



Somalia: Making the Most of the EU-Somalia Joint Roadmap

The Somali government aims to “eliminate” Al-Shabaab by the year’s end, marking a crucial point in its sixteen-year war with the insurgency. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group explains what the EU can do to address Somalia’s challenges.

The Somali government has a crucial year ahead in 2024. Its offensive against Al-Shabaab, the Islamist insurgency besetting the country since 2007, has sputtered since making important gains in the second half of 2022. The government promises to “eliminate” the group by year’s end, but the goal seems beyond reach. For one thing, Mogadishu will likely soon have less help: the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) that augments its campaign is to wind down in December, and discussions about a multilateral follow-on force are just getting started. The prospect of state-level elections has already reignited political and clan tensions. Additionally, as part of its plan to complete a provisional constitution, the government seeks wide-ranging changes to the electoral code ahead of national elections slated for 2026. Opposition groups eye these reforms warily, arguing that the government aims to use them to retain power.

The state also faces other old and new challenges. The humanitarian situation remains precarious, with climate stresses adding to the burden placed on long-suffering Somalis by the country’s decades-long conflicts. Meanwhile, an unexpected new crisis arose at the new year, when neighbouring Ethiopia said it had agreed

with Somaliland – whose 1991 proclamation of independence Mogadishu rejects – to lease a parcel of land on the Gulf of Aden.

The EU and its member states can help address Somalia’s challenges by:

- Remaining engaged in discussions about forming a new AU-led multilateral mission to succeed ATMIS and detailing the conditions under which they could provide funding in the absence of other sources, even as Brussels increases its support for building the capacity of Somali forces;
- Urging the Somali government to undertake broader reconciliation efforts including by focusing on grassroots convenings within a framework that can endure from one administration to the next;
- Pressing Mogadishu for a long-term approach to tackling Al-Shabaab that goes beyond military measures. To this end, they should indicate their support for exploring the prospect of eventual dialogue with the insurgents;
- Working to contain tensions related to the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement, including by facilitating back-channel diplomacy between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu;

- Making clear the importance of Mogadishu sticking to the EU-Somalia Joint Operational Roadmap adopted in May 2023. Depending on how the security situation evolves,

Brussels could reward progress with additional (technical, financial and other) support or reduce assistance if progress stalls.

A Struggling War Effort amid Other Challenges

As 2024 approached, Somalia was on a streak of big wins on the international stage. In the last quarter of 2023, Mogadishu persuaded the UN Security Council to lift an arms embargo that had been in place since 1992. The country completed a debt relief program backed by the International Monetary Fund, reducing its external debt from 64 per cent of GDP at the end of 2018 to about 6 per cent at the start of 2024. The East African Community admitted Somalia as its eighth member, marking the start of an integration process aimed at reducing economic barriers and deepening trade opportunities, including eventual visa-free travel.

Then, on 1 January, came a thunderbolt. Addis Ababa announced that it had struck a deal with neighbouring Somaliland to give landlocked Ethiopia access to a 20km stretch of coastline, reportedly to establish a naval facility. The revelation rattled Mogadishu – which views itself and not Hargeisa as sovereign in Somaliland and by all appearances was not included in the negotiations – and set off a furor among Somalis who saw it as an insult to national dignity. The degree of popular discontent is likely to mean that President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's administration will spend precious time in 2024 addressing the fallout.

But President Mohamud, who took office after a protracted electoral process in May 2022, will nonetheless need to dedicate significant effort to handling domestic priorities. There, the picture is decidedly gloomier than in foreign policy. The offensive against Al-Shabaab has tapered off after initial advances, which loosened the insurgents' grip on swathes of central Somalia. A key element of the government's strategy was to tap into clan resentment of the group, and partner with *macawisley*, or clan militias, to take the war to Al-Shabaab's

rural strongholds. By early 2023, however, Al-Shabaab had adjusted, turning to guerrilla tactics. Its fighters withdrew from population centres, returning later to attack over-exposed government forces. Mogadishu had difficulty supplying the front, and its new recruits lack battle experience. At the same time, Al-Shabaab reached out to clans to dissuade them from allying with the government.

Thus, a campaign Mogadishu billed as striking a death blow to the insurgency is now largely stalled. The Somali government has managed to hold most ground it seized, but in areas such as southern Galmudug, Al-Shabaab has pushed it back. Even in towns and villages authorities recovered from the insurgency, the government is struggling to consolidate its gains. Stabilisation efforts to provide basic services and oversee reconciliation dialogue have been slow. The overstretched authorities have also been unable to deploy enough police and local military-police known as Darwish to provide security. Nonetheless, the government says it hopes to clear the remainder of central Somalia before turning its attention to a second phase of the offensive in the south. Given the problems to date, uprooting Al-Shabaab from its heartlands in the south will be a formidable task indeed.

