso cui soppesare le possibili implicazioni, sotto il profilo della sicurezza e della stabilità politico-sociale, degli investimenti e dei progetti di cooperazione internazionale nel Corno d’Africa, superando la categoria dello stato-nazione quale unità d’indagine privilegiata dell’arena politica regionale. Il progetto ambiva a offrire una panoramica dei diversi attori, statali e non, che esercitano prerogative di sovranità nelle regioni di frontiera dell’Etiopia e della penisola somala, influenzando i regimi di circolazione di merci e persone attraverso i corridoi infrastrutturali che collegano l’Etiopia e la Somalia ai mercati internazionali.

Attività svolte nell’ambito del progetto

Il piano iniziale prevedeva lo svolgimento di un’attività di ricerca nei Paesi del Corno d’Africa e in altri contesti extra-UE allo scopo di raccogliere materiale archivistico e interviste per la realizzazione del prodotto finale, consistente in un workshop da tenersi presso l’università di Palermo. Il responsabile di progetto Luca Puddu ha effettivamente svolto un soggiorno di ricerca in Etiopia ed Eritrea nel mese di dicembre 2023, nel corso del quale ha iniziato a tessere contatti con studiosi etiopici poi coinvolti nel workshop tenutosi a giugno. Un ulteriore periodo di lavoro all’estero ha avuto luogo, nel gennaio 2024, presso la Faculty of History di Oxford University. Il soggiorno, inquadrato come visiting scholarship, aveva l’obiettivo di consentire la raccolta di materiale cartografico presso gli archivi della Bodleian Library, nonché presentare i risultati preliminari della ricerca. A tal fine, Luca Puddu ha tenuto un seminario intitolato “Oil, trade, and state building in the Ethiopian-Somali borderlands” presso il Centre for African Studies di Oxford University il 17 gennaio 2024, alla presenza di studiosi di chiara fama sui temi trattati nel progetto.

Risultati conseguiti

Il progetto di ricerca ha portato alla realizzazione di un workshop internazionale alla presenza di studiosi africani ed extra-africani dediti allo studio delle dinamiche transfrontaliere nel Corno d’Africa. L’incontro si è tenuto il 3 giugno 2024 presso l’Aula Borsellino del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e delle Relazioni Internazionali dell’Università di Palermo e, contemporaneamente, sui canali Teams, vedendo la partecipazione di cinque relatori suddivisi su due panel e una sessione finale.

Il primo panel, focalizzato sull’Etiopia prevedeva inizialmente la partecipazione di Desalegn Amsalu (Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University), Luca Puddu (Università di Palermo) e Asnake Kefale (Faculty of Political Science, Addis Ababa University). Quest’ultimo non ha in realtà potuto prender parte all’evento a causa di gravi problemi familiari sopraggiunti nell’immediata vigilia del

seminario. Il secondo panel, focalizzato sulla Somalia, prevedeva la partecipazione di Nasir Ali (Hargeisa University), Ali Abdi Hassan (Somali National University) e Markus Hoehne (Leipzig University). Anche in questo caso, difficoltà concernenti il rilascio del visto del Dr. Nasir Ali hanno ridotto il panel a due soli relatori, affiancati dal Prof. Salvatore Mancuso (Università di Palermo). La sessione finale di discussione si è conclusa con l'intervento della Prof.ssa Carla Monteleone (Università di Palermo), la quale ha tracciato una panoramica sulla collocazione internazionale dei centri di potere costituiti del Corno d'Africa in seno agli organi delle Nazioni Unite.

Sintesi analitica dei working paper

Le riflessioni maturate durante il workshop si sono tradotte nella realizzazione di alcuni working paper. Tali lavori, maturati anche grazie al coinvolgimento di studiosi internazionali distaccati presso l'Università di Palermo in qualità di visiting scholars, saranno oggetto di pubblicazione on-line sui canali del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e delle Relazioni Internazionali nel prossimo futuro.

L'intervento di Desalegn Amsalu (Institute of Ethiopian Studies) esplora i molteplici fattori di tensione che investono la frontiera tra Etiopia e Sudan, già interessata dal conflitto tra milizie Fano e tigrine per il controllo del triangolo di Al Fashaga e del varco frontaliero con l'Eritrea. Più a sud, lungo il confine internazionale con il Sud Sudan, Amsalu mette in luce il perdurare di conflitti a bassa intensità tra le costituenti Anuak – egemoni nello stato regionale del Gambella nel corso degli anni '90 – e Nuer, minoritarie in Etiopia ma maggioritarie nel vicino Sud Sudan. La porosità del confine internazionale e la facilità di spostamento di rifugiati lungo i due lati della frontiera ha incentivato, nel corso degli anni, un crescente afflusso di Nuer in territorio etiopico, modificando l'equilibrio demografico e i criteri di rappresentatività nell'area. Tali dinamiche, a loro volta, hanno incentivato l'impiego di raid violenti da parte di movimenti armati Anuak allo scopo di arrestare l'afflusso di Nuer nel Gambella e ripristinare i rapporti di forza post-1991. La mobilità di altri gruppi sudanesi residenti nei pressi del confine, come i Murle, ha introdotto nuove variabili nel conflitto Anuak-Nuer. L'analisi di Amsalu conferma come l'indebolimento del governo federale a seguito della transizione del 2018 abbia avuto un effetto moltiplicatore sugli episodi di violenza armata nell'area, a causa dell'incapacità di Addis Abeba di governare i flussi transfrontalieri di merci e persone.

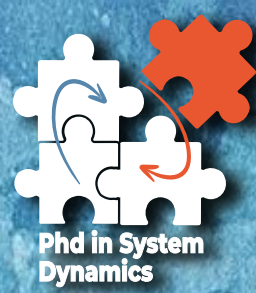
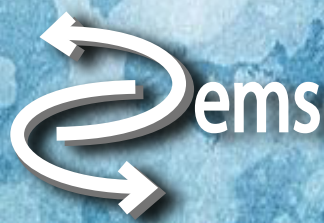
La porosità dei confini amministrativi e identitari nella penisola somala è stata al centro degli interventi di Abdi Ali Hassan (Somali National University) e Markus Hoehne (Leipzig University). Quest'ultimo, in particolare, è stato autore di una ricerca sul terreno nella città contesa di Las Anood immediatamente dopo la fine delle ostilità che, nell'estate 2023, hanno visto contrapporsi milizie claniche Harti e truppe Isaaq dell'esercito del Somaliland. Hoehne evidenzia come la struttura mobile della società somala sia un ostacolo alla territorializzazione del potere e alla riproduzione del modello di stato vestfaliano contenuto all'interno di confini chiaramente definiti. Accanto a quegli attori formali identificabili nell'amministrazione federale e nei livelli di potere regionali, formazioni claniche soggette a continue rinegoziazioni identitarie si contendono quotidianamente il controllo di rotte commerciali, risorse del territorio e rendite della cooperazione internazionale. La difformità tra mappe amministrative ufficiali e sfere d'influenza delle diverse milizie claniche ha favorito la conflittualità tra stati regionali sorti a seguito della riforma federale del 2013, complicando anche i rapporti tra centri di potere costituiti nella regione. L'avanzamento della sfera d'influenza Daarod a Las Anood a seguito della sconfitta delle forze di Hargeisa, ad esempio, rischia di aggiungere nuove fonti di tensione nel rapporto tra Mogadiscio e Addis Abeba nel caso quest'ultima dovesse procedere

al definitivo riconoscimento dell'amministrazione secessionista del Somaliland. Ciò, soprattutto, alla luce del fatto che i territori situati all'estremità orientale dell'ex protettorato britannico sono oggi parte di una zona grigia di sovranità su cui insistono le ambizioni di Hargeisa, del Puntland e di Mogadiscio.

