



The Diplomatic Gaffe That Could Sour Relations Between Kenya and Somalia

By Rasna Warah



On Saturday 12 October 2019, a plane carrying a high-level Kenyan delegation arrived in the Somali port city of Kismaayo for the inauguration of Ahmed Madobe as the president of Jubaland, a Somali federal state that borders Kenya. The delegation included Aden Duale, the Majority Leader in Kenya's National Assembly, and Member of Parliament Yusuf Hassan Abdi, among others.

The arrival of Duale and his entourage of mainly Kenyan Somalis in Kismaayo broke several diplomatic protocols. The delegation did not make a courtesy call to Somali president Mohammed Abdullahi Farmaajo in Mogadishu before embarking on their journey to Kismaayo, and was, therefore, perceived as snubbing a sitting head of state. The visit reignited fears in Somalia that Kenya is trying to assert its authority in Somalia through puppet regional leaders such as Madobe who do Kenya's bidding.

The visit also contravened a directive by President Farmaajo that all international flights to Kismaayo should first pass through Mogadishu's Aden Adde international airport for inspection. By ignoring the directive, Duale and his delegation not only spurned an ally and a neighbour, but deepened fissures between Somalia and Kenya, two countries that already have tense relations due to an ongoing Indian Ocean maritime boundary dispute.

Farah Maalim, the former Deputy Speaker in Kenya's National Assembly, had warned that the visit could damage Kenya's diplomatic relations with Somalia and with other countries in the region. He advised Kenya to cut its ties with Madobe in order to foster a healthier and more amicable relationship with the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu and with President Farmaajo. (It should be noted that President Farmaajo did not support Madobe's election in the Jubaland polls and had backed a candidate from his own Marehan clan for the state presidency.)

Kenya's Man in Somalia

Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed Islam, better known by his nickname Madobe, is often viewed as "Kenya's Man in Somalia" because of the critical role he and his Ras Kamboni militia played in helping the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) to push out Al Shabaab from the port city of Kismaayo in September 2012. Yet, despite being viewed as an ally of Kenya in its war against terror, Madobe is a man who has himself been associated with terrorist activities and radical elements that wreaked havoc in Somalia after the fall of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006.

It is common knowledge that Madobe was a high-ranking official of the militant Islamic group Hizbul Islam, which was formed in 2009 by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys - who has been designated as an international terrorist by the United States - before he joined the Kenyan forces. Madobe was the governor of Kismaayo in 2006 during the short and ill-fated rule of the ICU, a militant coalition of clan-based entities, businesspeople and Muslim clerics who sought to bring about a semblance of governance in Somalia, but which was ousted by US-backed Ethiopian forces because it was perceived as an Islamic fundamentalist group that would bring about the "Talibanisation" of Somalia.

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Madobe later joined and then defected from Al Shabaab (formed after the collapse of the ICU), ostensibly after protesting against its brutal methods. He later formed the Ras Kamboni militia to fight his former allies and to regain control over the prized port of Kismaayo, which was under the control of Al Shabaab when his militia and the Kenyan forces entered Somalia. (This could have been his primary motive for collaborating with the Kenyans.)

In his book *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, American journalist Jeremy Scahill says that Madobe's change of heart vis-à-vis Al Shabaab came about after he spent two years in an Ethiopian prison after he was captured while fleeing Ethiopian and American forces when the ICU fell. He then became "one of the new generation of US-backed warlords drawn from the rubble of the Islamic Courts Union".

Some observers believe that because he already knew the lay of the land, and had similar objectives as the Kenyan forces - to gain control of Kismaayo, Al Shabaab's economic base - Madobe was identified (and probably presented himself) as a natural ally of the Kenyans. That he belongs to the Ogaden clan, which has for years sought to control southern Somalia - one of the most heterogeneous regions of Somalia that is home to several clans and which is also politically dominant in north-eastern Kenya - could also have worked to his advantage.

In the early part of 2011, prior to joining forces with Madobe's militia, the Kenyan government had plans to support Mohamed Abdi Mohamed Gandhi, the former Minister of Defence and an Ogaden

from the Jubaland region, to administer a potential Jubaland regional authority called “Azania” (also known as the Jubaland Initiative). It is believed that Ethiopia - Kenya’s “big brother” when it comes to regional military matters - opposed the creation of the Azania “buffer zone” between Kenya and Somalia as it was viewed as an Ogaden-dominated Kenyan project. It is likely that, because of its propensity to support warlords in Somalia, the Ethiopian government encouraged Kenya to work with the battle-hardened Madobe, whom they trusted more than the suave and cultured anthropologist Gandhi, who did not command any militia in Jubaland.

