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Unmasking the Historical and Contemporary Causes of the Conflict in Somalia

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Abstract

The article critically examines the historical and contemporary causes of the conflict in Somalia, highlighting six interrelated drivers: clan rivalry, foreign interventions, the rise of radical extremism, entrenched corruption, deep-rooted social inequalities, and widespread poverty and unemployment. Adopting a qualitative research approach and a case study design, the study employed sixteen Key Informant Interviews (KII) and two Focus Group Discussions (FGD) of ten participants each. Both primary and secondary data sources were analyzed thematically to capture the complexity and dynamics of the conflict in Somalia. Drawing on historical and contemporary perspectives, the study revealed how colonial legacies and weak governance structures facilitated the weaponization of clan rivalry, while international interventions further exacerbated internal divisions. The emergence of extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab has deepened the cycle of violence, exploiting governance failures and marginalization. Thus, there's a need for multi-dimensional strategies that strengthen governance and inclusivity

Keywords: *Unmasking, Historical, Contemporary, Causes, Conflict*

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1. Introduction

Somalia, a nation located in the Horn of Africa, presents a tragic yet compelling story of promise, struggle, and endurance. In 1960, the state of Somalia was formed through the union of the former British Somaliland, which declared its independence from Britain on 26th June 1960, and the territory previously under Italian administration as a UN trust territory, which achieved its independence from Italy on 1st July 1960. Voluntarily, these two territories united on 1st July 1960 to form the Somali Republic. The unity introduced a period of harmony and adopted a parliamentary democracy as its form of government. This was despite Somalia's lack of essential human resources, a culture of democracy, and institutional foundations that were vital for the democratic system to thrive (Lewis, 1980). With a democratic framework in place, political parties gained the liberty to form and vie for positions in national elections. These measures culminated in Somalia, an evolving

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democracy where all citizens enjoyed the right to vote and the opportunity to run for office, together with the freedom to assemble. Within this period, Somalia observed nine years of parliamentary democracy, making it Africa's first peaceful democratic transition of power, with President Adam Abdulle Osman being the first African head of state to willingly resign following a loss in the national elections after serving seven years (Samatar, 2016).

A few years later, the democratic system initially planned was quickly marred by the emergence of political factions that mirrored tribal divisions, causing the early demise of the democratic dream in Somalia. The ambitions of autonomous governance were crippled by rampant corruption, poverty, and a general state of insecurity, all of which severely undermined the fledgling democratic institutions of the country (Abdi, 2012). The decline deepened and allowed General Mohamed Siyad Barre to take over in 1969 through a military coup that was executed without shedding blood, dismantling the civilian government. This new military regime swiftly transitioned the governance model from a democratic framework to a Leninist-Marxist system, effectively halting constitutional democracy in its tracks (Elmi and Barise, 2006: 33-35). The governance under this regime was notably characterized by its ideological and economic reliance on the Soviet Union. However, after enduring twenty-one years under oppressive and dictatorial governance, marked by blatant human rights abuses, the military-led government was forcefully dislodged from power in 1991 by a coalition of political factions and tribal-based insurgent groups (Elmi, 2010). Following this upheaval, the absence of a structured succession plan led to the immediate descent of the nation into chaos and widespread destruction (Abdi, 2012).

The conflict in Somalia can be traced back to the 1980s, when widespread bad governance, corruption, and systemic inequalities in access to political power and resources among different clans fueled tensions and laid the foundation for prolonged instability. This led to the emergence of armed clan-based movements that forced the Siyad Barre regime to flee the country following the collapse of the state in 1991. Since then, Somalia has been in a failed situation (Abdi, 2012). Following this, different armed groups sought to control the national territory of Somalia, leading the country into decades of prolonged conflict and civil war (Elmi and Barise, 2006). The absence of a central authority, coupled with clan-rebel groups that overthrew the Siyad Barre regime, immediately led them to fight one another to control Somalia. Ali Mahdi was appointed as interim president by residents in Mogadishu to lead the civilian wing of the United Somali Congress (USC). However, General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, who played a leading role in the fight against Siyad Barre, was annoyed by the nomination of Ali Mahdi as president. Thus, Aidid rejected Ali's leadership and claimed to be the rightful person to lead Somalia (Abdi, 2012). In 1991, several attempts aimed to reconcile these two rival groups held in Djibouti. Nevertheless, these attempts were missed opportunities leading to the outbreak of a destructive fight between General Mohamed Aidid and his rival, Ali Mahdi, which claimed the lives of as many as 25,000 innocent civilians and caused the depletion of material resources (Clark, 1993).

