

Query response

Ethiopia: The special police (Liyu Police) in the Somali Regional State

- What tasks does Liyu Police have?
- In which areas does Liyu Police operate and how visible is their presence?
- To what degree are members of Liyu Police held accountable for violations?
- Who and how does Liyu Police recruit?
- Does Liyu Police practice forced recruitment?
- Does Liyu Police recruit people below the age of 18?

Introduction

This query response concerns the special police force in the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia (Somali Region),¹ the so-called Liyu Police (*liyu* means «special» in Amharic).² Information about conditions in the Somali Region, including Liyu Police, is very limited. This is partly because the Ethiopian authorities have strict control over international presence in the region, thus limiting the possibility of independent reporting on conditions in the region. This query response is largely based on information collected on a fact finding mission to Addis Ababa and the Somali Region in April 2016. During the trip, Landinfo met with numerous sources from different backgrounds and who had very good insight into the Somali Region. All

¹ Ethiopia is a federation made up of nine ethnic regional states (kilil) and two federal city-states (astedader). The Somali Region is one of the regional states and is based on Ethiopia's ethnic Somali population. The Somali Region is sometimes referred to as «Ogaden». Landinfo is of the opinion that calling the region Ogaden is politically charged. Ogaden is the dominant clan in the Somali Region. The region is, however, also home to a number of other clans. Therefore, only the term «Somali Region» is used in this query response.

² Source A (meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016) explained that all regional states in Ethiopia have their own special police, except Harar. These have different camouflage uniforms and are subject to the respective regional administration. It is unclear to Landinfo whether the special police in other regions are also referred to as Liyu Police. This response uses «Liyu Police» exclusively to refer to the special police in the Somali Region. According to source A, Ethiopians have begun to refer to the special police as «Agazi», a term previously reserved for the Ethiopian army's special forces.

sources stated that the conditions in the region are very sensitive. Consequently all sources are anonymized for the sake of their own safety and work.

Background and tasks

Liyu Police was established in the wake of the attack on an oil field near Abole in April 2007 by the separatist group Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The attack resulted in the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) escalating its operations against ONLF in the Somali Region. From October 2007, ENDF was replaced by local government-affiliated militias in the frontline against ONLF.³ The local military authorities were later on replaced by Liyu Police (source A, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016). The special police force was established by the current regional President Abdi Mohamed Omar (known as Abdi Iley), in his capacity as chief of the Regional Bureau of Justice and Security. Information from sources, however, diverges on when Liyu Police was established. Professor Tobias Hagmann (2014, p. 49) notes that the establishment took place in 2009, while Human Rights Watch (HRW 2012) refers that Liyu Police was created in 2007 and that the force was already prominent in 2008.

The sources Landinfo met with during the fact finding mission in April 2016 all agreed that Liyu Police today is not only responsible for fighting ONLF, but also for protecting the border and for handling general security challenges in the region.⁴ Source B (meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016) explained that Liyu Police has been very effective in combating ONLF and that ONLF today has been significantly weakened.⁵ Landinfo's understanding is that the current al-Shabaab infiltration from Somalia presents an equally great challenge.⁶

Liyu Police solves these tasks by – among other things – operating regional checkpoints and patrolling border areas. The security situation in the Somali Region is also characterized by various clan conflicts, which continually flare up (sources E and F, meetings in Addis Ababa, April 2016).⁷ Source G (meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016) asserted that Liyu Police tends to support the Ogaden clans in the event of clan conflicts.

³ This is further discussed in Landinfo's query response on the Ethiopian army in the Somali Region, dated 3 June 2016.

⁴ Source A explained that a number of government actors are tasked with protecting the border, including the federal police, ENDF and Liyu Police. The federal police wear blue camouflage uniforms.

⁵ According to source C (meeting in Jijiga, April 2016), ONLF today consists only of «a few hundred» fighters. These mainly conduct ambushes against government forces along the main roads in rural areas. A separate query response by Landinfo on the ONLF is under preparation.

⁶ The militant Islamist organization al-Shabaab operates mainly in Somalia. Ethiopian forces, both within and outside the African Union forces in Somalia (AMISOM), fight against al-Shabaab in southern Somalia. Source A explained that al-Shabaab therefore wishes to carry out terrorist attacks in Addis Ababa, which is also the headquarters of the African Union. The Somali Region represents a buffer zone in this context, since al-Shabaab must make their way through it in order to reach Addis Ababa. According to source A and source D (meeting in Jijiga, April 2016), al-Shabaab frequently enters the Somali Region.

⁷ Clan conflicts are usually about control over water, pasture land and other resources, yet are also about administrative boundaries and access to state resources resulting from administrative representation.

It is somewhat unclear to what extent Liyu Police holds regular police duties. Source A emphasized that Liyu Police's training is primarily of a military nature. Source C stated, however, that locals have begun to refer to Liyu Police only as «the police».