La presenza di molteplici livelli di autorità, spesso operanti parallelamente alle istituzioni ufficiali, ha incentivato il ricorso alle pratiche dell'estroversione da parte degli attori statali nel Corno. Jan Storrman (Science Po, University of Paris) mette in luce come il Memorandum of Understanding con cui il Somaliland ha barattato l'utilizzo del porto di Berbera con il riconoscimento internazionale di Addis Abeba sia solo l'ultimo esempio di un periodico ricorso a partner e donatori internazionali per ottenere dall'esterno quelle risorse finanziarie, tecnologiche e diplomatiche indisponibili in loco, così da consolidare il potere in patria. L'accordo tra Mogadiscio e Ankara per lo sfruttamento della zona economica esclusiva e il più recente dispiegamento dell'apparato militare egiziano in Somalia meridionale rientrano in questo spartito.



Università
degli Studi
di Palermo



WORKSHOP

Cross-border politics and trade

in the **Horn of Africa**

3 JUNE 2024 | h 9am

Aula BORSELLINO

**Department of Political Science
and International Relations
University of Palermo**



Teams meeting link:

<https://rb.gy/jctsd8>



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

This workshop is realized with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation - Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in accordance with Article 23 – bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967.

The views expressed in this workshop are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Institutional Remarks

● **Panel 1 – Ethiopian borderlands**

Time: 9am -10:30am

Chair: **Luca Puddu**, University of Palermo

Speakers:

Asnake Kefale, Addis Ababa University

Trade and politics in the Ethiopian-Somali borderlands (online)

Desalegn Amsalu, Institute of Ethiopian Studies

Cross-border political interactions in Metekel (Ethiopia-Sudan)

Coffee break

● **Panel 2 – Somali borderlands**

Time: 11-12:50pm

Chair: **Salvatore Mancuso**, University of Palermo

Speakers:

Nasir M. Ali, Hargeisa University

The Berbera corridor and its effect on regional trade (online)

Abdi Ali Hassan, Somali National University

Trade and politics in the borderlands of southern Somalia

Markus Hoehne, Leipzig University

Political configuration of the Somali borderlands

Concluding remarks

Carla Monteleone, University of Palermo

Moving across scales: the Horn of Africa in the international arena

“An open gate invites the enemy in”: The geopolitics of Ethiopia’s Gambella cross border conflicts since 2018

Desalegn Amsalu

Introduction

In this working paper, I aim to indicate the implications of conflicts in Ethiopia since 2018 on the cross-border relations across Ethiopia's Gambella region and South Sudan. Specifically, my focus revolves around the observation that although Gambella has historically faced vulnerability to cross-border conflicts along the (South) Sudanese border, the situation has significantly intensified since 2018 due to conflicts in other regions of Ethiopia. Evidence suggests that when other regions undergo a heightened process of securitization due to conflicts, it often results in a diversion of resources and attention away from the vulnerable region of Gambella.

Gambella Region is one of the units of Ethiopia’s federation with a physical size of 30,065 square kilometers. Its projected population was 493,000 in 2021, with only 15.08% of the urban inhabitants (CSA 2013). “Gamabella” is also the name of the capital city of the region, which is one of the oldest towns in Ethiopia established in about 1902 (Pankhurst 1968:304). The distance between the city and Addis Ababa is 776 kilometers (GPNRG 2015). The region is home to many ethnic groups: Nuer (46.66%), Anyuak (21.16%, Majang, Komo, Opou, Amhara, Oromo, and other communities (CSA 2008). However, the first five are designated “Indigenous” to the region (Constitution of Gambella Regional State 2002:Preamble) de facto relegating others to be “settlers” or “highlanders” due to their origin from highland areas through formal state-sponsored resettlement in the 1980s and self-initiated migrations afterward. The two major ethnic groups in the region are, Nuer and Anyuak, share straddling borders with South Sudan. There is 1.8 million Nuer population in South Sudan while there is 147,672 in Ethiopia (CSA 2008). Anyuak people number 89,000 in Ethiopia (CSA 2008) and as Sudan Tribune cites the 2008 Sudanese census, there are 165,000 Anyuak in South Sudan (CSA 2008).¹ The region is also the host of the largest refugee population in Ethiopia. At seven refugee camps, it hosted 337,081 refugees and asylum seekers as of November 2020. Almost all refugees (99.43%) are South Sudanese (UNHCR Ethiopia 2020).

The primary source of livelihood for the majority of the people in Gambella is agriculture. The Nuer are mainly agro-pastoralists while Anyuak are settled agriculturalists mixing crop production and cattle rearing. Other communities also mix crop cultivation, livestock rearing, bee keeping,

¹ "The Anyuak Kingdom". Sudan Tribune. October 31, 2016.
https://sudantribune.com/article58930/#google_vignette

fishing, and mining. The main investment opportunities in the region are agriculture and Agro-industries (GPNRG 2015).

There are different epicenters of the conflicts in Gambella: between Nuer and Anyuak, and between “indigenous” and “settler” populations. The Nuer-Anyuak conflicts started when in 1887, the Nuer penetrated the Anyuak territory and took over certain Baro lands. The Anyuak were dissatisfied with the Nuer's constant territorial expansion, which sparked continual fighting and violence between the two communities. Before 1991 when ethnic-based politics officially was not implemented in the country, the main source of conflict in this region of Ethiopia was the two communities' competing demands for livelihood. Both often have farms along the Baro riverbed, which was primarily fought there in Itang Special Woreda. However, since 1991, ethnic politics has added fuel to resource competition. For example, the control of regional power became the major driver of conflicts between the two groups. In 2002, ethnic conflict and clashes have increased in the region (Feyisa 2009:645).

Besides, indigenous communities, both individually and collectively, find themselves engaged in ongoing struggles against the so-called "settlers" who were relocated by the Derg regime in the 1980s (Seide 2017:39) in response to the devastating drought of 1977. From the perspective of the indigenous population, these settlers are regarded as occupiers of their ancestral lands, creating tension and conflict. The indigenous communities deeply cherish their connection to the land, considering it an integral part of their cultural heritage and identity. They view the arrival of settlers as a disruption to their traditional way of life, encroaching upon their territories and undermining their ability to sustainably utilize the natural resources that have sustained them for generations. The indigenous communities often bring the past into their discourse, alleging they have faced marginalization in the regimes before 1991 (Feyissa 2009:644).

