



Containment at Risk: Modeling the Impact of Ethiopian Forces's Withdrawal from Somalia

On January 1, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM) formally replaced the African Union Transition Mission (ATMIS), marking a new phase in Somalia's peacekeeping framework. While this transition represents a shift in name and mandate, it remains largely symbolic, rebranding the remaining ATMIS forces initially slated for withdrawal under the now-canceled phase four of the drawdown. Unlike the structured handover from AMISOM to ATMIS, the transition to AUSSOM has been characterized by uncertainty, with ad-hoc arrangements, an undefined force composition, and the absence of a sustainable funding mechanism. Adding to these challenges was the uncertainty surrounding Ethiopian forces.

For over a decade, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) have played a critical role in countering militant threats and bolstering fragile government control in South West State and Jubaland. However, a contentious Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)—reportedly involving Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland in exchange for access to a naval base—triggered a diplomatic crisis, casting doubt on Ethiopia's continued role in Somalia's stabilization efforts. Perceived by Mogadishu as a direct violation of Somalia's sovereignty, the MoU reignited historical tensions and prompted the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to exclude Ethiopia from AUSSOM and announce the complete withdrawal of Ethiopian forces—both under ATMIS and bilateral arrangements—by the end of 2024.

This decision appeared definitive until Türkiye's last-minute mediation in Ankara brought the Somali president and Ethiopian premier together, resulting in a breakthrough agreement. The Ankara Declaration halted Ethiopia's withdrawal and cleared the path for its inclusion in AUSSOM, alleviating immediate fears of a wholesale withdrawal. However, ambiguities in the communiqué—particularly regarding Ethiopia's maritime ambitions—remain a source of contention. For example, Ethiopia's need for access to the sea, described in the communiqué as commercial, is viewed with suspicion in Mogadishu. The reported agreement with Somaliland, past statements, and Addis Ababa's apparent disinterest in Djibouti's port-sharing offer hint at broader ambitions for dual-use infrastructure, including naval applications, which directly conflict with Somalia's sovereignty stance. Yet, despite these unresolved and simmering tensions—set to dominate upcoming negotiations—the Ankara talks significantly improved relations, leading to the resumption of full diplomatic ties and guaranteeing Ethiopia's inclusion in AUSSOM.

However, Ethiopia's integration into AUSSOM, while addressing immediate uncertainties, introduces new challenges to the mission's operational framework. Excluded from AUSSOM's initial planning process, Ethiopia's late inclusion necessitates adjustments to troop deployments and base allocations, as its previously allocated quota had already been redistributed among other troop-contributing countries. These operational hurdles are further complicated by political dynamics. While relations between Somalia and Ethiopia have improved, the FGS remains wary of Ethiopia's extensive military footprint and close ties with Federal Member State (FMS) administrations. The FGS is expected to leverage troop allocation processes to limit Ethiopia's influence, likely resulting in localized withdrawals from specific districts.

Given these uncertainties, this study evaluates the risks associated with such drawdowns and their broader implications for Somalia’s fragile transition. Using a dual-method approach—integrating field research with advanced machine learning—this analysis assessed district-level risks in four Ethiopian-deployed regions. The findings are stark: ENDF withdrawal is projected to result in near-total militant control in key districts, particularly in South West State and Jubaland.

II. Contextualizing Ethiopia’s Complex Engagement in Somalia

Ethiopia’s involvement in Somalia reflects a complex interplay of security concerns and strategic interests. While the two countries share deep historical ties, Addis Ababa’s modern engagement began in 2006 with a controversial military intervention to dismantle the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a coalition of Sharia-based courts that had seized control of southern Somalia, including the capital, Mogadishu.¹ Alarmed by the ICU’s rise and its security implications, Ethiopia intervened at the request of Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and with tacit U.S. support, swiftly dismantling the ICU’s dominance. However, many Somalis perceived Ethiopia’s presence as an occupation rather than a stabilizing force, fueling resentment. This backlash allowed al-Shabaab, the ICU’s militant wing, to exploit anti-Ethiopian sentiment and expand its influence. By 2009, under international pressure and rising costs, Ethiopia withdrew,² leaving a security vacuum that al-Shabaab quickly filled, escalating its threat to Somalia’s government.

The growing threat posed by al-Shabaab necessitated Ethiopia’s return to Somalia in 2011. This time, Addis Ababa adopted a revised strategy, focusing on securing key border locations like Belet Weyne in Hiiraan and extending its presence into Gedo, Bay, and Bakool regions. Similar to the 2006 intervention, this re-engagement operated under unilateralism and bilateral agreements, functioning outside the African Union-led Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Despite this autonomous approach, Ethiopian forces played a critical role in regaining territories from al-Shabaab and preventing the group from consolidating control over border regions. This marked the beginning of Ethiopia’s sustained presence in Somalia—particularly focused on the Ethiopia-Somalia borderlands—which has persisted across various administrations.

However, Ethiopia’s intervention often prioritized Addis Ababa’s strategic interests, frequently shaping the dynamics of its military engagements. When these interests were unmet or challenged, Ethiopia occasionally leveraged its military presence through abrupt troop withdrawals, leaving local communities vulnerable to al-Shabaab’s resurgence. A notable example occurred in March 2013, when Ethiopian forces abruptly withdrew from Hudur, the capital of Bakool, without coordinating with AMISOM or the Somali security forces. Al-Shabaab swiftly recaptured the town, forcing approximately 2,500 residents to flee alongside the departing Ethiopian forces to Ceel Barde near the Ethiopian border, leaving Hudur under al-Shabaab’s control until March 2014, when Ethiopian forces retook the town.³⁴

Formal Integration into AMISOM and Tensions with FGS

By 2014, Ethiopia’s role in Somalia became more formalized with the integration of 4,395 troops into AMISOM, transitioning from unilateral military operations to a multilateral peacekeeping framework.⁵ The Ethiopian contingent within AMISOM assumed responsibility for Gedo, Bay,

and Bakool—regions where Ethiopian forces had already maintained a significant presence. Despite this integration with AMISOM, Addis Ababa retained a separate bilateral contingent, allowing it to operate independently and prioritize its own security objectives. This dual structure sometimes created friction, as Ethiopian operations occasionally conflicted with Somali government efforts to assert sovereignty over its security landscape and gain control of regional administrations.

These frictions escalated following the conclusion of the TFG mandate and the establishment of the FGS under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (HSM) in 2012. As Somalia's first formal government in decades, the FGS sought to assert authority over regional administrations during the federal state formation process. This centralization effort frequently clashed with Ethiopia's interests due to HSM directly challenging regional officials supported by Ethiopia. A notable example occurred in February 2013, when Mogadishu controversially replaced Bay Governor Abdifatah Ibrahim Geesey with Abdi Adan Hooshow, sparking clashes between militias loyal to each leader, with Ethiopian troops reportedly backing Geesey.⁶

This dynamic—Addis Ababa's efforts to maintain influence through regional leaders and HSM's push for centralization—defined the contentious relationship between Ethiopia and HSM's administration during his first term (2012–2017). To safeguard its interests, Ethiopia increasingly relied on its non-AMISOM military presence in Somalia as a bargaining tool, often at the expense of local stability. This was illustrated in October 2016, when Ethiopian forces abruptly withdrew from Tiye glow, mirroring their withdrawal from neighboring Hudur in 2013. Although officially attributed to “logistical challenges”⁷, the withdrawal was widely perceived as politically motivated, leaving the town under al-Shabaab's control—a situation that persists to this day—and prompting mass displacement. Like the 2013 Hudur withdrawal, this episode highlights the dual nature of Ethiopia's role in Somalia, acting as both a stabilizing force and, at times, a source of vulnerability when its strategic interests are at odds with local dynamics.