In May 2013, less than a year after Kismaayo fell to KDF (then re-hatted as AMISOM) and his militia, Madobe declared himself president of the self-styled state of Jubaland, which was not recognised by the central government in Mogadishu. It is believed that the Federal Government of Somalia had been supporting a rival group headed by Barre Aden Shire, who declared himself president of Jubaland moments after Madobe did.

Despite an Ethiopia-brokered agreement in August of the same year that stipulated that Madobe’s “interim administration” should hand over the port of Kismaayo to the central administration in Mogadishu within six months, there have been no signs of a handover to date. Somalia’s fragile “federalism” project to create semi-autonomous states also seems to be suffering from a lack of clarity or direction. Meanwhile, eleven years after Kenyan boots entered Somalia, there seems to be no stabilisation plan for the region, nor any exit strategy for the Kenyan forces.

Clan politics and fears of secession

Some Somali analysts and conspiracy theorists believe that Kenya does not want to see a strong and stable Somalia because the latter would pose a threat to its own national political and economic interests. They say that Kenya seeks a weak - but friendly - Somalia because Kenya believes that a strong Somali state may revive aspirations for a “Greater Somalia” that would include the ethnic Somali-dominated Ogaden region in Ethiopia and the north-eastern region of Kenya.

The Somali analyst Afyare Abdi Elmi believes that both Kenya and Ethiopia have been manipulating Somalia’s political leadership and could actually be fuelling conflict in Somalia to maintain an upper hand in the country. In his book *Understanding the Somalia Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding*, published in 2010, he writes:

“Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent Kenya, have important stakes in either installing their own proxy government in Somalia or in perpetuating the Somali conflict for as long as they can. The strategies that Somalia’s hostile neighbours adopt differ. At a time when the world would not allow an opportunistic invasion, Ethiopia sent weapons and created warlords from different clans. After 9/11 Ethiopia and Kenya capitalised on the ‘war on terror’ and used it to their advantage. As such, Ethiopia invaded Somalia [in 2006] as part of a ‘war on terror’ campaign, albeit in pursuance of its own geographical interests. Kenya has also facilitated this invasion. This leads me to conclude that these countries are determined to block a viable and strong Somali state for as long as they can as their perception is based on a zero-sum understanding of power.”

However, Kenya’s and Somalia’s fears that ethnic Somalis within their territories pose a threat to national unity are not completely unfounded and have historical roots. In the 1960s, Somalia’s first president Aden Abdullah Osman supported secessionist movements in both Kenya and Ethiopia. Although the Somali government eventually entered into a truce with both countries and restored diplomatic relations, the 1969 coup d’etat revived ambitions of a Greater Somalia in President Siad Barre. In 1977, Barre initiated a war with Ethiopia in a bid to regain the Ogaden region. Memories of Barre’s attempts to take over the Ogaden in 1977 are still fresh in many Ethiopians’ minds

The Kenyan government, on the other hand, has been antagonistic and suspicious of its own ethnic Somali population ever since the people of Kenya's Northern Frontier District voted for secession prior to independence in 1962. This resulted in the so-called Shifta wars that led to the militarisation and marginalisation of the region by the Jomo Kenyatta and successive regimes.

"Taming" the Somalis in Kenya's north-eastern region has been one of the Kenyan government's objectives since the Shifta wars of the 1960s that saw this region become a terror zone. "Collective punishments" of the region's people by the government were common. Until devolution "mainstreamed" Kenya's northern territories, the region had remained largely neglected and devoid of any meaningful development.

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In its efforts to control the seemingly uncontrollable population, the Kenyan government relied on ethnic Somalis to carry out atrocities against their own people. For instance, the brutal operation known as the "Wagalla Massacre", which resulted in the death of between 3,000 and 5,000 men in Wajir, was carried out under the watch of General Mohamud Mohamed, the army chief of staff in Daniel arap Moi's administration, and his brother Hussein Maalim Mohamed, the minister of state in charge of internal security, both of who belonged to the Somali Ogaden clan that controlled politics in the then Northeastern Province. They were among a small group of Kenyan Somalis who were in positions of power in the Moi government. General Mohamed had played a key role in thwarting the August 1982 coup attempt, and had thus contributed to saving the Moi presidency.

