

The GLOCEPS

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De-escalating the Jubaland Crisis to Secure Somalia and Stabilize the Horn of Africa

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Executive Summary

The Jubaland crisis has evolved from a federal–state dispute into a grave threat to Somali stability and a flashpoint for regional rivalries. The confrontation between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Jubaland under President Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Madobe) has been militarized, diverting scarce military resources from counter-insurgency against Al-Shabaab. This has generated security vacuums, strengthened the insurgency, and undermined trust in Somali institutions. Regionally, Jubaland's instability is entangled in broader rivalries. Kenya sees it as a buffer against Al-Shabaab and essential for the Lamu Port–South Sudan–

Ethiopia–Transport (LAPSSET) corridor. Ethiopia regards it as a defensive shield for its Somali Region. Egypt's entry into the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) has added a new variable, linking Jubaland to the Egypt–Ethiopia confrontation over the Nile and Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

This brief identifies five interlinked issues, which include contentious federalism; unfulfilled campaign promises; militarization of political disputes; geopolitics of AUSSOM expansion; and strategic autonomy and the sovereignty dilemma. Unless



de-escalated through Somali-led dialogue and insulated from external rivalries, the crisis risks collapsing counter-terrorism efforts and turning Jubaland into a proxy battleground. The brief recommends clarification of constitutional powers, separation of politics from security, safeguarding AUSSOM's neutrality, harmonizing regional diplomacy, and empowering Somalia civil societies.



Context

Somalia's journey since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991 has been marked by fragmented authority, clan-based politics, and recurring cycles of international intervention. At the heart of these challenges lies the question of federalism on how to balance central authority with the autonomy of federal member states. Jubaland, established formally in 2013 after years of contestation, has become the most visible stage on which this unresolved question plays out.

Jubaland's importance stems from three interlocking features. First, its geostrategic location. It borders both Kenya and Ethiopia, making it a buffer zone and corridor for regional trade, migration, and insecurity. Second, its security profile. Al-Shabaab's de facto headquarters in Jilib lies within Jubaland, giving the state both central importance in counterterrorism and high vulnerability to insurgent activity. Third, its political leadership. President Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Madobe), a former warlord turned federal-state leader, commands Jubaland forces descended from the Ras Kamboni movement. These forces, trained initially by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF),

symbolize the fusion of clan authority, regional patronage, and armed forces.

The current crisis escalated in 2024–2025 when FGS, under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, advanced sweeping constitutional and electoral reforms. Intended to consolidate federal authority and return Somalia to universal suffrage, these reforms alarmed semi-autonomous states. Puntland suspended ties in March 2024, and Jubaland followed in November. Madobe organized separate elections in Kismayo, securing a third term, which Mogadishu rejected as illegitimate. The FGS issued an arrest warrant, deployed the Somalia National Army (SNA) to Gedo, and triggered armed confrontation.

By 2025, Gedo was engulfed in violence. Towns like Balad Hawo and Dolow became flashpoints as SNA and Jubaland forces clashed, causing hundreds of casualties and displacing thousands into Kenya's Mandera County. The militarization of this dispute has disrupted cross-border trade, strained humanitarian resources, and heightened tensions along the Kenya–Somalia frontier. These conditions have given Al-Shabaab critical openings to regroup and expand, validating analysts' fears that militarized federal–state disputes are force multipliers for the insurgency.

Regionally, Jubaland is a stage of competing interests. Kenya sees it as a buffer protecting its border communities and the LAPSET Corridor, while Ethiopia views it as a forward defense zone



against Somali irredentism. Egypt's entry into the AUSSOM has added a Nile dimension. Cairo's proposed presence in Gedo signals both solidarity with Mogadishu and strategic maneuvering against Ethiopia over the GERD and Red Sea influence. Meanwhile, Gulf states and Turkey extend their influence in Somalia through aid, investments, and political patronage, further entangling Jubaland in external rivalries.

