

## **Exiting Somalia's Political Impasse**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper argues that Somalia's Weberian state apparatus and legal-rational bureaucratic model need revision. Given the country's clan-based societal organization and dominant agrarian and pastoral economy, an alternative form of government that includes clan leaders, businesspeople, and urban-based non-governmental organizations works best for Somalia. In such a system, the central government is a moderator articulating and aggregating diverse demands instead of power monopolizing. The success of the Islamic Courts and al-Shabaab Movement in working with the local population in their areas of control suggests that an informal form of government is more suitable for Somalia's traditional society than a formal system based on the concept of anonymous citizenship that is alien to the local value system. The unpropitious legacy of colonialism, and the failure of its democracy during the 1960s, leading to civil strife, wars, foreign intervention, and state failure that continue to grip Somalia validate the paper's research approach.*

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### **Introduction**

Somalia's independence in 1960 did not bring economic development, stability, the construction of a sense of national identification, and the establishment of modern political institutions. Instead, its fragile political system collapsed following a military coup in 1969. Since then, Somalia encountered cycles of political violence, frequent famines, state failure, and foreign intervention. These untoward events gave rise to Islamic revivalism, notably the al-Shabaab Movement, which continues to exercise its physical presence in significant parts of the country, despite a determined government effort to eradicate it. Somalia has not recovered from the effects of internal conflict that marred the 1990s. In 2000, the belligerents signed an agreement on a transitional formula for governance based on clannish accommodation for three years, after which the country would adopt a system of political pluralism. But after over two decades, this agreement still must take off.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres arrived in Mogadishu in April 2023, where he held talks with senior government officials. Guterres' visit came to express the UN's solidarity with Somalia in the face of the terror attacks carried out by the al-

Shabaab Movement and the Islamic State at a time when attacks against civilians have escalated, resulting in the killing of 1,059 people in the second half of 2022. President Sheikh Mohamud's administration vowed to wage an all-out war against al-Shabaab, focusing on a military solution without addressing security and governance challenges. During his first term as president in 2012, he made similar pledges and promises. Since then, all Somali presidents have vowed to defeat the al-Shabaab Movement and achieve security and stability without fulfilling their stated commitments. Contrary to their ostentatious claim, al-Shabaab continued to exert its hold on sizeable parts of Somalia's territory and population.

The Somali government's approach to dealing with the al-Shabaab rebellion coincides with the international approach to the war on terrorism, which is unlikely to succeed. Most cases of rebellion described as terrorism are nothing more than cases of political violence and civil war resulting from the failure of a state run by corrupt elites linked to a network of local and international interests. In his speech during the general debate of the seventy-seventh session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, Somali President Sheikh Mohamud said that terrorism remains an ongoing and complex challenge for the entire world and contributes to the exacerbation of all other crises, including food insecurity, displacement, and climate change. He promised to launch a 'total war' against al-Shabab and eliminate terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Mohamud ruled out the possibility of reconciliation and reaching a sensible solution to Somalia's endemic travails. This uncompromising approach to al-Shabaab, which he adopted during his two presidential terms, led to the emergence of a more radical group, the Islamic State in Somalia in 2015, which would supplant al-Shabaab in the event of its defeat.

This paper asserts that the only plausible solution to Somalia's chronic upheavals lies in adopting an inclusive political system that recognizes its social fabric, limitations of the Weberian state model, unstable regional geopolitical environment, and the central role of Islam in society. Somalia needs a unique governance formula that considers its demography, food insecurity and vulnerability, clan behavior, colonial past, and post-independence political impasse that caused state disintegration and allowed foreign meddling.

### **Country Profile**

Greater Somalia spreads over an area estimated at 620 thousand square miles. Some of its historical territories lie today in western Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Somalia - whose arable land area exceeds eight million hectares - is famous for its diversity of natural resources, as it has many natural gas and oil reserves. In addition to that, it is rich in iron, tin, copper, and salt. Agriculture in Somalia is distinguished as one of the largest economic fields, as it is famous for its vast livestock wealth. Its most important exports are meat, fish, and agricultural products, making it a potential food basket for the region's countries, pending agrarian reform and water resources management.

