SOMALI CIVIL WAR

By Georgia Steigerwald

INTRODUCTION

A patrolling soldier in Somalia.
The Organization for World Peace

Violence has been a way of life in Somalia since the outbreak of the civil war in 1991

"Amino Hussein Hassan, a female law student, was shot dead on her university campus. Yahye Amir, a prominent economics professor and political analyst, escaped an assassination attempt when a bomb strapped to his car exploded, killing his brother. And Ahmed Mukhtar Salah, from the long-marginalized minority Bantu community, was beaten and burnt to death by a mob after his nephew married an ethnic Somali woman.

Violence has been a way of life in Somalia since the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, seeping deep into the nation's marrow as clan conflict gradually morphed into an all-out war against the al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist group al-Shabab."

Hassan Ghedi Santur, "Reporter's Diary: Heal Somalia's Former Child Soldiers, Heal a Nation," 2018

The ongoing civil war has had a profound impact on Somali society, permeating every aspect of life. The violence has become ingrained in the nation's psyche, leaving long-lasting scars on its people. Laetitia Bader, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, emphasizes that the layers of violence people have had to endure present a significant obstacle to building a peaceful and healthier society.

Tragically, the most vulnerable segments of society, such as the poor, the politically marginalized, and young people, are disproportionately affected by the violence. Children have grown up in the midst of the turmoil, facing the trauma of witnessing years of conflict and living on the front lines of a war-ravaged country.

As Somalia struggles to find a path to peace and stability, it is essential to understand the human cost of the conflict. The stories of Amino Hussein Hassan, Yahye Amir, and Ahmed Mukhtar Salah are just a few among countless others, representing the broader impact of violence on individuals and communities. In this briefing, we will

delve deeper into the historical context, the key actors, and the current state of the Somali Civil War, with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in creating a more peaceful and prosperous future for this troubled nation.

EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

Historical Development

Somalia has been rife with conflict for the past thirty years as its citizens battle historical divisions, the legacy of colonialism, clan warfare, and overarching instability.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Era

Prior to colonization by Britain, France, and Italy, Somalia was inhabited by various nomadic clans and tribes (Janzen and Lewis). The primary government structure was decentralized and based on clan identities and cultural customs. However, with the arrival of European powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the region was divided into different colonial territories. Britain took control of northern Somalia, which they called British Somaliland, while Italy colonized the southern part, calling it Italian Somaliland ("Somalia Country Profile").

The colonial era had a profound impact on Somalia and set the stage for future conflicts. The arbitrary division of Somali territories by colonial powers disrupted traditional clan structures and created artificial borders (Tripodi). This colonial deconstruction of traditional clan cultures ignited clan conflict. The British and Italians imposed their own systems of governance, which marginalized and undermined the authority of traditional Somali leaders, while also creating a culture of resentment and distrust (Janzen and Lewis). This led to simmering tensions and grievances among the Somali people, as their sense of unity and shared identity was challenged. These historical legacies would later contribute to the fragmentation and clan-based conflicts that characterized the Somali civil war. (Janzen and Lewis). Once southern Somalia gained its independence from Italy in 1960 and united with Somaliland, then a British protectorate, it formed the Somali Republic. However, in its earliest years the Somali government, still a budding republic, saw political power struggles.

Siad Barre's Regime and the Rise of Opposition

In 1969, military leader Siad Barre seized power in a bloodless military coup. The opposition movements that emerged in response were pivotal in shaping the historical development of the Somali civil war. Once Barre came to power, he established an authoritarian regime that concentrated power and suppressed dissent. His regime,

Celebrations for Somalia's 62nd Independence Day.
Daily News Egypt

***Colonization** – the establishment and maintenance of control by one group or nation over a foreign territory, often involving the exploitation of resources and imposition of cultural norms.*

known as the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party (SRSP), implemented socialist policies and centralized control over political, economic, and social spheres ("Somalia Country Profile"). However, his rule was marked by political repression, human rights abuses, and economic mismanagement, which led to growing discontent among the population.