Today, Somalia's political and security landscape continues to be heavily influenced by the aftermath of its state collapse. The lack of strong central governance allowed warlords, humanitarian crises, piracy, and extremist groups like Al-Shabaab to gain a foothold in the society by exploiting governance weaknesses and clan rivalries (Menkhaus, 2007). While regional and international efforts such as the African Union peacekeeping mission and the United Nations missions have aimed at stabilizing the nation, progress remains fragile due to ongoing insecurity, fragmented political authority, and recurring violence (Williams, 2013). Consequently, Somalia's situation highlights how historical failures in governance alongside unresolved grievances can lead to enduring conflict with significant repercussions for both the Horn of Africa region as well as global stability (Elmi, 2010).

The study seeks to unmask the historical and contemporary causes of the conflict in Somalia, examining how clan-based rivalries, external interventions, violent extremism, and socio-economic inequalities have interacted to fuel decades of instability. By analyzing these interconnected factors, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of Somalia's protracted conflict and to highlight the need for inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding and state reconstruction.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study research design to provide an in-depth

description, analysis, and comprehensive understanding of the historical and contemporary causes of the conflict in Somalia. The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a robust and multifaceted perspective. Primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A total of sixteen (16) key informant interviews were conducted across diverse communities, including Baidoa, Mogadishu, Hirshabelle, Kismayo, Puntland, and Jubbaland. The interviewees included senior personnel from the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU), civil society leaders, government officials, local community leaders, researchers, and ordinary Somali citizens. To complement the KIIs, two FGDs were conducted face-to-face in Mogadishu, each consisting of ten (10) participants from the local population. These discussions provided rich, context-specific insights into the lived experiences of ordinary Somalis and the multifaceted causes of the conflict. On the other hand, secondary data were collected through published and unpublished research works, including books, journal articles, and reports, obtained from both online and offline libraries. These sources were reviewed to provide historical context and theoretical grounding for the study.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify respondents, selecting participants based on their knowledge and experience, with the historical and contemporary causes of the conflict in Somalia. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, indicating that no new information emerged from further interviews. Both KIIs and FGDs were guided by a ten-question interview guide designed to explore key themes related to the causes of the conflict in Somalia.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the thematic method of data analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes that emerge from the data. Thematic analysis is a widely recognized, accepted, and flexible method for interpreting qualitative information. This makes it appropriate for unmasking the details and multifaceted issues surrounding the cause of the conflict in Somalia. The researcher had to first familiarize himself with the data, which means he had to listen to the records and read the interview transcripts over and over again to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. Furthermore, the researcher developed codes by breaking the data into meaningful units and coding in relation to the research objective. The codes were then grouped into themes that reflect key aspects of the study.

Considering ethical considerations, the researcher upholds strict ethical standards throughout the study. Key ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent from the respondents before engaging in the interview. Respondents were fully briefed about the objective of the study and their rights to participate or not to participate in the study. Also, to ensure confidentiality, the identities and responses of respondents were protected. Anonymization was employed to protect the identities of respondents, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. The study applied thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the field data systematically.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the field and supports them with relevant literature. The results are organized into thematic categories, reflecting the data collected. Specifically, the analysis highlights six major themes that encapsulate both the historical and contemporary causes of the conflict in Somalia: clan rivalry, foreign intervention, radical extremism, widespread corruption, political, economic, and social inequalities, as well as extreme poverty and high unemployment. These interrelated drivers have played a pivotal role in fueling and sustaining the conflict, thereby shaping Somalia's present situation.

3.1. Clan Rivalry

Somalia has a long history of clan-based politics, where societal structures are organized along clan lines. The competition for power and resources among different clans has often resulted in conflict and instability (Menkhaus, 2015). It is the single most important element that has historically defined the identity and social relations of Somalis for centuries. Most Somalis identify themselves in terms of their lineage or clan. Historically, it was the basis that structured law and order and social activities within and between the various clans.

The politicization of the clan structure during and after colonial rule led to its deployment in the struggle for control of the enormous political power and economic resources of the modern centralized state imposed on Somalis by colonial fiat. During the reign of General Siad Barre, clan divisions were manipulated and

further entrenched as some groups dominated Somali politics and others were marginalized and subjected to harsh and even violent treatment (World Bank, 2005: 15-16). This situation worsened when the opposition to Barre's government escalated following the defeat of the Somali forces by Ethiopia and the 1978 attempted coup to overthrow the government. While on the one hand, Barre's government actively resorted to the systematic use of the clan system of political patronage to strengthen its grip on power, on the other hand, it marginalized certain clans, including major ones, and took violent actions against those clans that were blamed for the attempted coup and were feared to pose a serious threat to the regime (Prunier, 1995).

