

## Somalia Overview

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### Environment

The Somali Republic is the eastern-most extension of the African continent, located in the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by [Djibouti](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Kenya](#), the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

The southern region between the Juba and Shebelle rivers is the main area of settled agriculture. However, as only 13 per cent of the land is arable, there is intense pressure on available pasture and water.

### Peoples

Main languages: Somali, Arabic, Goshal

Main religions: Islam, local religions

Minority groups include 'Bantu' (Goshal, Shabelle, Shidle, Boni) 1 million (15%), Gaboye ('Midgan') caste groups (Tumal, Yibir, Madhigan, other) 1.5 million (22.5%), Oromo 41,600 (0.4%), and Benadiri Swahili-speakers (including Rer Hamar Amarani, Bajuni) 1.5 million (0.4%)<sup>1</sup>

Occupying the south-central portions of the country, Hawiye (part of the Irir clan family) is probably the largest clan within Somalia, while Darood is the largest clan among all Somalis across borders. Since independence Hawiye have occupied important administrative positions in the bureaucracy and the top ranks of the army.

According to Amnesty International, the Somali minorities comprise principally the "African" Bantu/Jarir, who are mostly landless labourers; the Benadiri/Rer Hamar urban traders of Middle Eastern origin; and the smaller dispersed Midgan (Gaboye), Tumal and Yibro occupational groups of metal-workers, leather-workers, hairdressers, herbalists and others. There are other smaller minorities, such as the Ashraf and Shikhal Muslim religious communities, Bajuni fishing people, and remote hunter-gatherer groups.<sup>2</sup>

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## **History**

At the 1884 Berlin Conference, European powers carved Somali territory into four different territories: British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland (later Djibouti), and Kenya. In 1949, when Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was reinstated to the throne, Britain ceded the Ogaden region to Ethiopia. The question of reunification preoccupied successive Somali elites at the cost of addressing more concrete issues. Economic and social issues received scant attention while the cultivation of clan and subclan interests accentuated the demise of kinship and the rise of clannism. When British Somaliland gained independence in 1960, it immediately joined with the formerly Italian-administered Somaliland. In 1969 a military coup displaced independent Somalia's civilian government following the assassination of President Shermarke by a rival clan member. Mohammed Siad Barre became president.

Barre proved adept at exploiting Cold War politics for his personal gain. Initially a nominal proponent of Marxism, his regime received large-scale military and financial support from the Soviet Union. But following the 1974 military coup in Ethiopia that overthrew the US-backed Haile Selassie and brought to power the Communist Mengistu Haile Mariam, Moscow rapidly withdrew its support for Somalia's claims on Ethiopia's Ogaden region. When Somalia invaded the Ogaden in 1977, the Soviet Union airlifted Cuban troops to help Mengistu repel Barre's forces. Barre deftly switched allegiance to the United States, which, especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, provided lifeblood for his autocratic military regime until the Cold War's end.

### **Clan rivalries**

Traditional rivalries among various Somali clans, including Isaaq of the north, Ogadeni of the south and Hawiye of central Somalia, were exacerbated by Barre's divide-and-rule policies. The failing economy and political system reawakened long suppressed discontent over the regional neglect of the north, compounded by the fact that various clan groups in the north were not treated equally. The historically strong and wealthy Isaaq had been systematically undermined in military and civil service posts and through the unequal development of resources and the location of development projects. Barre constructed the inner core of his government from representatives of three clans belonging to the Darood clan family. By mid-1988 Somalia was embroiled in one of the most brutal civil wars in Africa, involving the government and five armed opposition groups. With dwindling US support to fight off encroaching clan militants, by 1990 Barre only controlled the capital, Mogadishu. However, in January 1991 Mogadishu fell to Hawiye clanspeople under the leadership of General Mohammed Farrah Aidede and his USC. In 1991 Barre fled to Kenya.