Despite endowment with natural wealth, issues about political instability, security, and drought tear Somalia apart. According to UN estimates, more than half of Somalia's 16 million people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, significantly more than three million who live in camps for the displaced.<sup>2</sup> Somalia suffers from chronic climate change that causes frequent droughts and floods, leading to massive population displacement, rapid urbanization, hunger, malnutrition, and

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poverty. Climate change is also a cause of tribal conflicts, deepening divisions, chaos, and insecurity. In 2021, the government attempted to raise just over a billion dollars. Still, despite aid from the international community, it secured up to 70 percent of the funds to meet basic humanitarian needs. The loss of traditional livelihoods makes people amenable to recruitment by militant groups such as al-Shabaab. Somalia is witnessing a third consecutive season of below-average rainfall, and 80 percent of the population suffers from drought, water shortages, and livestock deaths. Somalia's food insecurity situation is extremely alarming. Given the absence of indicators for reaching a negotiated political settlement, it does not bode well for the future.<sup>3</sup>

Chaos, turmoil, and famine are not unusual for Somalia. The country suffered from years of civil war, making it a fertile environment for the growth of militant armed groups led by the al-Shabaab Mujahideen Movement, which controlled about 85 percent of the country in the past decade. Clan consciousness dominates Somali society where, given its largely pastoral and agropastoral economy, groups historically fought over water and livestock in the country's arid and harsh weather. In explaining Somalia's civil strife, Afyare Elim observes that "competition for power and resources are the main engine of hostility."<sup>4</sup> He concludes that allocating the country's spoils require crafting workable political institutions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Analytical Framework**

Somalia is a segmented country consisting of several powerful clans, especially the Hawiye, Darood, Isaac, and Dir, in addition to numerous subclans. Contrary to prevalent evidence, Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis dismiss the role of primordial divisions in instigating conflict Africa's turmoil, claiming that "deep political and economic development failures --not tribalism or ethnic hatred-- are the root causes of Africa's problems."<sup>6</sup> In fact, al-Shabaab Movement won the support, even if utilitarian, of alienated clans as observed by Matthew Hoddie who believes violence ensues when "clans and leaders that feel alienated in resource agreements and power sharing... tactically affiliate with Al-Shabaab, then realign with the government after their demands are granted."<sup>7</sup> In segmented state, "the leaders... seek to redefine the established relationship with the central state in terms of relative power and representation."<sup>8</sup> Observers of Somali politics agree that its power elite "do not have agreed authority relations or agreed means of settling disputes" over them. The country does not fulfill a modicum of the Weberian statehood paradigm... [and] Westphalian sovereignty."<sup>9</sup> Instead, what characterizes Somalia is the proliferation of clan segmentation.

Without a strong central authority, tribes and clans fight over anything, especially water, grazing, pasture, and other resources. In postcolonial weak states, they often compete violently over material resources and political representation. James Corum recognizes that insurgencies are more complex than conventional wars because they pit a segment of the population against the government and because of some insurgents' proneness to switch allegiances, given that social and economic issues lie at their "center of gravity."<sup>10</sup> Africa is beset by interstate and internal wars, making conflict in the continent more the norm than the exception. In 2018, it witnessed 21 civil wars in 17 countries.<sup>11</sup> Scholars established a "link between underlying tensions in society and insurgent movement formation... [notably ideological, social, religious, and economic]."<sup>12</sup> They also noted that "civil wars are

distinct from interstate wars mainly through the level of intimacy each exhibits.”<sup>13</sup> Somalia witnessed interstate and internal wars and frequent military intrusions by neighboring countries, specifically Ethiopia and Kenya.

Weak states do not always fail because of accidents or unsuccessful policies. Sometimes, states fail because of elite design, when a group of them deliberately make the central government devoid of natural powers, which they arrogate to their persons while remaining unaccountable for their actions. The Lebanese state failed because, in 1943, the country’s confessional elites created a weak state to further their business interests and keep its multiple sects divided and wary of one another. Stewart Patrick concurs. He reports that “state weakness is not just a question of capacity, but also of will.”<sup>14</sup>

Segmented states fail because the ruling elite fail to introduce a participatory political system or a consociational democracy, but again traditional societies lack the capacity for collective work, preferring instead to pursue particularistic approaches to political action. T. I. Rotberg notes that

“Failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and contested bitterly by warring factions.”<sup>15</sup> In most African societies, the state idea remains nebulous, and parochial population segments perceive economic or political rivals from other groups with alarm and apprehension. As Hakeem Najimedeen observes: “Africans adhere to their tribes for factors such as the sense of belonging to a clan or extended family.”<sup>16</sup> In Africa, as in the Middle East, most countries are artificial colonial creations that do not fit the modern state concept, such as nationalism, legality, and rationality, which are essential for bureaucratic performance. Therefore, corruption becomes an endemic phenomenon flagrantly attesting to state failure. Najimedeen further declares that “corruption flourishes in many states, but in failed states it often does so on an unusually destructive scale.”<sup>17</sup>