Renewed Cooperation with Farmaajo and New Tension with HSM's 2.0

Despite these challenges, relations between Ethiopia and the FGS improved significantly during President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo's tenure, which began in 2017, and with the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's Prime Minister in 2018. This period marked a significant shift in Ethiopia-FGS relations, characterized by enhanced diplomatic cooperation that culminated in a tripartite agreement between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea aimed at addressing shared security priorities.⁸ The close alignment between Farmaajo's administration and Abiy Ahmed's government provided Farmaajo with a strategic advantage as he pursued centralization efforts much like his predecessor HSM. But, unlike HSM, Farmaajo secured Ethiopian support, particularly in Gedo where Ethiopian troops were based, as part of his broader strategy to consolidate power and weaken the authority of Jubaland President Ahmed Madobe.⁹

This renewed cooperation, however, began to cool following Farmaajo's defeat in 2022 and the re-election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. HSM's return to power revived some of the contentious dynamics from his first term, as his initial diplomatic efforts prioritized strengthening ties beyond neighboring countries, including Egypt—a long-standing adversary of Ethiopia—before

addressing relations with Addis Ababa.¹⁰ Despite this, Ethiopia-Somalia relations remained steady during the transition from AMISOM to ATMIS, with Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti pledging support for HSM's renewed military campaign against al-Shabaab. This commitment was formalized at a Mogadishu summit attended by the three neighboring leaders, where they pledged additional troops and military assistance to the FGS.¹¹

This period of cooperation, nevertheless, proved short-lived. In early 2024, tensions escalated when Addis Ababa signed a controversial MoU with Somaliland, reportedly agreeing to recognize the self-declared region's independence in exchange for a naval base.¹² The FGS perceived this as a direct violation of Somalia's sovereignty, triggering a swift diplomatic backlash. In response, Ethiopia was excluded from the post-ATMIS mission, and plans were announced for the full withdrawal of Ethiopian forces—both ATMIS and bilateral—by December 2024.¹³ These developments prompted Somalia to strengthen ties with Egypt, Ethiopia's regional rival, resulting in a defense pact, military aid, and Egypt's proposal to deploy troops under the post-ATMIS framework.^{14,15} However, Egypt's broader regional ambitions—particularly its longstanding Nile water dispute with Ethiopia—have added layers of complexity to the post-ATMIS transition. These geopolitical tensions contributed to delays in planning for AUSSOM, which, while *de jure* operational as of January 1, 2025, remains incomplete, with both funding and troop composition still unfinalized.

Seeking to de-escalate rising tensions and stave off an end-of-year deadline, Türkiye facilitated last-minute talks on December 12 that culminated in the Ankara Declaration. The agreement replaced the contentious MoU with a framework reaffirming Somalia's sovereignty while addressing Ethiopia's aspirations for sea access, though ambiguities in the communiqué—particularly regarding Ethiopia's naval ambitions—left critical issues unresolved. Despite these uncertainties, the Ankara talks significantly improved relations. Somalia and Ethiopia have since restored full diplomatic ties, and Ethiopia's inclusion in AUSSOM now seems almost certain, alleviating immediate concerns about a wholesale withdrawal of Ethiopian forces. However, the historically fraught relationship between the two countries casts uncertainty over the longevity of this renewed cooperation. The upcoming technical negotiations on Ethiopia's access to the sea will be a decisive test for this fragile accord, with failure to resolve the issue likely to reignite tensions.

III. Model Predictions: Evaluating District-Level Vulnerabilities

Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia reflects a complex interplay between advancing national interests and playing a critical role in containing al-Shabaab. While Ethiopia's integration into AUSSOM resolves immediate uncertainties, it also introduces new challenges to the mission's operational framework. Initially excluded from AUSSOM's planning process, Ethiopia's late inclusion has forced adjustments to troop deployments and base allocations, as its previously assigned forces were already redistributed among other troop-contributing countries. These operational hurdles are further complicated by political dynamics, with the FGS seeking to curtail Ethiopia's influence due to its extensive military presence and close ties with FMS administrations. As a result, localized withdrawals in specific districts are likely, raising concerns about potential security gaps. This study examines the risks posed by these anticipated drawdowns and their broader implications during this critical and fragile transition.

Methodology

The study adopts a dual-method approach, combining field research with advanced machine learning techniques, to evaluate district-level vulnerabilities and the potential security implications of Ethiopian forces' exit. By integrating conflict data, mapping, and scenario-based analysis, the methodology provides robust, data-driven projections of risks in 14 districts across four regions—Gedo, Bay, Bakool, and Hiiraan—that are currently stabilized by Ethiopian forces.

A key part of this approach was a district mapping exercise conducted across Jubaland, South West, and HirShabelle states. This fieldwork provided valuable insights into local dynamics, including the distribution of government control, al-Shabaab influence, and clan-led uprisings. Through an in-depth analysis of both district centers and rural areas—critical factors shaping governance and security—the mapping captured the layered realities of Somalia's security landscape. This approach ensured the machine learning model reflected real-world conditions, offering an accurate assessment of risks across districts with varying levels of stability.

Building on this fieldwork, the model was developed using a dataset of 3,229 conflict-related incidents spanning nearly five years, from January 1, 2020, to September 15, 2024.¹⁶ This dataset captured key details of each incident, including instigators, targets, precise locations (down to the village or town level), fatalities, and whether events occurred in district centers or rural areas. **To address challenges in ascertaining boundaries for newer districts and ensure consistency in categorizing conflict-related incidents, pre-1991 district boundaries were utilized, grouping newer districts, such as Buurdhubo in Jubaland and Berdale in South West, along with any associated ENDF presence, under their respective parent districts.** Of the 3,229 incidents, 2,942 were recorded in districts with Ethiopian forces present, while 287 occurred in districts without Ethiopian or other multinational military presence. The inclusion of districts without ENDF or other multinational force, such as Buale, Saakow, Tiyeglow, and Sablaale—areas fully controlled by al-Shabaab—was critical in providing a comparative perspective. This approach allowed the model to analyze both the relative stability maintained by ENDF and the vulnerabilities in areas lacking external forces. By contrasting these dynamics, the model highlighted the indispensable role of Ethiopian forces in maintaining stability and illuminated how their withdrawal could shift the balance of power, particularly in districts heavily reliant on their presence for security.

To enhance predictive accuracy, the model incorporated several key features derived from field data. In machine learning, features represent variables the model uses to identify patterns and make predictions. Each selected feature reflected critical dimensions of Somalia's security landscape and the potential implications of ENDF withdrawal. These include:

- **Ethiopian Forces Presence:** A binary variable indicating whether ENDF forces are currently present in a district. This feature was central to the analysis, as the presence—or absence—of ENDF forces directly relates to the core question the model sought to address: the implications of ENDF withdrawal on the risk of militant takeover in these districts.

- **Al-Shabaab Control Level:** A continuous variable measuring the extent of al-Shabaab’s control within a district. Higher levels of militant influence strongly correlated with increased instability risks, especially in the absence of ENDF forces.
- **Government District Center Control:** This variable indicates whether the government controls the district center, a key administrative and governance hub. Control of these centers significantly impacts overall district stability.

To capture the nuanced interplay between these variables, the model integrated interaction terms. For instance, the *ENDF Presence and Government District Center Control* interaction quantified how ENDF forces bolstered government stability in district centers—and critically, what their absence would signify for government control over these strategic hubs. Similarly, the *ENDF Presence and Al-Shabaab's Control Level* interaction assessed how ENDF deployments counterbalanced al-Shabaab’s influence, acting as a barrier to militant expansion into district centers even when al-Shabaab exhibited dominance in surrounding rural areas—and crucially, what their absence would imply for risk levels within a district. These interactions allowed the model to simulate shifts in power dynamics following ENDF withdrawal, providing insights into potential expansions of militant influence.

The model employed a Random Forest algorithm, an advanced machine learning technique designed to analyze complex datasets by constructing multiple decision trees and aggregating their predictions for improved accuracy. Following rigorous training, the model generated two key outputs: the current risk of instability in each district with ENDF troops present and the projected risk if ENDF troops were withdrawn. Since ENDF forces remain deployed and their withdrawal has not yet occurred, a simulation was conducted by modifying the “Ethiopian Forces Presence” feature from “Yes” to “No”, enabling the model to predict vulnerabilities under hypothetical conditions. Validation metrics demonstrated the model’s robustness, **with a Mean Squared Error (MSE) of 13.79 and an R-squared value of 0.9823, indicating strong predictive accuracy.** By integrating field research with advanced machine learning, this comprehensive methodology offers a detailed, data-driven evaluation of the security gaps likely to emerge from ENDF withdrawal. The findings are alarming: ENDF withdrawal is projected to result in near-total militant control in most districts analyzed, with the most severe impacts anticipated in South West State and Jubaland.