Thus, Jubaland is not merely a Somali periphery. It is a contested theatre where federal fragility, clan rivalries, militant insurgency, and regional geopolitics converge. Addressing it is inseparable from addressing Somalia's state-building crisis and the Horn's fragile security order.

Analysis of Key Issues

The catalysts of the Jubaland crisis are not isolated to Somalia; they mirror the structural weaknesses that affect fragile states across the Horn of Africa (HoA). The analysis below unpacks the key issues driving the Jubaland crisis.



Geopolitics of AUSSOM

Egypt's proposed troop deployment under AUSSOM is both a milestone and a minefield. It marks Cairo's first participation in an AU mission in Somalia, officially framed as strengthening the fight against Al-Shabaab. Yet, as regional analysts argue, its deeper logic lies in Nile geopolitics. Egypt seeks leverage against Ethiopia over the GERD, which it fears will reduce Nile flows. Stationing Egyptian troops in Gedo, a border region adjoining Ethiopia, gives Cairo a foothold on Addis Ababa's

vulnerable flank. For Somalia, this support bolsters its war effort, while for Ethiopia, it is perceived as encirclement.

The risk is that Jubaland becomes a proxy arena for the Egypt–Ethiopia rivalry. The precedent for such dynamics can be traced to the Ogaden War (1977–78), where Egypt supported Somalia's irredentist campaign against Ethiopia, foreshadowing today's tensions.

The precarious neutrality of the AUSSOM faces growing pressure on its impartiality. Peace operations are only as neutral as their funding sources and troop contributions, and AUSSOM relies heavily on external donors at a time when the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) are redirecting resources to the war in Ukraine. Without stronger African financing, the mission risks capture by competing agendas from Gulf states, Turkey, or Egypt.

Historical precedents are instructive. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) both became arenas for regional rivalries, weakening their effectiveness and credibility. If AUSSOM suffers the same fate, Somalia's sovereignty will erode further, and stabilization efforts will falter.

Contentious Federalism

The Jubaland dispute highlights the deep structural flaws of Somalia's federalism. The 2012 Provisional Constitution, while innovative, left unresolved critical aspects of Somalia's federal arrangement. Authority over security forces within federal member states remains undefined, creating parallel chains of command that frequently clash. The regulation of elections is equally ambiguous, with both Mogadishu and state authorities claiming legitimacy in organizing polls. Resource and revenue sharing is another unresolved issue, leaving competition over taxation, ports, and natural resources open to political manipulation.





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These constitutional gaps have consistently incentivized confrontation rather than compromise, eroding trust between the Federal Government and federal member states and fueling recurrent crises.

In Jubaland, this has manifested as parallel elections, competing claims to legitimacy, and the refusal of Jubaland forces to integrate into the SNA. Madobe's role as both political leader and military commander embodies this problem. For Mogadishu, such autonomy undermines central authority; for Kismayo, it safeguards local survival. The absence of institutionalized negotiation mechanisms means disputes are resolved through unilateral action and military deployment.

This ambiguity is compounded by Somalia's clan-based politics. Without a national census, clan claims to majority status remain contested. In Jubaland, the Ogaden clan dominates, but rival clans contest representation, particularly in Gedo. Federal-state disputes thus double as clan contests for power, legitimacy, and resources.

Comparative experience underscores the stakes. Nigeria's Niger Delta crisis escalated when state-level grievances over oil revenues were left unaddressed; only constitutional reforms and federal revenue-sharing arrangements defused tensions. In contrast, Somalia's constitutional vacuum leaves Jubaland disputes militarized, not negotiated. Unless federal-state relations are clarified, Somalia risks perpetual crisis.