In failed states, militant groups not only compete over sharing resources, but power hegemony, often fighting a protracted and inconclusive war. Such wars occurred in countries other than Somalia, such as Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Occasionally, emerging militant groups resort to excessive violence to secure their autonomy and inviolability. Perpetrators of violent attacks often employ terror attacks to warn their adversaries about the heavy cost of meddling in their affairs.<sup>18</sup> Intimidating the enemy to sway them against escalation or further intervention in their affairs is a common practice by states and insurgent movements. In a gruesome display of brutality, the Forest of the Corpses lives on as a grotesque reminder of what beleaguered combatants can do to intimidate their opponents. In 1562, Vlad III impaled thousands of Ottoman soldiers in Targoviste when Sultan Mehmed II invaded Wallachia.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Shabaab engages in violence against civilians in Somalia and Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, especially after foreign-backed government forces made headway against its strongholds in 2022 without evicting them from Somalia’s political scene as a significant force. Emboldened by his troops’ battlefield achievement, Sheikh Mohamud’s total war slogan to eliminate al-Shabaab seems unrealistic. The war on terrorism has proven to be a failure and one of the critical reasons for the surge of terrorism due to the insistence on focusing on military means to combat it. Instead of searching for sustainable solutions, failed governments resort to the militarization of the state and the securitization of society and invite international and regional

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powers to meddle in their affairs, leading to fueling interstate conflicts and giving rebel movements reasons to continue fighting.

The pertinent literature review on social segmentation relates to Somalia's predominantly pastoral clan divisions and pursuit of personal politics, leading to runaway corruption, endemic civil strife, and persistent violence. The literature provides valuable insights into the role of European colonial powers in fragmenting Somalia into separate political entities without preparing them for independence before dismantling their colonial empires. Tracing the evolution of Somali politics from independence in 1960 and the state's disintegration since the 1990s shows that ending the cycle of unchecked violence requires a negotiated settlement, not an endless war on terrorism. The United States 20-year war on the Taliban in Afghanistan proved futile and only led to the rise of the Islamic State's militancy. Faced with an intractable dilemma, President Joe Biden eventually pulled out US troops from Afghanistan's unwinnable war, acquiescing to the Taliban's dominance over the country.

### **Colonial Legacy and Prelude to State Failure**

Somalia experienced foreign intrusion since 1515 when the Portuguese reached the Somali coast to help the Ethiopians against them. In the nineteenth century, foreign countries began focusing on the geographically important East African coast. In its bid to conquer the Nile's headwaters, Ismail Pasha ordered the invasion of western Somaliland in 1874, but the territory went to the British after they conquered Egypt in 1882. Britain sought to take control of Somalia due to its strategic importance after it occupied Aden in 1839. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 incentivized Britain to occupy Somalia as part of its naval strategy of dominating all maritime routes leading to India. France also hastened to buy the port of Obock, located in Djibouti, in 1862, and in 1884 it was also able to agree with the Sultan of Tadjoura, and in 1888 France and England decided that Djibouti would be for the French and Saylac for the British. In 1888, Italy concluded a series of protection treaties with the sheikhs and sultans of the Somali coast in exchange for sums of money.

In 1940, the Italians crossed the Ethiopian border, launched a ground attack on British Somalia, and seized it during the East African battles in World War II. In January 1941, the British-commanded forces launched a ground offensive from Kenya, recovering British Somalia and seizing most Italian Somali regions. In 1958, France held a referendum in Djibouti to determine if its people wanted to join the state of Somalia. Most voters expressed the desire to remain under French protection. France granted Djibouti its independence in 1977. In the aftermath of World War II, Britain maintained control over British and Italian parts of Somalia as protectorates. Under pressure from East African allies in World War II, Britain gave the Basin region, a crucial Somali grazing area, and the predominantly Somali Ogaden region to Ethiopia and the Northern Frontier District to Kenya as a reward for helping it crush Somali tribal resistance at the start of World War I. In 1960, the British and Italian Somali regions declared independence in a unitary state.