The problem of maladministration had serious consequences not only in terms of the attitude of Somalis towards the central government but also in terms of the nature of inter-clan relations. According to Visman (1994), while Siad Barre's repressive regime incited widespread distrust of the central government, his strategy of divide and rule left a legacy of deep inter-clan hostility. While the clan system continues to provide indispensable social services, including justice, social security, and physical protection, as various political forces resort to it for political ends, it has also become a source of division and conflict. It is the major factor that has continued to sustain the war in Somalia. Various warring factions continue to use clan division for political dominance and to monopolize the state or prevent the emergence of a strong state run by another clan (Lewis, 1994). As some argue, it is this situation that both scholars and policymakers need to address to end the Somali internal war and create a viable state.

The researcher engaged a respondent from Mogadishu, and he has this to say:

Clan rivalry is a serious problem in Somalia. People are judged by their clan in politics, jobs, and opportunities, which creates divisions. After the government collapsed, clans armed themselves, and leaders exploited these loyalties for power, leaving others feeling excluded. Ordinary people cannot fully trust neighbors from other clans, and peace talks often fail because clan interests come first.

A youth leader from Kismayo said:

Being a young man in Somalia, I find myself confined by tribal separations. Regardless of my efforts, those belonging to influential tribes (such as Hawiye and Darod) receive priority for opportunities. Several of my peers decided to join militant organizations as they perceive no alternative path forward. As long as our authorities continue to show preference toward specific tribes rather than providing equal opportunities to all, youth will remain without hope, and the violence will endure.

Makhubela's (2016) opines that allegiance to one's clan stands as a fundamental aspect for every Somali tribe. This has steered the nation's political mechanisms, which have been driven by the clan framework since the reign of Siad Barre. Clan disputes, especially over resources such as land, have instigated 24% of violent incidents, a situation that has become increasingly common in Somalia over the past years. With this, Somalia is ranked among the most perilous countries in Africa concerning internal strife and the violation of human rights. A situation that has been exacerbated by the actions of both Al-Shabaab and clan rivalry. The International Training Programme for Conflict Management (2013) undertook research on the dynamics between Clan and State Politics in Somalia, aiming to facilitate interclan reconciliation, conflict resolution, mediation, and the construction of institutional frameworks within the country. The outcome of the research underscored the severe nature of clan-based violence in Somalia, pointing to it as a significant barrier to achieving a peaceful societal environment. Hammond (2013), reveals that Somalia continues to battle political instability, marred by widespread corruption and frequent clashes among its clans, particularly in the southern and central parts of the country.

According to Ali and Neelam (2019), since the civil war erupted in 1991, Somalia has been plunged into serious conflict based on clan rivalries, often fighting over resources such as water, livestock, and grazing land. The clan disputes within the Baidoa district, however, fall into three primary categories: social inequality, economic decline, and civilian access to weapons (Elmi and Barise, 2006). Clan loyalty often outweighs national identity, and it is tribalism that predominantly shapes the conflict in Somalia, permeating every aspect of life for Somalis (Shortland et al., 2013). Consequently, the struggle for power, economic resources, and political supremacy, along with other rivalries, has sharply delineated clan boundaries across the region, notably in the Baidoa district (Samatar, 1992). This has led to the emergence of new clans, solidifying their power over territories at a great cost to human life. Apparently, among the pressing issues facing every clan

and sub-clan in Somalia, the issue of alteration of clan distributions on state and societal dynamics potentially ignites various forms of conflict.

3.2. Foreign Intervention

Foreign intervention, both overt and covert, has played a substantial role in aggravating the conflict in Somalia (Bradbury, 2016). External actors have often pursued their strategic interests in the region, sometimes at the expense of stability and peace within Somalia. These actors have been very instrumental in complicating the problem in Somalia. The country experienced a relationship of rivalry with different neighbors at different moments for different reasons. Each country in the region was dealing with some form of internal conflict and other challenges. Interestingly, each of the governments tried to deal with their problems by meddling and offering some degree of support for insurgencies in neighboring countries, especially those that were seen as constituting a threat (Cliffe, 1999). Consequently, when Somalia's internal troubles and uprisings began, some took advantage of the situation and put their noses to its grindstone in a manner that benefited their cravings. The whole of the Horn of Africa has been the scene of a lot of differences and friction, pitting not only the countries of the region against each other but also external powers against one another and enemies of their allies and interests in the region. This became so serious that the region acquired the reputation of being host to one of the largest externally funded military build-ups in the whole of the developing world (Kendie, 2003).