Militarization of Political Disputes

The militarization of Somali politics, which treat political disagreements as security threats, is perhaps the most challenging tendency. The securitization theory of the Copenhagen School explains this. It asserts that when disputes that should be resolved politically are elevated into existential threats, they justify military actions. This has four consequences. First, it creates security vacuums. When SNA units are redeployed to fight Jubaland forces, frontlines against Al-Shabaab collapse. The 2019–2021 Farmaajo–Madobe standoff allowed Al-Shabaab to retake rural Jubaland towns. In 2025, clashes in Balad Hawo and Dolow again distracted forces, enabling militants to consolidate in Jilib.

Second, it leads to the fragmentation of security forces. Somalia's security architecture is already fragile, with the SNA divided by clan loyalties. Militarization deepens this fragmentation as soldiers must choose between federal orders or clan elders. Jubaland's forces, trained originally by Kenya, operate outside federal command, creating parallel chains of command and eroding coordination.

Third, it fuels grievances. Civilian displacement and abuses validate Al-Shabaab's propaganda that the government is corrupt, clanist, and foreign-backed. Young men join militants out of



Photo Credit: thedefensepost.com



anger, survival needs, or disillusionment. Communities sometimes view Al-Shabaab as a lesser evil than predatory state forces.

Fourth, it erodes state legitimacy. When governments resort to force against their own citizens, they lose the trust essential for intelligence-sharing and community cooperation. This mirrors dynamics seen in Nigeria's fight against Boko Haram, where militarization alienated communities and undermined counterinsurgency.

Fifth, it undermines community-based initiatives. The Macawisley militias have been among the most effective actors in pushing back Al-Shabaab because they combine local legitimacy, cultural knowledge, and intelligence networks. However, when federal and state leaders militarize disputes, resources and attention are diverted from supporting such grassroots initiatives. Worse, Macawisley fighters risk being labeled as partisan militias rather than community defenders, weakening their credibility and sustainability. Thus, militarization transforms political disputes into insurgent lifelines. Al-Shabaab thrives on these divisions, making Somali leaders their own worst enemies.



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Unfulfilled Campaign Promises

Unfulfilled campaign promises have emerged as a significant source of federal-state tension in Jubaland. Political leaders frequently campaign on commitments regarding revenue-sharing, resource allocation, security arrangements, and

representation in federal institutions. When these commitments are not delivered, Jubaland's leadership interprets Mogadishu's inaction as marginalization, eroding trust between the Federal Government and the state. This perceived breach of agreement incentivizes unilateral actions by state authorities, such as organizing parallel elections, withholding integration of local forces into the Somalia National Army, and asserting greater autonomy in governance. These measures not only challenge federal authority but also entrench a cycle of political contestation.

The consequences of unfulfilled promises extend beyond political disputes. By undermining institutional credibility and weakening mechanisms for negotiation, they contribute to militarized confrontations that displace civilians and disrupt local governance. Clan-based tensions are exacerbated as groups compete over scarce resources and political representation, creating openings for insurgent actors like Al-Shabaab to exploit insecurity. In this way, the failure to deliver on campaign commitments transforms localized grievances into broader threats to state stability, highlighting the central role of political trust and promise-keeping in the fragile architecture of Somalia's federalism.

Strategic Autonomy and the Sovereignty Dilemma

Jubaland is at the nexus of competing regional interests. For Kenya, Jubaland is a buffer protecting its border communities from Al-Shabaab and a safeguard for the LAPSSET Corridor, particularly Lamu Port. Nairobi has historically hosted Somali reconciliation conferences and cultivated ties with Madobe. Yet, Mogadishu views Kenya's involvement with suspicion, often interpreting it as interference. For Ethiopia, Jubaland is part of its forward defense, preventing Al-Shabaab infiltration and countering Somali irredentism threatening its Somali Region. Addis Ababa sees Egyptian troops in Gedo as an existential challenge, raising fears of proxy conflict.





Beyond these two, Gulf states and Turkey deepen their presence in Somalia through aid, military support, and political patronage. Qatar and Turkey back Mogadishu, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has supported rival factions, including some within Jubaland. These rivalries overlay Somali disputes with external agendas.