Al-Shabaab – a militant Islamist extremist group based in Africa, particularly Somalia, known for carrying out violent attacks and insurgency activities with the aim of establishing an Islamic state governed by their strict interpretation of Sharia law.

As opposition to the Barre regime grew, various rebel groups emerged to challenge his authority. One notable opposition movement was the Somali National Movement (SNM), primarily based in the northern regions of Somalia. The SNM, composed of predominantly Isaaq clans, sought greater autonomy and self-governance for the northern regions of Somalia, which had long felt marginalized by the central government ("Somali Civil War"). In the southern regions, the United Somali Congress (USC) emerged as a major opposition force. The USC comprised a coalition of clans and factions that opposed Siad Barre's rule and sought political and economic reforms (Janzen and Lewis). These opposition movements gained support from both within Somalia and from external actors, and their resistance efforts eventually culminated in the overthrow of Siad Barre's regime in 1991. This event plunged the country into a prolonged and destructive civil war (Janzen and Lewis). Clan-based militias and warlords seized control of different regions, leading to a power vacuum and the disintegration of the central government ("Somali Civil War").

Clan-Based Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis

Siad Barre's military coup in 1969 established an authoritarian regime that concentrated power and suppressed dissent, his rule was marked by political repression, human rights abuses, and economic mismanagement, which led to growing discontent among the population.

The clan-based conflict and the ensuing humanitarian crisis were significant aspects of the historical development of the Somali civil war. Following the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia descended into a state of anarchy and clan-based violence (Makinda). With the absence of a functioning state, various clan militias and warlords emerged, vying for power, control over resources, and territorial dominance (Felbab-Brown). The conflict took on a predominantly clan-based nature, with rival factions engaging in armed confrontations, often fueled by historical grievances, competition over land, and access to economic opportunities (Felbab-Brown). The absence of a centralized authority and the proliferation of heavily armed militias exacerbated the intensity and complexity of the conflict, leading to a protracted civil war (Kapteijns).

Emergence of Islamist Groups

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of Islamist extremist groups across the globe. This played a significant role in the historical development of the Somali civil war. In the early 2000s, Al-Shabaab, an extremist group with affiliations to Al-Qaeda, gained prominence and became a major player in the conflict.

Exploiting the power vacuum and the state's weak governance structures, Al-Shabaab capitalized on the grievances of marginalized communities and exploited their discontent to recruit fighters and expand their influence ("Somali Civil War").

Al-Shabaab launched a series of attacks against both domestic and international targets, including bombings, assassinations, and guerrilla warfare tactics (Masters and Sergie). The group sought to undermine efforts towards stability, impede humanitarian aid operations, and challenge the presence of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping forces (AMISOM Mandate"). Their extremist ideology and brutal tactics further intensified the conflict, causing significant casualties and widespread fear among the civilian population. International efforts, including military operations by AMISOM and international partners, have been undertaken to combat the influence of Al-Shabaab and other extremist groups ("Somalia Country Profile"). However, their resilience and ability to adapt to changing circumstances have made them a persistent challenge in the pursuit of lasting peace and stability in Somalia.

International Involvement and Transitional Governments

The 21st century has seen significant developments in the Somali civil war, particularly in terms of international involvement and the establishment of transitional governments. During this period, AMISOM troops from various African nations played a crucial role in supporting the Somali government's efforts to stabilize the country (AMISOM Mandate"). AMISOM forces engaged in military operations against Al-Shabaab and other militant groups, helping to reclaim territory and secure key urban centers ("Somalia Country Profile"). Their presence was essential in creating an environment for political and security reforms to take place and was supported by the United Nations as well as the U.S. However, AMISOM forces have been accused of being responsible for civilian deaths during their military operations.