The Somali Region has its own regional police,⁸ but according to source D (meeting in Jijiga, April 2016), it is Liyu Police who maintains the real police authority in the region. During the trip in April 2016, Landinfo noted that the regional police, unlike Liyu Police, was conspicuously absent.

Presence and visibility in and outside of the Somali Region

Liyu Police members wear desert-colored camouflage uniforms (beige, light green, brown and black). At first glance their uniform can be mistaken for belonging to ENDF, but it is nevertheless distinctive (source A).⁹ During Landinfo's fact finding mission in April 2016, Liyu Police was highly visible in the streets. In Jijiga town, they manned numerous checkpoints and stood guard along the street corners in the city. They operated in teams of two or more, and were armed with automatic rifles and various types of striking weapons. According to source A, Liyu Police also has access to heavy weapons like machine guns. Landinfo also observed several uniformed Liyu Police officers apparently not on duty. They were unarmed and socialized with the civilian population. Also, Liyu Police manned a number of checkpoints along the main road from Jijiga to the border town Wajale. Checkpoints outside of Jijiga were of a more permanent nature and were better staffed than the checkpoints in the city.

It is Landinfo's understanding that Liyu Police was originally only present in those parts of the Somali Region that constitute the heartland of the Ogaden clan, i.e. the previous districts/zones Fik, Degehabur, Good, Korah and Werder.¹⁰ According to sources A and D, Liyu Police today operates throughout the entire region. This is consistent with the statement that Liyu Police is responsible for dealing with security challenges in the region in general. It is unclear when Liyu Police expanded its presence.

Hagmann (2014, p. 49) previously estimated that Liyu Police consisted of between 10,000 and 15,000 members.¹¹ Source C estimates, however, that the force today has approximately 42,000 members. Landinfo takes this as an indication that Liyu Police has grown considerably in recent years, which is consistent with the force having expanded its responsibilities in the region. The Somali Region is, however, very large and the road network is very poor (sources

⁸ The regional police in the Somali Region wear blue uniforms (light blue shirts and dark blue pants), without any camouflage patterns.

⁹ Liyu Police's uniform is clearly visible in the following picture: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ipsnews/14346274157>. Furthermore, it should be noted that ENDF, unlike Liyu Police, only has very few ethnic Somalis in its ranks (see Landinfo query response dated June 3, 2016 on ENDF in the Somali Region).

¹⁰ The districts/zones of Fik, Good and Werder have been renamed Nogob, Shabelle and Dollo respectively. According to source D (e-mail, May 3, 2016), Nogob was divided into two districts/zones earlier this year: Nogob and Erar.

¹¹ Hagmann bases his estimate on an article appearing in The Guardian (Quinn 2013), which refers to information from an internal document of the British Department for International Development. It is unclear when or where that information was obtained.

E, H and I, meetings in Addis Ababa, April 2016). Liyu Police's mobility and thus presence in rural areas is also limited by the fact that many roads are impassable during the rainy season (source C).¹² Liyu Police's vehicles are typically Toyota Pickups. These are often painted in different camouflage patterns. Some cars have sirens and police signs (source A). In light of the above, it is Landinfo's assessment that Liyu Police has presence in the cities and larger villages along major roads throughout the Somali Region, but that they are not necessarily present in every village. Their presence in rural areas depends on the situation at hand.

A number of media reports in 2015 show that Liyu Police has been involved in battles and other incidents on the Somali side of the border.¹³ Sources C and J (meetings in Nairobi, January 2016) confirmed that Liyu Police operates in southern Somalia.

In January 2016, allegations appeared claiming that Liyu Police was being used against demonstrations, including in the city-state Dire Dawa and in Benedo in the Ethiopian regional state of Oromia (Iaccino 2016). During the fact finding mission in April 2016, source D also stated that there were rumors that Liyu Police had begun operating on the Oromian side of the regional state border. It is Landinfo's view that the source material is too limited to fully assess whether this is correct, but it cannot be excluded as a possibility.

Accountability

There is little doubt that Liyu Police has committed a number of serious violations, including executing civilians (see for example HRW 2012). Several sources pointed out that similar abuses still occur, especially in rural areas (sources A, G and C). Also, media reports from Somalia (see footnote 13) allege that Liyu Police still commits abuses against civilians. However, it is unclear how comprehensive and systematic such abuses are. The limited opportunity for independent investigations allows for speculation, which one should be cautious about.