Anthony Clayton attributes African countries' post-independence violence to their precolonial past, asserting they are "neither ideological nor political, but economic."<sup>20</sup> However, Francis Deng presents a counterclaim, noting that the colonial powers drew Africa's state boundaries, created artificial political entities, disrupted their economies, and displaced the rural population, [depriving them]

depriving them “of their resource-base and capacity for self-reliance.”<sup>21</sup> He blames the continent’s existing problems on the “formation of the colonial state.”<sup>22</sup> The Somali government faced a severe financial challenge upon independence because “it did not have the administrative capacity to collect taxes from herders and farmers who lived in remote areas of the country.... As a result, Somalia was forced to depend on subsidies from the British and Italian governments.”<sup>23</sup> According to Mohamed Salah, “the colonial powers... employed the clan factor as a divide-and-rule tactic, which preserved its role in social and political spectrums.”<sup>24</sup> Irrespective of whether the colonial powers did not create Somalia’s clan feuds, the fact remains that they did not prepare it for statehood. Still worse, they partitioned it and granted parts to Ethiopia and Kenya, setting the stage for aggravating its post-independence turmoil.

J. David Singer questions the viability of former colonies that achieved independence after the Second World War.<sup>25</sup> Siad Barre staged a military coup in October 1969 following the assassination of President Abdirashid Shermarke. There was no popular reaction to the coup, given the rampant corruption in Somalia despite the nature of its democratic system. A few Somalis describe Barre as a modernizer, despite his Jupiterian powers and proneness to the cult of leadership. However, some view him as a tyrant who brought Somalia into chaos.

He attempted to resolve the identity crisis by promoting Somali nationalism and discarding alternatives while forcing political-identity hegemony.<sup>26</sup> Barre adopted a Marxist communist policy and violently ruled the country, controversially prohibiting reference to clannish identification. His erratic policies increased widespread anger against him, primarily due to economic problems and his unsuccessful eight months Ogaden War against Ethiopia in 1977 Ethiopia. His repressive policies, especially against civilians, eventually led to his ouster in 1991 and the disintegration of government authority, leading to state failure and unchecked violence. Barre used extreme coercion to pacify the opposition and factionalized the clans that led the unsuccessful coup against him, eventually plunging Somalia into a cycle of violence that precluded the possibility of installing a viable central government.<sup>27</sup> The economic, social, and political situation at the beginning of the 1970s was at its worst. Poverty and ignorance pervaded Somali society. Barri adopted a welfare system, built the country's infrastructure, and modernized the state's machinery. He also created job opportunities and introduced free universal education while adopting authoritarian and repressive measures.

### **Rough Domestic Politics**

The nascent democracies adopted by Arab and African countries after independence did not survive because of their authoritarian legacy. Somalia did not return to its fragile democracy after the collapse of Barre’s regime in 1991, as promised by the rebel leaders. After the success of the uprising in the north and south to overthrow the military regime, efforts to establish a constitutional government failed as the Northern Region declared its secession under the name of the Republic of Somaliland. However, the remaining regions and provinces entered a bitter civil war. Following the overthrow of the military government, the Somalis rose to arms, waging tribal wars. The international community's attempts failed to restore security and stability and prevent the country's disintegration into warring factions, subject to manipulation by Somalia's neighbors. The country's rival warlords tore Somalia

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into clan-dominated fiefdoms. Somaliland and Puntland, the relatively peaceful northern regions, effectively broke away from the country, respectively, in 1991 and 1998. However, the internationally backed unity government that formed in 2000 unsuccessfully struggled for control of the country.

Piracy began in 2000 as a response to fishing by sophisticated foreign fishing vessels, threatening Somali fishermen who did not have the technologies to keep up with foreign fishing operations. Somalia's transformation into a failed state has resulted in the absence of any official response to the intrusion of its exclusive economic zone. Somali sailors organized themselves to confront the assailants on their livelihood and began kidnapping foreign fishing crews. With the increase in poverty because of internal wars and the absence of the state, many Somalis shifted to piracy as of 2005 and hijacking ship crews for heavy ransoms, mainly from Puntland, posing a direct threat to international shipping in the vital Gulf of Aden, Cape of Guardafui, and Somali Sea. Piracy started to taper off after Kenyan troops seized Kismayo Port in 2012, ending in 2017.