### **The downfall of Siad Barre: the effect on minorities**

By 1991 Somalia was a nation without a government or central security force, where a collection of armed clan militias fought over spoils, and in a combination of political and ethnic conflict, ravaged the land and systematically killed and displaced the civilian population. During Barre's reign, as many as 500,000 Somalis are estimated to have died and another 2 million fled their homes to become displaced persons within their own country or unwelcome refugees in Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. By the time UN troops arrived in force two years after Barre's fall, the crisis was far advanced. These two years allowed warlords to fragment the country in an attempt to consolidate shifting fiefdoms and alliances, and to deny resources to civilian communities as the source of this power. The arrival of UNOSOM, with aid and resources, provided them with a new surge of strength. Indeed, several of the warlords who came to dominate later in the decade received their initial funding through UN contracts.

Minority groups were hard hit by the chaos following the fall of Siad Barre. Outside the clan system of protection, they faced expulsion from their land as well as looting by armed militias belonging to the more powerful groups. The victimization of women, particularly the displaced, was widespread. In the Shebelle region and the Hiran region north of Mogadishu, Gosha suffered displacement and starvation early on in the civil war. Scorched earth tactics were in operation against Bantu and other agricultural communities in the region between the Juba and Shebelle rivers in 1991–1992, removing their very means of survival. Communities were raided, stripped of their resources or expelled. Wells were destroyed, and seeds, stocks and livestock looted. Meanwhile, the Gaboye – accused of supporting Barre – faced brutal reprisals from Aideed's militias. Many were murdered, others simply disappeared, their remains never discovered.

## **Somaliland**

While Southern Somalia was tearing itself apart, the North-Western strip of the country, Somaliland, was declaring independence. This region had already had a taste of state-hood in the 1960s, when it was independent for a few days in 1960 between the end of British colonial rule and its union with the former Italian colony of Somalia. This area of the country is dominated by the Isaaq clan. They had long complained that the Darood and Hawiye had dominated power and privilege in the country at the expense of Isaaq since independence, and that southern Somalia, being both more developed and denser in population, had tended to dominate the northern region. In an attempt to crush the Isaaq Somali National Movement in the late 80s Barre's military unleashed terrible force against civilians. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed and at one point around 90 per cent of Hargeisa - the main town in the area - was destroyed. Some 400,000 people fled into eastern Ethiopia. Somaliland's independent status has yet to be recognised by the United Nations.

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## **Governance**

In the absence of central governance, and with the exception of brief rival administration by Islamists and an attempt to form an inter-clan government (both discussed below), a fractured Somalia has fallen under the shifting control of competing clan elites. Somalis belonging to clans constitute 85 per cent of the country's population. Within a caste-like hierarchy, Somalis are divided into three to five major clan families; the number and definitions of these are contested. Most conventional descriptions of Somali society identify 4 or 5 major clan groups: Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye and Darood, who make up higher Samaal castes, and Digil-Mirifle/Rahanweyn (sometimes mentioned as two distinct clan groups), belonging to the low-caste Saab. Some consider the Isaaq part of the Dir clan. Each clan comprises numerous subfamilies and lineages. Sixty per cent of the population is nomadic and concentrated primarily in the north.

While clan refers to the social organization, clannism is the politicization of the clan structure by elites, for personal gain. The clan is an important social organization in the Somali social structure. It affects politics, economics and social status. For minorities, the clan structure poses special difficulties; the Bantu, Gaboye, Bendari and others lie outside the system. They have no political power, and during upsurges of the conflict, have been especially exposed. Without militia protection, they are vulnerable to attack and to having their properties seized. Thus, in a country where all residents face some degree of threat, minorities are at special risk.