Simultaneously, transitional governments were established with the support of the international community. The Transitional National Government of Somalia operated from 2000 to 2004. It was succeeded by the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, which held power until the Somali constitution was adopted in 2012. The United Nations and African Union supported these governments, which aimed to establish effective governance structures, rebuild state institutions, and pave the way for a more permanent and inclusive political system (Janzen and Lewis). The transition process involved various stages, including the formation of interim governments, the drafting of a new constitution, and the holding of elections. However, the transitional period was marked by significant challenges, including political divisions, corruption, and

AMISOM Peacekeepers.
UN News

ongoing security threats from militant groups ("Somali Civil War"). Despite these obstacles, the international community remained engaged in supporting the transitional governments, providing financial assistance, capacity-building programs, and diplomatic support ("Somalia Country Profile").
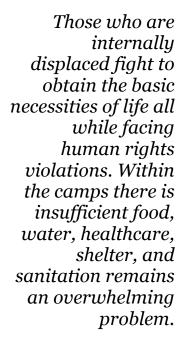
Scope of the Problem

Those who are internally displaced fight to obtain the basic necessities of life all while facing human rights violations. Within the camps there is insufficient food, water, healthcare, shelter, and sanitation remains an overwhelming problem.

The current landscape in Somalia is riddled with humanitarian issues and instability, and the situation remains complex and ever-changing. Millions have been displaced by conflict or by recent droughts which have hit the country ("World Report 2022: Somalia"). Internally displaced Somalians must fight to obtain the basic necessities of life, all while facing human rights violations. Within the refugee camps there is insufficient food, water, healthcare, shelter, and sanitation remains an overwhelming problem ("Somalia 2022"). Women and girls in refugee camps are at vastly increased risk of gender-based violence ("World Report 2022: Somalia"). Freedom of expression and journalism have also been heavily restricted by authorities in an attempt to seize control ("Somalia 2022"). The shifting dynamics and players are constantly evolving further complicating the situation. That said, a few key aspects to focus on are:

Security Challenges

Despite efforts to combat militant groups such as Al-Shabaab, the extremist organization continues to pose a significant security threat in Somalia. Al-Shabaab carries out frequent attacks targeting civilians, government institutions, and African Union forces ("Somali Civil War"). The group maintains control over rural areas and pockets of territory, and its activities impede peacebuilding and stabilization efforts (Felbab-Brown).

Political Landscape

Somali Internally Displaced Refugee Camp.
UN Sustainable Development Group

Somalia has made progress in its political transition with the completion of multiple electoral cycles, including parliamentary and presidential elections. In 2017 the country shifted towards a party system, with over 100 registered political parties. These parties typically form coalitions to reach sufficient representation to pass legislation. However, political tensions, clan-based rivalries, and disagreements over power-sharing arrangements persist (Kapteijns, "Somali Civil War"). Achieving a consensus among political actors and fostering inclusive governance remain ongoing challenges (Janzen and Lewis).

Humanitarian Situation

Somalia continues to face significant humanitarian challenges. Years of conflict, climate-related shocks, and chronic poverty have contributed to widespread food insecurity, displacement, and inadequate access to healthcare and education ("Somalia 2022"). The country relies on humanitarian assistance to meet the basic needs of a large portion of the population. However, the ongoing conflict has made it difficult to ensure humanitarian aid reaches those who need it most (Somalia's Challenges in 2023"). The security of humanitarian aid efforts must be addressed.

AMISOM– a regional peacekeeping mission deployed by the African Union to support the stabilization and security efforts in Somalia.

Regional and International Involvement

The Somali conflict remains a concern for regional and international actors. The African Union, through its peacekeeping mission AMISOM, continues to support the Somali government in efforts to stabilize the country and combat militant groups ("Somalia Country Profile"). The United Nations and other international partners are involved in humanitarian aid, development assistance, and supporting state-building initiatives. But as the war drags on, many nations have become tired of the crisis and looking to decrease their involvement (Felbab-Brown).

