The Enduring Conflict in Somalia: Analyzing the Dynamics of Instability and the Path to Sustainable Peace

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The Federal Republic of Somalia, located in the Eastern Horn of Africa, has experienced prolonged conflict and instability for nearly three decades. As a result, the country ranks 153rd in the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2024, placing it among the least peaceful nations of the 163 states assessed (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024, p. 11). The conflict formally began with the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991. However, conflicts rarely emerge suddenly, and the case of Somalia is no exception. The conflict is multifaceted, driven by a complex interaction of social, political, economic, and historical factors, which collectively present a bleak picture of humanitarian crises, political turmoil, and socioeconomic upheavals (Dersso, 2009, p. 1-6.) These dynamics have severe implications for the peace process in the region, further exacerbated by the involvement of international actors and the growing threat posed by militant Islamist groups. This essay examines the current conflict dynamics in Somalia, tracing their origins and analyzing them through the lens of the GPI 2024 peace indicators.

Many scholars attribute the Somali conflict to the colonial legacy. Before colonialism, Somalis were relatively peaceful (Adamu, 2009, p. 298). In 1885, the land was divided between the French, British, and Italians, without regard for the distinct identities of the Somali people when drawing borders. The Somali Republic was formed on July 1, 1960, following the unification of Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland. Somalis were identified primarily by their clan affiliations (e.g., Dir, Darod, Isaaq, etc.), and competition for resources among these clans and other actors was common. Clan militias existed, and under the Xeer system, elders mediated conflicts (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). Many Somalis were divided across state borders, further fueling conflict as they were separated from their patrilineal clan members.

Amid political turmoil, Siad Barre came to power through a coup in 1969. As a member of the Darod clan, he further polarized the clan-based system in Mogadishu

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(Osman & Souare, 2007). His regime, a repressive and brutal dictatorship, rejected clan politics and the indigenous identities of the Somali people. The state-operated under a 4.5 power-sharing formula, which persists. According to this system, four major clans occupied key political positions, while a fractional 0.5 was allocated to minorities. In 1976, Barre introduced the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party to promote 'Scientific Socialism' in Somalia (Harvard Divinity School, n.d). However, his regime ultimately failed due to corruption, opposition from rival clans, defeat in the Ogaden War, a lack of legitimacy, and waning international support. His ousting in 1991 led to a power vacuum and the onset of civil war—one of the longest in African history. This collapse also paved the way for the independence of Somaliland and the establishment of Puntland as an autonomous region.

The civil war left Somalia in the hands of warlords. Peace talks took place with the intervention of the international community, including the United Nations, leading to the formation of the Transitional Government and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2000 and 2004, respectively. In 2006, the Islamic militant group, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), strengthened its presence in southern Somalia. With the support of the United States, the African Union, and Kenya, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006 and successfully defeated the ICU. However, one of the ICU's offshoots, Al-Shabaab, gained territory in central and southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab's goal is to establish a Greater Somalia, overthrow the Somali government, and implement a strict Islamic state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

The present conflict involves the forces of the TFG, which was replaced by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012, and fundamentalist groups like Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab maintains strong ties with Al-Qaeda. The two conflicting parties differ in ideology, political objectives, and territorial control and have both committed significant human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2023). In 2011, Somalia was ranked as the world's most peace-deprived nation (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2011, p. 9), characterized by a state of war, the absence of a stable government, and pervasive violence. However, Somalia improved in subsequent years, rising to 158th out of 163 countries in the GPI 2020 report (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020, p. 9). This improvement can be attributed to factors such as establishing the FGS, although challenges persist.

The GPI's 23 indicators are categorized into Militarization, Ongoing Conflict, and Social Safety and Security. Analyzing Somalia through these qualitative and quantitative indicators offers valuable insights into why the country ranks so low in the GPI 2024. These indicators reveal both direct and indirect violence in Somali society, which impedes the achievement of both negative and positive peace. Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 80% of its population living as refugees in neighboring states like Kenya and Ethiopia. At the same time, hundreds of thousands are internally displaced (USA for UNHCR, 2023). The country is also experiencing the worst drought in a century and is ranked the world's hungriest nation (Global Hunger Index, 2024, p. 15). Violent demonstrations, particularly by Al-Shabaab, have intensified, with the deadliest occurring in 2022. Other groups, such as the Islamic State and unrest in Somaliland, further fuel clan violence (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2023). This situation is illustrated in Figure 1 (ACLED, 2024).