South West State: The Epicenter of Risk

South West State stands out as the most precarious FMS, with ENDF already operating under alarmingly high risks of al-Shabaab dominance in seven out of the eight districts. Current risk levels, ranging from 60.28% to 92.85%, illustrate the substantial foothold al-Shabaab retains even in the presence of ENDF. However, a withdrawal of Ethiopian forces would escalate these risks dramatically, with probabilities surging to between 96.23% and 98.13%, signaling an almost inevitable shift to near-total militant control. This stark contrast highlights the dual reality of ENDF’s role in South West State: while their presence offers only limited containment, they remain an essential barrier against full al-Shabaab control. The state’s reliance on ENDF is particularly evident in districts like Hudur, Buur Hakaba, Waajid, Qansax Dheere, and Diinsoor, where ENDF prevents al-Shabaab from gaining full control. However, the narrow margin between risks under

ENDF presence and absence highlights the fragility of this stability, as the likelihood of a complete takeover becomes nearly inevitable upon ENDF withdrawal.

Hudur district exemplifies this fragility, with the model projecting an alarming 98.13% risk of al-Shabaab takeover if ENDF were to withdraw, effectively guaranteeing militant control upon their departure. However, even with ENDF deployed, Hudur faces a high-risk level of 89.40%, reflecting its strategic isolation and the entrenched influence of al-Shabaab. Hudur town, the district center, remains the only area under government control, with al-Shabaab dominating 90-95% of the district and all key roads, leaving the town almost entirely reliant on ENDF for security. The district's vulnerability is compounded by its proximity to Tiyeeglow, fully controlled by al-Shabaab since ENDF's 2016 withdrawal. Tiyeeglow's district center lies just approximately 90 kilometers from Hudur town, providing militants with a strategic base for expanding their influence. Historical precedent reinforces the model's dire predictions: in 2013, an unplanned ENDF withdrawal from Hudur led to an immediate militant takeover, triggering mass displacement as thousands of residents fled the district. This scenario could easily repeat if ENDF were to exit, as Somali forces currently lack the capacity to secure the district independently, highlighting the district's reliance on ENDF to prevent a repeat of such an outcome.

Buur Hakaba, Diinsoor, and Qansax Dheere exhibit similar vulnerabilities, with projected risks surging to 97.96%, 97.49%, and 97.86%, respectively, in the absence of ENDF. These districts are characterized by extensive al-Shabaab control over roads and rural areas, while government authority remains confined to district centers. In Buur Hakaba and Diinsoor, ENDF forces under ATMIS are essential for maintaining stability, though their influence is limited to the immediate vicinity of district centers. Diinsoor, in particular, faces acute isolation, with no secure road access and all movement in and out of the district reliant on air transport. This severe isolation, coupled with al-Shabaab's control of over 90% of the district, makes the collapse of government authority in Diinsoor town highly probable if ENDF withdraws. Similarly, Buur Hakaba's vulnerability is compounded by its proximity to al-Shabaab-controlled territories in Lower Shabelle. These districts' projected near-total takeover underscores their dependence on ENDF to sustain even minimal government presence. Without ENDF, local security forces would struggle to retain control, paving the way for al-Shabaab to expand its hold.

Baidoa district, South West State's de-facto capital, faces a significant and precarious security threat, as highlighted by the model's projections. The risk of al-Shabaab takeover surges dramatically from 60.28% with ENDF presence to 96.99% if ENDF withdraws—a sharp 36.71 percentage point increase. This stark rise reflects the district's political and strategic significance, making it a high-priority target for al-Shabaab. The district hosts two ENDF bases, one under ATMIS in Baidoa city and another operated by bilateral ENDF forces in Berdale. These military installations, coupled with the presence of Somali National Army (SNA) and South West State forces, make Baidoa a relatively fortified area within an otherwise highly vulnerable region.

However, despite this concentration of forces, Baidoa's security remains fragile. The district is surrounded by al-Shabaab-dominated territories, including Wajid, Hudur, and Qansax Dheere. Al-Shabaab's control over key roads leading to and from Baidoa presents a critical risk of isolation. If ENDF were to withdraw, resupplying and reinforcing Baidoa would become severely restricted,

effectively trapping government forces within the city. This isolation would weaken Baidoa's defenses, making it increasingly vulnerable to a prolonged siege and potential collapse. Therefore, the model's projections underscore Baidoa's precarious position, suggesting that while it may resist militant takeover longer than other districts in South West State, its security hinges heavily on external forces. The cascading effects of ENDF withdrawal, including the likely collapse of surrounding districts, would further weaken Baidoa's already fragile defensive capacity, jeopardizing not only the city's security but also the broader stability of South West State.

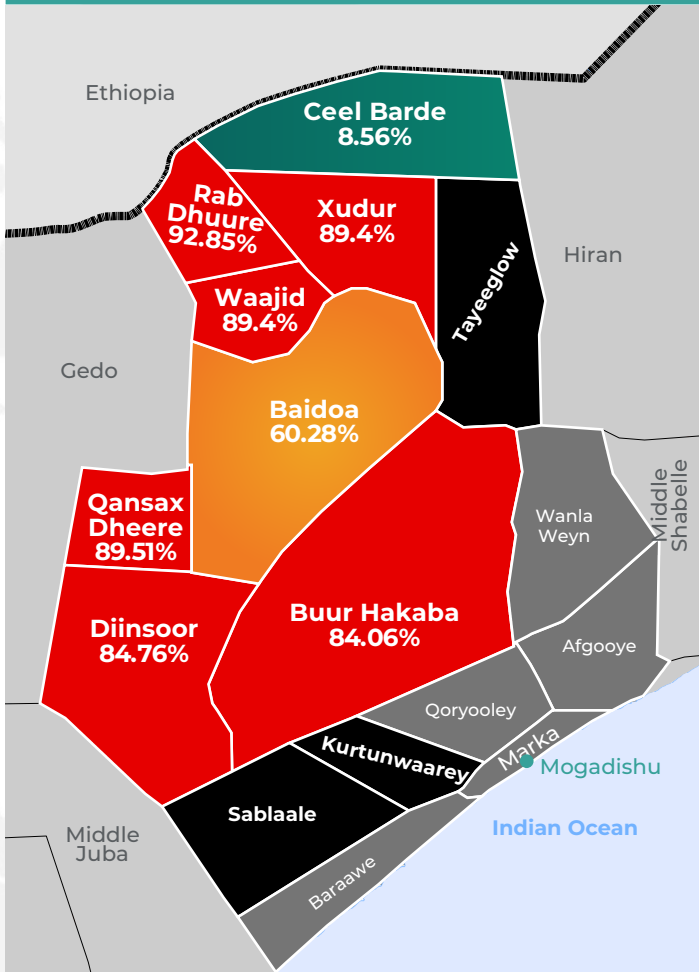
Meanwhile, Rab Dhuure exhibits a unique security profile, with the model projecting a 92.85% likelihood of al-Shabaab takeover even with ENDF present, rising modestly to 96.23% following their withdrawal. This marginal increase of 3.38% reflects the entrenched militant control over more than 95% of the district, including Rab Dhuure town, its administrative center, and critical infrastructure such as major roads. The minimal variation in risk highlights that while ENDF provides some stability, it does not substantially shift the deeply entrenched security dynamics of the district. This can be partly explained by Rab Dhuure's strategic location along the Ethiopia-Somalia border, which introduces mitigating factors that blunt the full impact of an ENDF withdrawal. For instance, the nearby northern town of Yeed, which hosts an ENDF base and remains under government control, serves as a crucial buffer. Even if ENDF withdraws, Yeed's proximity to Ethiopian forces across the border restricts al-Shabaab's operational reach, creating a partial buffer against full territorial dominance. Nevertheless, Rab Dhuure remains deeply vulnerable, as al-Shabaab's pervasive control and the government's limited authority severely constrain local forces' capacity to reclaim or stabilize the area without significant external support.