In 2012, efforts to restore centralized power made headway after swearing in the Parliament in more than 20 years, and Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud won the first presidential election since 1967. Pro-government forces also made significant advances against al-Shabaab. However, "Political infighting [over tax collection and local power dynamics] has undermined the counter-insurgency campaign waged by the Somali government against al-Shabaab."<sup>28</sup> Somalia's political system is spoils-driven and personalized. The scramble for a slice of the country's political and material resources preoccupies its clans, business, and civil society organizations. Ken Menkhaus notices that "delegates devote almost all of their energies, not to discussing the critical issues dividing them, but rather to extended and unseemly haggling over the apportioning of positions in a future national government."<sup>29</sup> Somalia has been susceptible to lawlessness and crime due to the modern state concept's unworkability because of its traditional and patrimonial societal structure. However, informal governance mechanisms, such as Sharia Courts and al-Shabaab Movement, have demonstrated their capability to provide a semblance of stability and contentment, winning the approval of the local communities.

Optimism prevailed in international circles immediately after President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo assumed power in 2017, hoping that he would lead Somalia to direct pluralistic elections at the end of his term, according to the 2016 constitution. However, this did not happen, and the crisis surfaced in mid-2018 when the head of the Independent National Elections Commission announced the difficulty of holding elections on time in 2020. Somalia witnessed a sharp division between Farmaajo and Roble, as the former derived his strength from the convergence of some of his regional states, such as Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and southwestern Somalia. He was also strongly supported by the Popular Defense Forces known as the Shadow Brigades, which he founded to promote his policies, in addition to ensuring the support of some government forces with the help of some of his regional allies. On the other hand, Roble relied on the backing of several regional states, such as Jubaland and Puntland. He also counted on his constitutional legitimacy, granted to him by the provisional constitution, especially since Farmaajo's presidential term ended in February 2021, leading to the loss of his executive powers.

Farmaajo did not accept to step down when his term ended in 2022. Instead, he asked Parliament to extend his time for an additional two years, angering the opposition forces and leading to street clashes that forced him to leave the presidency. The situation worsened due to the escalation of the dispute between Farmaajo, who postponed the general elections, and Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, who opposed the other remaining in power. President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud, who succeeded Farmaajo in 2022, confirmed that the upcoming general elections planned for 2026 would occur according to the direct universal suffrage system instead of the problematic indirect voting system adopted in 1969.

### **Foreign Intervention**

In April 1992, in response to a famine that killed 35 thousand Somalis, the Security Council passed a resolution to commission the United Nations Operation in Somalia to provide humanitarian relief to the population. Four months later, the UN authorized the US-led Unified Task Force—part of the US Operation Restore Hope—to oversee the delivery of life-saving aid. The success of UNTAF paved the way for the Security Council to vote in March 1993 in favor of initiating United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM II), a multinational military force involving 27 countries, essentially to maintain law and order and combat radical Islamic movements. In July, US attack helicopters raided a gathering in Mogadishu, killing 53 civilians, including tribal leaders. The attack precipitated protests from many countries involved in UNOSOM II, leading them to curtail further military action. In July, US helicopters started the Battle of Mogadishu—or Operation Gothic Serpent—against Mohamed Farrah Aidid, a former ruling dictator and leader of the Somali National Alliance. The battle ended in a disaster, inflicting a heavy toll on US military personnel, as Aidid's militants dragged 19 US service personnel into the city streets. At the time when the American soldiers were searching for Aided, they had no idea that President Bill Clinton was asking former President Jimmy Carter to contact him. The fateful battle eventually led to disbanding the UN mission in 1995.

The United Nations established an office in Kenya to follow up on the situation in Somalia and delegate to the African Union the mandate of controlling the situation there, especially after the Somalis resented non-Africans' presence in their country. In March 2000, the UN held a meeting with Somali intellectuals for a peace plan that resulted in the formation of a transitional government. Still, it did not enjoy any authority on the ground, making Somalia a mere geographical term within the framework of a disjointed state. When the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) emerged in Nairobi in 2004, it failed to enter Mogadishu and established its headquarters in Baidoa. In 2006 the Union for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism was founded by secular warlords in Mogadishu, funded by the CIA, to counter the growing power of the Islamic Courts Union, which was enforcing Sharia law. The US Navy increased its activities in the Red Sea and the coast off the Somali coast after the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in the Gulf of Aden, forming a multinational anti-piracy task force and ending the phenomenon by 2017.

