

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1057
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	ACLED
Titel:	Situation Update, January 2024. The Complexities of the Somaliland-Ethiopia Sea Access Deal
Udgivet:	15. januar 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. marts 2024

Situation Update | January 2024

The Complexities of the Somaliland-Ethiopia Sea Access Deal

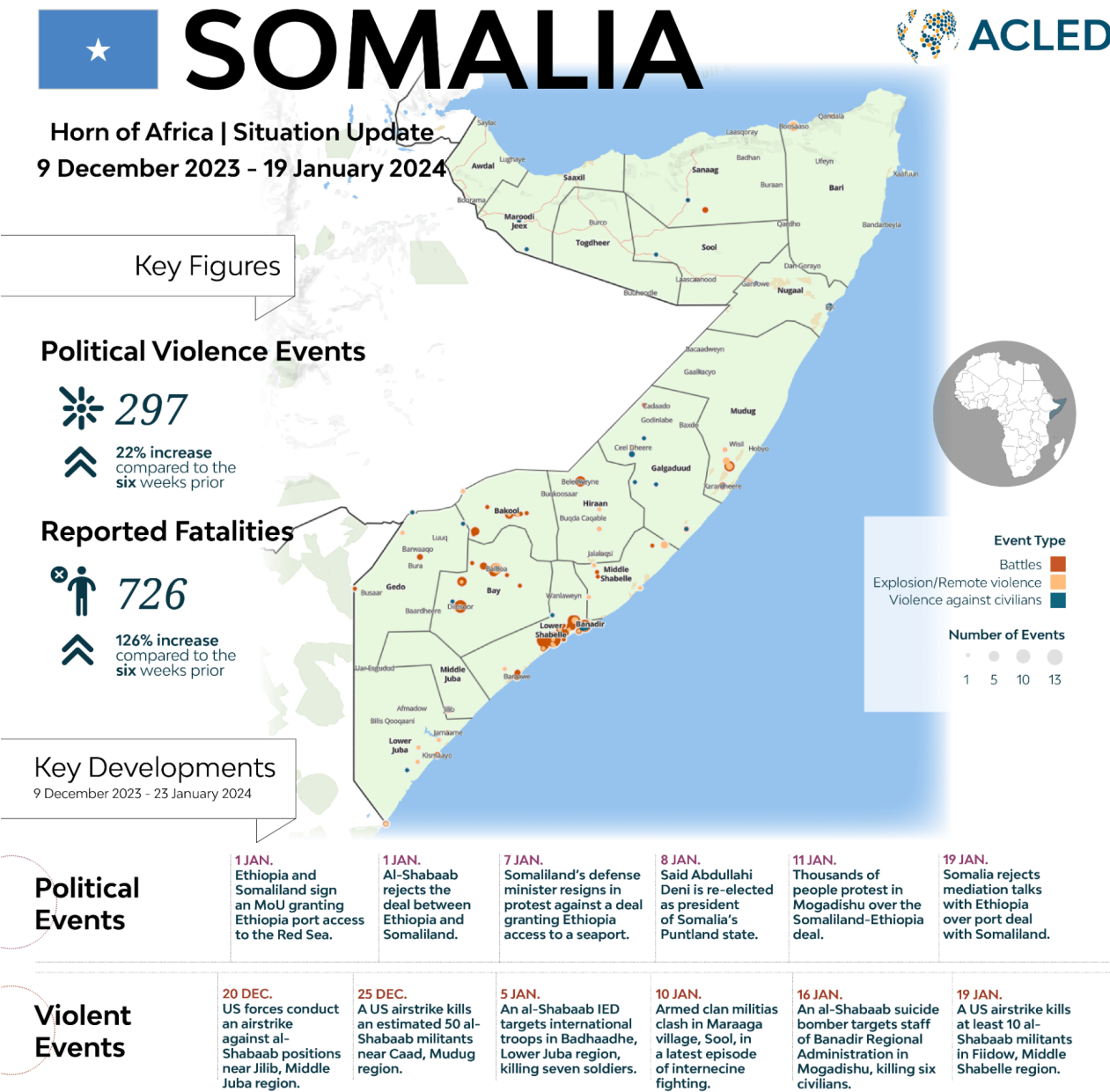
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Somalia at a Glance: 9 December 2023-19 January 2024

VITAL TRENDS

- From 9 December 2023 to 19 January 2024, ACLED records nearly 300 political violence events and at least 726 reported fatalities in Somalia. Most political violence centered in Lower Shabelle region, where al-Shabaab targeted security forces and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).
- Mudug region had the highest number of reported fatalities, with 412. Lower Juba region followed, with at least 121 reported fatalities. Most of the fatalities came after battles between al-Shabaab and security forces.
- The most common event type was battles, with over 500 events, followed by explosions and remote violence, with nearly 180 events. Most of the events involved clashes between security forces and al-Shabaab.