Ceel Barde, by contrast, presents a unique case in South West State, with the lowest baseline risk of 8.56% under ENDF presence. However, the model projects a dramatic increase to 62.22% upon ENDF withdrawal, representing the largest risk differential among the districts at 49.58 percentage points. Ceel Barde's lower initial risk is largely attributable to its location on the Ethiopia-Somalia border, where ENDF bilateral bases in Ato and Ceel Barde town exert a stabilizing influence. The district's relatively low al-Shabaab presence further contributes to its manageable security conditions. Nevertheless, the significant risk increase following ENDF withdrawal underscores the fragility of this stability, suggesting that without sustained external support, Ceel Barde could quickly become a focal point for militant expansion. This sharp post-withdrawal increase illustrates that even districts with relatively stable conditions are highly vulnerable in the absence of Ethiopian forces.

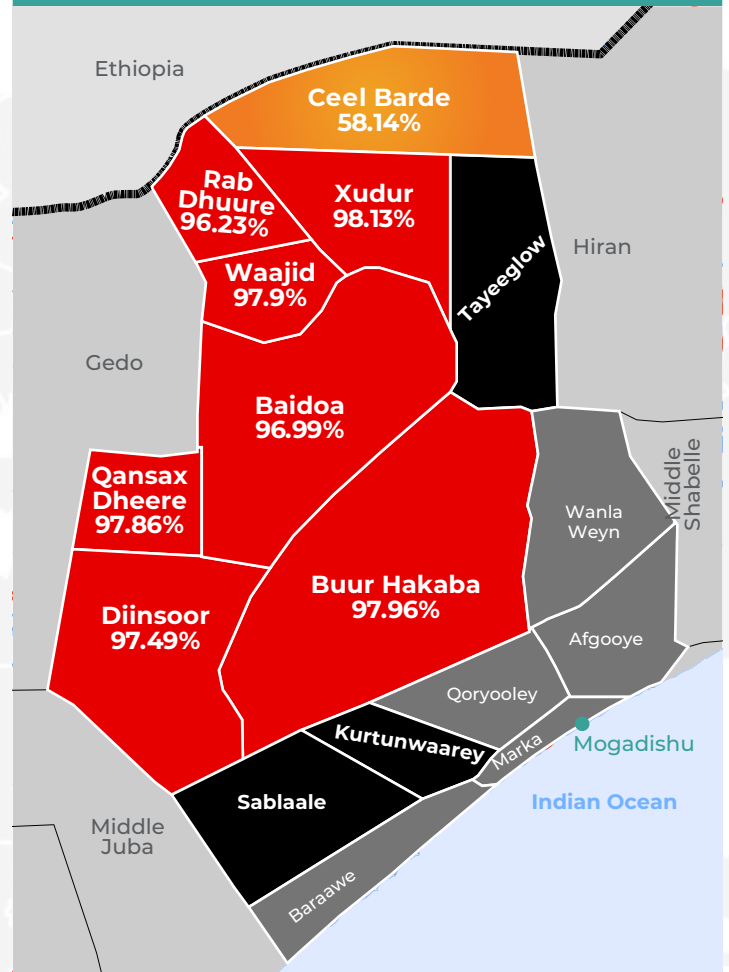
Finally, South West State's reliance on ENDF is exacerbated by the limited capacity of local militias to counter al-Shabaab effectively. Unlike other FMS, such as HirShabelle and Galmudug, where clan-based militias like the Macawisleys have mobilized against militant dominance, South West lacks an equivalent force capable of mounting a unified resistance. While localized groups, such as the Leysan clan militia in Berdale, offer sporadic support, their focus remains on protecting narrow clan-specific interests rather than contributing to broader, coordinated counterinsurgency efforts. This fragmented and reactive approach not only weakens the overall security framework but also leaves districts overwhelmingly dependent on ENDF for even minimal stability. In the absence of external support, these vulnerabilities would likely intensify, creating an environment ripe for widespread militant expansion and further eroding the fragile security landscape.

DISTRICT RISK SCORES SOUTH WEST STATE

RISK OF TAKEOVER WITH ENDF PRESENCE



RISK OF TAKEOVER IF ENDF WITHDRAWS



PERCENTAGE RISK DIFFERENCE

Xudur	8.73%
Buur Hakaba	13.9%
Waajid	8.5%
Qansax Dheere	8.35%
Diinsoor	12.73%
Baidoa	36.71%
Rab Dhuure	3.38%
Ceel Barde	49.58%

KEY

- 0-35%
- 35-70%
- Above 70%
- Fully Controlled by Al-Shabab

Jubaland's Gedo: Containment Amid Persistent Vulnerabilities

Jubaland's Gedo region presents a distinct security challenge compared to South West State. While South West is marked by widespread militant dominance, Gedo serves as a containment front where Ethiopian and Kenyan forces, supported by Somali security forces, act as the primary line of defense against al-Shabaab's expansion from its headquarters in Middle Juba. However, this precarious balance is heavily reliant on ENDF in four districts, and their withdrawal would likely expose Gedo, and indeed Jubaland, to heightened risks. The four districts analyzed—Baardheere, Luuq, Garbahaarey, and Doolow—highlight varying levels of vulnerability shaped by geography, local dynamics, and strategic positioning.

Baardheere stands out as one of the most vulnerable districts in Gedo, with the model projecting a sharp increase in the likelihood of al-Shabaab takeover, rising from 84.58% under Ethiopian forces' presence to a near-total risk of 98.01% following their withdrawal. This places Baardheere among the highest-risk districts analyzed, reflecting a combination of entrenched vulnerabilities and its precarious geographic position. The district's geographic context significantly amplifies its risks. As the largest district in Gedo, Baardheere is surrounded by militant strongholds, including Saakow in Middle Juba, just 85 kilometers away. This proximity leaves Baardheere encircled, with government control limited to the district center and its immediate surroundings. The sharp escalation in projected risk underscores the critical role Ethiopian forces play in preventing a total collapse of government presence in Baardheere. However, even with Ethiopian forces present, the district faces elevated risks, emphasizing Ethiopian forces act primarily as a deterrent force that limits militant advances rather than a stabilizing presence. Without Ethiopian forces, Baardheere's fragile security environment would likely unravel, making complete militant control of the district almost inevitable.

Luuq faces similar vulnerabilities, with a projected takeover risk escalating to 96.20% in the absence of Ethiopian forces. With Ethiopian forces present, the model estimates a 70.15% risk level, highlighting the defensive contributions of two key Ethiopian bases in the district: one in Luuq town and another in Yurkud along the Baidoa-Luuq corridor. This corridor, a vital transit route, is frequently targeted by al-Shabaab to disrupt movement and trade, making it a hotspot for militant activity. While these bases play a critical role in securing the corridor, limiting militant disruptions, and curbing al-Shabaab's influence in key areas, much of Luuq's territory beyond these control points remains under al-Shabaab's shadow. Thus, with Ethiopian forces acting as a vital constraint on militant advances, as reflected in the 26.05 percentage-point increase in takeover risk in the absence of Ethiopian forces, the district is heavily dependent on Ethiopian troops for security. Without their presence, militants would almost certainly exploit the resulting vacuum, seizing control of the Baidoa-Luuq corridor and overrunning the district center, thus making an al-Shabaab takeover of Luuq highly probable.

Meanwhile, Garbahaarey, as the regional capital of Gedo, faces a high-risk profile due to its administrative and strategic importance, making it a key target for al-Shabaab. Ethiopian forces currently anchor the district's defenses with two key bases: one within Garbahaarey town and another in Buurdhubo, located 40 kilometers southeast. These installations, combined with a substantial presence of Somali security forces, create a defensive perimeter that protects the district

center from al-Shabaab advances, particularly from the militant-controlled areas of Baardheere to the south and Bay to the east.