Source C explained that Liyu Police has a good command structure. The force answers to the regional president, and is led by Abdirahman Abdillahi Burale (also known as Abdirahman Labagole) (Africa Intelligence 2015). Source A emphasized that the force is nevertheless relatively undisciplined. According to source C, pressure from the federal government resulted in Liyu Police improving their behavior in cities in the last 12-18 months.¹⁴

¹² The Somali Region has two annual rainy seasons: *Gu* and *Deyr* (DPPB 2004, p. 2). In the districts/zones of Sitti (Shinile) and Fafan (Jijiga), the rainy season usually lasts from late March to late May (*Gu*) and from late July to late September (*Deyr*). In the other districts/zones, the rainy season normally occurs from mid-April to late June (*Gu*) and from early October to late December (*Deyr*). Even during the rainy season, several weeks can go by without rain, and it can rain periodically in drought times. Precipitation can vary greatly from year to year.

¹³ For example, fighting between Liyu Police and local clan militias supposedly occurred in Galagdad region in Somalia in May 2015 (AFP 2015). In June 2015, Liyu Police was involved in a clan conflict in the Somali Hiran-region (OCHA 2015). In August 2015, it was reported that Liyu Police fought against al-Shabaab in the Somali Bakool-region (Abdirhaman 2015). In January 2016, Liyu Police reportedly arrested several people in Bakool (Mareeg 2016). Also in April 2016, Liyu Police supposedly fought local clan militias in Galgadud (Shabelle Media Network 2016).

¹⁴ During a fact finding mission in October 2015, source K (meeting in Addis Ababa) said that the federal government wanted to dissolve Liyu Police. This has not occurred. Source L (meeting in Jijiga, April 2016)

The sources were in agreement that Liyu Police operates with a high degree of legal impunity. This is consistent with previously available information (see for example Hagmann 2014, p. 49). Sources D and M (meetings in Jijiga, April 2016) emphasized, in this context, that rule of law does not exist in the Somali Region. All the sources pointed out that clan structures are of great importance in the region. Several sources emphasized that clan loyalty and traditional clan mechanisms for dealing with conflict are far stronger than state institutions, especially in rural areas (source N, meeting in Oslo, April 2016; sources L, O and P, meetings in Jijiga, in April 2016; source Q, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016). When asked whether Liyu Police also enjoys impunity from traditional clan mechanisms such as compensation claims and revenge killings, source G testified to the fact that Liyu Police members sometimes hide their faces when they commit abuses precisely to avoid such reactions. Source N explained that Liyu Police members generally behave better towards their own clan members. Furthermore, a HRW report (2012) claims that Liyu Police released prisoners after clan elders intervened. Landinfo believes that clan affiliation can influence the behavior of Liyu Police members and that individual Liyu Police members can be held accountable within the clan system in certain situations.

Recruitment

A key point in the creation of Liyu Police was that Ethiopian authorities wanted to fight ONLF using the same clans as the ones that ONLF recruited from, i.e. the Ogaden clans (International Crisis Group 2013, p. 12).¹⁵ Also, defectors from ONLF were recruited by Liyu Police (Hagmann, 2014 p. 32; sources C and G). According to source C, previously recruitment also took place in prisons, where prisoners were given the choice between joining Liyu Police or remaining in prison. The rationale behind this was that Liyu Police wanted to utilize the knowledge of former ONLF members on how ONLF operated, who the members were, where they hid, and who supported them. Source C underlined, however, that such recruitment has not been common since 2010/2011.

The sources we met with during the April 2016 mission to the Somali Region all agreed that Liyu Police does not use forced recruitment.¹⁶ Sources A, C, G and N explained that unemployment in the Somali Region is high and that it is very lucrative to work for Liyu Police. Not only is the pay good, but the members are allowed to keep «confiscated» valuables. In addition, families of Liyu Police members who are killed in service are compensated. Source G also pointed out that Liyu Police is interested in loyal and motivated members, which is unachievable through forced recruitment. Source C explained that Liyu Police has little need for more recruits. Vacancies are no longer publicly advertised, but are instead made known through clan networks.

explained that the regional president opposed the dissolution by pointing out that it would result in a destabilization of the security situation in the Somali Region.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group (2013, p. 12) points out that this led to conflicts within the Ogaden clans since clans/families had members in both ONLF and Liyu Police. None of the sources Landinfo met with during the April 2016 mission mentioned this. As previously commented, sources agreed that ONLF's activity has been substantially reduced. See footnote 5.

¹⁶ Forced recruitment is here defined as recruitment through violence or threat of violence. Violence is intentional use of physical force against another person in order to inflict unwanted pain, injury or death.

The sources also agreed that Liyu Police today is still mainly composed of members from the Ogaden clan, and especially from the Abdille clan.¹⁷ According to source D, the population therefore also refers to Liyu Police as «Abdille». Other clans are, however, also represented in Liyu Police (source G). According to source C, Liyu Police has been particularly active in recruiting members from other clans other than the Ogaden since 2014/2015. According to the source, non-Ogaden clan members also hold certain leadership positions in the force.