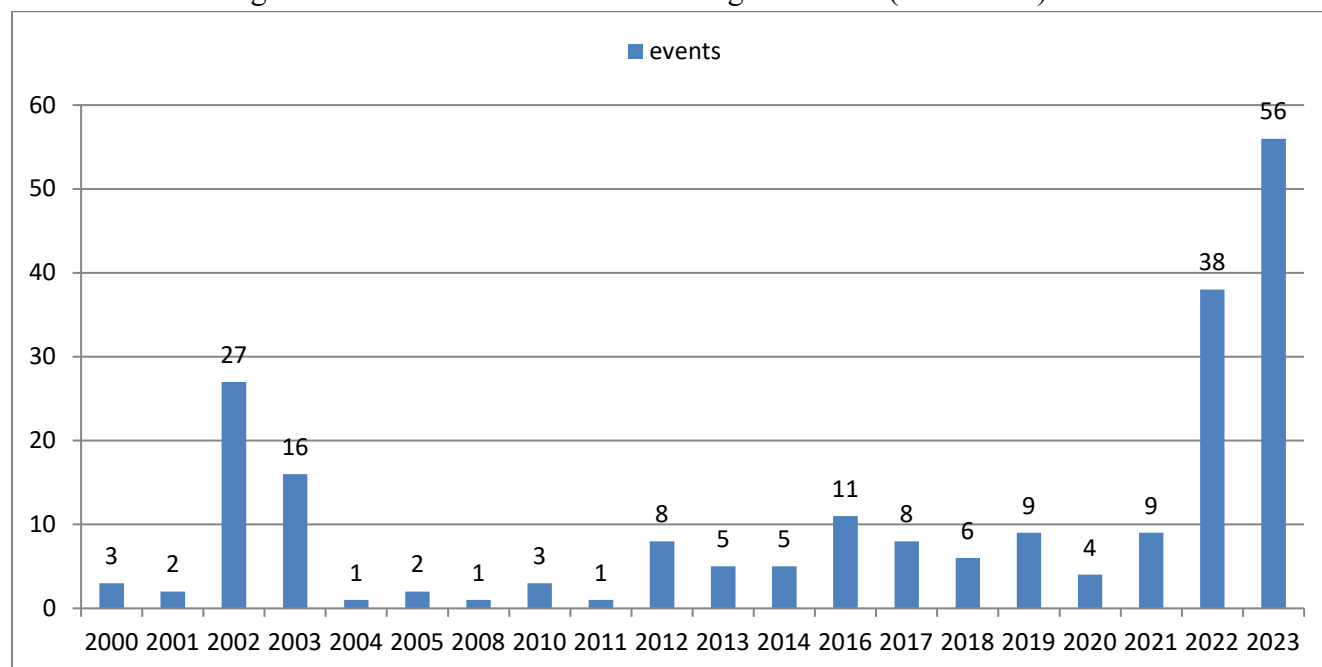
The epicenters in this particular region bear a profound entanglement with the intricate geopolitical situation of Ethiopia and Sudan. Various ethnic groups residing on the Sudan side expand territory to the Ethiopian region or frequently conduct raids, further exacerbating tensions and territorial disputes. Additionally, the porous borders between the two countries witnessed a continuous influx of refugees seeking safety from the turmoil, thereby intensifying not only the humanitarian challenges faced by both countries but also ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, the presence of insurgency groups infiltrating each other's territories, often with the support of different regimes in history each side of the country, adds another layer of complexity to the conflict in this part of Africa. The interplay of these factors intertwines the social, political, and security dynamics, making the situation highly intricate and demanding comprehensive efforts for resolution and stability.

Conflicts in Gambella since 2018

Since 2018, Ethiopia has undergone significant political changes that have contributed to both positive transformations and increased conflicts within the country. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 with a vision of political reform and national unity. His administration implemented several reforms aimed at opening up the political space, including releasing political prisoners, lifting media restrictions, and initiating dialogue with opposition groups. Abiy also pursued reconciliation efforts with neighboring Eritrea, resulting in the signing of a historic peace agreement in 2018. These initial steps were met with optimism and hope for a more inclusive and democratic Ethiopia.

However, alongside these positive developments, Ethiopia has experienced a surge in conflicts rooted in ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and competition for resources and political power. The conflicts have emerged primarily in regions such as Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Afar regions. As this paper maintains, these conflicts have exposed the country to geopolitical factors of conflicts such as in Gambella. ACLED's EPO database shows that 215 political violence events have been reported in various areas of Gambella throughout the years from 2000 to 2023. However, most of the conflicts occurred after 2018. Of 215 violent conflict events, 122 (58%) of them occurred since 2018. But even from those years, violent conflicts have spiked continuously since 2021.

Figure: Conflict events in Gambella Regional State (2000-2022)

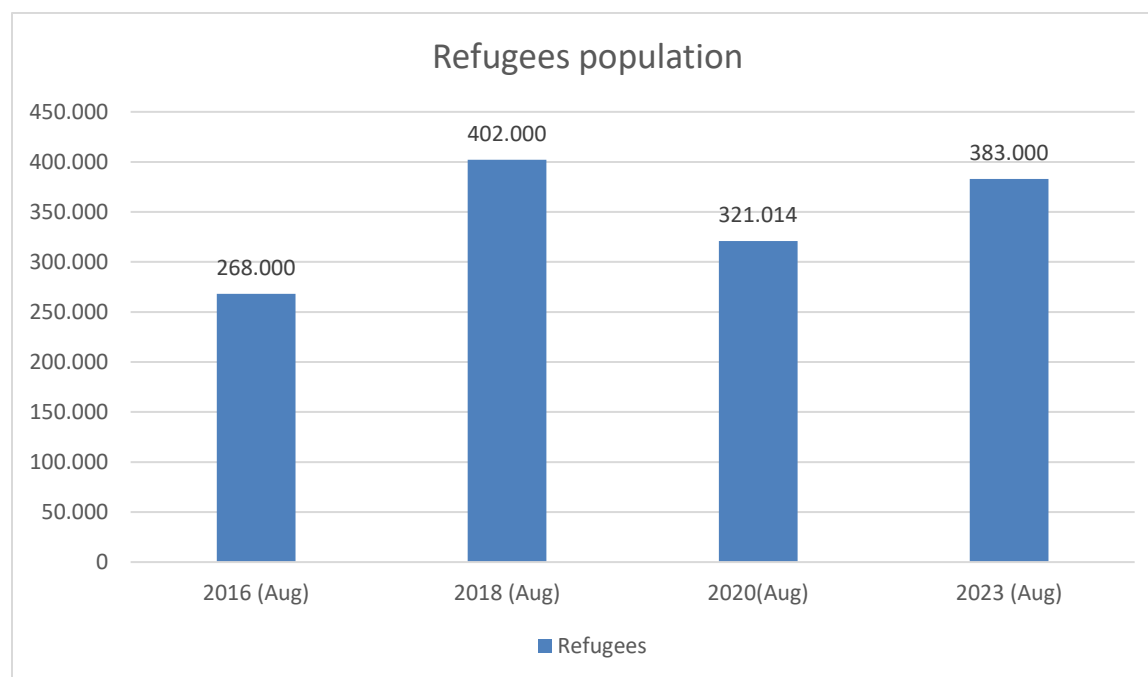


Source: <https://epo.acleddata.com/> (2000-2023)

While the above data on conflicts may offer valuable insights into political violence, it is important to acknowledge that conflicts in the region extend beyond the scope of the information presented in the figure above. The complexity of conflicts often involves various factors, including social, economic, and cultural dimensions, which are not fully captured by the above figure which provides only politically motivated violent events.

The refugee factor

The southern Sudanese civil war has significantly sped up Nuer immigration to the Gambella region of Ethiopia, and many Nuer refugees have been successful in obtaining Ethiopian citizenship and establishing themselves there permanently (Sewnet 2002). Besides, according to interview data, the Sudanese refugees constantly fed the Nuer population in Ethiopia. The Region hosted more than 400,000 South Sudanese refugees between the start of the first civil war in Sudan in the 1950s and the start of the second civil war in 1983. There are several refugee camps located in the Gambella region housing around 268,000 refugees from South Sudan in August 2016. By August 2018, the numbers increased to 402,000 refugees, almost equaling the projected (CSA 2013) native population of the Gambella Region. As of August 2023, Gambella hosted approximately 383,000 South Sudanese refugees across seven camps,² more than one-third of Ethiopia's refugee population.³ The flow of refugees continued even during border closures in 2020 due to COVID-19.