Ethiopia's intervention in the Somali civil war was a significant cause of the radicalization of al-Shabaab, and its transformation from a small, moderate group into the most potent extremist armed faction. Its first foreign operations were in 2010, when it launched a suicide bombing in Kampala, killing 74 people, in response



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to Uganda sending troops, as part of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), established in 2007. In early 2009, Ethiopian soldiers withdrew from Somalia, leaving behind the forces of AMISOM to help the weak coalition government assert its authority in Mogadishu. After Ethiopia's defeat, the southern half of Somalia quickly fell into the hands of the Islamists, who subsequently defeated the local army and AMISOM in several key regions and enforced Sharia law in the areas under their control. During the same year, they attacked Mogadishu and seized parts of it but failed to overthrow the government. The Security Council declared a state of emergency in Somalia in 2010 due to piracy off the Somali coast. In April 2023, US President, Joe Biden, extended the state of emergency in Somalia due to its insecurity because the situation there still represented a significant threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.

### **Surge of Islamism**

Secularism did not impress most Somalis, and Islam has demonstrated the strength of its roots, not only in performing religious rituals but also as a conflict resolution mechanism and instrument of effecting fairness and justice. Islam arrived in Somalia in the seventh century, and from that time until the nineteenth century—when European powers began colonizing the Horn of Africa—it was ruled by feuding tribal sultanates. Most of Somalia came under Italian control, while Britain dominated the northwestern region. In 1960, the Somali lands under Italian and British colonization became independent and merged to form what is known as the United Somali Republic.

A few years after Somalia's independence, Islamism surged in the Middle East and North Africa. Thanks to its proximity to the region, especially the Arabian Peninsula, the wave of Islamic revival reached Somalia, partially influenced by the return of Somali expatriate workers from Saudi Arabia, who witnessed a surge in Wahhabism because of the 1970s oil boom and heavy government spending on exporting its austere religious values. The events of September 11, the warlord, backed by the US and Ethiopia, launched a violent campaign against moderate Islamists, whom they branded as terrorists, eventually convincing them to abandon their nonviolent activities. Acting under the umbrella of the Islamic Courts, the Islamists defeated the warlords.

By July 2006, the Islamic Courts controlled Mogadishu, expelled the Union, and eliminated the warlords. The Courts also expanded until they reached the borders of Puntland, took control of southern and central Jubaland, and contributed to alleviating the widespread public abuse after many years of hardship for the Somali people. The Islamic Courts received the support of Eritrea and foreign Mujahideen. They declared jihad against US-backed Ethiopia, which occupied Gedo and concentrated its forces around Baidoa. Fighting broke out between the Islamic Courts on the one hand and the federal government and the Ethiopians on the other. The Courts suffered many defeats and finally lost the decisive Battle of Jowhar in 2006. Somalia then entered a great spiral of a strange war in which many parties participated without clear objectives. But this growing power did not impress Puntland, Galmdu, or the federal government, initially established to counter Islamic growth, as this expansion tempted Ethiopia to intervene, which supported the Somali secularists. The Courts seized Mogadishu and southern Somalia before the

regionally and internationally supported warlords evicted the Islamic Courts from power.<sup>30</sup>

The Somali al-Shabaab movement began in 2006 as the military wing of Salafi forces affiliated with al-Qaeda. It has its roots in the Islamic Union, a militant religious group partly funded by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, which peaked in the 1990s. The number of the al-Shabaab Movement partisans remains a mystery, but when the Union of Islamic Courts collapsed, it had roughly seven thousand members. Its personnel previously received basic training in Eritrea and some funding through piracy off the coast of Somalia. Al-Shabaab affiliates aspire to form a Greater Islamic State of Somalia. It carried out several terrorist attacks that left hundreds dead, including the 2013 attack on Westgate Mall, killing 71 shoppers, and the 2015 attack on the Kenyan Garissa University, killing 148 people. The Movement includes hundreds of Arab and foreign jihadists and aims to establish a Sharia state. Al-Shabaab is particularly active in Somalia's central and southern regions and has strong ties with other terrorist organizations, such as the Nigerian Boko Haram group. Al-Shabaab Movement received significant public support because of its opposition to the U.S.-supported TFG and hostility toward the influential Majeerteen-Rahanwein clan alliance, sponsored by Ethiopia, Somalia's historical enemy. Furthermore, al-Shabaab succeeded in administering in the areas of their control a competent and fair Sharia-based judicial system that surpassed what the warlords failed to deliver.<sup>31</sup>

During the reign of its leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who lost his life in a US air strike in 2014, al-Shabaab reached the peak of its strength, as it controlled three-quarters of Mogadishu and almost destroyed the Somali government had it not been for its sudden withdrawal from the capital due to internal disputes between its leaders. After several years of territorial expansion, al-Shabaab began to face unprecedented military pressure, which made it lose its initiative in the fighting, leading to its decline. However, widespread popular resentment and climate change contributed significantly to the Movement's battle defeats and loss of large areas. Since July 2022, al-Shabaab has lost more than 40 cities, towns, and villages, losing more than 500 of its fighters after the government opened many battlefronts in cooperation with the clannish militias, known as Ma'awisley, backed by the strikes of the US and Turkish drones, which decisively turned the battle tide on the army's side. The government operations, in cooperation with the clans, only covered some of the central and southern regions but focused on the areas of Middle Shabelle, Hiran, and parts of the regions of Lower Shabelle and Jaldud. Encouraged by military gains, the government prepares to open new fronts in other Somali areas.