A respondent adds that:

Having daily interactions with local communities gives me firsthand insight into how international involvement serves as both a blessing and a burden. While global organizations deliver essential humanitarian assistance, resources, and occasionally security aid that our citizens urgently require, these efforts frequently carry concealed motives and political objectives. Neighboring nations such as Ethiopia and Kenya, alongside major world powers, utilize Somalia as a means to advance their own security interests and strategic priorities.

Mohamed (2018) submitted that the turmoil in Somalia has been exacerbated not just by the intervention of neighboring countries but also by the global community's engagement. Until the end of the 1980s, superpowers, including the United States and the Soviet Union, utilized Somalia and its environs as a key battlefield for their worldwide dominance, neglecting the consequences for the local populations (Yuusuf, 2021). The end of the Cold War removed the strategic justifications for the US involvement, which, in the early 1990s, shifted to humanitarian concerns under the pretext of the "new world order," and following 9/11, shifted again towards counter-terrorism objectives (Møller, 2009). Despite the initial altruistic intentions and the later more self-interested reasons, the results were equally harmful, exacerbating the predicaments faced by the Somali population rather than mitigating them (Nyadera et al., 2024). External interference has played a major role in obstructing peace initiatives in Somalia. The forceful military strategies focused on establishing regional dominance have greatly impeded efforts toward peace and the establishment of a stable state in Somalia.

A Somali government official emphasized that:

While foreign interventions are usually framed as peace efforts, many of them instead intensified the conflict. By backing certain clans or political factions, foreign actors deepened divisions and mistrust among the people. Military operations, though aimed at fighting terrorism, have sometimes harmed civilians, fueling resentment and recruitment by extremist groups. Regional actors like Ethiopia and Kenya, in particular, have pursued their own security interests that conflict with Somalia's priorities. This dynamic has reinforced clan rivalries, undermined reconciliation, and left many Somalis feeling that their sovereignty is being eroded, thereby adding another layer to the conflict.

The aspects of foreign intervention have been a significant contributing factor to the protracted conflict in Somalia. It plays a complex and multifaceted role in exacerbating existing tensions and dynamics within the country. One aspect of foreign intervention lies in historical geopolitical rivalries and strategic interests of external powers in the Horn of Africa region (Yuusuf, 2021). During the Cold War era, Somalia found itself at the center of the East-West rivalry, with the United States and the Soviet Union both seeking to gain influence in the strategically important region. This geopolitical competition led to military support and alliances with different factions within Somalia, fueling internal conflicts and instability (Bradbury, 2016). Moreover, the post-Cold War era witnessed continued foreign involvement in Somalia, albeit under different

pretexts. Humanitarian interventions, such as the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in the early 1990s, aimed to provide humanitarian aid and restore order, but ultimately ended up entangling foreign forces in Somalia's internal affairs, often exacerbating existing tensions and triggering backlash from local actors (Nyadera et al., 2024). The infamous "Black Hawk Down" incident in 1993, where American troops clashed with Somali militia forces, underscored the risks and challenges of external military intervention in the country.

Menkhaus (2013) lamented that neighboring countries and regional powers have pursued their strategic interests in Somalia at the expense of stability and peace within the country. Ethiopia, for example, has intervened militarily in Somalia multiple times, citing concerns over security threats posed by Islamist groups like Al-Shabaab. While these interventions have targeted militant groups, they have also stirred nationalist sentiments and fueled anti-foreigner sentiments among Somalis, contributing to the cycle of violence and instability. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "proxy wars" in Somalia has seen various external actors providing support to competing factions and armed groups, either directly or indirectly, in pursuit of their interests. These proxy conflicts have not only prolonged the conflict but have also complicated efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement and sustainable peace (Lidén, 2019). The involvement of external actors in arming and financing different factions has perpetuated violence and hindered genuine reconciliation efforts within Somalia.

3.3. Radical Extremism

Radical extremism, particularly embodied by groups like Al-Shabaab, has greatly contributed to the conflict in Somalia. Al-Shabaab, which emerged as a radical Islamist militia in the early 2000s, has exploited the power vacuum resulting from state collapse and the weaknesses of governance structures to establish control over significant portions of territory in Somalia (Menkhaus, 2013). The group's extremist ideology, rooted in a strict interpretation of Sharia law, has not only fueled violence and insecurity within Somalia but also posed a threat to regional stability.

