6. Conflict Resolution in Eastern Africa: A Focus on Somalia

Abdifatah Aden Abdi

Abstract

The article argues that Eastern Africa's strategic location makes regional instability globally consequential, and presents Somalia as the most emblematic case. It traces Somalia's conflict to colonial boundary-making, the politicization of clan identities under Siad Barre, and the state collapse of 1991, which entrenched fragmented authority. It shows how external involvement—AU missions (AMISOM/ATMIS), neighboring interventions by Kenya and Ethiopia, Gulf rivalries (UAE–Qatar), and Western counterterrorism and anti-piracy efforts—often mixes security aims with geopolitical and economic interests, sometimes worsening internal divisions. Resource competition is highlighted as a key driver: fisheries, suspected oil and gas reserves, port infrastructure, and the Somalia–Kenya maritime boundary dispute fuel both domestic contestation and interstate tension. The article analyzes regional calculations: Kenya's buffer-zone strategy in Jubaland and port competition; Ethiopia's concerns about its Somali Region and access to ports; and Djibouti's leverage as a military basing hub and Ethiopia's main maritime outlet. Al-Shabaab is portrayed as an adaptive insurgency sustained by governance failures, coercive local control, and illicit financing networks, making purely military solutions insufficient. The proposed pathways emphasize Somali-led, inclusive and accountable governance; transparent resource management and job-creating economic recovery; regional trust-building to replace zero-sum policies; constructive, coordinated external engagement; and community-centered counter-extremism. The conclusion stresses that sustainable peace requires reforms that reduce clan patronage, align neighbors toward cooperation, and rebuild state legitimacy.

Keywords: Somalia state collapse, Clan-based politics and governance, AMISOM, ATMIS, Resource competition, Al-Shabaab, counter-extremism

1. Introduction

Eastern Africa remains one of the world's most strategically significant yet persistently fragile regions. From the shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the interior highlands and semi-arid borderlands, this region has long been a crossroads of civilizations, trade routes, and competing empires. Its geographic location linking Sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East and serving as a vital maritime gateway for global commerce means that any instability here reverberates well beyond the continent.

The region's volatility is rooted in a complex interplay of historical rivalries, unresolved territorial disputes, resource-driven competition, and entrenched governance challenges. Layers of colonial legacies, overlapping ethnic identities that cut across national borders, and the enduring influence of external actors have combined to make conflict not only likely but, at times, seemingly intractable. Countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan each have their own internal dynamics, yet they are deeply interconnected through security alliances, economic interdependence, and shared environmental vulnerabilities such as drought and transboundary resource scarcity.

Within this broader context, Somalia stands out as a particularly complex and emblematic case of the region's challenges and its possibilities. Strategically located along the Horn of Africa, commanding over 3,000 kilometers of coastline that borders key shipping lanes connecting the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal, Somalia occupies a position of immense geopolitical value. However, decades of state collapse, civil conflict, weak governance, and fragmented authority have turned this potential asset into a source of persistent regional instability.

The conflict in Somalia is neither recent nor contained within its borders. The overthrow of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 unleashed decades of civil war and clan-based power struggles, which successive transitional governments and international interventions have struggled to resolve. The

ongoing presence of violent non-state actors, such as Al-Shabaab, piracy networks off Somalia's coast, and disputes over resource control have compounded the crisis.

Figure 1: AI-generated map based on the information at https://www.mapsofindia.com/

Significantly, the consequences of Somalia's fragility extend well beyond its territory. Neighboring countries Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti in particular remain directly affected by Somalia's instability. Refugee flows, cross-border militancy, maritime security threats, and contested borderlands all tie these states' security and economic calculations to developments inside Somalia. At the same time,

global powers and Gulf states maintain a keen interest in Somalia's political trajectory, drawn by the promise of untapped natural resources (such as offshore oil and gas reserves), lucrative fishing grounds, and the strategic imperative to secure vital sea lanes against threats like piracy and terrorism.

Resolving Somalia's conflict, therefore, is not just a national imperative but a regional and global one. It demands an honest reckoning with the root causes from historical grievances and clan-based divisions to the counterproductive role of competing foreign interests and a clear-eyed understanding of the regional dynamics that both sustain and are sustained by Somalia's instability.

This paper sets out to unpack these complexities. It examines the historical and socio-political drivers of Somalia's conflict, explores how regional powers' policies and actions have shaped and often complicated peace efforts, and outlines realistic pathways toward a durable and Somali-led resolution. By situating Somalia's challenges within the wider Eastern African security architecture, the analysis seeks to inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners who are committed to fostering a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Horn of Africa.