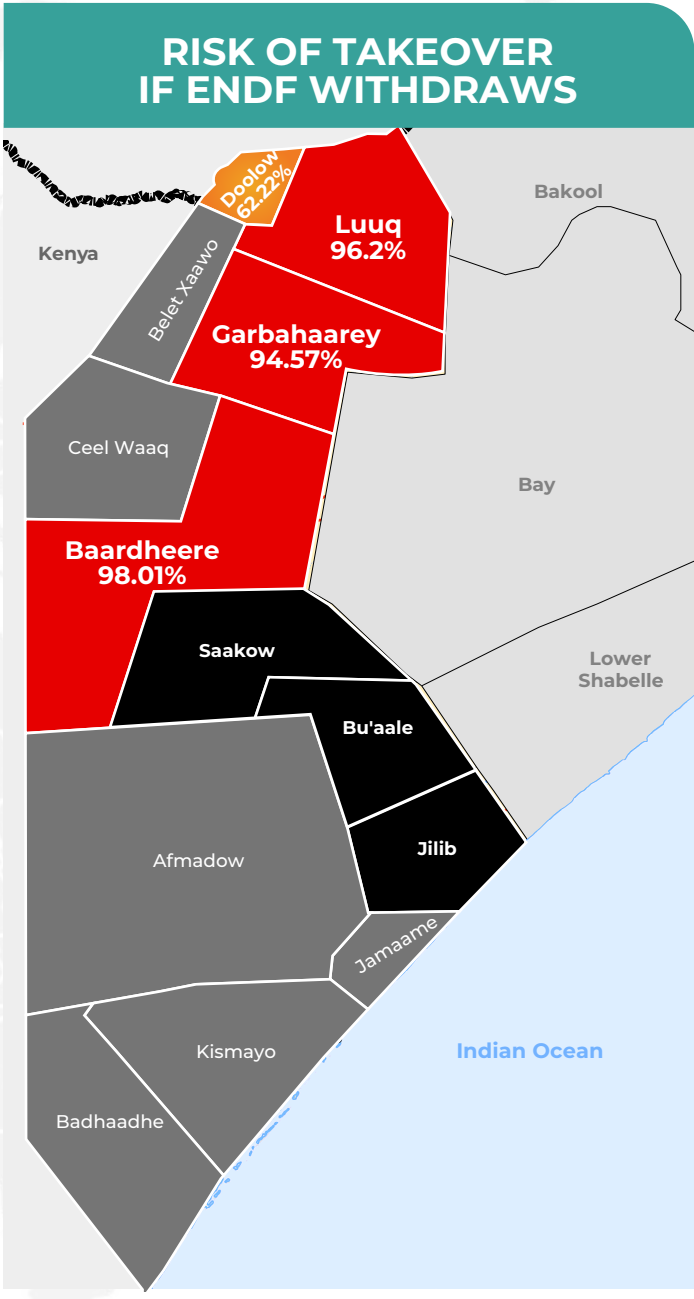
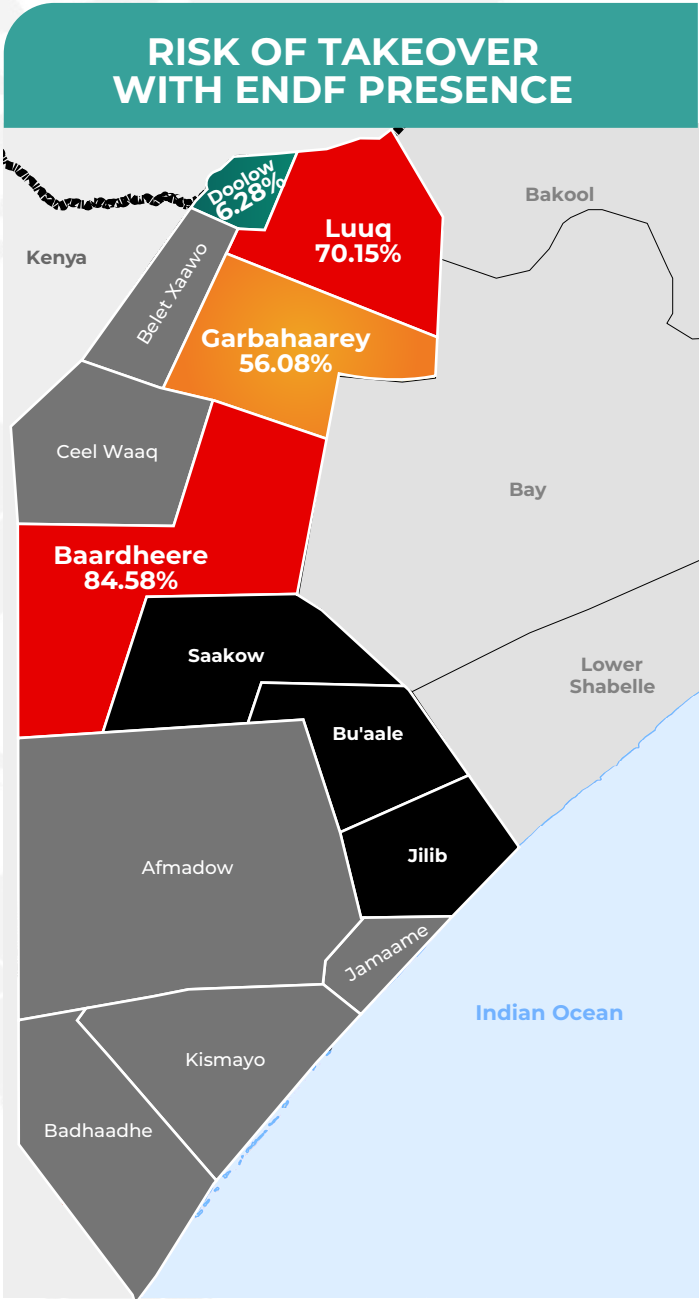
This fortification is reflected in the model's current medium risk projection of 56.08% for an al-Shabaab takeover, emphasizing the critical contributions of the Ethiopian bases and Somali forces. However, this risk escalates dramatically to 94.57% in the absence of Ethiopian forces, marking a 38.49 percentage-point increase. This significant rise mirrors projections for Baidoa, another key regional capital, highlighting the indispensable role external troops play in securing such strategically vital locations. Similar to Baidoa, the heightened projected risk for Garbahaarey likely results from the cascading effects of Ethiopian withdrawal, which would leave the district vulnerable to encirclement by al-Shabaab. A full withdrawal could trigger the sequential fall of Luuq, Baardheere, and Qansax Dheere, leaving Buurdhubo exposed and Garbahaarey town isolated. This isolation would cripple defenses, sever supply lines, and enable al-Shabaab to advance from multiple directions, overwhelming any remaining local forces and leading to the district's likely collapse.

However, Doolow, as a lower-risk district within Gedo, presents a contrasting profile with a relatively minimal model-estimated takeover risk of 6.28% under Ethiopian forces' presence. This low risk is largely attributed to its strategic location along the Somalia-Ethiopia border, with Doolow town functioning as a key border hub. Ethiopian forces stationed in the town and across the border provide a strong layer of security, effectively deterring al-Shabaab activity and enabling the government to maintain dominant control over the district. Militant movements are mostly constrained to peripheral areas, with an asymmetric presence along the Doolow-Luuq road. However, the model projects a sharp rise in takeover risk to 62.22% if Ethiopian forces withdraw, reflecting a medium-risk scenario. Nonetheless—and despite Doolow's strategic location offering inherent advantages—the absence of Ethiopian forces would significantly weaken the district's defensive capacity, enabling militants to exploit vulnerabilities along critical routes and expand their influence.

That said, even with a medium risk profile, the overall risk in Doolow remains manageable and can be attributed to two key factors. First, the district's strategic location along the Somalia-Ethiopia border provides a significant advantage. Doolow town benefits from its proximity to Ethiopian forces stationed across the border—similar to Yeed in Rab Dhuure district—which serves as a partial buffer against militant encroachment. This proximity prevents al-Shabaab from fully taking control of the district center in a post-withdrawal context, underpinning a level of stability unique to Doolow among the four districts in Jubaland. Secondly, given the district's current government control and border dynamics, Ethiopian forces withdrawing from neighboring districts are likely to pass through Doolow on their way to Ethiopia. This movement would likely include Somali forces retreating alongside them. In previous withdrawals from districts such as Hudur and Tiyeeglow, Somali forces have typically relocated to safer districts with departing international troops, largely due to their limited capacity to maintain control independently. As a result, the concentration of Somali forces in Doolow, combined with its proximity to Ethiopian reinforcements across the border, would strengthen the district's defensive posture and reduce the immediate risk of a militant takeover compared to other districts in Gedo.