Congressional Action

There is not much current congressional action regarding the Somali Civil War. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the U.S. involvement in Somalia has been multifaceted over the course of history, ranging from humanitarian assistance to military operations. At present, the majority of congressional efforts in Somalia are focused on military involvement and counter-terrorism efforts. In May of 2022, President Biden approved an order authorizing the military to deploy hundreds of special operations forces to Somalia (Savage and Schmitt, 2022). In 2023, a resolution was introduced in the House of removed all United States Armed Forces, other than those stationed to protect the U.S. embassy, from Somalia (H.Con.Res.30). However, it failed to pass the House.

Past Policy Action

The extent and nature of U.S. action on the Somali civil war have evolved over time based on changing priorities, security concerns, and regional dynamics.

Humanitarian Intervention in the 1990s

In the early 1990s, the United States led a multinational humanitarian intervention known as Operation Restore Hope ("U.S. Relations With Somalia"). The intervention aimed to provide

humanitarian assistance and restore order in the midst of the devastating humanitarian crisis caused by the civil war. U.S. forces, along with troops from other countries, were deployed to Somalia to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and protect relief operations. However, the mission faced significant challenges, including clashes with local warlords and armed factions, which ultimately led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1994 ("U.S. Relations With Somalia").

Counterterrorism Operations

In the post-9/11 era, the United States increased its focus on counterterrorism efforts in Somalia. The presence of Al-Shabaab, an extremist group with ties to Al-Qaeda, raised concerns about the group's potential to carry out attacks beyond Somalia's borders (Masters and Sergie). The U.S. has declared Al-Shabaab an official terrorist group and has conducted drone strikes and other targeted military operations against Al-Shabaab and other militant groups (Felbab-Brown). These actions aimed to degrade the capabilities of these groups and eliminate high-value targets (Mazzetti and Schmitt). However, thousands of civilians have been killed during these operations, raising serious questions about the role of these interventions moving forward.

Support for Somali Security Forces

The United States has provided military assistance and training to the Somali security forces as part of its efforts to build their capacity and enable them to take a greater role in securing the country (Felbab-Brown). This support has included the provision of equipment, advisors, and special operations forces. The goal has been to enhance the Somali government's ability to combat terrorism, stabilize the country, and restore law and order ("U.S. Relations With Somalia").

Conflict resolution prioritizes dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation processes to address the underlying causes of the conflict and foster long-term stability.

AREAS OF DEBATE

Addressing the Somali civil war requires a multifaceted approach that involves political, social, and economic policies. It's important to note that the situation in Somalia is complex, and the effectiveness of these policies depends on various factors. Below are some policies that could be considered.

Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

One possible solution that Congress could consider would be aiding with conflict resolution and reconciliation. These approaches prioritize dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation processes between the various warring factions to address the underlying

causes of the conflict and foster long-term stability. Conflict resolution initiatives aim to bring together warring parties, including government representatives, opposition groups, and marginalized communities, to engage in inclusive dialogue and find common ground. Mediation efforts, facilitated by regional and international actors, can play a crucial role in facilitating these negotiations and promoting a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Additionally, reconciliation processes focus on healing divisions, addressing grievances, and promoting social cohesion among communities affected by the conflict. These processes may include truth and reconciliation commissions, community dialogues, and initiatives aimed at fostering trust and understanding.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Many individuals and groups, both domestically and internationally, support conflict resolution and reconciliation as a viable solution to the Somali civil war. In particular, Democrats might view these approaches as essential for achieving lasting peace, stability, and inclusive governance in Somalia. Supporters often prioritize dialogue, negotiation, and building trust among conflicting parties, as well as addressing the root causes of the conflict. They believe that by engaging in reconciliation processes and promoting social cohesion, Somalia can move towards a more unified and prosperous future.

Some political actors, including some Republicans, may hold a more skeptical view regarding the efficacy of conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. They may question the willingness and ability of warring factions to engage in meaningful dialogue and compromise. Skeptics may express concerns about the potential for power imbalances, lack of genuine commitment, or the presence of spoilers who could disrupt the reconciliation process. Republicans may argue for alternative approaches, such as more assertive military action or stronger focus on security measures, before engaging in reconciliation efforts.