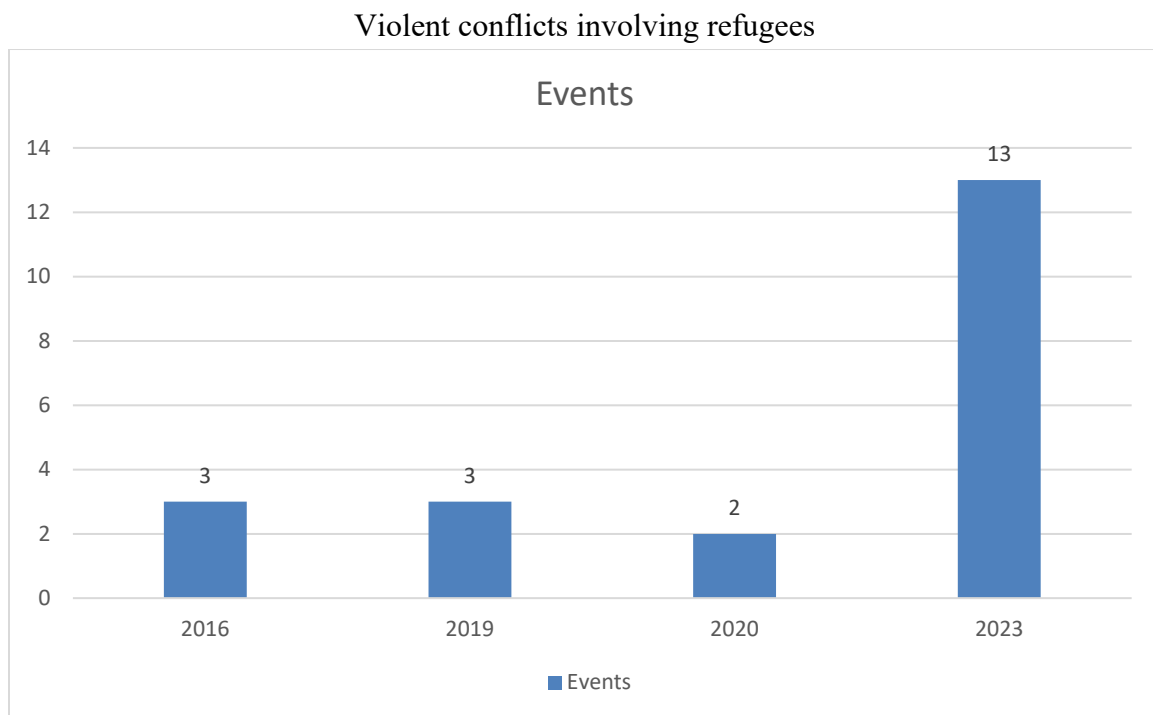


² UNHCR, "Ethiopia: Total Refugee and Asylum Seekers." Accessed 14 December 2023.

³ UNHCR, "Ethiopia Refugee Crisis: Aid Statistics and News." Accessed 12 January, 2023.

Source: UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107312>

The influx of refugees shapes the local demographics in Ethiopia. It is anticipated that the number of “refugees” will continue to rise as a result of some individuals integrating into the local population. This phenomenon occurs when displaced individuals, who may initially be classified as refugees, gradually assimilate into the host community, seeking stability and a sense of belonging. As this integration process takes place, the distinction between refugees and the local population becomes less clear, and the overall number of Nuer population in Gambella increases. Factors such as extended stays, intermarriage, and economic opportunities within the host community contribute to this integration process. Therefore, while the initial influx of refugees may be a notable concern, it is essential to consider the long-term impact on population figures, as the integration of refugees into the local population can lead to an increase in the overall number of individuals who were originally displaced. Consequently, refugee camps are one of the battlefields in Gambella but almost a new phenomenon largely exhibited in 2023. ACLED’s EPO database since 1997 shows that conflict events involving refugees have increased in 2023 while none were exhibited before 2016. There were 21 conflict events involving refugees recorded by EPO from 2000 to 2023, but most of them occurred in 2023.



Source: EPO, <https://epo.acleddata.com/> (2000-2023)

A pattern of sustained and organized violence against this vulnerable population is discernable. First, ethnic tensions between the Anyuak and Nuer communities, which exist both between local militias and between South Sudanese refugee groups, have clearly exacerbated inter-communal

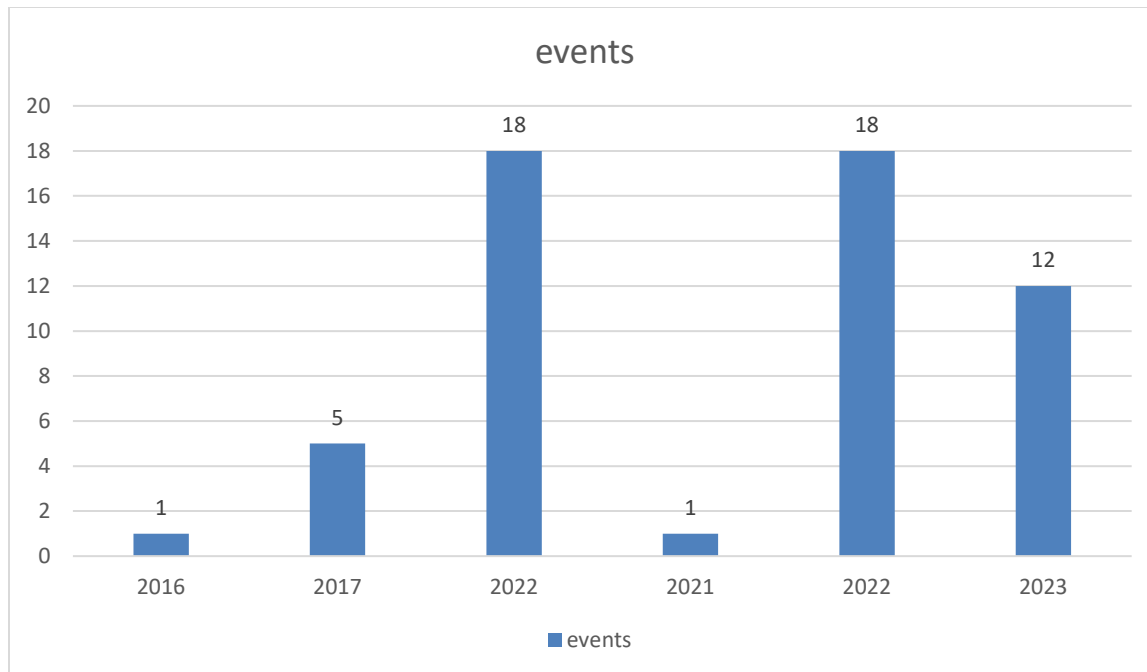
tensions in the border region. Some attacks against refugees are directly retaliatory based on ethnic affiliations, suggesting localized conflicts from South Sudan have been imported and localized conflicts in Ethiopia are executed on the South Sudanese refugees.

However, the targeting of refugees, including women and children, goes beyond spontaneous ethnic clashes. In most cases, refugees were ambushed with firearms while undertaking daily livelihood activities away from camps, demonstrating the assailants had both intent to harm civilians and the means to carry out coordinated attacks. The use of grenades in one incident also signifies a considerable degree of planning and weaponry. With near impunity, armed groups have been able to repeatedly breach camp perimeters and open fire on inhabitants over an extended period. The consistency and scale of violence point to organized militias deliberately targeting refugees in Gambella. Without strong security provisions or measures to address local community grievances, refugees have remained highly susceptible to exploitation of ethnic and political tensions.

Cross border raiding

The Murle people of South Sudan, like the Nuer, are pastoralists who depend on livestock. The Murle have a seasonal, transhumance lifestyle as they move to find grazing land and water sources for their cattle. Unlike the Nuer, the Murle have a distinct cultural view on cattle ownership. They believe they are the rightful owners of all cattle in the world. As a result, the Murle consider cattle raiding to be an acceptable practice, as they see it as reclaiming "lost" cattle that belong to them. In contrast, the Nuer also have a strong connection to their cattle. Cattle are central to Nuer's identity and wealth. The Nuer require ample grazing land and water sources to support their herds. While the Nuer recognize that other groups rely on cattle for subsistence, cattle raiding is not viewed as acceptable by the Nuer in the same way it is by the Murle. This difference in cultural perspectives on cattle ownership and raiding has contributed to cross-border conflicts and tensions between the Murle and Nuer communities in the region. ACLED's EPO database⁴ shows that from 2018 to 2022, a total of 55 cross-border raiding events were reported. The main armed groups involved in cross-border raids were militias from the Murle ethnic group implicated in 40 events and others such as the SPLM-IO rebel group from South Sudan implicated in 2 events. As the figure below shows, most of these raids occurred since 2018 in the context of increased conflict situation in Ethiopia at large.