Both sources F and N were of the opinion that among Liyu Police's ranks, there are people between 15 and 18 years of age. Several of Liyu Police members who Landinfo observed during the April 2016 trip might have belonged in this age group. Source O emphasized that 15-year old boys are considered adults in the Somali Region. It is still unclear whether Liyu Police formally recruits persons below the age of 18. Source F and source Q explain that very few births in the Somali Region are recorded and that it may therefore be difficult to determine how old recruits are.

Liyu Police also consists of female members, some of which Landinfo saw during the April 2016 fact finding mission.

About Landinfo's Query responses

The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, is an independent body within the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. Landinfo provides country of origin information (COI) to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet – UDI), the Immigration Appeals Board (Utlendingsnemnda – UNE) and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

Query responses produced by Landinfo are based on information from carefully selected sources. The information is researched and evaluated in accordance with [common methodology for processing of COI](#) and [Landinfo's internal guidelines on source and information analysis](#).

Responses provide brief answers to queries from the Directorate or Appeal's Board. They are written within time constraints and do not provide exhaustive overviews of topics or themes.

Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

References

Written sources

- Abdirahman, A. (2015, 19 August). '11 militants killed' in fierce gun battle in Somalia. *Horseed Media*. Available at <https://horseedmedia.net/2015/08/19/11-militants-killed-in-fierce-gun-battle-in-somalia/> [downloaded 9 May 2016]
- Africa Intelligence (2015, 9 October). Disagreement on dissolution of highly contested Liyu Police. *Africa Intelligence*. Available at <http://www.africaintelligence.com/ION/politics-power/2015/10/09/disagreement-on-dissolution-of-highly-contested-liyu-police,108105610-ART> [downloaded 1 June 2016]

¹⁷ Abdille is a sub-clan of the Ogaden clan Muhamed Zubeir, which is also found in Lower Juba in southern Somalia. Hagmann (2014, p. 49) notes that Liyu Police are mainly recruited from the Abdille sub-clan, Ali Yusuf.

- AFP (2015, 31 May). Clashes in Somalia leave 35 dead. *Hiraan Online*. Available at http://hiiraan.com/news4/2015/May/99896/clashes_in_somalia_leave_35_dead.aspx [downloaded 26 May 2016]
- DPPB, ie. Somali region Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (2004). *Somali Regional State Summary*. Addis Ababa: DPPB. Available at <http://www.dppc.gov.et/Livelihoods/Somali/Downloadable/SNRS%20Regional%20Summary.pdf> [downloaded 30 May 2016]
- Hagmann, T. (2014). *Talking Peace in the Ogaden. The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.
- HRW, ie. Human Rights Watch (2008). *Collective Punishment. War crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Region*. New York: HRW. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/ethiopia0608/ethiopia0608web.pdf> [downloaded 30 May 2016]
- HRW (2012, 28 May). *Ethiopia: 'Special Police' Executive 10*. New York: HRW. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/28/ethiopia-special-police-execute-10> [downloaded 30 May 2016]
- International Crisis Group (2013, 6 August). *Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace in Ogaden*. Brussels: International Crisis Group. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia-eritrea/207-ethiopia-prospects-for-peace-in-ogaden.pdf> [downloaded 30 May 2016]
- Mareeg (2016, 25 January). Somalia: Ethiopian Liyu police step into somali politics, arrest 20 elders in Ato town. *Mareeg*. Available at <http://www.mareeg.com/ethiopian-liyu-police-somali-region-arrest-nearly-20-people-in-somalia/> [downloaded 26 May 2016]
- OCHA, ie. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2015, 25 June). *Inter Agency Initial Investigation report – Inter Clan Fighting in Deefow, Hiraan Region*. New York: OCHA. Available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/150625_deefow_initial_investigation_inter_clan_conflict.pdf [downloaded 26 May 2016]
- Qinn, B. (2013, 10 January). UK tenders to train Ethiopian paramilitaries accused of abuses. *The Guardian*. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/10/ethiopia-forces-human-rights-funding> [downloaded 6 May 2016]
- Shabelle Media Network (2016, 23 April). Somalia: Heavy Fighting Renews in Central Region. *Shabelle Media Network*. Available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201604230227.html> [downloaded 26 May 2016]

Oral sources

- Source A, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source B, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source C, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source D, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source D, e-mail 3 May 2016
- Source E, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source F, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source G, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source H, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source I, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016
- Source J, Nairobi, 22 January 2016

Query response **Ethiopia: The special police (Liyu Police) in the Somali Regional State**

- Source K, meeting in Addis Ababa, October 2015
- Source L, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source M, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source N, meeting in Oslo, April 2016
- Source O, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source P, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016
- Source Q, meeting in Addis Ababa, April 2016

© Landinfo 2016

The material in this report is covered by copyright law. Any reproduction or publication of this report or any extract thereof other than as permitted by current Norwegian copyright law requires the explicit written consent of Landinfo.