A major challenge is that the international forces who have been battling Al-Shabaab alongside the national army are packing up just as Somalia is ramping up its campaign. ATMIS is scheduled to send home the remainder of its 14,000-odd forces by the end of 2024 (two phases of the drawdown have already occurred). Yet few expect Somali forces to be ready to take over from the mission – which plays a big role in holding urban areas and thus freeing the army to stage offensives – when it

departs. The government, bullish at first about its capacity to fill the gap the mission will leave, now admits that the timeline is ambitious.

At a December 2023 conference, it proposed that the African Union (AU) lead a successor to ATMIS, focused on securing key towns and infrastructure as well as giving air and ground logistical support to local forces.

The conversation about a follow-on mission is embryonic, however. The Somali plan provides a framework for discussion, but many details, including the force's size, composition and duration, still need to be worked out. A key missing piece relates to funding. ATMIS and its predecessor the African Union Mission in Somalia relied heavily on the EU, which paid the troops' stipends. Yet the EU has long sought to reduce its financial contribution. It is reluctant to be on the hook again for a follow-on mission – although differences of opinion exist among member states.

The hesitancy about open-ended subventions owes to several factors. First, some in the EU feel its funding, much of which flows to the troop-contributing countries for the stipends, has supported only a short-term solution when the main task is to build up Somali forces. Secondly, although ATMIS has deferred to Somali forces for the conduct of offensive operations, some member states complain that it should engage in more combat itself. They view ATMIS as expensive, given its limited role, though it is cheaper than a typical UN peacekeeping operation. Thirdly, some in Brussels resent the lack of burden sharing, especially as other international partners present in Somalia grouse about adverse ramifications whenever the EU wishes to trim its contributions but offer few options of their own.

The search for alternative sources of funding for a follow-on mission remains arduous. The UN and AU struck a framework agreement in late 2023, by which the global body is to fund up to 75 per cent of certain AU-led peace operations. Political will exists in Mogadishu, as well as at UN and AU headquarters, to test this approach for a follow-on mission in Somalia,

according to diplomats, although much work lies ahead at the technical level to align AU troop management procedures with those of the UN. The AU and Somali government have also looked to non-traditional donors – such as China, Gulf states and Türkiye – to fill the gaps, but none have stepped up to the plate.

Tackling Al-Shabaab is only part of the equation in bringing peace to Somalia, however. Deep-seated tensions related to competition for power and resources among Somali elites continue to foment instability. Such divisions, at the national level between the federal government and federal member states, and within the states themselves, are rooted in longstanding grievances, underpinned by the lack of a comprehensive political settlement in the country. They often fuel conflict in the run-up to elections, which many view as manipulated to favour incumbents.

The next round of state-level elections threatens to restart this dynamic. Due in November, these will be held concurrently for the first time, in a bid to align the timetables (aside from semi-autonomous Puntland in the north, which staged its vote in line with its previous electoral calendar in early January). The modality for the elections, ranging from the persistent but unachieved goal of universal suffrage to the more familiar (and thus realistic) indirect model of clan delegates picking winners, remains unclear. Political tensions in many member states are mounting, amid complaints that the elections have already been delayed several times. If these votes are not handled in an open, inclusive and transparent manner, or if Mogadishu tries to intervene in state-level affairs by backing candidates, the tensions could further fracture some member states.

Splits over the next elections at the national level are also zooming into view. President Mohamud seeks to push through parliament an electoral model that adopts universal suffrage in 2026, including with a direct vote for the presidency. This change would in effect shift Somalia away from a parliamentary system of

governance. The proposal would also limit the playing field to two political parties, ostensibly to discourage formation of clan-based parties. These ideas are already facing significant pushback in parliament and among the political opposition.

The relationship between the federal government and federal member states has improved under Mohamud, but it remains a work in progress. Mohamud convenes the National Consultative Council for regular, though still ad hoc, meetings between federal and member state leaders. But member state Puntland, accusing Mogadishu of seeking to concentrate power, has boycotted the Council

for the past year, putting it under a cloud. The conclusion of Puntland's elections, which took place in early January, provides an opening for the two sides to turn the page, even though the incumbent retained power.

Finally, the humanitarian situation in Somalia remains dire, with vulnerable groups, including women, bearing the brunt of it. While 2024 might not bring the severe shocks of previous years – including five consecutive failed rainy seasons followed by excessive rainfall and flooding amid an El-Nino-influenced rainy season in late 2023 – the compound effect of previous crises remains while climate change gathers speed.