A line for aid in a Somali refugee camp.

Washington Post

Humanitarian Assistance and Development

Humanitarian assistance and development are also important routes that Congress could consider as it begins to address the situation in Somalia. Humanitarian assistance aims to provide immediate relief to the population affected by the conflict, addressing urgent needs such as food, water, shelter, and healthcare ("Somalia's Challenges in 2023"). It focuses on alleviating the suffering of the vulnerable, including internally displaced persons and refugees, and ensuring their basic rights and well-being. Additionally, development initiatives seek to promote long-term stability and sustainable growth by investing in infrastructure,

education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities. These initiatives aim to rebuild communities, improve living conditions, and create economic opportunities that can help reduce the underlying grievances and address the root causes of the conflict. By prioritizing humanitarian assistance and development, Somalia can begin to recover from the devastating impact of the civil war, build resilience, and lay the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous future.

Congress could potentially provide financial support to humanitarian organizations and development programs operating in Somalia. This includes funding for food aid, healthcare services, education initiatives, infrastructure projects, and economic development programs. Congress could also contribute to the delivery of humanitarian aid by providing logistical support, transportation, and resources. This may involve deploying military assets, such as aircraft or naval vessels, to facilitate the distribution of relief supplies to areas in need. The government can also coordinate with humanitarian organizations to ensure the efficient and timely delivery of aid ("Somalia's Challenges in 2023").

American assistance can be channeled into development projects aimed at rebuilding infrastructure, promoting education, improving healthcare systems, and fostering economic opportunities in Somalia. This can involve investment in sectors such as agriculture, energy, transportation, and telecommunications. Additionally, nations can offer technical expertise, training, and capacity-building programs to help strengthen the institutions and human resources needed for sustainable development.

Congress can engage diplomatically with Somali authorities, regional organizations, and other stakeholders to advocate for policies and initiatives that prioritize humanitarian assistance and development. This includes participating in international forums, supporting peace and reconciliation processes, and leveraging diplomatic influence to promote stability and cooperation among different factions in Somalia.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both Republicans and Democrats largely recognize the importance of humanitarian assistance and development as vital components of a comprehensive approach to addressing the Somali civil war. Many Democrats believe that providing immediate humanitarian aid and investing in long-term development can help alleviate suffering, rebuild communities, and address the root causes of conflict. They argue that by prioritizing these efforts, Somalia can achieve stability, economic growth, and improved living conditions for its population.

While Republicans would not be fully against humanitarian assistance, they may approach the policy of humanitarian assistance and development with a focus on resource allocation and efficiency.

They may emphasize the need for transparent and accountable mechanisms to ensure that aid and development funds are effectively utilized and reach the intended beneficiaries. This perspective may advocate for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of projects, with an emphasis on results and impact. It may also involve discussions about balancing short-term humanitarian needs with long-term development goals. Ultimately, Republicans might be a bit more wary than Democrats about the potential costs of such humanitarian aid.

Countering Extremism and Terrorism

Any attempt to effectively handle the conflict will need to reckon with the prevalence of extremism and terrorism in the area. Doing so demands a multifaceted approach that aims to undermine the ideological appeal of extremist groups, disrupt their operational capabilities, and address the root causes of radicalization. This policy includes both security measures and preventative strategies. Security measures focus on strengthening the capacity of security forces to effectively combat extremist groups, dismantling their networks, and preventing their ability to carry out attacks (Felbab-Brown). Additionally, preventative strategies involve addressing the underlying grievances and socio-economic factors that contribute to the recruitment and radicalization of individuals. This includes promoting inclusive governance, providing education and employment opportunities, fostering community resilience, and engaging in counter-narrative campaigns that promote tolerance, peace, and moderate interpretations of Islam. By countering extremism and terrorism, Somalia can work towards creating a more secure and stable environment, while also addressing the underlying factors that fuel the conflict.