It is believed that Moi appointed ethnic Somalis in important positions as they were considered "neutral" in terms of their ethnic affiliation, and could, therefore, be trusted to be loyal. Incorporating ethnic Somalis in his government was also probably a strategy to defuse any "Greater Somalia" sentiments Kenyan Somalis might harbour - a strategy that the Jubilee government has also adopted by appointing or nominating Kenyan Somalis in important government positions.

Many Kenyan Somalis believe that the Mohamed brothers used their influential positions to punish and evict members of rival clans from the then Northeastern Province. Others say that in his hallmark Machiavellian style, Moi used ethnic Somalis in his government to carry out atrocities against their own people - who could easily be divided along clan lines. While it is unlikely that these powerful brothers sanctioned mass killings, they probably played into the clan politics of the area.

Clan politics is also what probably drove Aden Duale and his delegation to make the visit to Kismaayo; Kenya's north-eastern region is dominated by the Ogaden - Madobe's and Duale's clan. The visit symbolised Ogaden authority in Jubaland and in Kenya's north-eastern region.

And so, because many federal states in Somalia are run like personal or clan-based fiefdoms, decisions made by Madobe could be construed to be at the behest of Kenya. By aligning himself with Madobe, Duale - and by extension, the Kenyan government - has affirmed that Kenya is not interested in a united, democratic Somalia, and that it is using proxies to achieve its objectives in this fragmented country. The visit to Kismaayo was also a slap in the face of the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu, which is now likely to have an even more antagonistic attitude towards Kenya.

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Although many question the legitimacy of the government in Mogadishu – which is propped up mostly by the international community, mainly Western and Arab donors – the deliberate disregard for its authority by the Kenyan delegation is bound to deepen fissures between Kenya and Somalia, which could have an impact on how the Somali government views the presence of Kenyan soldiers on its soil. The Somali government, although relying heavily on AMISOM for security, has recently been making calls to strengthen Somalia's national army to replace AMISOM.

The Al Shabaab factor

It must be noted, however, that Somalia and Kenya enjoyed “live and let live” relations until the latter's incursion into Somalia in October 2011, which muddied the waters and painted Kenya as an aggressor nation in the eyes of many Somalis, not least Al Shabaab, which then made Kenya a target for its terrorist activities. Up until then – hosting the largest Somali refugee population – Kenya was viewed as a generous neighbour that came to the aid of people fleeing conflict. The decision to undertake a military intervention in Somalia was probably one of the biggest blunders of the Mwai Kibaki administration.

But even if Kenya's intention is to create a safe buffer zone between Kenya and Somalia, the fact remains that apart from controlling the city of Kismaayo and its immediate environs, Madobe has little control over the rest of Jubaland state where Al Shabaab is still very much in control. There have been reports of his administration and KDF making deals with Al Shabaab to gain access to the territories that the terrorist organisation controls. Some of these deals are said to involve the smuggling of contraband into Kenya, as has been reported severally by the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.

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The reality in Jubaland and in much of the rest of Somalia is that the majority of the people have not experienced the benefits of a strong central or state government for more than 20 years. The concept of a government has remained a mirage for most residents living outside Mogadishu, especially in remote areas where the only system of governance is customary law or the Sharia. In fact, it has been argued that, with its strict codes and its hold over populations through systems of “tax collection” or “protection fees” combined with service delivery, Al Shabaab offers a semblance of governance in the regions that it controls.

Where AMISOM forces have liberated regions from the clutches of Al Shabaab, they have essentially left behind a power vacuum which neither the Federal Government of Somalia nor the emerging regional administrations can fill. This has rendered these regions more prone to clan-based conflicts, already apparent in Jubaland, where some members of the marginalised Bantu/Wagosha minority group have taken up arms in response to what they perceive to be a form of “ethnic cleansing” by both Al Shabaab and the new Ogaden-dominated administration of Ahmed Madobe.

All these developments do not augur well for peace-building efforts in the Horn, which have been made more precarious by Kenya's relations with Madobe, who is not likely to cooperate with Mogadishu or cede control of a state characterised by clan-based feuds over resources.

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