Ethiopia officially recognizing Somaliland's independence. This would make Ethiopia the first country to recognize Somaliland as a sovereign country.¹

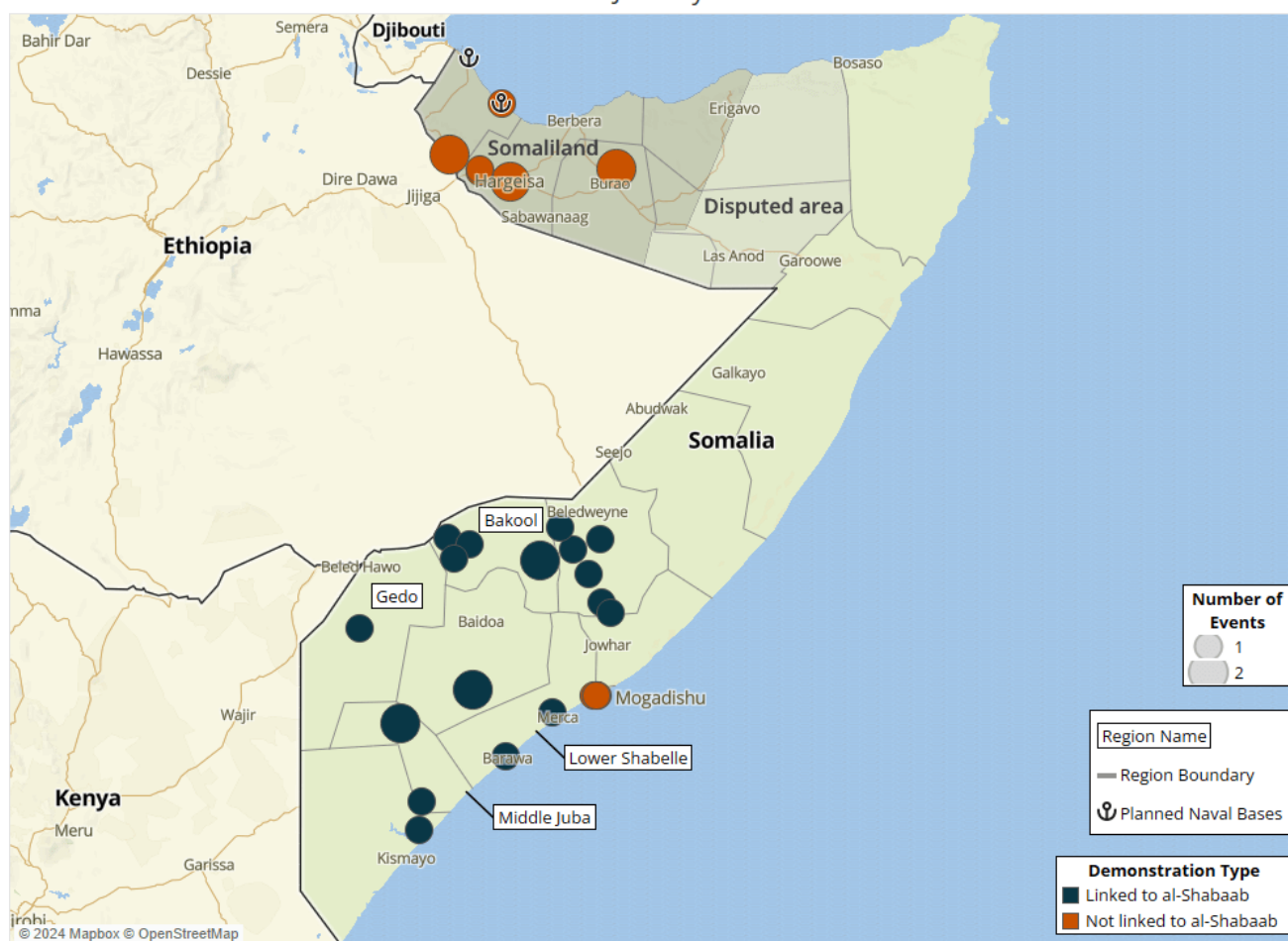
Though the full content of the MoU is not publicly available, it encompasses various aspects of bilateral cooperation between Ethiopia and Somaliland. One of the key areas is security cooperation. On 9 January, the army chiefs from Ethiopia and Somaliland met in the Ethiopian capital to discuss the naval base that Ethiopia plans to build in Somaliland.² During the meeting, the parties identified opportunities for enhancing economic and military cooperation, including establishing Ethiopia-owned ports and naval bases near Luqhaye and Saylac in Awdal region. Somaliland opposition criticized the agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland, arguing that the government had no public mandate to sign the MoU and that Ethiopia's recognition would not help Somaliland gain independence.³