⁴ <https://epo.acleddata.com/data/>



Source: <https://epo.acleddata.com/> (2000-2023)

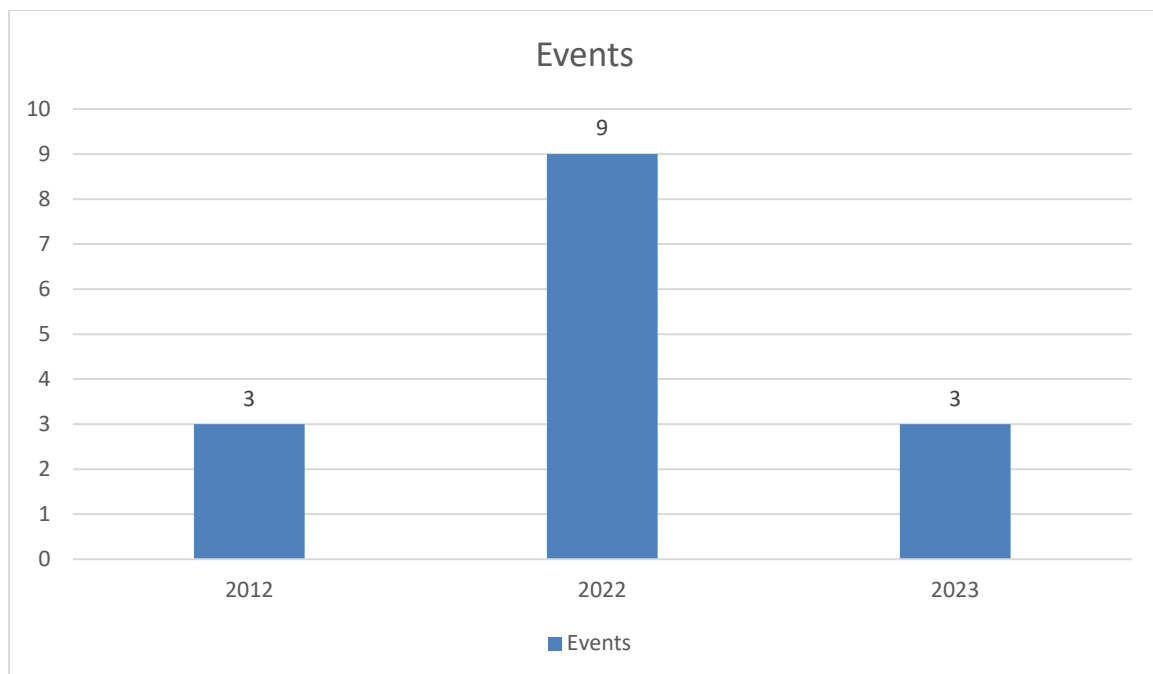
According to the pattern of their raid, their main targets appeared to be civilian settlements, to raid resources like cattle as well as carry out violence against rival ethnic communities in Ethiopia like the Anyuak. Clashes with Ethiopian forces occurred when the militias were pursued after attacks or ambushes. The border locations that experienced the highest levels of violence corresponded to the areas inhabited by ethnic populations in conflict with the Murle group. This reflects the spillover of existing sub-national tensions in South Sudan.

Cross border non-state armed groups' infiltration (2018-2023)

Cross-border conflicts in Gambella have been sustained by armed insurgency groups operating across the Ethiopia-South Sudan border. The region has already a complicated history of insurgency as both Ethiopian and (South) Sudanese governments supported insurgencies against each other across different periods. The armed groups in the region include the Gambella People's Liberation Front (GLF), Gambella Peoples Democratic Movement (GPDM), SPLM-IO, OLF-Shene, and others. The GPLM, a faction of the former GLF that has mainly Anyuak allegiance, received support from the Sudanese government and had links to OLF (Feyissa 2011:199), aiming to “liberate” Gambella from both “Highlander” domination (Zewde 2008:140) and the Nuer expansion (Feyisa 2010:32-33). The GPLM allied with the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) against the Derg regime, but tensions remained as their grievances differed from other EPRDF factions. After capturing Gambella in 1991, the GPLM dominated local politics until pressure from the federal government led to its renaming and merger with the Nuer-dominated GPDUP, forming the Gambella People's Democratic Front (GPDF), which still

faced Anyuak resistance through the breakaway Gambella People's Democratic Congress (GPDC) party. These shifting alliances and ethnic rivalries have fueled ongoing cross-border conflicts in the Gambella region (Feyissa 2009:645).

It is possible to imagine that whatever security measures loosens with the federal/central government of Ethiopia affects this geopolitically sensitive region, which is also reflected since 2018. During the period spanning from 2000 to 2023, a series of cross-border assaults occurred by insurgency groups. While there were a total of 15 recorded attacks throughout this timeframe, the majority occurred concentrated in the years 2022 and 2023. These aggressive actions were attributed to various groups, including the Gambella Liberation Front (GLF), Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).



Source: <https://epo.acleddata.com/> (2000-2023)

Conclusion

The Ethiopia-South Sudan border region remains volatile due to several interrelated factors. Instability in South Sudan has led to incursions by rebel groups, posing security risks to Ethiopian civilians. The porous border also allows for cross-border movement of arms and fighters that have exacerbated local conflicts. Additionally, the spillover effects of Ethiopia's internal conflicts, such as the Tigray war, have added new layers of complexity. The region has long seen autonomy struggles by groups like the GLF, which have periodically taken up arms depending how much control the central/federal government of Ethiopia has on the peripheral region. This combination of internal instability on both sides of Ethiopia and South Sudan, porous borders, and local

insurgencies has created a volatile mix along the borderland. This is not to say security forces have not contained any violence, but as the underlying drivers of conflict persist, these conflicts increase or decrease depending on how stable Ethiopia is internally. An open gate invites the enemy in.

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“Deferred Sovereignties”: Economic & security dependence in the Horn of Africa

“The Horn of Africa is a region of roads not taken and sovereignties deferred” Terrefe and Verhoeven conclude in their 2024 paper on the importance of infrastructure for competing claims to sovereignty in the region.ⁱ While not explicitly developed by the authors, “deferred” here can be read both as “deferred in time” as well as “deferred to someone”. Interestingly, both apply: In the Horn of Africa, competing claims to sovereignty are indeed often coexisting in a state of liminality, often for years, and sometimes decades, as the resolution is deferred to some later point in time. However, both this very frozen state of liminality and a great many attempts to overcome it rely on external third parties, which might be called “security guarantors” or “partners”, “(de facto) suzerains”, or “neo-colonizers” depending on one’s lens of analysis. In any case, one can easily make the argument that the sovereignties in question are indeed deferred to these external actors, at least in part. This working paper will attempt to briefly present how in recent years, a number of governments in the region have again resorted to “deferred sovereignties” in order to protect and assert their claims to sovereignty (or degrees thereof).

