

THE WIDER WORLD

Struggles in the Horn of Africa

By Diane Chido
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Horn of Africa Map

The Horn of Africa is so named because on the map, it resembles a rhinoceros horn.^[1] Fairly or not, these animals are famed for their bad temper. The region's character may also resemble this stereotype, as it has been fractious for decades, if not centuries. The Horn, or HOA, as military analysts refer to it, contains some of the poorest and most violent places in the world. HOA consists of eight

countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda.

To paraphrase American civil rights protester Rodney King's famous 1991 appeal: Why can't they "all just get along?" The short answer is that a lot of people *are* trying to get along. Today, these nations are part of a trade and security alliance called IGAD: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, formed in 1987. Delegates from these countries meet through IGAD to try to promote economic development and human security through a regional approach, increasing trade with each other and supporting peace initiatives.

IGAD serves as a platform for mediating regional disputes and is currently focusing on increasing infrastructure development and technological innovation. They do this with other African regional organizations and within the African Union and with support from individual countries like the U.S. and international organizations like the United Nations. The trouble is, though, that there is much internal conflict within IGAD's members, making it difficult to focus on future development and to communicate their efforts to national constituencies often only concerned with their own survival.

In the colonial period, Djibouti and the Sudans (South Sudan only emerged as an independent country in 2011 after a national referendum) were governed by France. Kenya and Uganda by Great Britain, and Somalia by Italy. Ethiopia boasts to be the oldest independent nation in the region, as the Italians tried to control it, but it was never actually colonized. Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia only in 1993. Let's take a brief and highly oversimplified tour through this troubled region to begin to understand what is happening in the Horn.

Djibouti is a small country often described as a city-state, with 75% of its population living in the capital, also called "Djibouti," and the remainder living as nomadic herders. President Ismail Omar Guelleh was first elected in 1999 and has been consistently re-elected, with his most recent landslide victory in 2021. It is a primarily Muslim country and home to a French military base, part of which is leased to the U.S. There is also a Chinese military base nearby, and in the past decade, China has made massive investments to Djibouti's port.

Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, taking the latter's only access to the sea after a 30-year civil war. Since that time, it has been governed by an autocratic, militaristic regime led by President Isaias Afwerki that essentially conscripts all citizens between 18 and 65 years of age. Nearly all Eritreans work for the government in either the military or civilian services and state-owned enterprises. Agriculture accounts for a third of the economy, which is heavily weather-dependent and has suffered recently from several consecutive

years of drought. It is also dependent on the mining sector, mainly for gold, but also for copper and zinc.^[iii] Due to Afwerki's autocratic rule, it is not uncommon for Eritreans permitted to travel abroad for sporting competitions to seek asylum to prevent returning home.

Kenya is a multi-tribal country considered a model of stability until it shocked the world in late 2007, falling into a brief but bloody ethnic civil war after presidential elections. A 2010 constitutional congress that changed the electoral and administrative structures decreased fragility steadily until a 2017 presidential election had to be reconducted, due to opposition leader Raila Odinga's claims that the vote had been hacked. The Supreme Court required a re-election, which Odinga boycotted, giving Kenyatta 98% of the votes cast.

The two families have been rivals for two generations, since the fathers of both 2017 candidates gained independence for the country in 1964 with Jomo Kenyatta as President and Odinga Odinga as Vice President. Since 2017, stability has improved. President Kenyatta was succeeded by former Deputy President William Ruto, after a contentious August 2022 campaign fraught with allegations of election rigging again by Raila Odinga.

Somalia is ethnically and religiously homogeneous under Islam but has been fragmented by rival clans. Two of its provinces, Somaliland and Puntland, have declared independence, but have not been broadly recognized internationally. Historically, these two subnational entities have adopted numerous international norms and have tacitly remained more stable than Somalia overall.

The international community is heavily engaged in Somalia. The African Union (AU) deployed a peacekeeping force in 2007 and a broad international coalition began patrolling Somalia's shores against pirates, which arose due to environmental degradation along the country's coast severely curtailing its critical fishing industry. The following year, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution permitting states and regional organizations pursuing pirates at sea to continue their effort on land.^[iii]

Somalia's tide may be turning as a new parliament has now been established, but the country was not considered stable enough to hold elections, so members were appointed for a peaceful transition of power in 2017. In May 2023, Parliament announced a constitutional amendment to allow one-person-one-vote elections after a census to be conducted in 2025. This is a significant change from the current clan-based system.^[iv]

Recent attempts at direct elections in Puntland led to some acts of violence, so it is not clear what will happen if the vote is extended to the whole country. Somalia also struggles against al-Shabaab, a violent Islamic extremist group with links to al-Qaida and the Islamic State trying to establish sharia law. Al-

Shabaab frequently attacks civilians, polling places, candidates, and election workers trying to disrupt the establishment of democracy and stability in the country.^[v]

Almost from its independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, **Sudan** has been beset by civil war. General Omar al-Bashir became president in 1993 after a series of military coups. Al-Bashir remained in power, continuing civil war, and engineering a genocide in the Darfur region until he was ousted by popular protests in April 2019. Under former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a power-sharing agreement was signed binding the military, civilian representatives, and protest groups together.^[vi] Prime Minister Hamdok was later the target of an assassination attempt, was then deposed in a military coup, then reinstated, and finally resigned in 2022.