Congress can provide training and support to Somali security forces, including military, police, and intelligence agencies, to enhance their capabilities in countering extremism and terrorism. This can include assistance in intelligence gathering, counterterrorism operations, border control, and the development of specialized units. Training programs can also focus on human rights and rule of law to ensure that security forces act in accordance with international standards.

International collaboration on intelligence sharing and analysis can help identify and disrupt the activities of extremist groups in Somalia (Felbab-Brown). Countries, including the United States, can strengthen information sharing networks, establish joint task forces, and provide technical assistance to enhance intelligence capabilities. This cooperation can aid in tracking the movement of individuals, identifying financing sources, and preventing cross-border terrorist activities.

FAFT – established in 1989 to combat money laundering, terrorist financing, and threats to financial systems.

Preventative strategies involve addressing the underlying grievances and socio-economic factors that contribute to the recruitment and radicalization of individuals.

Supporting initiatives that promote counter-narratives and rehabilitation programs is crucial in countering extremism and radicalization. Congress can provide resources and expertise to develop campaigns that challenge extremist ideologies, promote moderate religious interpretations, and highlight the benefits of peace and stability. It can also support efforts to reintegrate former extremists into society through rehabilitation and reintegration programs that address their socio-economic and psychological needs.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Republicans may prioritize a strong security-focused approach to countering extremism and terrorism. They may advocate for robust military operations, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement efforts to disrupt and dismantle extremist groups. This perspective emphasizes the need for decisive action to neutralize the immediate security threats posed by these groups. Supporters argue that a strong security response is essential to protect the population, maintain stability, and prevent the spread of violence.

Another political perspective that some Democrats may take is a more holistic approach to countering extremism and terrorism. This perspective calls for a range of measures that go beyond military operations. It includes initiatives that address the underlying factors driving radicalization, such as socio-economic inequalities, political grievances, and lack of opportunities. Supporters argue for investments in education, social programs, and community engagement to promote inclusivity, tolerance, and resilience against extremist ideologies.

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

These solutions can vary greatly in scale, commitment, and cost. Humanitarian aid could be raised through public-private partnerships, with tax incentives offered by the government, costing very little, or could represent a significant portion of the national budget. The United States must ultimately evaluate its resources and find the balance between allocating it towards domestics policies and international aid. Moreover, ensuring that funds maximize their impact and end up where they are meant to is another challenge, seen in the distribution of humanitarian resources and corruption at various levels. Moreover, most international involvements are a multi-year commitment which requires longer-term planning and budgetary accounting.

CONCLUSION

The Somalian Civil War has lasted over three decades and cannot be fixed by any one simple solution. Rather, this conflict offers a unique opportunity to consider the many facets of conflict, and its solutions range from social and humanitarian to military and economic.

I sincerely hope this committee will work together to craft unique solutions to this issue and will consider the many different obstacles at play.

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

As the war has spanned over three decades, there is no shortage of information on it. For the most up to date information, I recommend sources like the UN, BBC Country Profiles, and NGO websites to get a good picture of the overall landscape.

For more specific information, I would advise reading about the most recent events of the war (think past five years or so) from repeatable news sources (e.g. New York Times, Washington Post).

Official government websites like Congress.gov are good places to start to look for congressional action on the subject at hand. Since there is not much congressional action on the topic, however, looking at the actions of past presidents and executive agencies could also be helpful.

GLOSSARY

Al-Shabaab – a militant Islamist extremist group based in Africa, particularly Somalia, known for carrying out violent attacks and insurgency activities with the aim of establishing an Islamic state governed by their strict interpretation of Sharia law.

AMISOM – a regional peacekeeping mission deployed by the African Union to support the stabilization and security efforts in Somalia.

Colonization – the establishment and maintenance of control by one group or nation over a foreign territory, often involving the exploitation of resources and imposition of cultural norms.

Multilateral Action – cooperative efforts or initiatives involving multiple nations or international organizations working together to address common challenges or achieve common objectives

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