The government opened battle fronts from multiple axes in cooperation with the armed clans—which could no longer afford to pay taxes to the Movement, especially during drought. The clans understood the nature of the battle terrain and the al-Shabaab's tactics, inflicting on it stunning defeats. Al-Shabaab responded to the tribes' siding with the government by assassinating three prominent tribal sheikhs in the Hiran region, in the country's central part. The strength of the al-Shabaab Movement goes beyond the Somali arena. It launched many attacks in neighboring countries and penetrated Ethiopia through its Somali region in July 2022. Although the Ethiopian forces repelled the attack, the Movement's elements are present in Ethiopia. Al-Shabaab also launched several attacks against Kenyan forces along the Kenya-Somalia border, including the mortar attack in August 2022

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on a Kenyan army base in the Konton region in the northeast, preceded by two operations in the Garissa and Mandera regions. In 2020, al-Shabaab killed three US personnel training Kenyan counterterrorism forces.

Al-Shabaab fighters are still active in ten out of 18 regions, albeit in varying proportions. They fully control the Middle Juba region because its heavily forested terrain shields them against drone attacks. Since al-Shabaab continues to launch attacks on government-held areas, it is still able to continue to obtain funds, regardless of where its fighters are in Somalia. The Movement collects about \$100 million annually through various funds, including taxes and extortion of local companies and merchants, contributing to supporting its war activities. Al-Shabaab taxes people both inside and outside the areas it controls. Even residents of Mogadishu prefer to resort to the Movement's judicial system, which they consider more efficient and less corrupt than the official courts.

Businessmen in government-controlled areas, including Mogadishu, often complain that they must pay al-Shabaab and the government. Mogadishu's port is a significant source of revenue for the Somali government. However, the jihadists tax imports and obtain cargo ship data from port officials. Many government employees give part of their salaries to al-Shabaab, hoping it will leave them alone. State employees and others working in government-held areas also explain how the rebels contacted them via mobile phone to demand money. In al-Shabaab-controlled areas, the jihadists tasked with collecting the money go directly to the companies and demand payments. A Somali army military commander says he sent cash to al-Shabaab despite fighting them. He explained how a man building him a house stopped construction work and left after the commander refused to pay the gunman a fee. The Movement banned vehicles from transporting construction materials to the site because their owners refused to pay extortion money. The military commander said he finally had to choose between giving up construction work or paying al-Shabaab, adding that he had to pay them \$3,600 to complete the construction of his house.

### **Negotiating the Future**

In response to the increase in suicide attacks in Mogadishu, Sheikh Mohamud declared war against al-Shabaab, to eradicate it. His announcement triggered a surge in terrorist attacks, which government troops failed to stop or contain. The expulsion of the al-Shabaab from Somalia's middle regions does not mean the end of its existence, given that its fighters can easily find shelter in remote areas, from which they can launch bloody attacks on soft targets. Negotiating with radical groups is not an extraordinary event. Peter Neumann argues that “democratic governments often negotiate with terrorists.”<sup>32</sup> For example, Britain engaged the IRA diplomatically as did Spain with the Basque irredentists. At a certain point, militant groups decide to forgo violence in exchange for securing a place in national politics.<sup>33</sup> Some authors contend that leadership and decision-making in religious groups such as Hizbullah, Muslim Brotherhood, and al-Qa’ida] “are more politically pragmatic and rational than ideologically doctrinaire.”<sup>34</sup> Hizbullah’s pragmatism enabled it to forge alliances with erstwhile enemies, such as Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, which allowed it to become a mainstream power player in Lebanese politics.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Shabaab's flexibility suggests that it is adapting to the government campaign. For example, the Movement recognized the need to change its approach to the

population in central Somalia, realizing that its coercive model of securing obedience was counterproductive. It started offering more carrots than sticks, emphasizing the need to promote the common good in its rhetoric. This approach paid off. In late December 2022, a group of elders of the Seleban clan in Galmudug reached an agreement with the Movement to avoid confrontation. The clan withdrew support from the government in return for releasing hostages and property confiscated by Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab has always been more willing to make concessions to clans when it felt weak, only to fall back on them when it strengthened its position. The Movement is adapting to the government campaign, and even if the national army continues to make progress against its fighters, it is unlikely that military operations will end the war with al-Shabaab once and for all. A political settlement to end the armed conflict is unavoidable. Therefore, the government must establish communication channels while maintaining military pressure to convince it to make concessions, perhaps even swaying it to sit at the negotiating table on terms acceptable to the Somali government.