A history of competing sovereignties and violence

Assessments on the importance of colonialism on current African affairs vary,ⁱⁱ but its impact on current sovereignties in Africa is arguably generally very significant. It should be noted that the Horn of Africa is something of a special case within Africa however, as it features both one of the only countries that was arguably never truly colonized (and at times an empire in its own right) and an extraordinarily violent history, affected by the importance of its borderlands as places of state-making, past and present.ⁱⁱⁱ When competing (whether simultaneous or successive) attempts at state-making happen in the same or bordering regions, competing sovereignties are a likely outcome. In the case of the Horn of Africa, this competition often manifested violently and as such, the relative power of those making claims might have been more important than in other regions of Africa, where the value of developing and controlling the border- and hinterlands might have been less evident, as outlined by Herbst.^{iv}

As Reid explains in great detail, the history at the Horn is one where violence is historic, with various empires imposing themselves on each other and their subjects, but affects the presence, in a similarly violent fashion.^v These ongoing conflicts happen both within and between the nation-states of the region, currently the most high-intensity forms can be found in Ethiopia’s and Somalia’s ongoing wars with themselves. Arguably both are products of imperial legacies, be they the fallen Ethiopian Empire or the European powers that sought to control the region and reorder it with their departure. In both cases, the original supposed consensus on the self-determination of the peoples played a vital role in the development of claims to sovereignties, while the agreement on state sovereignty that followed created the imbalance between claims, legitimacy and means that would create further conflict.^{vi} Put differently, as in the post-colonial world, the principle of self-determination of the peoples was gradually replaced with the sovereignty of nation-states, and all attempts to escape this order faltered by the late 20th century,^{vii} these (often bloody) conflicting claims to sovereignty were partially externalized and outbursts of violence attempting to impose or probe some of these claims largely failed to provide definitive settlements.

The UN blue in Somalia's flag¹ is maybe the most visual reminder of the role external actors have historically played in post-colonial state-making in the region. However, this trend was never limited to the UN or Somalia: While US, Ethiopian and African Union interventions in Somalia are maybe the most well-known cases of military support for a central government in the region, in an attempt to strengthen their respective claims to sovereignty, various parties have received support from external actors.^{viii} To name but a few examples of substantial armed support in the past: the Soviet Union, Cuba and other Eastern Bloc states aided the Ethiopian Derg in its multitude of conflicts and atrocities, the PRC and Arab states provided short-lived support to the Eritrean Liberation Front, various support to Somalia in the Ethio-Somali War, the repeated French aid to Djibouti's government in its conflicts etc. As Terrefe and Verhoeven describe in their article, foreign interference or support went beyond arms shipments, intelligence and logistics, as a great many infrastructure projects in the region were also enabled by external actors – with significant consequences for competing claims to sovereignty.^{ix}

While one could hardly make the argument that in all cases of foreign interference or support sovereignty is being deferred to the external power in question, this list of foreign interventions, whether armed financial or political, shows how sovereignties in the Horn of Africa at the very least co-depend on foreign actors.

Sovereignties deferred – still: Ethiopia's port(s)

The Horn of Africa remains fragmented with intense political and economical tensions to this day. The response to these tensions of both central governments and those undermining the latter's claims to sovereignty has often remained foreign support.

The expanding foreign presence in Djibouti is both well-studied and one of the case-studies covered by Terrefe and Verhoeven, who argue that Gulf Arab and Chinese financial interests, mixed with vested security interest, especially of the US and France,² has both strengthened its sovereignty and made it dependent on these external actors to maintain it – at least until competing port projects catch up.^x While the authors touch upon Ethiopia's total dependence on Djibouti's port for its international trade, they don't explore the historical significance of this situation, nor the consequences of Ethiopia's attempts to "rectify" this. As others have pointed out, in the Ethiopian reading of history, sea access was a historic right of the empire with significant consequences when such access was not guaranteed^{xi} – and the current decency on Djibouti is both costly and humiliating.

The current Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, has publicly stated in 2023 that access to the sea would be re-established, ideally peacefully but violently if necessary³ – though all concerned neighbours, including Djibouti, clarified the demands were all crossing red lines.^{xii} Further attempts by Addis Ababa to become share-holders and guaranteed access to ports then turned from attempting to sway the sovereign national governments to negotiating with sub-national challengers of said sovereignty. As such, Ethiopia's Prime Minister signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the President of Somaliland, Musa Bihi Abdi, on 2 January 2024. This agreement foresees Ethiopian naval forces' access to 20 kilometres of Somaliland coastline for 50 years in exchange for a Somaliland stake in Ethiopia Airlines and possible future recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state. The

¹ As well as historically the flag of the State of Somaliland, before the latter adopted a different flag following the unravelling of the Somali Democratic Republic and seemingly criminalised the display of the current flag of the Federal Government of Somalia.

² Though one should also mention some other countries that have bases in Djibouti to assert their interests in maritime security and regional stability, such as the Japan, Italy and China, as well as those that have stationed troops in the country, such as Spain and Germany.

³ It seems unlikely that Ethiopia could realistically successfully engage in another armed conflict given the economic and military state of the country, as well as the conditions on the ground. Furthermore, any armed conflict would handicap the other economic and diplomatic ambitions of the government. So while this public announcement is most likely little more than domestic posturing, the consequences are nonetheless remarkable.

agreement was condemned internationally by both those supporting Somalia and Somaliland's close ally, the United Kingdom – as state sovereignty and the preservation of territorial integrity are central tenants of the current international order.^{xiii} Even Somaliland's own opposition remarked that the deal may threaten Somaliland's sovereignty, as it gives territorial control to a foreign power.^{xiv}

In Mogadishu, not only was the agreement “nullified” in a largely symbolic act,^{xv} but the government also sought a possible guarantor of Somalia's sovereignty over its shoreline.⁴ While officially the new Somalia-Tukey agreements are not related to the Somaliland-Ethiopia deal, most analysts beg to differ. Turkey has, through the MOUs with the Somali government become both responsible for training up the Somali coastal defences and de facto taken over some of its duties, in exchange for significant economic privileges, such as reportedly 30% of revenues from Somalia's exclusive economic zone, as well as, through the second MOU, rights to explore, develop and exploit Somalia's oil and gas fields.^{xvi} This agreements therefore strengthens Villa Somalia's indirect control of its coasts, weakening both the possible foreign and sub-state level competitors – but simultaneously weakens direct control and sacrifices significant parts of national natural resources in the foreseeable future.⁵ Of course, it is not unlikely that given the deep ties between Turkey and Somalia, such a deal was in the works well before, but the quick succession of it's signing and ratification in the context of the Ethiopia-Somalia deal seem to strongly indicate that there is a causal relationship as well – as does Turkey's role as a mediator between Ethiopia and Somalia.^{xvii}

What is less certain, is the causal relationship between these Turkey-Somalia agreements and the central government's audacious backing of the new controversial constitution, which of course further weakened sub-national actors, such as the now less independent regions and the tribal leaders. Puntland (which, though less independentist than Somaliland, has its own claims to limited Somali sovereignty within its territory) temporarily withdrew from the Somali federation in light of the new constitution and the region's leadership immediately sought support from foreign powers in the face of this perceived threat to their claims to (partial sub-)sovereignty.^{xviii} Some authors suggest that the agreement with Turkey was therefore necessary to strengthen the central government in light of this planned constitutional amendment,^{xix} and it is probably fair to assume that it might have emboldened Villa Somalia to go ahead with the constitutional amendment despite the opposition, triggering the “secession” of Puntland to some degree.

To then put the observed phenomenon back into our theoretical framework: It should not be lost on observers and policymakers that both Somaliland and Somalia have arguably to some degree lost some aspect of sovereignty. Somaliland faces the threat of losing some degree of sovereignty after attempting to assert it through foreign interference, as its de facto control of the coastline will be limited by (literal) Turkish cannon boat diplomacy. Meanwhile, Somali federal government's sovereignty might be both legally and militarily more asserted than ever through a new constitution and foreign steel, but also more practically threatened by a de facto secession and an emboldened Somaliland, internal turmoil and a stronger foreign military dependence than at any point in recent years (as well as the arguably rather neo-colonial payment model for Turkish military backing). Put differently, both Somaliland and Somalia attempted to assert their sovereignty by deferring it to a

⁴ N.B. While the European Union Naval Force Somalia Operation Atalanta was already well established at this point, the mandate of the operation is solely focused on piracy, not on enforcing Somali sovereignty over its breakaway regions.

