

SOMALIA: CAN THE CREATION OF AZANIA PREVENT THE REGIONAL EXPANSION OF AL-SHABAAB

By ESISC TEAM

With the creation of a third semi-autonomous region, named Azania, on Sunday, Somalia could face further disintegration as Kenya plays a part in internal Somali politics.

Azania, or alternatively Jubaland, is located in the southern part of the country bordering Kenya and the main aim of its new government is to root out the Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist and insurgent group Al-Shabaab, which controls large parts of the newly formed state besides parts in the centre and south of the country and large parts of the capital of Mogadishu.

The creation of a new state is not a new process, as other states have walked this path before. In 1991, the former British colony of **Somaliland** – the north-western part of the country - declared its independence after 30 years of unity with the rest of the country, although currently it has not been internationally recognised as a sovereign state. At the other side of the Horn of Africa, the semi-autonomous region of **Puntland** – which contrary to Somaliland does not seek independence from the rest of the country - was created in 1998.

Despite their legal obligation to promote and develop state governments in the framework of the planned process of federalisation, **the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) condemned this move as it could cause a further disintegration of the already embattled nation.** Azania's new President Mohamed Abdi Gandhi – who previously served as Somalia's Defence Minister - rebuked these claims and indicated that the new state “will not break away from Somalia”.

The fact that the creation of Azania was celebrated in the Kenyan capital Nairobi is not a coincidence; **the Kenyan government has actively supported and funded the efforts of the embryonic Azania region to fight Al-Shabaab.** Given the development of the recent weeks, during which Al-Shabaab fighters launched several attacks on the town of Liboi, located 18 kilometres from the border in Kenya's North Eastern Province, Kenya will be pleased with a new buffer zone – to prevent terrorist infiltrations and weapons trafficking - along its porous border with Somalia.

However, Somalia's other neighbours Ethiopia and Djibouti opposed to the idea as this further division could fuel the insurgency by other regions and degrade the territorial gains of the TGF.

Despite their goal to root out the presence of Al-Shabaab, it is unclear to which extend the new state will be able to militarily confront its enemies, which have found a new cash cow after forcing pirates operating in the Al-Shabaab controlled regions to grant them a fee of 20 percent on ransom money. Moreover, it remains unclear how the hastily constructed state will be greeted by its new subjects.

The creation of Azania nearly coincided with the capture of the Somali border town of Doble by pro-TFG troops, located in the newly created state. After heavy fighting "hundreds of Al-Shabaab" fighters were repelled from the city, although it is not unlikely that Al-Shabaab will launch a counter attack on the city, which is a gateway on the vital smuggling routes for counterfeit goods and weapons entering Kenya via Somalia's unguarded territorial waters. Here lies the actual challenge for Azania's new government, as pacifying the porous border area with Kenya will also prevent the further regional expansion of Al-Shabaab, which earlier threatened with new attacks on Kenya, Uganda or Burundi.

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