In April 2022, violence broke out between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the capital, Khartoum, leading to over 1 million people fleeing the capital and the country. The top generals from each faction had partnered to topple al-Bashir in 2019. They agreed to share power and to keep the peace, but their battle over the country's resources (primarily oil) is ongoing with over 4,000 civilian deaths thus far.^[vii]

South Sudan became an independent country in 2011 after decades of civil war within Sudan. From its formation, South Sudan has also been wracked by a series of civil wars that, by 2022, had displaced 4 million people and left another 6 million dependent upon humanitarian assistance in a country of 10.5 million. Internal boundary disputes and low oil production have led to continued low-level conflict despite a cease-fire and loose power-sharing agreement in place since 2018. By 2022, over 150,000 refugees returned to South Sudan from neighboring countries.

Uganda has been governed by President Yoweri Museveni since 1986. Although he has won elections at regular intervals, every election has brought claims of impropriety from opposition members and the international community. Uganda has been relatively peaceful and stable under Museveni, accompanied by economic growth. However, in May 2023, the President signed one of the harshest anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the world resulting in a suspension of World Bank funding.^[viii] The country has been roundly criticized for its stance on rights for this group, which often finds itself the target of violence and fear campaigns across much of Africa, but most egregiously in Uganda.

In addition to, and closely related to, extreme poverty, the region is beset with corruption and infighting among ethnic and religious groups and clans. This is exacerbated by a lack of resources, often the result of natural resource exploitation and environmental destruction by more developed countries outside the region.

One clear example is Somalia. Although the Italian government only maintained control of Somalia for a few years, it permitted overfishing off the Somali coast. In the late 1980s, European and Chinese companies dumped chemical and nuclear waste in northern Somalia, which rapidly increased after Somali President Muhammad Siad Barre was deposed in 1991. From that time, the country was essentially in chaos with no national leadership for two decades. This waste severely polluted the land and coastal waters, sickening and killing up to several hundred thousand people while also destroying the fishing industry.

While we all rooted for Captain Phillips to be saved in the Tom Hanks movie, and in real life in 2009, the pirates became the bad guys. Yet, many of them had been fishermen and without their livelihoods, they still needed to feed their families. Thus, Somalia entered an era of organized crime as the prizes of piracy became larger, including at least one oil tanker with a cargo worth over \$300 million.

This took place under the auspices of an essentially failed state. Unlike the rest of the HOA, Somalia is an ethnically heterogeneous country, but clan warfare is the norm. The importance of clan identity is taught to children at a young age, often by grandparents. For example, in a severe and rugged land mostly left in desert by over-exploitation of forests to make charcoal, a traveler needs to convince the owner of a water well to let him drink or pass safely through their land. The only way to do this when you are a stranger is to prove you are actually kin. Somalis know their heritage back perhaps 15 generations, so when someone asks them, "Who are you?" visitors can recount this in the hope that there will be a shared ancestor.

After 1991, the country was "governed" by various clan-based groups the United States branded as "warlords" when one of them, Mohammad Farah Aidid, thwarted a raid by U.S. special forces in 1994 as part of a United Nations peacekeeping mission. After the gruesome deaths and parade of four American servicemen through the streets, the U.S. no longer sent troops to U.N missions and turned its back on Somalia until it started threatening global shipping and some of its young men formed al-Shabaab, meaning "the youth," coalesced into violent Islamic extremists and allied with al Qaida.

Somalia is an outlier in a region beset with ethnic and religious violence, but the outcome of clan warfare and a lack of effective governance has the same effect on the population. Getting these nations to "get along" has a lot to do with long-term causes that still need to be addressed and with ensuring there are sufficient resources to reduce the infighting to control them. As I have stated before, today's warring factions are just following the example of the foreign exploiters

who came before them stealing their wealth and creating the power vacuums in the first place.

[i] Map of Horn of Africa, *Wikimedia Commons* available [here](#), accessed on August 17.

[ii] “The World Bank in Eritrea,” *World Bank*, updated September 18, 2019 available [here](#), accessed on August 16, 2023

[iii] Security Council Authorizes States To Use Land-Based Operations in Somalia, as Part of Fight Against Piracy Off Coast, Unanimously Adopting 1851 (2008), *UN Press Release*, December 18, 2008 available [here](#), accessed on August 16, 2023

[iv] “World Bank Halts New Funding to Uganda Over Anti-LGBTQ Laws,” *Bloomberg*, August 9, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on August 16

[v] “Somalia: Political Crisis Deepens Amid Transition to Direct Elections,” *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 28 July 2023, available [here](#), accessed on August 17, 2023

[vi] “Sudan profile – Timeline,” *BBC News*, updated September 10, 2019 available [here](#), accessed on August 16, 2023.

[vii] “Sudan civil war ‘spiraling out of control,’ UN says, as more than 1 million flee,” *CNN*, August 16, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on August 17, 2023.

[viii] “World Bank Group Statement on Uganda,” *World Bank Press Release*, August 8, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on August 16.

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