

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Nearly Violent Confrontation in Somali Parliament Highlights Government's Insufficiencies, Need for Accountability

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On April 4th, members of the Somali security services loyal to Mohamed Osman Jawari, speaker of the lower house of the Somali bicameral parliament, occupied the parliament building. Forces loyal to Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre responded by deploying outside the building. The situation calmed only after mediation from, among others, a representative of the military coalition inside the country fighting al-Shabaab (an al-Qaeda affiliate). Five days later, Jawari resigned as speaker, though he retains his parliamentary seat.

The roots of the crisis seem to lie in 2016 and 2017 agreements unilaterally struck by Somaliland (an autonomous area of northern Somalia) with the United Arab Emirates and its state-owned port development and management company DP World to build a military base and develop a port in Berbera in Somaliland. The deals exacerbated the concern felt by the federal government that its fragile sovereignty might erode further, protected as the government is by foreign armies and possessing little practical authority over its six member states (Somaliland, in fact, claims independence). When neighboring Ethiopia acquired a 19 percent stake

in the Berbera project in March 2018, Somalia publicly denounced it as a violation of Somalia's unity<sup>1</sup> and later appealed to the United Nations to stop the deal.

Parliament also expressed its disapproval by unanimously passing a bill that declared the Berbera deal invalid, required parliamentary approval of any future foreign investment in Somalia, and banned DP World from operating in the country. However, parliament reportedly did not consult with the president or prime minister,<sup>2</sup> likely stirring fears of a usurpation of executive power by the legislative branch as well as fears of personal loss of power to Jawari. Over the following weeks, the rivalry unfolded in the parliament as factions loyal to each side struggled for supremacy, culminating in the nearly violent confrontation and Jawari's resignation.

### Far-Reaching Effects of the Conflict

Somalia faces extraordinary challenges, and Mogadishu has a long list of urgent tasks: Al-Shabaab has lost most of its strongholds, but still controls significant territory. The most effective anti-Shabaab force, the military coalition that helped mediate the dispute, is supposed to leave Somalia by the end of 2020, but the Somali National Army is not ready to take over. Also, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is increasingly spilling into Somalia and the greater East Africa region,<sup>3</sup> and drought frequently threatens the country. Yet the elites' political squabbling consumed the government's agenda for nearly a month, ensuring little progress on these urgent tasks.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4850>

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The dysfunctional display is a setback in the fight against al-Shabaab. The government is competing with the terror group for the support (or acquiescence) of the Somali people, and the bickering in the capital suggests to Somalis that the government is not a viable alternative to the terror group.

The quarrel will likely also deepen the concerns held by some international donors supporting the country about the government's suitability as a partner. Mogadishu is currently trying to convince international creditors it deserves debt forgiveness,<sup>4</sup> but the parliamentary clash raises legitimate questions about whether the government can make responsible use of the opportunity debt relief would offer. The dispute also demonstrates how fractured the Somali security services are, with different elements at the disposal of powerful politicians.

In addition, Mogadishu wants to maintain Somaliland as part of the country. Yet, the most compelling aspect of Somaliland's case for independence is that it is relatively stable and democratic. The recent tiff undermines Mogadishu's ability to counter Somaliland's claim that it should not be shackled to an unstable south.

## Where to Go from Here

The U.S. should test whether the federal government, and the governance model established in the provisional constitution, is the right one to stabilize Somalia.<sup>5</sup> Supporting a hopeless government would be counterproductive since doing so would crowd out potentially viable alternatives, aid al-Shabaab by demonstrating to Somalis there are no reliable alternatives to its rule, and expose the U.S. to the various costs associated with having a feckless ally.

The previous president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, fought off an impeachment measure and had three prime ministers in four years as part of a running

feud over the delineation of power between the two offices. The previous parliament was little better, frequently failing to achieve a quorum because of absenteeism. This latest spat demonstrates that the current government has not made enough progress since winning international recognition five years ago.

Despite this poor record, it is too soon to give up on the government. Somalia had a peaceful presidential transfer of power in 2017. While the military fight against al-Shabaab is at a stalemate, the security gains made against the group are holding for now. The government has enacted several pieces of important legislation, and Somalia is undeniably significantly better off today than it was during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Moving forward, the U.S. must hold Mogadishu accountable to meeting a clear set of benchmarks in exchange for continued support. Those benchmarks should include crafting a new constitution and implementing the Security Pact and the partnership framework agreed upon at the London Conference in May 2017. If Mogadishu fails to achieve enough of these milestones over the coming years, the U.S. should pivot away from supporting state-building to focusing on counterterrorism and assisting any acceptable local systems of authority that could stabilize all or parts of the country.

## Accountability Needed

The U.S. should focus on influencing the Somali government to establish itself as a viable alternative to al-Shabaab. To accomplish this, the U.S. should:

- **Hold the government accountable to a series of benchmarks.** The Somali government must understand that retaining, and perhaps increasing, U.S. aid and diplomatic support requires that it make measurable progress in key areas.

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1 Daniel Mumbere, "Somalia Rejects Somaliland Port Deal with Ethiopia and UAE Company," *Africanews*, April 3, 2018, <http://www.africanews.com/2018/03/04/somalia-rejects-somaliland-port-deal-with-ethiopia-and-uae-company/> (accessed April 26, 2018).

2 Jina Moore, "Crisis Averted in Somalia's Parliament, but Tensions Simmer," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/africa/somalia-parliament.html> (accessed April 26, 2018).

3 Joshua Meservey, "The Saudi-Qatari Dispute: Why the U.S. Must Prevent Spillover into East Africa," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3268, November 29, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-saudi-qatari-dispute-why-the-us-must-prevent-spillover-east-africa>.

4 Harun Maruf, "Somalia Finance Minister Says Country Passes Trust Factor," *Voice of America*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-imf-word-bank/4360063.html> (accessed April 26, 2018).

5 Joshua Meservey, "U.S. Must Press Somalia to Deliver Competent Governance," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3252, October 5, 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/us-must-press-somalia-deliver-competent-governance>.

- **Mobilize major players to hold the Somali government accountable.** U.S. diplomats should work to persuade allies engaged with Somalia to hold the government accountable to the targets it has committed to reaching. The U.S. and its allies should coordinate delivering or withholding support based on the Somali government's performance.
- **Mediate regional powers' competition for influence in Somalia.** The spillover into Somalia of the Saudi Arabia–Qatar rivalry is intensifying, and the U.S. is the only country with sufficient diplomatic capacity to mitigate further spillover.

### **Little Progress**

The parliamentary dispute shows what little progress Mogadishu has made towards delivering competent governance, and time with which to build political legitimacy is growing increasingly short. The U.S. should cooperate with allies to hold the government accountable to its commitments—the best way to influence the situation in Somalia in the direction of stability.

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