DISTRICT RISK SCORES

JUBALAND STATE



PERCENTAGE RISK DIFFERENCE

Luuq	26.05%
Garbahaarey	38.49%
Baardheere	13.43%
Doolow	55.94%

KEY

- 0-35%
- 35-70%
- Above 70%
- Fully Controlled by Al-Shabab

The projections for Gedo underscore the critical role Ethiopian forces play in mitigating vulnerabilities across districts with varying levels of risk. Their withdrawal would have significant consequences, with high-risk districts like Baardheere and Luuq likely falling swiftly to al-Shabaab. This would, in turn, intensify pressure on Garbahaarey, leaving the regional capital isolated and increasingly susceptible to militant advances. Even in relatively stable districts like Doolow, the absence of Ethiopian forces would create opportunities for militants to exploit, threatening to destabilize one of Gedo's few secure areas. Thus, without external forces, Gedo's interconnected vulnerabilities would worsen, enabling militants to exploit weak points and expand their influence across the region.

Hir-Shabelle's Hiiran Region: Resilient Through Layered Defense

Hiiraan, one of the two regions constituting Hir-Shabelle State, emerges as the least vulnerable among the four regions analyzed. The districts of Bulo Burte and Belet Weyne exhibit relatively low risks of al-Shabaab takeover, with the model estimating a 52.83% risk for Bulo Burte and 37.93% for Belet Weyne if ENDF were to withdraw, making these districts the least susceptible to militant control compared to the other 14 districts. Unlike other regions where ENDF serves as a critical stabilizing force, the projections indicate that Hiiraan's security dynamics rely on a layered defense, with ENDF playing a supportive rather than indispensable role in maintaining stability.

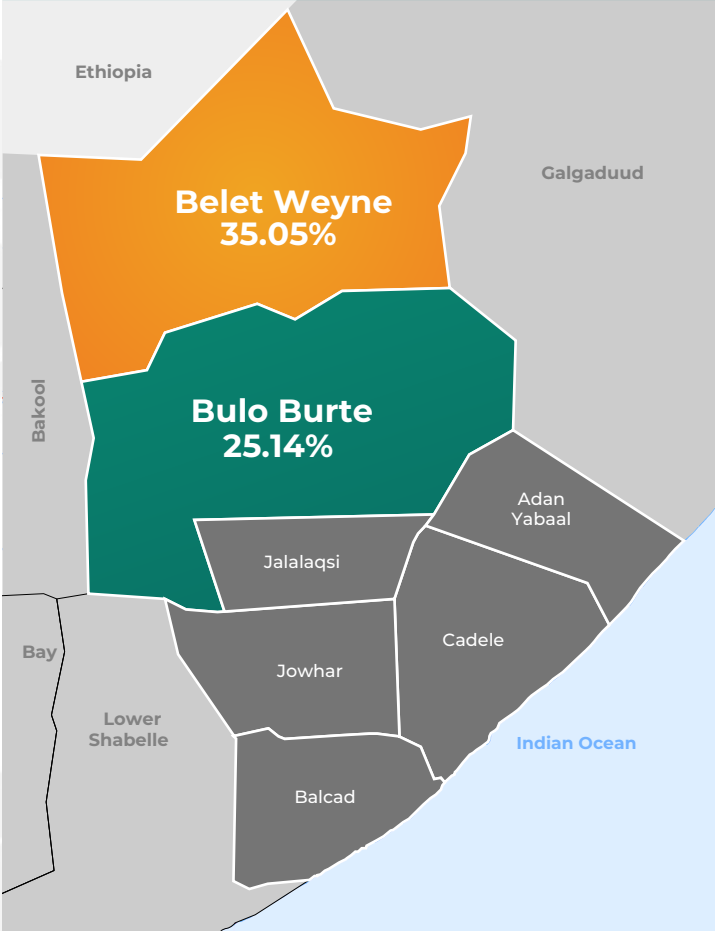
This layered security structure in Hiiraan is evident in the moderate increases in projected risks following ENDF withdrawal, which reflect the district's relative ability to manage security challenges. For instance, in Bulo Burte, the model estimates a 25.14% takeover risk with ENDF present, rising to 52.83% in their absence—a 27.69-percentage-point increase. While notable, this projection still places Bulo Burte within a medium-risk category, emphasizing the district's capacity to maintain a degree of stability even without ENDF. This capacity was demonstrated in August 2023 when ENDF forces stationed in Maxaas, within Bulo Burte district, vacated their forward operating base (FOB) as part of ATMIS's third-phase withdrawal, leaving Halgan as the district's sole ENDF base. Despite this withdrawal and the transfer of security responsibilities to Somali security forces, the district experienced no significant increase in al-Shabaab attacks or attempts to reclaim the area in the subsequent months.¹⁷ This stability, achieved in the absence of ENDF forces, underscores the resilience of Bulo Burte's local security framework and aligns closely with the model's projections.

Similarly, Belet Weyne presents an even stronger case for Hiiraan's security framework. The model estimates a 35.08% takeover risk with ENDF present, rising only modestly by 2.88 percentage points to 37.93% in their absence. This finding contrasts sharply with other regional capitals, such as Garbahaarey and Baidoa, where projected risks escalate significantly following ENDF withdrawal, underscoring the distinct security dynamics in Belet Weyne. Notably, despite hosting multiple ENDF bases—one under ATMIS in Belet Weyne town and three bilateral bases in Feer Feer, Aabuley, and Jawil—the minimal increase in projected risk following the withdrawal of forces from these bases suggests that Belet Weyne's stability is not heavily dependent on external military support. Instead, its security framework is underpinned by local forces, particularly the Macawisleys, whose active role has been instrumental in maintaining control, safeguarding strategic areas, and countering militant advances.

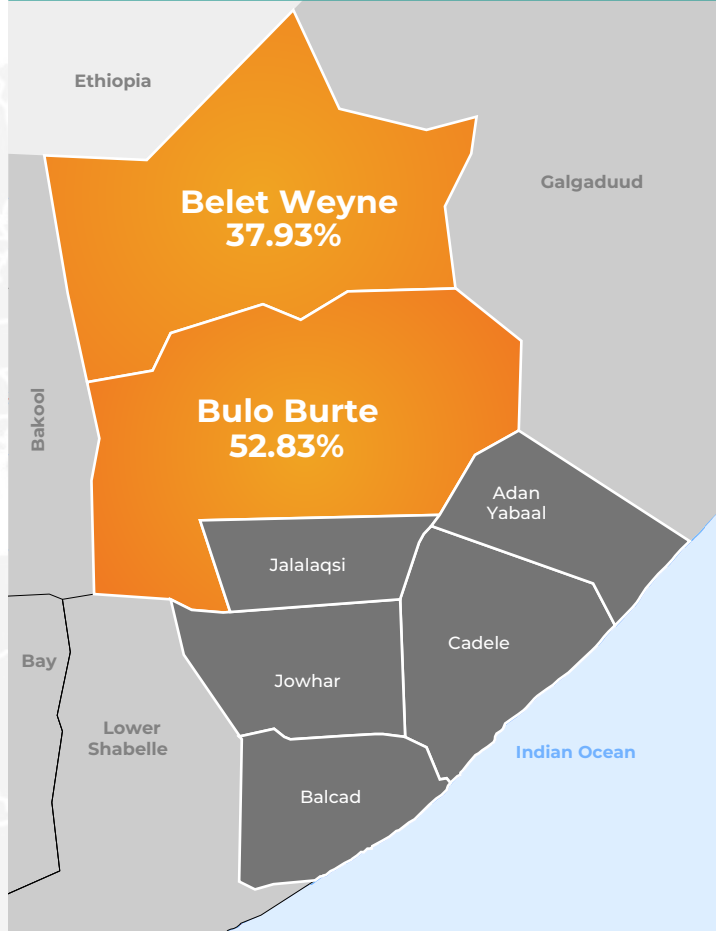
DISTRICT RISK SCORES

HIRSHABELLE STATE

RISK OF TAKEOVER WITH ENDF PRESENCE



RISK OF TAKEOVER IF ENDF WITHDRAWS



PERCENTAGE RISK DIFFERENCE

Belet Weyne	2.88%
Bulo Burte	27.69%

KEY

- 0-35%
- 35-70%
- Above 70%
- Fully Controlled by Al-Shabab

In conclusion, the model's findings for Hiiraan reveal a distinct security dynamic. Unlike other regions where ENDF presence is critical for maintaining stability, the model's relatively low vulnerability scores for Bulo Burte and Belet Weyne post-ENDF withdrawal highlight the effectiveness of a localized security landscape. This landscape, shaped by Somali security forces, the Macawisleys, and geographical factors, demonstrates the capacity of these local actors to effectively address security gaps and sustain control even in the absence of ENDF.

