



## Conflict and Oil Intertwined in Somalia

**OE Watch Commentary:** Amidst the many difficulties plaguing Somalia, including a government struggling to maintain national unity and terrorist attacks carried out by al Shabaab, comes a finding that could either be an opportunity for the country to lift itself up from where it is mired or yet one more problem that will further complicate the nation's plight. As the accompanying excerpted article from South Africa's *Institute for Security Studies* points out, that finding is oil, or in the words of the Norwegian seismic company Spectrum Geo exploring off the coast, "the scent of oil."

It appears there are significant gas deposits off the East African coast, and indeed Mozambique and Tanzania are searching for markets for their extensive reserves. Somalia also has large gas deposits, but particularly notable for the geologists is the likelihood that it also has oil. Should the geologists be right, and the oil fields developed, the revenue could fund schools, hospitals, road construction, and other projects that could help lift large numbers of Somalis out of poverty. However, there is also the "resource curse," known to so many other resource-rich African nations, where corrupt government officials and elites squander the money for themselves. With Somalia noted for its corruption and lack of transparency, it is feared a sudden influx of petro funds could further undermine the country's fragile democracy as well as aggravate problems with neighboring countries.

Already there are tensions with Somalia's southern neighbor, Kenya, which accuses Somalia of attempting to sell four offshore oil blocks whose ownership is contested. Somalia claims it was simply a marketing exercise, and that it is awaiting a decision from the International Court of Justice on whether the territory falls within Somali or Kenyan borders. While the competing claims may be settled on whether the court follows Article 15 of the 1982 Convention of the Law of the Sea, which, briefly, sets the maritime boundaries as being perpendicular from the point where the landward boundary of adjacent countries meets the coast, the issue is complicated by arguments over the colonial-era boundaries between the two.

There is yet another complication... Kenya is supplying troops to AMISOM to combat al Shabaab. While some Somalis accuse Kenya of being in Somalia for its own interests, including economic ones, Kenya has suffered heavy casualties since it invaded Somalia in 2011 in response to al Shabaab killing tourists at a Kenyan beach resort on the Somali border. Thus, Kenya and Somalia have security and economic relationships, albeit sometimes quite fraught. In the long run, oil may yet help Somalia. However, it has yet to be extracted from the ground and already there are arguments over it. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

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*A Kenyan soldier with AMISOM examines a car destroyed by a Kenyan Air Force missile strike during an operation to dislodge al Shabaab from Kismayo, Somalia. While Kenyan soldiers serve in Somalia, the two countries are arguing over potential oil discoveries off the East African coast.*  
Source: MISOM/Wikimedia Commons/Flickr, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMISOM\\_Kismayo\\_Advance\\_25\\_\(8049966250\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMISOM_Kismayo_Advance_25_(8049966250).jpg), Public Domain.

**Source:** Peter Fabricius, "Is the Scent of Oil a Solution for Somalia," *Institute for Security Studies*, 1 March 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-the-scent-of-oil-a-solution-for-somalia>

*Kenya recalled its ambassador and expelled Somalia's. Kenya's foreign affairs cabinet secretary Monica Juma told journalists that Somalia was 'deliberately misleading' prospective investors by offering to sell four offshore oil blocks in an area of the sea that was subject to court proceedings to resolve an ownership dispute between the two countries.*

*Kenya seems keener on settling the dispute bilaterally than through the ICJ.*

*Somalia has enough problems as it is. Now the resource curse, so fatal to many other African countries, appears to be raising its ugly head. On the military front, Mogadishu isn't winning the war against al-Shabaab. And now the African Union (AU) has reluctantly decided to downsize the AU Mission in Somalia, its force that has prevented al-Shabaab from overrunning the country.*