This dynamic generates a sovereignty dilemma, in which the FGS remains dependent on external actors for security provision while simultaneously resisting interventions perceived to infringe upon its authority. In this context, Somalia functions as a marketplace of external patronage, where local elites engage in strategic "forum-shopping" to attract and leverage competing sponsors for political and material advantage. The result is further fragmentation of state authority and prolonged instability.

Conclusion

The Jubaland crisis reflects the intersection of Somalia's domestic fragility and the Horn's regional rivalries. Federal-state ambiguities, militarized disputes, and external interventions have turned Jubaland into a theatre of instability, dividing Somali actors who should be united against Al-Shabaab and creating space for the militants to regroup. Egypt's entry into AUSSOM overlays Nile geopolitics onto Somalia's fractured landscape, while Kenya and Ethiopia's competing agendas complicate sovereignty. The consequences are profoundly regional. Jubaland's instability disrupts Kenya's border economy, strains humanitarian resources, and emboldens Al-Shabaab to expand operations into Ethiopia and Kenya. Without urgent de-escalation, a Somali-led constitutional settlement, and coordinated regional engagement through IGAD and the AU, Jubaland will remain a destabilizing flashpoint pulling the Horn deeper into crisis.

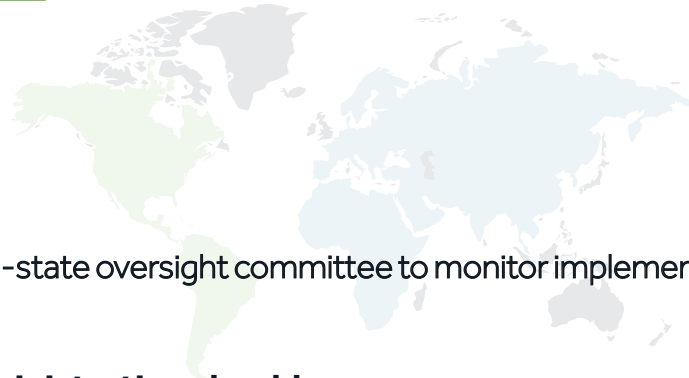


Recommendations

1. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) should;

- a) withdraw SNA from Gedo confrontation lines and revoke the arrest warrant against Madobe to allow dialogue;
- b) convene an inclusive process to clarify federal-state powers, using models like Nigeria's federal revenue-sharing reforms as reference;
- c) establish a permanent federal-state forum, co-facilitated by IGAD, to address disputes politically rather than militarily; and





- d) create a joint federal-state oversight committee to monitor implementation of agreements and resource-sharing.

2. The Jubaland Administration should;

- a) institutionalize a civilian oversight for Jubaland forces, reducing perceptions of personalized militias; and
- b) broaden representation beyond dominant clans, integrating elders and civil society to reduce the grievances Al-Shabaab exploits.

3. The African Union and AUSSOM should;

- a) adopt transparency on troop deployment and funding;
- b) deploy Egypt's contingent alongside troops from other contributing countries to ensure a multinational presence in contested areas;
- c) appoint a senior AU/IGAD envoy with authority to mediate federal-state disputes, prioritizing Jubaland.

4. Kenya and Ethiopia should harmonize approaches via IGAD rather than unilateral bilateral deals with Jubaland. They should pursue a joint Kenya–Ethiopia track on Somalia.

5. Egypt should;

- a) submit deployment plans to AU/IGAD oversight to reassure Ethiopia; and
- b) engage Ethiopia diplomatically alongside the AU forums to prevent Somalia from becoming a proxy front.

6. International Partners should;

- a) tie assistance to demonstrable federal-state cooperation and integration of security forces; and
- b) increase support for Somali NGOs, elders, and independent media to mediate disputes, promote civic education, and monitor leaders.



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