IV. Unpacking Implications: Ethiopia, AUSSOM, and Egypt's Role in Somalia

The research findings underscore the critical role Ethiopian forces play in curbing militant expansion, particularly in South West's Bay and Bakool regions and Jubaland's Gedo region. Their withdrawal is projected to significantly increase the risk of militant dominance, potentially driving several key districts toward near-total control by al-Shabaab. This risk is compounded by the fraught transition to AUSSOM, with Ethiopia's unclear role in the mission complicating the process following the diplomatic fallout from the MoU. Although Turkish mediation has improved bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries, unresolved issues—slated for discussion in forthcoming technical negotiations—continue to cloud Ethiopia's long-term involvement. However, recent high-level engagements and the resumption of diplomatic relations suggest Ethiopia's inclusion in the evolving stabilization mission, ensuring its continued presence in Somalia.

The extent of Ethiopia's involvement, however, will likely depend on a combination of strategic imperatives and political considerations. Strategically, as the model indicates, Ethiopian forces have been crucial in stabilizing regions such as Gedo, Hiiraan, and South West State, where their presence has significantly curbed militant influence, underscoring the importance of their continued deployment. Politically, however, Somalia's federal government is increasingly cautious of Ethiopia's influence, viewing its extensive presence and strong ties to FMS administrations as a challenge to its federal authority. For instance, Ethiopia's recent support for President Ahmed Madobe, who is at odds with the federal government, has bolstered Jubaland's resistance to federal authority, further complicating Mogadishu's efforts to consolidate control over the state. These overlapping dynamics place the FGS in a challenging position, requiring it to navigate a delicate balance between its security priorities and political objectives.

In this context, the FGS is expected to approve Ethiopia's participation in the new mission but impose constraints in terms of size, scope, and operational focus. Four scenarios outline the potential configurations: The first scenario envisions Ethiopian forces withdrawing from Hiiraan and Gedo, focusing their operations exclusively in South West State. The second scenario retains Ethiopian forces in Hiiraan and South West State but withdraws from Gedo. The third scenario maintains Ethiopian forces in Gedo and South West State, while exiting out of Hiiraan. Finally, the fourth scenario, the most extensive, would see Ethiopian forces continuing their presence across Gedo, South West, and Hiiraan with minimal changes.

The FGS appears to favor a more restrictive version of the first scenario, which includes the additional withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Baidoa. While this strategy ostensibly seeks to preserve Ethiopia's stabilizing role in the Bay and Bakool regions—areas where Ethiopian forces

have extensive operational experience—it is also heavily shaped by political considerations. Specifically, the FGS’s preference for Ethiopia’s withdrawal from Baidoa, potentially replaced by Ugandan forces, reflects an effort to weaken Ethiopia’s strong ties with the South West State administration, which Mogadishu also views as a challenge to federal authority. However, Ethiopia, supported by the South West and Jubaland administrations, is likely to resist significant reductions in its troop presence or geographical footprint, favoring the fourth scenario. This divergence between the FGS’s preferences and Ethiopia’s strategic objectives underscores the ongoing uncertainty surrounding Ethiopia’s future role in Somalia.

This ad-hoc approach to troop contributions and persistent ambiguities reflects broader structural challenges within AUSSOM, raising serious concerns about its capacity to address the operational and strategic void left by ATMIS. The mission’s planned deployment of 12,626 uniformed personnel—a reduction of nearly 8,000 compared to ATMIS’s initial strength—significantly constrains its operational capacity. According to the original Concept of Operations (CONOPS), AUSSOM will operate from 14 main bases and nine tactical operation bases (TOBs), previously referred to as forward operating bases (FOBs). The allocation of these bases provides insight into the mission’s strategic priorities: Sector 1 will focus on Mogadishu and the broader Banadir region, Sector 2 on Jubaland with key bases in Kismayo and Garbahaarey, Sector 3 on South West State with a presence in Baidoa, Xudur, and Waajid, and Sector 4 on Hir-Shabelle and parts of Galmudug, including Jowhar, Belet Weyne, Bulo Burte, and Dhuusamareeb.

While this leaner structure seeks to preserve strategic footholds, the exclusion of several Ethiopian-manned bases introduces critical vulnerabilities, particularly in high-risk districts. In South West State, ENDF bases that underpin government control of districts centers like Qansax Dheere, Buur Hakaba, Ceel Barde, and Yeed are absent from AUSSOM’s base plan. While border-adjacent towns such as Ceel Barde and Yeed may retain some stability due to their proximity to Ethiopia, the risks in Qansax Dheere and Buur Hakaba are significantly higher and more pronounced. Projections indicate a dramatic rise in the likelihood of al-Shabaab takeovers—97.96% in Buur Hakaba and 97.86% in Qansax Dheere—following Ethiopian withdrawal. The potential loss of these districts carries severe strategic consequences, including the disruption of critical supply routes and the isolation of Baidoa, triggering cascading effects that strain even districts where AUSSOM intends to maintain bases, ultimately threatening the mission’s overall effectiveness.

These vulnerabilities illustrate the strain of reduced troop numbers on AUSSOM’s mission. The diminished force levels will lead to reduced troop densities at each base, severely limiting AUSSOM’s capacity to secure expansive territories and counter entrenched al-Shabaab influence. For instance, Waajid, despite the support of approximately 1,000 Ethiopian troops, still faces a high takeover risk of 89.4%. Transitioning to a TOB under AUSSOM, with significantly fewer troops, would only heighten this risk, critically weakening the district’s defensive posture and leaving it increasingly vulnerable to militant advances. This pattern is likely to be replicated across other districts, where the deterrence provided by larger Ethiopian contingents will be undermined by AUSSOM’s scaled-back presence. These operational vulnerabilities are compounded by financial constraints that threaten AUSSOM’s sustainability. The European Union’s €60 million allocation offers only short-term relief, barely covering troop stipends, while shifting U.S. priorities under the incoming Donald Trump presidency further undermine the long-term funding

commitments outlined in Resolution 2719. Together, these challenges raise serious concerns about AUSSOM's ability to fill the operational void left by ATMIS.

The potential deployment of Egyptian forces, while offering a partial response to Somalia's security challenges, introduces uncertainties rooted in Egypt's longstanding rivalry with Ethiopia. Although the Ankara détente and the resumption of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Somalia have reduced the immediate urgency for Egyptian deployments, the option remains viable as a means of retaining strategic leverage. Somalia appears to be gravitating toward a dual-deployment strategy, incorporating both Ethiopian and Egyptian forces, either under the AUSSOM framework or through bilateral arrangements. This approach reflects a calculated effort to manage uncertainty, balancing Ethiopia's critical stabilizing role with the contingency of scaling up Egyptian deployments should relations with Ethiopia deteriorate. However, this strategy entails significant risks. Deploying Egyptian forces in Somalia would, for the first time, position them close to Ethiopia's border—an arrangement likely to amplify sensitivities and potentially exacerbate regional tensions given their historical rivalry.

Beyond external troop deployments, Somalia's stability depends on addressing systemic weaknesses within its own security forces. The leaner AUSSOM configuration places significant trust in Somali forces to assume primary responsibility for security. However, these forces face persistent and structural challenges, including inadequate training, insufficient resources, and a fragmented operational structure, which severely constrain their ability to independently secure high-risk districts. These constraints are starkly reflected in the model's predictions, which already account for the current deployment of Somali forces. Unless significant improvements have been made since developing the model, these findings highlight critical gaps in their ability to stabilize volatile regions without sustained external support.