**Figure 1.** Inter-Clan Clashes in Somalia (1 June 2023-26 July 2024)
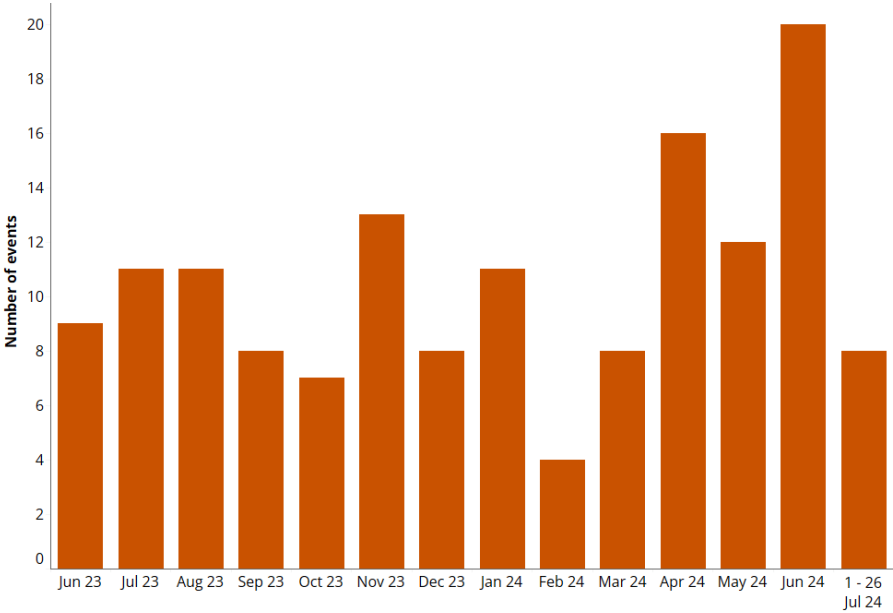
Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (2024)

Surprisingly, Somalia has improved its ranking regarding the impact of terrorism. It is now ranked as the 7th most terrorized country globally—an alarming position but four places lower than in previous years (Global Terrorism Index, 2024, p. 8).

Somalia remains in the process of state-building. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), violence in various parts of the country has led to an increase in conflict-related deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Although Somalia has not been involved in any state-to-state wars in 2024, the ongoing threat from Al-Shabaab has increased militarization. Somali society itself is militarized, with clan militias playing a significant role. The Somali National Army (SNA) is undergoing reforms but remains dependent on external support from the United States, Turkey, and the African Union Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). Somalia's GDP remains lower than that of many other African nations, as shown in Figure 2 (Urama et al., 2024, p. 21).

Figure 2. Somalia's GDP Compared to African Nations
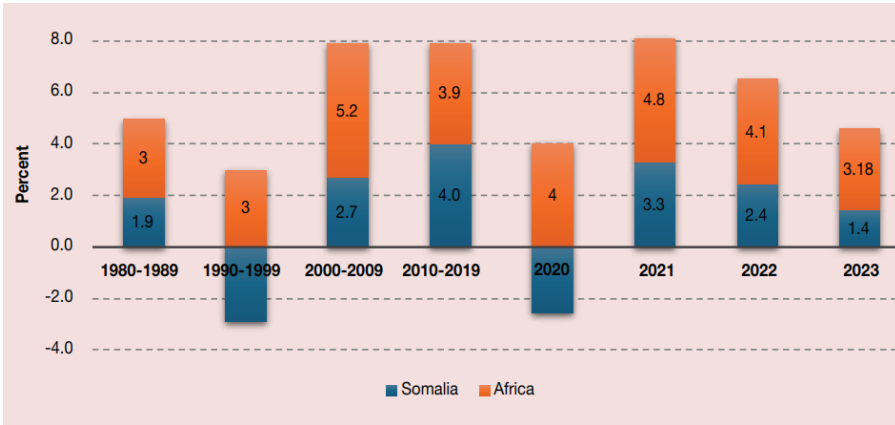
The incarceration rate in Somalia is not exceptionally high, not due to effective law and order but because of limited data availability. Prisoners are often held in small cells with inhumane living conditions. The criminality index in Somalia remains significant compared to other African states, though its resilience score has improved. Somali society is also plagued by human trafficking, the possession of illegal weapons, and the illicit trade of pharmaceuticals and flora. Drug trafficking, while not widespread, has been observed in some cases.

The country is a hotspot for transnational crimes such as piracy, which has driven demand for illegal weapons. Al-Shabaab disrupts internet access in areas under its control and has been involved in hacking government websites. Due to the absence of cybersecurity measures, Somalia is vulnerable to cybercrime. Tax evasion and financial crimes are prevalent, and law enforcement remains weak. The judicial system is deeply corrupt, undermining the social contract and perpetuating instability. Somalia remains a dangerous place for journalists, with limited press freedom and a high homicide rate (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

The United Nations continues to support Somalia through various agencies, including UNOSOM I & II, UNSOM, UNICEF, and UNDP. Recently, at the request of the Somali government, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) agreed to transition UNSOM into the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS), which will continue its peace initiatives in Somalia until 2026 (UN, 2024).

Conclusion

The Somali conflict has persisted for decades, driven by both surface-level and deeply ingrained factors that have been simmering for years. Although there have been some signs of progress in specific indicators, the overall peace process remains hindered by the rise of extremism, the effects of climate change, the ongoing humanitarian crisis, weak governance, clanism, regional and external influences, competition for resources, and a lack of national unity. The Somali case study highlights the importance of addressing both negative and positive peace to achieve lasting stability. Despite some progress, the current situation remains insufficient to address the underlying issues. International efforts have not succeeded in ending the prolonged violent phase, as the

root causes of the conflict persist. Throughout these struggles, the civilian population has borne the brunt of the suffering over the past few decades.

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