Mogadishu rejected the MoU and accused Ethiopia of violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia.⁴ Somali President Mohamud also signed legislation nullifying the MoU.⁵ Several countries and international organizations, including the United States, United Kingdom, China, Turkey, European Union, and Arab League, urged Ethiopia not to proceed with the deal, reaffirming their support for Somalia's territorial integrity and calling for dialogue between Ethiopia and Somalia.⁶

Al-Shabaab also released a statement rejecting the agreement and threatening to wage war on Somaliland and Ethiopia. The militants called on Somali people to defend and protect their country from "apostates and traitors."⁷ Several anti-Ethiopia protests were organized in al-Shabaab-controlled areas in Middle Juba, Lower Shabelle, Bakool, and Gedo (*see map below*). The militants also launched a massive recruitment campaign calling Somalis to join in defending their land from Ethiopia and other foreigners.⁸

Demonstrations Against the Somaliland-Ethiopia Agreement

1 - 19 January 2024



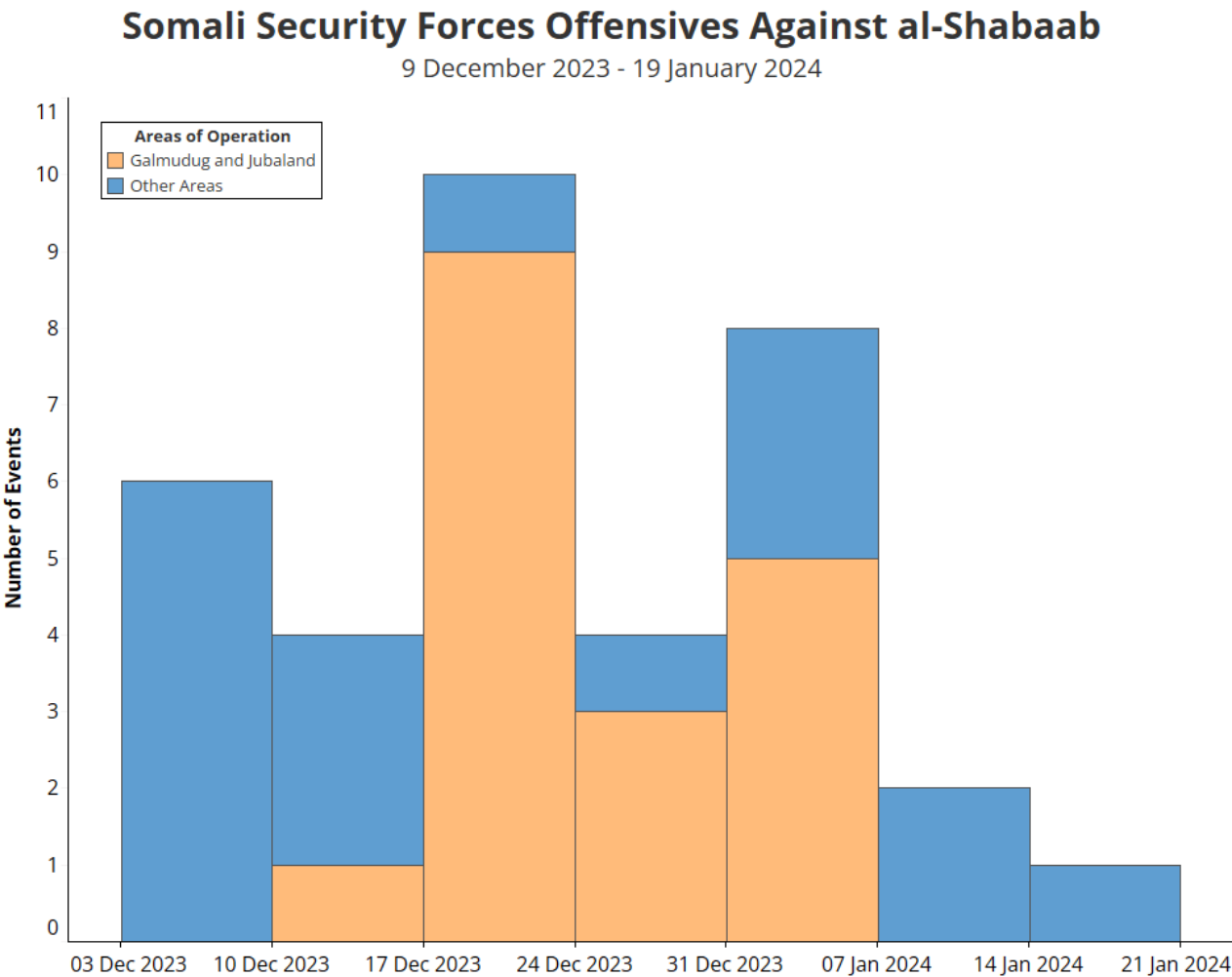
The agreement comes days after the Somali and Somaliland presidents held a meeting in Djibouti, during which they agreed to resume peace talks and form a single Somali government.⁹ Somali-Somaliland talks had been ongoing for the last 10 years, though they failed to reach an agreement to unify all territories of Somalia under the federal government of Somalia. The recent meeting in Djibouti is the first since the current federal government of Somalia came into office in May 2022. Despite the rapprochement, Somaliland retained plans to regain control of Laascaanood — the capital of Sool region — and some parts of Sanaag and Ceyn regions from the Sool, Sanaag, and Ceyn (SSC) militia.¹⁰