As mentioned above, Somaliland has formed a breakaway region of Somalia since 1991, dominated by the Isaaq clan. Over the past 17 years, this northern area has been relatively calm while the rest of the country remained immersed in chaotic inter-clan warfare. In October 2008, however, a series of

bombings across Somaliland and Puntland (see below) killed nearly 30 people and led to fears about deteriorating security here too. The Issaq majority for the most part has proved tolerant of southerner clan minorities. In 1997, the clans of Somaliland reached a peace accord that established proportional clan representation in government. In 2001, a referendum approved independence and the introduction of multi-party politics, followed by local elections in 2002 and presidential elections in 2003 that international observers deemed free and fair. However a 2005 report prepared by a UK NGO, Oxford House, concluded that minorities in Somaliland faced 'serious discrimination'. Among other issues, they faced widespread exclusion from employment opportunities. Discrimination and economic exclusion lead many Gaboye, Midgan, Tumul and Yibro to keep their children out of school, preferring to teach them such traditional trades as shoe cobbling or blacksmithing. The people of the Gaboye caste complain of a lack of representation in the clan-based government, and discontent with the authorities led to protests in 2005. Two government officials come from minority communities, but the lone minority representative in Somaliland's lower house of parliament lost his seat in 2005. June 2010 saw the victory of opposition candidate Ahmed Mohamed 'Silanyo' in Somaliland's delayed Presidential election. The election was declared 'reasonably free and fair' by Human Rights Watch (HRW), with the exception of the death of one individual in the Sool region.

Another area which has declared autonomy is Puntland. This area in central Somalia is dominated by the Majerteen clan, and under Siad Barre's regime, the area had suffered harsh treatment because of the presence of the rebel SDF movement. In May-June 1979, over 2,000 people died of thirst and the clan lost 50,000 head of cattle and 100,000 goats. In 1998 under Majerteen leadership, the region declared autonomy. Its stated goal was the establishment of a federated Somalia rather than the independence sought by neighbouring Somaliland. As has been the case with Somaliland, Puntland's support from Ethiopia has further inflamed tensions with southerners.

### **Attempts to restore central governance**

Up to 2004, there had been 14 attempts to restore a central government to Somalia. The 2004 effort resulted in lengthy peace negotiations in neighbouring Kenya, which were held under the supervision of several Horn of Africa states. This finally resulted in a new agreement in August 2004 to create a new Transitional Federal Government (TFG). In October 2004, the Transitional Federation Assembly (TFA) elected Puntland's president, Abdullahi Yusuf, a Darood, to serve as president of the TFG. The following month the president named Ali Mohammed Gedi, a Hawiye - but one lacking clan backing - as prime minister. The new transitional assembly - also elected in Kenya - had 30-odd seats reserved for minorities. It was a small but largely symbolic step forward as from the outset there were doubts about the TFG's ability to take control of the country. The TFG inherited the clan-based power sharing system, the '4.5 formula' 2004. It allows half a seat to representatives from minority clans for every four seats held by members of majority clans. Although the number of minorities in Somalia remains difficult to count, it is likely to be much higher than the 4.5 formula suggests, and even within the given ratio, members of majority clans continue to disproportionately dominate.

Islamic courts with backing from Hawiye businessmen seeking a more secure environment began to subdue the warlords in the capital. Amid the uncertainty of everyday Somali life in the south, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) gained popular support and were able to establish order through Sharia law, although women and non-Muslims found themselves living under stricter conditions.

In June and July 2006, the ICU defeated a coalition of militia leaders, taking control of the capital and other parts of the south. Mogadishu and its surroundings were calmer and safer than at any time since 1991. The ICU accused the TFG of receiving direct Ethiopian military assistance, and called for holy war on Addis Ababa. This in turn fuelled Ethiopian concern about secessionist sentiment in its Somali Region. The United States also grew concerned about the ICU, accusing it of maintaining links to Al

Qaeda.