Worsening these structural deficiencies are escalating tensions between the federal government and FMS, particularly Jubaland, where political rifts and clashes have further weakened coordinated security efforts. The re-election of President Ahmed Madobe on November 25 has deepened existing rifts, with Jubaland accusing Mogadishu of undermining federalism in favor of centralization. Following Puntland's lead, Jubaland has suspended cooperation with the federal government, fracturing the national security framework that relies heavily on coordination between the FMS and the federal government. These growing divisions have taken on a securitized dimension, as evidenced by clashes in Ras Kambooni involving heavy artillery and conflicting narratives,¹⁸ and recent confrontations in Doolow, where Jubaland forces were reportedly supported by Ethiopian troops.¹⁹ These conflicts not only divert focus but also deplete resources that could otherwise be directed toward countering al-Shabaab. Instead of uniting against a shared threat, federal and regional forces remain locked in mutual conflict, further undermining coordinated security efforts.

This disunity offers al-Shabaab a significant strategic advantage, enabling the group to exploit governance gaps and political fragmentation to consolidate its influence further. The ongoing conflict between the FGS and Jubaland provides fertile ground for such exploitation, diverting critical attention and resources away from counterinsurgency efforts. For instance, the deployment of federal forces to Ras Kambooni—a location that has been under government control for over a

decade—illustrates how political disputes misdirect focus from high-risk militant strongholds. These misaligned priorities undermine Somalia’s broader security strategy, creating exploitable gaps that al-Shabaab leverages to solidify its foothold in contested regions with minimal resistance. In this fragmented context, marked by entrenched mistrust between the FGS and FMS, and with political tensions likely to persist throughout the remainder of the current FGS term, Somali forces remain critically underprepared to deliver the stabilization required to effectively counter al-Shabaab’s expanding influence.

V. Conclusion and Way Forward

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges Somalia faces as it transitions from ATMIS to AUSSOM, a process defined by ad-hoc arrangements, unclear force compositions—including uncertainty surrounding the role of Ethiopian forces—and the absence of a sustainable funding mechanism. For over a decade, Ethiopian forces have been a cornerstone of stability in Somalia’s most volatile districts, providing essential support in areas where Somali security forces and prior African Union missions have struggled to exert control.

Model-estimated district-level risks emphasize the critical role Ethiopian forces play in stabilizing Somalia’s most vulnerable regions. Their withdrawal would dramatically heighten the risk of militant dominance, with key districts facing near-total control by al-Shabaab. These risks are particularly acute in South West State and Jubaland’s Gedo region, where stability heavily depends on Ethiopian forces. In South West State, the model projects alarmingly high risks of militant takeover, with several districts, including Hudur, Waajid, Buur Hakaba, Diinsoor, and Baidoa, nearing near-total militant control. Similarly, in Jubaland’s Gedo region, Ethiopian forces act as a critical buffer against al-Shabaab’s expansion, particularly along essential transit corridors and in key districts such as Luuq, Baardheere, and Garbahaarey. Even relatively stable districts like Doolow, which benefit from cross-border dynamics, would face heightened pressures in their absence.

These risks are further exacerbated by the structural, financial, and operational limitations of AUSSOM. Unlike ATMIS, AUSSOM operates with significantly reduced troop numbers, and ambiguities surrounding Ethiopia’s role—including its thousands of forces deployed under bilateral arrangements—raise serious concerns about the mission’s capacity to address operational and strategic gaps. With a reduced strength of 12,626 personnel—nearly 8,000 fewer than ATMIS—AUSSOM faces substantial challenges in securing expansive territories, leaving high-risk districts increasingly exposed to militant advances. Additionally, AUSSOM’s base allocation under its Concept of Operations (CONOPS), while preserving some strategic footholds, excludes key districts currently stabilized by Ethiopian forces. If these exclusions are compounded by a transition driven by mission constraints or political expediency, security voids may emerge. These risks are particularly pronounced in Gedo and South West State, where the absence of Ethiopian forces could trigger cascading instability.

For instance, in Gedo, the model’s findings indicate that retaining Ethiopian forces in Baardheere, Luuq, and Garbahaarey is essential for preserving regional stability. Withdrawal from these districts would severely undermine Garbahaarey’s defenses, leaving it encircled and increasingly

vulnerable to militant advances. In South West State, the severe vulnerabilities across Bay and Bakool regions necessitate prioritizing ENDF presence in all districts. If drawdowns or reconfigurations become necessary, they should focus on the border districts of Ceel Barde and Rab Dhuure, where Ethiopian forces across the border could mitigate the risks of withdrawal. Reductions or withdrawals in other districts, such as Buur Hakaba, Qansax Dheere, or Hudur, would likely trigger cascading instability, jeopardizing Baidoa's defenses. Furthermore, altering the composition of security actors in Baidoa—such as replacing Ethiopian forces with troops from other contributing countries—could create vulnerabilities during the transition. These changes risk disrupting the established local dynamics maintained under ENDF's presence and would necessitate a period of adjustment for incoming forces to navigate the region's complex and volatile environment effectively.

Meanwhile, Somali security forces, expected to assume greater responsibility under AUSSOM, remain constrained by inadequate training, insufficient resources, and persistent political fragmentation. Adding to these vulnerabilities are escalating tensions between the FGS and FMS, particularly with Jubaland, which undermine the cohesion and coordination necessary for a unified counterinsurgency strategy. Collectively, these overlapping vulnerabilities weaken Somalia's ability to manage its security transition and expose critical gaps in the country's broader stabilization efforts.

Addressing these challenges and risks demands pragmatic solutions that balance immediate security needs with long-term stability:

- **Recalibrate Ethiopia-Somalia Relations:** For decades, Addis Ababa has prioritized its national security interests, using military and political leverage to influence Somalia's internal affairs. However, recent years have seen Somalia's federal government adopt a more assertive stance, challenging Ethiopia's historical dominance. This shift was evident in Somalia's strong response to the MoU, which included forging alliances with Ethiopia's regional rivals, rallying international support, and demanding the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops—a marked departure from its previously deferential approach. Thus, building on the Ankara Declaration and the resumption of full diplomatic relations, Ethiopia must transition from an asymmetrical relationship to one that engages Somalia as a sovereign and equal partner. For these renewed relations to hold, Ethiopia must commit to respecting Somalia's sovereignty and fostering collaboration on shared security, political, and economic challenges. This requires Ethiopia to clearly delineate its maritime ambitions, ensuring they align with Somalia's sovereignty while seeking alternative pathways for its naval aspirations.
- **Implement a Phased Withdrawal Strategy:** As the model highlights, Ethiopian forces are indispensable in stabilizing Somalia's most vulnerable regions, and their withdrawal would expose high-risk districts to militant control, creating immediate security vacuums. While recent improvements in Ethiopia-Somalia relations signal progress, the relationship has historically been fraught with tensions, raising uncertainties about the longevity of this renewed cooperation. To address potential risks from future tensions or Ethiopia's history of unilateral withdrawals, both countries should agree on a phased withdrawal plan as a

contingency measure. If tensions arise that necessitate withdrawal, the plan will prioritize the gradual withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, beginning with less volatile districts such as those in Hiiraan and select areas of Gedo, while retaining their presence in critical high-risk districts in South West State until an equivalent replacement force is deployed.

- **Strengthen Somali Security Forces through Improved Federal-FMS Relations:** Strengthening Somalia's security forces requires addressing the persistent discord between the federal government and member states. While ongoing efforts to train and equip security forces remain essential and warrant further investment, technical measures alone are insufficient to create a cohesive and effective force capable of confronting al-Shabaab. Long-term stability depends on anchoring the rebuilding of Somali security forces within a political settlement framework that fosters sustained collaboration between federal and regional authorities. In the immediate term, priorities must include de-escalating tensions between the FGS and Jubaland, where political divisions have recently escalated into military confrontations. Additionally, broader electoral and constitutional reforms, along with contentious governance issues, must be addressed through consultations with all FMSs, facilitating trust-building and serving as the foundation for a unified security architecture.
- **Strategic Deployment of External Forces:** If Egyptian forces are deployed, their integration alongside Ethiopian forces within AUSSOM will require careful planning and effective management to ensure operational cohesion and maximize overall effectiveness. Clear geographic delineations should be established to prevent overlaps and minimize friction. Ethiopian forces, with their extensive operational experience and deep understanding of local dynamics, should remain concentrated in high-risk areas where their expertise is critical. Conversely, Egyptian forces could be deployed to relatively stable zones, where they can provide support and capacity-building for Somali security forces.

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