Moyale: A Local Dispute in the Crosswinds of Foreign Exploitation

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Translated from the Arabic original. In case of any discrepancy, the Arabic text prevails.

One Town, Fifty Thousand Displaced

Since the third week of October, Moyale — a border town administratively divided between Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions — has become a battleground between the forces of the two regions. Nearly 700,000 people have been displaced inside Ethiopia, according to Islamic Relief, and some 50,000 have crossed into Kenya, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The first round of talks between the two sides stalled over the flag and the administrative boundary.

This paper does not set out to find a single party to shoulder all the blame. It has three aims: to distinguish what is old and local from what is new, to identify who is investing in the fire, and to set out what our Center can offer to help put it out.

An Old Dispute, a New Escalation

Competition between the Borana Oromo and the Garre Somali over pasture, wells and local administration is long-standing. Pastoral communities by their nature share overlapping ranges, so limited skirmishes break out within a narrow area and are then settled by the wise elders of both sides. That has long been the pattern between Somalis and Oromo, between Afar and Somalis, and between Oromo and Afar.

Three things are new in the current round: the alleged entry of regular regional forces as direct parties, the spread of fighting to several districts beyond the town, and a shift in rhetoric from a dispute between two neighbouring clans to a confrontation of "nation against nation." The stated trigger was the raising of the Somali regional flag over an administrative office on 18 October. But the spark does not explain the size of the blaze.

Responsibility Begins at Home

Primary responsibility lies with those who hold decision-making power on the ground: the two regional governments, which are alleged to have deployed their forces rather than restrain clan militias on their respective sides, and the federal government, which bears

the duty of an immediate response. A local official has acknowledged that halting the fighting and bringing the two sides together lies beyond the authority of the local administration.

At root, the problem is an unresolved constitutional one: a single town under two administrations, and administrative boundaries contested since they were drawn in the early 1990s. Unless a constitutional process is opened to settle Moyale's status, every ceasefire will remain a temporary truce.

We state this plainly so that what follows about outside interference is not read as absolving anyone at home.

From the Palace Speech to the Embassy Tweet

For the past year and a half, an ethnic discourse has travelled from the very top of power in Asmara to its diplomatic and media platforms, and it has now reached Moyale. The sequence is as follows:

1. **24 May 2025:** In his Independence Day speech, President Isaias Afwerki linked Ethiopia's crisis to what he called the ideology of "Oromummaa" and invoked a Cushitic–Semitic dichotomy.
2. **11 November 2026:** Eritrea's ambassador to Kenya, Beyene Russom, posted on X about a meeting he hosted with Kenyan MP Farah Maalim and several academics. His post brought together the Moyale clashes, the question of the port of Assab, and what he called an "Oromo supremacy" agenda imposed by force on Ethiopia's other nations and nationalities.
3. **13 November 2026:** An article titled "Prosperity: From Internal Turmoil to Regional Hostility," written by Eyob Gebrehiwet of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and published on the official accounts of the Ministry of Information. It describes Ethiopia as a country "over which a cloud of destruction hangs because of the dangerous and narrow ethnic ideology of 'Oromummaa'" (HAPC translation from Tigrinya).

In its linguistic origin, "Oromummaa" simply means "Oromo-ness" — belonging to the Oromo — just as "Eritreanness" denotes belonging to Eritrea. Some theorists have given the term a political, nationalist meaning, and that is a legitimate debate. Turning a people's identity into a political charge is one thing; criticising Abiy Ahmed's government is another, and entirely legitimate.

The author of these lines warned of this trajectory in two articles published on 18 and 31 October: the first on the implications of the May speech, the second on his concern that the Moyale dispute would be pushed beyond its natural scale. The activist Jawar Mohammed — an opponent of Abiy Ahmed's government, not its defender — reached a similar reading. In an open letter to MP Farah Maalim, he described the events as a

recurring dispute between two closely related clans rather than a confrontation between two nations. On 12 November he wrote that the ambassador's meeting had exposed the source of the narrative, and on 14 November he drew attention to the ministry's article.

HAPC assessment: The available facts do not establish that an external party ignited the fighting. What is established is that official Eritrean discourse has adopted and amplified an ethnic reading of events, and that some of the most inflammatory rhetoric originates outside the affected area. We also note that the narrative of "Oromo expansionism" has independent Kenyan-Somali voices: Asmara amplifies it, but is not necessarily its sole author.

Two Grievances, Not One

No one who sees only one side's grievance is fit to mediate. Somalis fear federal bias in favour of the Oromia leadership, and they have lost civilians, including at least eight killed in an attack on 14 November, according to Anadolu Agency. The Oromo, and the Borana in particular, believe they have lost historic pastures and wells, and today face a campaign that puts their very identity in the dock.

Between the two sides are measured voices worth heeding. The Somali writer Ali Ahmed Mohamed al-Muqdishi has reminded readers that centuries of trade, neighbourliness and intermarriage have built a closeness that must not be squandered, and has urged that local disputes not be conflated with disagreements between states. Oromo intellectuals have challenged aspects of his historical reading — a legitimate disagreement whose place is the seminar hall, not the battlefield.

A Lesson from the Afar–Somali Frontier

The Afar know this road well, for they have walked it. Pastoral skirmishes along the boundary between the two regions escalated some years ago into organised war between the Afar and Somali regions. Among the milestones in containing it was the ceasefire agreement of April 2024, brokered by the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council.

What the Center Offers

The Horn of Africa Policy Center announces its readiness to host a series of Oromo–Somali dialogue seminars, as an independent research institution affiliated with neither side:

1. **Elders' session:** community and religious leaders from the Borana and the Garre, to discuss de-escalation and the return of the displaced.

2. **Historians' session:** academics from both sides presenting the two historical narratives side by side, rather than wielding them as weapons.
3. **Media session:** journalists and activists drafting a code of conduct for covering the conflict.

We recommend the following:

- **The two regional governments:** an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of regular forces from the town, and a joint mechanism to protect civilians.
- **The federal government:** mediation whose impartiality both sides can trust, and a constitutional process to settle Moyale's status.
- **Kenya and IGAD:** support for the return of the displaced, and measures to keep inflammatory rhetoric from spilling into the Kenyan arena.
- **External actors, Asmara first among them:** an end to using diplomatic and media platforms to frame a local dispute in ethnic terms.
- **Elites and activists on both sides:** to call the conflict by its name — a dispute over the administration of a town, not a war between two peoples.

The Oromo and the Somalis, like the Afar, are peoples who straddle political borders, and what binds them is older than any administrative line drawn between them. The matter now rests with their wise voices, and the Center places its platform at their service.

Sources

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Previous articles by the author (Arabic)

- Why did activist Jawar Mohammed side with the government he opposes against Isaias Afwerki? (18 October 2026)
- What is happening in southern Ethiopia is not separate from what is happening in the north (31 October 2026)