According to Mohamed (2018), the fusion of culture with religion is notably deep, as Islam has become interwoven with the societal fabric through a gradual process of cultural assimilation and acceptance. This close connection to Islamic traditions has made it easier for extremist ideologies to spread among the people. Covert operations by religious groups were indeed present during the era of military rule, which, by suppressing these activities harshly, inadvertently kept Islamist pursuits to a low in the political arena (Tripodi, 1999: 114). Nonetheless, the collapse of the military regime in 1991 acted as a triggering point for radical Islamic factions to rise in arms and join the conflict. Among these factions, Al-Ittihad Al-Islam (AIAI), a neo-Salafist group, announced its existence in 1992 from the United Kingdom, quickly moving to seize territories within Somalia to enforce its ideology (Mohamed, 2018). Leading its objectives was the aspiration to form an Islamic State, alongside other goals such as rejecting any governance system that does not adhere to Islamic law, pursuing Islamic justice, promoting peace within society, establishing a strong economy, propagating the Islamic faith, and opposing any heretical beliefs and innovations that diverge from Islamic teachings.

A community leader said:

Radical extremism has destroyed the peace in our communities. Groups like Al-Shabaab take advantage of unemployed and hopeless youth, offering them money, security, and false promises. Many do not join because of ideology, but because they feel excluded and abandoned. These groups use religion as a tool to control people, but what they bring is only fear, violence, and suffering. The solution must go beyond guns; it requires jobs, education, and rebuilding trust between the people and the government.

According to Menkhaus (2013), radical extremism aggravates the conflict in Somalia mainly through its strategies for enlisting new members. Al-Shabaab targets young people who feel alienated, leveraging their frustrations over being marginalized, jobless, and devoid of prospects. This group provides those it recruits with a sense of direction, identity, and community, especially appealing to individuals who consider themselves sidelined or suppressed by the prevailing social systems. This not only continues the cycle of conflict but also counteracts initiatives aimed at establishing peace and stability in Somalia. Al-Shabaab's approach, encompassing suicide attacks, strategic killings, and irregular warfare, has sown widespread terror and uncertainty among civilians. Its random violence against civilians, state officials, and global representatives

has disrupted communities and obstructed recovery efforts aimed at infrastructure and institutional rebuilding. Moreover, the climate of fear Al-Shabaab has engendered has exacerbated societal divisions, complicating the efforts toward peaceful cohabitation and reconciliation (Tripodi, 1999: 114).

During the 1990s, the military wing of Al-Ittihad Al-Islam (AIAI) engaged in several conflicts with Somali warlords and Ethiopian forces within Ethiopia's Somali region. These skirmishes eventually led to the collapse of Al-Ittihad Al-Islam, signifying Ethiopia's first military incursion into Somali territory. The root cause of this aggressive move towards Somalia can be traced back to a series of destructive bombings and attacks in Addis Ababa, with Al-Ittihad publicly claiming responsibility through a representative in Mogadishu (Mohamed, 2018). Despite Al-Ittihad's downfall, the ideology of extremism saw not its end but rather its transformation. In the aftermath, control of Somalia, especially the southern parts, fell to warlords, amid continued efforts by extremists (CSIS, 2021). Consequently, Somalia turned into a breeding ground for global terrorism, offering refuge to some of the world's most notorious terrorists, including those behind the East African US embassy bombings.

3.4. Widespread Corruption

After achieving independence in 1960, Somalia struggled with widespread corruption across its government bodies. The first ten years of independence, often referred to as the era of democratic civil governance, experienced an increase in corrupt practices as the Somali government expanded (Best and Humphreys, 2005). During this period, the people's patience with corruption was severely tested, prompting a widespread call for political reform and changes. Criticism was directed towards the adoption of a parliamentary system akin to that of Italy, which was believed to have facilitated the growth of corruption. Payton (1980a) further observed that in the nascent years of the Somali Republic, corruption flourished alongside favoritism and nepotism, reaching its peak. Such conditions paved the way for clan-based conflicts as politicians exploited clan differences for their benefit, vying for control over state resources. In addition, it was discovered that significant public funds were being misappropriated by officials to manipulate elections to their advantage.

Payton (1980b) indicates that from January to October 1969, it was documented that the Prime Minister's Office had redirected £500,000 of state funds to members of the National Assembly, effectively turning it into a corrupt environment where legislative votes were traded for personal advantages, overlooking the people's welfare. The growing mismanagement and corruption in Somalia from 1960 to 1969 greatly contributed to the army's rise in popularity and eventual seizure of power (Tripodi, 1999: 114). Although the military initially adopted a stringent stance against corruption, the issue only deepened, permeating all levels of the military-led government. The widespread corruption incited dissatisfaction among different clans, fostering the seeds of resistance against the military rulers and sparking the beginnings of the Somali conflict. In a stark accusation, Sheikh Mukhtar, the most senior parliamentarian from the last civilian administration, explicitly charged Siad Barre with manifesting corruption, underlining the extent and invasive nature of corrupt practices within the government (Ingiriis, 2016: 131).