⁵ While this goes far beyond the scope of this working paper, future research should explore the rather unambiguous quid pro quo extractive deals that have recently become more common again in Africa. One may call this the resurgence of the (de facto) protectorates, with deals that appear (at first sight) to be far more blunt and explicit in their scope and intentions than the neo-colonial practices typically associated with the former colonial powers...

stronger foreign power, which in turn arguably further weakened both existing claims to sovereignty, though one more practically and directly, and one more abstractly.

A post-imperial cycle?

One might then conclude that the cycle set in motion by Ethiopia is typical for the region: One foreign power attempts to subvert the already challenged sovereignty of another government through local sub-national actors with competing claims. Or from a different perspective, internally competing and post-imperial sovereignties invite foreign interference. This causes the actors whose sovereignty is threatened by this first action to seek international support to reassert their sovereignty, thereby deferring some of that same sovereignty to the intervening power that helps secure the claims of the competing internal factions. This, in turn, practically (and temporarily) stabilizes one actor's, and in this particular case the central government's control, but further deepens grievances with both the international and internal challengers to the capital's sovereignty, and weakens the central government's abstract claim to sovereignty. This might facilitate further challenges down the line and in turn invite further foreign mingling and support, as the post-imperial⁶ order produces ever more deferred sovereignties.

Whether this cycle is bound to repeat, or will end in either a sovereignty no longer deferred but fully asserted by a current federal government, a current sub-national actor, or foreign power is yet to be seen. For now, the apparent cycle appears to repeat itself and sovereignties appear to continue to be deferred for another decade at least. To return to the authors of this paper's opening quote: "different imaginations of regional order" and of "what the Horn of Africa is, what it could have been and what it can still become"^{xx} are still possible, though the current cycle offers few apparent ways to evade future repetitions with similar effects.

⁶ Post-imperial here encompasses both post-colonial in the context of Italian and British rule, but also the wider (dis-)order left behind after the fall of the Ethiopian empire.

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Political configurations in the Somali borderlands

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Borderlands as political grey zones

In the introduction to an edited volume on borders and borderlands in the Horn of Africa, Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne (2010) proposed some years ago to differentiate borders as “thin red lines on maps” from borderlands as social, political and economic spaces on both sides of these lines. Borderlands are geographically less clear defined. They can extend a few kilometers on each side of the lines on the map or even hundreds of kilometers. In my own chapter (Hoehne 2010) in the mentioned edited volume I outline an ethnographic experience I had in 2003 and 2004 several times, when traveling in northern Somalia (between Hargeysa in Somaliland and Garowe in Puntland), over a distance of roughly 700 kilometers along the (back then) only tarmac road in the region. Leaving Hargeysa one would reach Burco in central Somaliland after a bit less than 300 kilometers. There, back then, the currency was changed from Somaliland shilling to Somali shilling, indicating an economic gray-zone or even borderland due to the change of currency. Continuing by car toward Lasanod in the east the driver would change the number plates from Somaliland to Puntland/Somali plates some 80-100 kilometers after Burco. The Somaliland check points along the road would also end there. This indicates a political gray-zone or the beginning of a political borderland. On the one hand, we were still in Somaliland (according to the colonial maps used by the government of Somaliland to indicate their newly independent republic that seceded unilaterally from Somalia in 1991). On the other, we obviously entered a new economic and political space in the middle of Somaliland toward the east, which seemed to be part of Puntland and thus, Somalia (given that Puntland in the northeast perceived itself as autonomous region of Somalia back then). Once we entered Lasanod, after some 500 kilometers along the road from Hargeysa, Somali flags were everywhere (in 2003, 2004). It seemed that we were in a town of Somalia. Here I also had to buy a visa for Puntland/Somalia, in a local office run by authorities considering themselves part of Puntland/Somalia. Yet, on the map Lasanod was still part of Somaliland. The journey continued east of Lasanod to Garowe, the capital of Puntland. Some 120 kilometers east of Lasanod we crossed the former colonial border between British Somaliland and Italian Somalia. Yet, no one noticed it. Ex post, I realized that a thorn bush we passed along the way most likely marked the colonial border. Just before entering Garowe, however, we had to pass a tightly guarded checkpoint. There the soldiers did not want to accept my Puntland/Somalia visa I had just purchased in Lasanod. They demanded that I would get a new visa in Garowe. What could be interpreted as an attempt to make some extra money also had a political implication: indeed, Lasanod was, from the perspective of the authorities in Garowe, an unstable place. It was contested between Somaliland and Puntland and

partly run by local traditional authorities. Thus, to follow the protocol, authorities in Garowe insisted on issuing a really valid visa in the stable and administratively well-ordered capital of Puntland.

Reflecting on this journey, one can say that back in 2003, 2004, the borderlands between Somaliland and Puntland in northern Somalia extended from ca. 80 kilometers east of Burco up to the checkpoint just before Garowe, over some 250-300 kilometers. In this space, a certain degree of political and economic ambiguity reigned. Business was done and politics were made that were shaped by this ambiguity. Imported goods including rice and spaghetti, but also technological products and building materials came mostly from the port of Berbera in Somaliland to Lasanod. But on the way, the currency changed. Also, some goods came from southern Somalia to Lasanod and were transported further to Hargeysa (especially fruits from the inter-riverine areas of Somalia). Again currency was changed. At various checkpoints, different (competing) actors collected small taxes. Politically, the extensive borderlands indicated that the independence of Somaliland, unilaterally declared in 1991, in the wake of Somalia's civil war and state collapse, was not uncontested. The image one could get from just looking at the thin red lines on the map of northern Somalia was not in line with the much more complex and dynamic political realities on the ground.

These findings from northern Somalia twenty years ago are in line with borderlands as grey zones in other parts of Africa and elsewhere. Similar issues concerning political grey zones appear in the borderlands in eastern Congo. Certainly, also parts of the borderlands in and between Mali, Niger and Nigeria more recently could be considered political grey zones. Also in Asia, e.g. in Myanmar, borderlands can be understood as political grey zones. What is negotiated there is political belonging.

Now, over the past twenty years, the situation has of course been changing and evolving. Yet, borderlands in Somalia have remained notoriously dynamic and ambiguous. Just to give you some more recent examples:

Concerning internal borders: with the introduction of a federal system in Somalia – effectively with the provisional constitution in 2012 – several border conflicts between the newly founded federal member states (FMSs) emerged. Puntland in northeastern Somalia was founded 1998. In 2016, Galmudug was founded in central Somalia. Between then and 2022, conflict ranged between both federal member states of Somalia over their border. This conflict manifested most intensively in the city of Galkayo which is divided between Puntland and Galmudug. Southern Galkayo is the capital of Galmudug. Given that territory in Somalia is claimed as clan homeland (Somali: degaan) by patrilineal descent groups, territorial conflicts are always also clan conflicts. While Puntland is dominated by the Darood/Majeerteen clan, Galmudug is dominated by the

Hawiye/Habar Gedir clan. Both have been fighting each other across south-central Somalia from 1991 onward, when the Darood dominated government of General Mohamed Siyad Barre was toppled by the Hawiye dominated guerillas of the United Somali Congress (USC), led by Mohamed Farah Aydeed (Hawiye/Habar Gedir). This long-standing inter-clan conflict was continued between the federal member states Galmudug and Puntland. It was settled only recently. Also other federal member states in Somalia are haunted by border-conflict between or within them. One important dimension of border conflict in Somalia, in my view, is the overlap between clan and political-administrative territories, as just mentioned.