In November 2006 the Ethiopian government admitted to military engagement in Somalia, and with the backing of United States air support, routed the ICU from Mogadishu and southern Somalia in the following month. But Ethiopian forces, backed up by a small contingent of African Union peacekeepers from Uganda and later Burundi, struggled to impose their control in the face of a growing counter-attack by factions including remnants of the ICU operating under the name al-Shabaab ('youth'). Al-Shabaab started out as the youth wing of ICU and developed into a hardline military force that opposes any UN or AF led peace process, which the more moderate ICU would support in the framework of a power-sharing agreement between the Islamists and the government. There was a renewal of bitter clan fighting, as largely Hawiye fighters have clashed with Ethiopian forces and their Darood allies. Heavy-handed tactics by Ethiopian troops increased popular opposition to the invasion. U.S air strikes on alleged terrorist targets in 2007 and 2008 also killed civilians and may have contributed to greater support for al-Shabaab militants. In October 2007, the struggling government entered into a power-sharing deal with a more moderate Islamist faction and called for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces. Ethiopia, whose troops had been subject to fiercer counter-attacks than anticipated, agreed. As the last of its forces withdrew in January 2009, the government remained only in control of the town of Baidoa and some neighbourhoods of Mogadishu. For its part, al-Shabaab announced that it would now turn its full attention to targeting AU peacekeepers in its effort to establish an Islamic state.

In its 15th attempt to set up a government since 1991, the parliament elected a new moderate Islamist president from the Hawiye clan in early 2009. Sheikh Sharif Ahmed is reported to have headed the Sharia courts movement that brought some stability to Mogadishu and most of south Somalia in 2006, before Ethiopian military ousted them. Ahmed chose a Darood, Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke as prime minister in a power-sharing government intended to end civil conflict, resettle the displaced and facilitate international aid. Prime Minister Sharmarke resigned from the TFG in September 2010 and was replaced by Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed. In August 2010, the TFG drafted a new Constitution and launched a consultation process.

Fighting between al-Shabaab and TFG forces, the African Union Mission for Somalia (AMISOM) continued throughout 2009. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that in May 2009, more than 200 civilians were killed, at least 800 wounded and some 121,000 displaced by the first week of June 2009. It is reported that over the weekend of 5-7 June alone, some 30,000 people fled the city, and several thousand people experienced a second round of displacement. According to reports by Amnesty International, members of minority groups remain displaced for comparatively longer periods. Violence and continued military atrocities are not limited to the capital but spread to several major towns in South and Central Somalia. On 17 May 2009, al-Shabaab forces took control of Jowhar town (90km north of Mogadishu) and raided humanitarian supplies, assets and equipment. This act has serious country-wide humanitarian implications as Jowhar is the main hub for the provision of humanitarian services and supplies to the whole of South-Central Somalia.

Continuous fighting in Mogadishu marked 2010 as the worst year for Somali violence in over a decade. UN figures reported an average of more than 20 weapon related casualties per day over the year. Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam launched a new offensive against the TFG in May, which intensified during the months of Ramadan (August-September). Al-Shabaab also claimed responsibility for the 11 July bombing in Kampala, Uganda, which they said was a response to Uganda contributing troops to AMISON in Somalia. Al-Shabaab made significant territorial gains in 2011 gaining control of most of South-Central Somalia from the Kenyan border to regions bordering Puntland, whilst the TFG controlled only a few blocks of Mogadishu around the Presidential Villa. In 2010 al-Shabaab enforced a version of Shari'a law which is severely in breach of international legal standards. This includes a number of 'morality laws' such as the systematic closure of cinemas, and bans on khat, smoking and

music. Huge restrictions were also placed upon women, who are prohibited from leaving the house alone and forced to wear the abaya, a garment supplied by al-Shabaab which covers the whole body.

In 2011 the humanitarian situation in Mogadishu remains grave. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that around 2, 400 Somalis were forced to flee their homes in Mogadishu in January alone, and that 1.5 million Somalis are internally displaced, and a further 650 000 have fled to neighboring countries.