The researcher engaged with a citizen, and he said:

You can find corruption everywhere in my country, from the national government to local offices. Our leaders use public money for themselves or their clans, while ordinary people struggle without basic services. This has made people lose trust in the state, and it pushes many to turn to clan structures or even armed groups for protection. As long as corruption continues, it will be very hard to build peace or unity in Somalia.

Transparency International (2021) reports that the widespread corruption in Somalia has long been recognized as a significant contributor to the conflict and instability in the country. Corruption permeates various levels of society, from local administrations to national institutions, exacerbating grievances, undermining trust in government, and perpetuating cycles of violence (Mudey and Arshad, 2024). Corruption fuels conflict in Somalia through its impact on governance and state institutions. Weak governance structures and rampant corruption have eroded the legitimacy and effectiveness of the central government, leaving it unable to provide essential services or enforce the rule of law (Hassan, 2018). This lack of governance and accountability creates fertile ground for the emergence of armed groups and militias, which often exploit grievances related to corruption to garner support and challenge the authority of the state.

Mwangi (2019) lamented that corruption distorts economic opportunities and exacerbates socio-economic disparities, fueling grievances and tensions within society. Elite networks and corrupt officials in Somalia siphon off public resources, depriving the population of vital services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The perception of unfairness and inequality perpetuated by corruption breeds resentment and alienation, particularly among marginalized communities, such as minority clans, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and rural populations excluded from political and economic opportunities. These groups often view the state as a predatory rather than protective entity, which deepens mistrust and fuels support for alternative authorities, including clan militias and extremist organizations like Al-Shabaab (Menkhaus, 2014; Transparency International, 2021).

Corruption undermines efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation in Somalia by perpetuating a culture of impunity and hindering accountability for past atrocities. Corrupt officials and warlords often enjoy immunity from prosecution, making it difficult to hold them accountable for human rights abuses or war crimes (Makinda, 2017). This lack of justice and accountability undermines confidence in peace processes and reconciliation efforts, perpetuating grievances and fueling cycles of revenge and violence.

3.5. Political, Economic, and Social Inequalities

The origins of the conflict in Somalia lie in entrenched political, economic, and social inequalities. These disparities have not only intensified grievances but have also nurtured feelings of bitterness, thus escalating the conflict within the nation. These disparities manifest in multiple ways, particularly through the imbalanced allocation of authority, resources, and opportunities, which have collectively contributed to the fragmentation and division within Somali society. In terms of governance, Somalia has faced challenges with its clan-based political system, where specific clans or powerful groups maintain control over most of the authority and available resources. This arrangement sidelines many groups, propagating governance structures that exclude significant portions of the population. According to Menkhaus (2015), such a political system hampers the creation of inclusive institutions and the cultivation of national togetherness, further aggravating the difficulties faced by sidelined communities and stoking the flames of discord among them. In Somalia, the intersection and mutual reinforcement of political, economic, and social disparities result in a relentless circle of conflict and instability. Communities that feel marginalized due to their insufficient representation and lack of opportunities often turn to violence as a form of recourse, which only serves to heighten tensions and perpetuate the ongoing violence (Menkhaus, 2015). Furthermore, the competition for limited resources such as land, water, and economic prospects, driven by these inequalities in access, aggravates community tensions and conflicts (Aryeetey-Attoh, 2018).

Muse (2019) opines that the disparity in politics, economy, and society significantly exacerbated the conflict in Somalia. Certain clans acquired greater political influence than others, exploiting limited economic resources for personal gain. This caused not only political but also economic imbalances, which further deepened social divides. The World Bank Group (2017) reports that the "Gini coefficient", a tool for measuring inequality, was recorded at 34 percent in Somalia. These layers of inequality in Somalia led to grievances and resentments among individuals, which in turn, accelerated and prolonged the conflict. Despite this, discussions around the political, economic, and social disparities are often overlooked and neglected in the pursuit of resolutions. These disparities perpetuate and expand conflict as long as they exist. For nations such as Somalia, which are in the throes of seeking stability across various domains-including economic, political, social, and cultural realms - it is crucial to consider and address the prevalent inequalities that affect broad sections of the population, specifically referencing the clan divisions in Somalia.