What the EU and Its Member States Can Do

The EU has consistently been one of Somalia's major partners. Brussels has invested €4.3 billion in the country since 2007, focusing on security. This amount includes the aforementioned troop stipends for ATMIS and its predecessor, to the tune of €2.6 billion in that period. Relations between Brussels and Mogadishu have warmed since Mohamud returned to the presidency in May 2022 (he previously held the office between 2012 and 2017), after a chill during the tenure of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" (2017-2022). The EU was notably one of the first outside actors to issue a statement calling for respect of Somalia's territorial sovereignty following the Ethiopia-Somaliland port access announcement.

A roadmap the EU and Somalia adopted in May 2023 provides a framework for the EU-Somalia partnership through 2025. At its core, it brings the various EU instruments and member states under a single framework with the Somali government to detail joint priorities. The roadmap outlines three areas of partnership: inclusive politics and democratisation; security and stabilisation; and socio-economic development. Completing the transition from ATMIS to Somali security forces by December is one of the listed milestones.

The joint roadmap will have little chance of success if the security situation in Somalia deteriorates precipitously. It will thus be important for international forces to be in Somalia past 2024, in line with the Somali government's new request. If the UN assessed contributions, the prospect of which is uncertain, do not come to pass, continued EU financing will likely be required. Despite understandable fatigue in Brussels after a decade and a half of support, the EU should prepare itself for a contingency plan by coming to a common position on the issue of continued funding as soon as practicable. The EU should make clear under what conditions it could offer aid to a new mission, such as the level of cost sharing it would want to see from others or the components of the mission it would be comfortable funding. Doing so earlier rather than later would provide a degree of clarity while other sources of financing, in particular from the UN, are explored.

The EU can also help plug holes in the Somali security sector and address concerns that too much of its support goes to non-Somali troops. Channelling additional funds via the European Peace Facility could help improve Somali forces, particularly in equipment, logistics and training. The European Union Training

Mission could consider how it can provide more mentoring for the soldiers it trains. The European Union Capacity Building Mission could also enhance its training programs for police, and even extend them to Darwish (state-level military police) personnel, to help Somali authorities hold areas vacated by Al-Shabaab but where the army lacks the personnel to leave garrisons.

Brussels should also support steps to address the national and local-level grievances and disputes that undergird conflict in Somalia. The EU should press the Somali government to consider initiating a comprehensive reconciliation project that both moves beyond narrow, elite-driven politics and endures from one presidential administration to the next. A component would be grassroots conferences to discuss local expectations of how governance should function in Somalia, including in areas recovered from Al-Shabaab. Participants should be representative of local populations, including women and other vulnerable groups. This bottom-up approach has the most promise as a method to durably support finalising the provisional constitution. Closed-door consultations among rivalrous politicians are unlikely to yield a compact with broad buy-in.

The EU should also support a long-term approach to fighting Al-Shabaab, shifting from the short-term objectives President Mohamud has pursued to date. The government's military-first approach is understandable, but most in Somalia and beyond understand that, as Crisis Group and others have argued, Al-Shabaab will not be defeated by military means alone. The EU should press Mogadishu to focus more on stabilisation in recovered areas to prove that it can govern them better than Al-Shabaab. The EU should also privately signal it would

back a federal effort to consider dialogue with the insurgency, if Mogadishu decides to pursue that path.

The EU can also help tamp down acrimony resulting from the Ethiopian agreement with Somaliland, continuing the proactive stance it has taken through its collective institutions to date. Its actions have included discussions between President Mohamud and EU High Representative Josep Borrell and regional engagement by the EU's special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Annette Weber. The deal has inflamed tensions at a delicate time in the Horn. While the risk of immediate conflict is low and Mohamud is treading a fine line to address the issue diplomatically, the EU can use its ties with Addis Ababa, Hargeisa and Mogadishu to promote back-channel discussions aimed at lowering the volume.

Finally, Brussels should make sure to follow up on implementation of the joint roadmap. On top of regular assessments of progress, it could make adjustments in the absence thereof, which in turn could include evaluating the level of technical or financial support it reserves for Somalia. Whether to go down this route will of course have to be evaluated in light of prevailing circumstances, including with respect to the security situation. But too often in Somalia, new administrations offer lofty promises but succumb to inertia and political infighting with an eye to the next election. The Somali-EU roadmap provides a framework for keeping matters on track, and 2024 will offer an important opportunity to test the approach. ■