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## **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

Amid the resurgent conflict, and worries about the opening up of a new front on the so-called War on Terror in the Horn of Africa, the situation for all Somalia's people looks bleak. In MRG's 2010 'Peoples under Threat' ranking, Somalia topped the list of countries where minorities are most at risk. This is based, partly, on the fact that during outbreaks of fighting in Somalia, it is the minorities who suffer most. They fall outside the clan structure, and therefore outside the protections of the war-lords and militias. But they are also vulnerable to increased risk of rape, attack, abduction and having their property seized by criminals in an increased atmosphere of lawlessness. Equally, when some semblance of calm does return, they have little chance of gaining compensation for their losses, because again they fall outside the clan structure. The well known Somali maxims, 'No one will weep for you', and 'No one will avenge your death' have become a living reality for many Somali minorities.

An Amnesty International Report in 2005 stated that the majority of over 300,0000 internally displaced persons in several parts of Somalia are members of minority groups. It stated, 'They subsist in mainly unregulated settlements in abject conditions, with international relief assistance reportedly often diverted and stolen by members of local clans.' The same report also noted that the international agencies involved in relief distribution were poorly informed about the special risks faced by minorities during times of insecurity.

According to UNHCR figures, the number of internally displaced people hit 1.5 million in January 2011, a number steadily on the rise. The recent fighting in Mogadishu aggravated an already dire humanitarian crisis in the country. The UN rated Somalia as the most pressing humanitarian emergency in the world, worse than the crisis in Sudan's Darfur region. Assessment reports estimated the overall food security situation in many parts of the country stressing; at least 3.76 million people (around 50 per cent of the country's population) continue to require humanitarian assistance and livelihood support.

In a report on minorities in Somalia the UN OCHA had warned already in 2001 that the socio-economic problems of members of different minority groups (estimated to constitute one third of the total Somalia population; approximately 3 million people) existed prior to the armed conflicts that followed the overthrowing of the dictator Siyad Barre in 1991 and further deteriorated during the decades of war. The report states that as a result of social segregation, economic deprivation and political manipulation minority groups have been excluded from political participation and systematically denied their rights. Because of their distinct ethnic identity, some minorities, particular the Bantu and Bajuni have suffered systematic confiscation of their lands and properties. As pointed out by Amnesty International, members of minority groups suffer longer periods of displacement and in many cases lose their lands.

Armed conflicts and insecurity further endangers the delivery of humanitarian services to minority groups in post-displacement areas. In January 2010, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) announced the suspension of its work in Southern Somalia due to threats against its staff and unreasonable demands by al-Shabaab, and All Headline News reported that al-Shabaab blocked over 20 aid agencies from

working in South-Central Somalia. Aid is also reportedly blocked in IDP camps, where according to UN OCHA reports, armed majority clan members often divert supplies from international agencies, and offer armed protection in exchange for food. UN estimates indicate that about seventy per cent of the minorities who live in camps for refugees and displaced people have major difficulties in accessing adequate food, shelter and education. The situation for minority women in IDP camps is especially grave due to the heightened threat of rape and sexual violence. According to the UN independent expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia, victims of rape in IDP camps 'are generally of minority clan origin, bereft of clan protection and often forced to engage in risky coping mechanisms'. Victim testimonies reported in Minority Rights Group International's (MRG) 2010 report, 'No redress: Somalia's forgotten minorities' revealed that these cases often go unreported due to both the stigmatization of victims of sexual violence and the powerful positions often held by the perpetrators. One minority woman in a Puntland IDP camp told MRG; 'There is not a single woman here safe from rape ... cases occur twice a week'.

Religious minorities face constant threats of persecution in areas controlled by al-Shabaab. Bantu, Benadiri and Christian communities have all been attacked for practicing their religion and Bantu women have been forced to wear the hijab.

In a country where there is no national government that would be responsible for safeguarding and upholding the rights of minority groups, Somalia minorities remain in an extreme vulnerable position.

## Notes

1. MRG Report, [\*No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities\*](#), 2010
2. Amnesty International, (2005): Somalia: Urgent need for Effective Human Rights Protection, <http://www.amnesty.org/>