From a social anthropological perspective, one can see that indeed the segmentary lineage system at work in Somali societies provides considerable challenges to the territorial ordering of Somalia within and also between Somalia and its neighboring states. This segmentary lineage system has been famously (or infamously) been outlined by the British social anthropologist Ioan M. Lewis, whose epistemological conceptions derived from the (British) colonial context and have more recently been criticized by Somali and other scholars. Nevertheless, I propose that thinking about borders and borderlands in Somalia and the Horn of Africa requires also considering this specific social structure existing throughout the Somali Peninsula (covering besides Somalia also northeast Kenya, eastern Ethiopia and parts of Djibouti). The segmentary lineage system means, in a nutshell, that every Somali can identify as member of a patrilineal descent group. This type of identification is just one of several available to Somalis (who can also identify, for instance, as members of specific Sunni Muslim sub-groups, such as Sufi or Salafi or even as members of specific Sufi or Salafi sub-groups etc.). Also, patrilineal descent is by no means the only form of relevant kinship ties. There are also ties on the mother's side (matrilateral) and through marriage (affinal). Yet, patrilineal descent is arguably an important form of identification among many Somalis today and it frequently provides a basis for primary political solidarity. Especially in situations of escalating conflict, Somalis tend to show solidarity with paternal relatives. The sociologically interesting aspect of this type of identification is that it is highly dynamic. A Somali can in one moment identify as member of an extended family (Somali: *reer*) comprising dozens if not hundreds of people residing typically in a territorially rather confined area like one village or a quarter of a city, in the next as a member of a lineage (Somali: *jilib*) comprising several hundred or some thousand people residing across several villages or in several towns, and again in another moment as member of a clan (Somali: *qabil* or *qolo*) which can comprise tens of thousands of people residing across whole regions, even across national borders. Given that the structure of the segmentary lineage system is created by living people, the whole system is a living system which also travels with people. This means: the attempt to establish a territorial system in Somalia, like the federal system, which at the same time is tied to the territories controlled by patrilineal descent groups, is inherently problematic. Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was

introduced in the mid-1990s in a multi-ethnic society. It created many border-problems between the ethnic groups of Ethiopia, such as Somali, Oromo, Afar etc. Yet, arguably, although ethnic groups are socially constructed, they nevertheless are considered to have some stable cultural core which, at least in the eyes of the members of such groups, keeps them together. Ethnic groups do not change all the time (but they of course can change over long time). In contrast, the patrilineal lineage system among Somalis is characterized by permanent fusion or fission tendencies. In case of external threats, members of large patrilineal descent groups unite (e.g., as clans) in defense. In times of peace, patrilineal groups fall apart into small subunits (e.g. as reer) within which individuals pursue their particular interests. This was already problematic. This indicates which challenges the federal system in Somalia is still facing today. Trying to fix borders between Federal member states in Somalia constantly produces tensions since groups cooperating today may be in conflict tomorrow. This also has the potential to tear already existing federal member states like Hiirshabelle apart. Note: the land is not controlled by the government in Mogadishu, but by representatives of patrilineal descent groups.

Concerning external borders: What I just outlined regarding internal borders in Somalia also, to some degree, is relevant for the borders between Somalia and its neighbors. Somalis reside across the Horn and the borders between Somalia and Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia and Somalia and Djibouti are running through ethnic Somalis, even dividing members of the same clan or lineage. The borderlands between Somalia and its neighbors are mono-ethnic (sometimes even mono-clan) and multi-state, so to say. This again creates a huge potential for political ambiguity and also conflict. Historically, the Ogaden war 1977-1978 was a result of this mono-ethnic – multi-state situation. Yet, I would say that also the most recent tension between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Memorandum of Understanding between Ethiopia and breakaway Republic of Somaliland is related to this issue. The government in Mogadishu threatened Ethiopia that if the government in Addis Ababa would proceed with this MoU, which threatens the territorial integrity of Somalia, Somalis would create unrest in the Somali region of Ethiopia. Al Shabaab also issued threats against Ethiopia on the basis of having an easy access, ethnically speaking, to considerable parts of eastern Ethiopia. So, the ambiguous and dynamic borders in Somalia and between Somalia and its neighbors entail a potential for political mobilization. They facilitate trade in times of peace but create a difficult to calculate threat in times of conflict.

While I emphasized so far the flexible nature of (clan-) belonging and related to that, territorial order among Somalis, one should not be mistaken. Temporarily, the flexible (and soft) social and territorial borders can become fixed and hard. The latter happens in times of conflict. Most recently, in 2023, such conflict escalated between the Somaliland administration and people in the east, living in and around Lasanod (mentioned in my introduction). Lasanod and the whole

eastern regions claimed by the Somaliland government have been controlled by Somaliland forces over the past decade. The Somaliland state building project has advanced from the situation I described for 2003, 2004 above in various stages toward the east: Somaliland capturing Lasanod 2007, Somaliland extending to Tukaraq east of Lasanod in 2018, Somaliland holding parliamentary elections in Lasanod and surroundings 2021. Yet, the people residing in the east, mainly belonging to the Darood/Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans, never really consented to the secession of Somaliland from Somalia. End of 2022 some conflict between local youth and Somaliland police escalated in Lasanod. The police opened fire on demonstrating youth and in January 2023, this led to an armed uprising. In reaction, the Somaliland forces left the city. Local elders sought to mediate and on 6 February 2023 demanded the Somaliland forces to leave the whole clan homeland of Dhulbahante. In reaction, the Somaliland army positioned on the hills north of Lasanod started bombarding the town. Up to 180.000 women, children and elderly fled and the remaining Dhulbahante men put up their own militia defending Lasanod. End of February extended clan relatives came from Puntland to assist them. Eventually, the fight was between Darood/Harti clans including Majeerteen and Warsangeli on the one side and the Somaliland army which was dominated by members of the Isaaq clan-family (comprising several large clans) on the other side. Although the Somaliland government tried to present the conflict as a fight between state forces against local rebels (including allegedly Al Shabaab forces), in local parlance the fight quickly was interpreted as between Darood/Harti and Isaaq. In this way, it replicated large clan clashes characterizing the civil war in northern Somalia in the late 1980s, with Dhulbahante supporting the Darood-dominated government of Mohamed Siyad Barre and Isaaq supporting the guerillas of the Somali National Movement (SNM). More importantly, the clan-interpretation of the conflict over Lasanod in 2023 meant that this conflict became a life-and-death-matter for ordinary people throughout the contested east of Somaliland, since it not only concerned political belonging but clan-survival.

Against this backdrop, the clan militias defending Lasanod were highly motivated and eventually managed to defeat the actually militarily superior Somaliland army on 25 August 2023. Since then, a new frontline runs through Somaliland some 150 kilometers east of Burco, between Oog (Isaaq) and Gumays (Dhulbahante). Trade relations and partly social relations have been cut by this. Lasanod is now the capital of the newly declared SSC-Khaatumo administration which aspires to become a new federal member state of Somalia. Goods are now imported from the privately funded deep sea port Garacad in south Puntland. If this situation continues, political divisions manifesting in inter-clan conflict will create a new political order in northern Somalia, with new (however, most likely contested) borders separating Somaliland, SSC-Khatumo and Puntland. This of course will also affect the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland. In case Ethiopia recognizes Somaliland as part of this MoU, it will – as of today – create new military clashes east of Somaliland.

As a general conclusion one can say that the Somali social fabric is notoriously dynamic. This also influences politics in Somalia and the wider Somali-inhabited Horn, and to some degree defies the stable territorialisation of Somali politics.

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