Fighting between Somaliland forces and SSC militia broke out in December 2022, when government security forces killed over a dozen demonstrators who were protesting against the assassination of an opposition Waddani party member. On 5 January 2023, Somaliland forces withdrew from Laascaanood, ceding control of the regional capital to Dhulbahante and SSC clan militias, which in turn formed a separate administration known as SSC-Khatumo. The clashes in Somaliland are estimated to have killed hundreds of people and displaced hundreds of thousands, many of whom were forced into the neighboring Somali region of Ethiopia.¹¹ In a blow to the Somaliland authorities, the Somali federal government recognized the SSC-Khatumo in October 2023 as a “transitional administration.”¹² Demonstrations opposing the deal also broke out in the Awdal region, which would host the sea access granted to Ethiopia. Members of the Issa clan — considered one of the four founding clans of Somaliland alongside the Isaaq, Dir and Darood — organized demonstrations against the MoU in Lugahey and Saylac. Clan elders accused the Somaliland president of selling Issa land in exchange for diplomatic recognition and threatened to go to war with the Somaliland government unless they withdrew the deal.¹³

Should Ethiopia proceed with the deal, Mogadishu has signaled it may order the expulsion of Ethiopian troops deployed in Somalia to fight against al-Shabaab. A withdrawal would affect the ongoing counterterrorism campaigns undertaken against al-Shabaab in southern and central Somalia, forcing Somali government forces to expand their presence into other locations. Due to fears of an escalation of violence between Somalia and Ethiopia, Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency William Burns visited Mogadishu on 17 January, where he met with Somali President Mohamud and National Intelligence Security Agency Director Mahad Salad to discuss security cooperation in the region.¹⁴

Security Forces Shift Focus to Southern Mudug

During the reporting period, Somali security forces and allied clan militias intensified the operation against al-Shabaab in the southern part of Mudug region. Federal troops advanced toward Hobyo to flush out al-Shabaab militants from the remaining parts of the group’s stronghold in Galmudug state. Further south, Jubaland security forces and elite Danab soldiers supported by US airstrikes targeted al-Shabaab hideout positions in Middle and Lower Juba regions. Due to the overwhelming operation of the security forces in Galmudug and Jubaland states (see graph below), al-Shabaab militants fought with security forces to defend their strongholds in Mudug, where they staged several attacks to divert the attention of the security forces.



Recent military operations inflicted major setbacks on al-Shabaab. During the reporting period, two US drones reportedly hit al-Shabaab positions in the southern part of Mudug region; these strikes provided crucial support to the advancing security forces. One of al-Shabaab's top leaders, Moalim Ayman, also known as Jaysh Ayman, was killed in a US drone strike near Jilib, Middle Juba region, on 17 December. The leader is linked to the 2020 Manda Bay attack in Lamu, Kenya, which killed a US soldier and contractors.¹⁵ Elsewhere in Mudug, security forces and allied militias from the Habar Gedir clan jointly attacked al-Shabaab positions in Jeex-jeex area, situated between the towns of Camaare and Caad, where the militants set up covert checkpoints to defend their remaining strongholds in the region. The government claims to have killed over 80 militants.¹⁶ Despite facing increasing pressure, al-Shabaab militants resisted withdrawing from their strongholds in Mudug.

These actions point to the existing danger of al-Shabaab escalating its operations beyond central and southern Somalia, potentially staging attacks in Somaliland and Ethiopia. The militant group expressed its firm opposition to the Somaliland-Ethiopia deal, and may seek to take advantage of public discontent to mobilize supporters and recruit fighters in Somalia.¹⁷ Ethiopia has long been a prized target for al-Shabaab, while domestic unrest within Somaliland may provide the group with an opportunity to activate local sleeper cells.¹⁸ Whether al-Shabaab can be successfully restrained will ultimately depend on the ability to resolve this latest regional crisis through diplomacy and restore effective counter-terrorism cooperation between Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Somalia.

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