The events in Somalia affect neighboring countries. In Central Africa, the growth of radical entities loyal to the Islamic State and their alliance with the Mozambican al-Shabaab Movement threaten to spread throughout the continent. The al-Shabaab Movement, which still controls some areas in Somalia, poses a permanent and imminent threat to the Horn of Africa and neighboring countries. Despite the success of the military campaigns led by the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) in expelling it from crucial areas, the al-Shabaab Movement still seeks to extend its influence into other places. It takes advantage of the political chaos in Somalia to expand its geographical control and increase its local and regional impact. The Movement addressed the challenge of relaxing its radical regime in its areas of presence, ending forced conscription, and reducing the royalties imposed on the population to win over the tribes to stop their rebellion against it. ATMIS evacuated seven military bases in the center and south of the country in late June 2023. It should withdraw all its forces by the end of 2024, leaving the national army alone in an unwinnable war against al-Shabaab. In May 2023, al-Shabaab fighters inflicted heavy casualties in an attack on the Ugandan forces operating within ATMIS in Somalia in Buulo Mareer, 130 km southwest of Mogadishu.

Despite the extended government war against al-Shabaab, the involvement of the US in the war, the deployment of forces from the African Union, and the participation of other countries, al-Shabaab has become the strongest and richest branch of al-Qaeda and the most dangerous source of threat to security in Somalia and east of Africa. The failure of the total war against al-Shabaab points to an apparent defect in local and international strategy that reduces Somalia's problems to the war on terrorism. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Somalia has succumbed to chaos, corruption, mismanagement, tribal conflicts, and regional rivalries. Its ruling elite's focus shifted from one issue to another, ignoring Somalia's societal and tribal dilemmas and the noxious foreign meddling in its internal affairs.

Any successful approach to dealing with al-Shabaab should consider its makeup, sources of strength, and the reasons for its emergence. It is counterproductive to view the Movement as nihilistic, seeking death and destruction, despite its resort to violent and destructive military tactics. The Movement's violent and civil behavior is part of a strategy to achieve political and ideological goals. Al-Shabaab has become part of Somalia's reality, observable in all political, security, and economic

## Exiting Somalia's Political Impasse

domains. It fills gaps resulting from the weakness of the government system and state authority, surpassing the state in administrative efficiency and local governance.

There is a consensus among experts and analysts that the all-out war waged by the Somali government against al-Shabaab cannot lead to its elimination. Even Sheikh Mohamud “acknowledges that al-Shabab cannot be defeated by brute force alone.”<sup>36</sup> The best plausible option to end the conflict is initiating dialog to agree on a workable political contract to administer Somalia. Sheikh Mohamud’s speech does not encourage dialogue. In 2018, the Movement expressed willingness to negotiate an end to the war, but its offer did not receive a response from the government, which led it to insist on continuing the fighting. Some corrupt elites benefit from not reaching an agreement, and neighboring countries invest in Somalia's war and chaos.

The dilemmas of Somalia are deeper than reducing them to the al-Shabaab. The main problem facing the country's security and stability results from the lack of agreement among the political, religious, tribal, and business elites on how to govern the state. Somalia needs an agreed-upon constitution and more understanding of the nature of the federal government and the structure of the armed forces. The al-Shabaab is a symptom, not an underlying cause, of the failure to govern Somalia. It is one of the actors in the deadlocked country and an eventual player in exiting its impasse.

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- <sup>4</sup> Elmi, *Somalia Conflagration*, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Elmi, *Somalia Conflagration*, 4.
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<sup>26</sup> See Roeder, *Nation-States*.

<sup>27</sup> Murphy, *New Barbary*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Political Turmoil*.

<sup>29</sup> Menkhaus, *State Collapse*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Elmi, *Somalia Conflagration*, 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> For more on this, see Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 31-49.

<sup>32</sup> Neumann, *Negotiating with Terrorists*, 91.

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