A respondent who lives in Baidoa lamented that:

Life is not the same for everyone in Somalia. There are some clans that get more jobs, more money, and better schools, while others are left behind. This alone makes people feel excluded and frustrated. When the government ignores these inequalities, it pushes young people toward militias or extremist groups, because they see no future in the system. Until everyone is treated fairly, peace will remain out of reach.

Aryeetey-Attoh (2018) submitted that inequalities across political, economic, and social dimensions have served as primary catalysts for the conflict in Somalia. In terms of governance, authority has frequently been consolidated among powerful clans, sidelining minority communities and restricting their involvement in

political processes. From an economic perspective, unequal access to resources, job opportunities, and developmental prospects has resulted in widespread poverty among substantial population groups, especially young people, making them susceptible to recruitment by militant organizations (Ingiriis, 2018). Regarding the social front, a systemic disparity in educational access, medical care, and government services has spread patterns of exclusion and resentment, hindering the development of representative institutions that could resolve conflicts and foster national unity (Mwangi, 2019; Muse, 2019). All these overwhelming systems of inequality not only create dissatisfaction but also establish circumstances where conflict participants can gain followers by capitalizing on feelings of unfair treatment.

3.6. Extreme Poverty and High Unemployment

Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world. The World Bank Group (2019) published that 69% of Somali people lived in poverty in 2017. Somalia has the sixth-highest poverty rate in the region, only after the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Burundi, and South Sudan (World Bank Group, 2019). Extreme poverty is a consequence of high unemployment in the country. The population aged 15-64 years comprised just above half (52.3%) of the total population (UNFPA, 2014). Young people in Somalia's workforce encounter significant obstacles when seeking meaningful job opportunities. The country's employment market cannot accommodate the increasing number of recent graduates and students completing their education, leading to continuously elevated levels of joblessness and inadequate employment (World Bank, 2005). This financial exclusion creates a situation where numerous young individuals remain without purpose, experiencing disappointment and becoming vulnerable targets for armed organizations. Militant groups and various participants in Somalia's ongoing conflict take advantage of these weaknesses by providing monetary rewards, including payments, allowances, or regular income, combined with assurances of community acceptance and safety (The Global Economy, 2024). In situations where government institutions cannot deliver financial stability or realistic career options, these organizations position themselves as substitute sources of both revenue and personal identity. As a result, the lack of employment among young people not only worsens economic hardship but also maintains ongoing violence patterns by creating an essential source of new members for groups involved in conflict, which damages efforts toward lasting peace and stability.

A respondent said:

Most young people in our communities have no jobs and no steady income. Poverty forces many to struggle just to survive, and without opportunities, some are drawn into armed groups or illegal activities. When people see no hope for work or education, frustration grows, and the cycle of conflict continues.

Another respondent cries out:

In our community, nearly every resident faces financial hardship. Graduates leave educational institutions unable to secure employment, leading to feelings of despair and helplessness. Some turn to militant organizations where they receive meals, compensation, and direction in life. Poverty and unemployment are not just economic problems; they feed the conflict and keep our communities unsafe.

A lady from Puntland lamented:

As a mother, my kids miss school frequently since we can't pay for tuition or educational materials. Many young men from this area become involved with militant organizations simply to support their families. This thus creates danger for the entire community. Poverty is not just about money; it destroys hope, education, and safety in our neighborhoods.

Somalia's high levels of youth unemployment have significantly fueled the protracted conflict. In the 1970s, the country's population was estimated at approximately 5 million. Although no reliable nationwide census has been conducted since then, current estimates place the population at around 9 to 10 million, reflecting a rapid demographic increase that has further strained limited economic opportunities and state capacity (Ingiriis, 2016). In the 1980s, Somalia's burgeoning youth population faced severe unemployment, exacerbated by a government unable to provide meaningful employment or education. The underdeveloped private sector further limited opportunities. Consequently, many young men found themselves in a state of despair, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation by elites seeking to advance their own interests. These elites capitalized on the situation by organizing these disillusioned youths, offering them a sense of purpose and

belonging. This dynamic significantly contributed to the escalation of conflict in the region (Menkhaus, 2018; Bradbury and Healy, 2010).

Aryeetey-Attoh (2018) reveals that Somalia's economic landscape is marked by pervasive poverty and deep inequality, further exacerbated by decades of conflict, the collapse of state institutions, and chronic underdevelopment. Opportunities for economic advancement are scarce, especially for those in marginalized communities, resulting in significant unemployment, poverty, and economic exclusion (Aryeetey-Attoh, 2018). Wealth and resources are unevenly distributed, leading to social inequalities and fostering discontent, particularly among young people who feel disconnected and sidelined. On the social front, Somalia is characterized by ingrained splits based on clan, ethnicity, and region, which continue to perpetuate social inequities and sow seeds of mistrust and hostility between various factions (Menkhaus, 2015). The practice of discrimination and exclusion based on clan identity intensifies social frictions and obstructs the path toward creating unified and welcoming communities. Additionally, unequal access to education, healthcare, and essential services deepens social inequalities, thus perpetuating ongoing cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Summarily, the conflict in Somalia stems from a multifaceted combination of political, economic, social, and historical elements. Persistent inequalities, ineffective leadership, and widespread corruption have undermined governmental credibility and allowed militant organizations to flourish in the resulting power void. Clan politics and networks of favoritism controlled by elites have deepened societal rifts, while external military involvement, driven by regional and strategic considerations, has frequently intensified conflict in the country.

4. Conclusion

The conflict in Somalia represents an intricate interplay of historical, social, political, and economic factors, demonstrating how the collapse of state structures can perpetuate cycles of violence and instability in a country. This study has established that clan rivalry, foreign interventions, radical extremism, widespread corruption, deep-rooted inequalities, and extreme poverty are not isolated phenomena but interwoven drivers that collectively shape the protracted conflict in Somalia. The centrality of clans in Somali society, historically a source of social cohesion and customary governance, has paradoxically become a source of division when politicized, manipulated, and weaponized by both domestic elites and external actors (Menkhaus, 2015; Visman, 1994). Clan loyalty often supersedes national identity, undermining attempts by the central government to instill peace and security in the country (Ali and Neelam, 2019).

The interventions of foreign actors such as Ethiopia and Kenya, and global powers like the United States and the former Soviet Union, have always chased their interests at the expense of Somalia internal stability. This further deepened clan divisions and undermined local ownership of the peace processes in Somalia (Bradbury, 2016; Elmi and Barise, 2006; Lidén, 2019). Governance vacuums, corruption, and mismanagement have further weakened state legitimacy, while structural inequalities and clan-based favoritism have intensified grievances, creating fertile ground for radicalization. Extremist groups, particularly Al-Shabaab, exploit youth unemployment, poverty, and social marginalization to recruit disaffected populations, fusing ideological narratives with socio-political grievances to entrench cycles of violence and insecurity (Menkhaus, 2013; CSIS, 2021; Mwangi, 2019).

Sustainable peace in Somalia requires multi-faceted and Multi-dimensional strategies that address the immediate security concerns and also the drivers of the conflict in the country. Aspects such as historical grievances, weak institutions, socio-economic exclusion, and persistent insecurity must be tackled alongside reconciliation and inclusive state-building efforts (Elmi, 2010; Samatar, 1992). The Somali case underscores that short-term interventions without attention to these root causes risk perpetuating instability, highlighting the necessity of integrated approaches that combine security, governance reform, social cohesion, and local, national, and international collaboration to achieve long-term recovery and stability within the country.

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Appendix

Name	Status	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
Ayaan Warsame (pseudonym)	UN Worker	35	August 14 th 2024	Mogadishu
Faarah Abdulle (pseudonym)	Researcher	37	August 17 th 2024	Jubbaland
Hodan Isse (pseudonym)	Community Leader	44	August 20 th 2024	Baidoa
Abshir Mahamud (pseudonym)	Community Leader	42	August 10 th 2024	Kismayo
Ifrah Yusuf (pseudonym)	Civil Society Leader	35	August 11 th 2024	Puntland
Bashir Guled (pseudonym)	Civil Society Leader	34	August 21 st 2024	Jubbaland
Zamzam Ali (pseudonym)	AU Worker	37	August 13 th 2024	Mogadishu
Mahad Roble (pseudonym)	Government Official	40	August 16 th 2024	Mogadishu
Fadumo Nur (pseudonym)	Researcher	38	August 19 th 2024	Kismayo
Osman Dirie (pseudonym)	UN Worker	36	August 15 th 2024	Mogadishu
Naima Shire (pseudonym)	UN Worker	38	August 11 th 2024	Mogadishu
Abdiqani Salah (pseudonym)	Government Official	43	August 18 th 2024	Mogadishu
Roda Jama (pseudonym)	Civil Society Leader	33	August 10 th 2024	Hirshabelle
Hassan Kediye (pseudonym)	Researcher	36	August 14 th 2024	Baidoa
Deqa Omar (pseudonym)	AU Worker	35	August 14 th 2024	Mogadishu
Liban Barre (pseudonym)	Government Official	54	August 13 th 2024	Mogadishu

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