2. Somalia's Unresolved Conflicts: Drivers and Somali Perspectives

2-1 Historical Legacies and Clan Divisions

Somalia's contemporary instability cannot be fully understood without tracing the layers of its complex historical trajectory. The roots of today's conflict lie partly in the country's colonial past, which carved arbitrary boundaries that failed to reflect the deeply embedded clan identities and kinship networks that had long defined Somali social organization.

Prior to colonial partition, Somali society operated through a decentralized pastoralist system governed by customary law (*Xeer*) and clan elders. This indigenous governance structure allowed for negotiation, conflict resolution, and resource sharing among nomadic communities in an arid and unpredictable environment. However, the arrival of European colonial powers in the late 19th century most notably Britain in the north (British Somaliland) and Italy in the south (Italian Somaliland) disrupted

these indigenous systems by imposing rigid administrative boundaries and favoring certain clans over others through indirect rule and divide-and-rule tactics.

When Somalia gained independence in 1960, the unification of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland created a state whose artificial borders did not resolve underlying clan rivalries. Instead, the fragile post-independence democratic experiment gave way to the authoritarian regime of General Siad Barre, who seized power in a 1969 military coup. Barre initially sought to suppress clan identities in favor of scientific socialism and national unity. Yet, in practice, his regime relied heavily on favoring certain clans particularly his own Marehan sub-clan through preferential appointments, patronage networks, and resource allocation. This showed resentment among marginalized groups and laid the groundwork for widespread disillusionment and rebellion.

The regime's collapse in 1991 created a sudden and devastating power vacuum. With no strong state institutions to manage the transition, the country fractured along clan lines as warlords and militia leaders mobilized their kinship networks to compete for territory, resources, and power. Decades later, the same clan structures remain deeply influential in Somali politics, shaping how power is distributed at both the federal and local levels.

To this day, the clan system provides a vital social safety net for many Somalis, offering identity, protection, and support in the absence of robust state institutions. Yet it also continues to fuel competition and fragmentation. Disputes over leadership positions, control of ports and border towns, and allocation of international aid are often refracted through clan dynamics, making consensus-building and inclusive governance persistently challenging.

Many Somalis contend that external actors have historically and contemporarily exploited these clan divisions to advance their own interests. Foreign governments, multinational companies, and regional neighbors are often perceived as manipulating local leaders and factions to secure strategic footholds along Somalia's coastline, gain access to valuable offshore oil and gas reserves, or maintain leverage over shipping routes in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. For many Somalis, this external interference entrenches internal fragmentation, weakens the legitimacy of national institutions, and perpetuates a cycle of conflict and underdevelopment.

The persistence of these historical legacies means that any attempt at sustainable conflict resolution must grapple honestly with the clan question. Efforts to build peace and a cohesive Somali state must strike a delicate balance: acknowledging and respecting clan identities while building national institutions that are inclusive, equitable, and strong enough to transcend parochial interests in favor of a shared vision for the future.

2-2 Foreign Interventions and Competing Interests

Over the past three decades, Somalia has remained one of Africa's most persistently externally engaged conflict zones. These interventions have taken many forms military, diplomatic, humanitarian, and covert pursued by a range of actors whose stated humanitarian goals have often been intertwined with less openly acknowledged strategic interests.

The most visible and sustained foreign involvement has come through multilateral peacekeeping missions, initially under the United Nations and later under the African Union. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) established in 2007 and recently transitioned to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) has served as the principal stabilizing force, mandated to combat Al-Shabaab insurgents, protect key government institutions, and help train Somali security forces. While these missions have prevented the total collapse of Somalia's federal government and helped reclaim major urban centers such as Mogadishu from insurgent control, they have yet to deliver a durable, self-sustaining national security architecture.

Beyond formal peacekeeping, neighboring states especially Ethiopia and Kenya have conducted unilateral and joint military operations inside Somalia's borders. These operations are typically framed as counter-terrorism measures targeting Al-Shabaab and securing national security interests, especially in the wake of devastating cross-border attacks such as the Westgate Mall siege in Nairobi. However, within Somalia, these incursions are widely viewed as being driven by deeper strategic motives. Ethiopia has a long history of military involvement, including interventions to block the rise of any Somali administration perceived as unfriendly or capable of reigniting separatist ambitions among Ethiopia's own Somali population.

Kenya's presence in southern Somalia particularly in the Jubaland region has likewise raised questions about Nairobi's ultimate objectives. Many Somali analysts contend that Kenya's involvement aims to create buffer zones along its porous northern border, manage clan dynamics connected to the Northern Frontier District, and secure influence over lucrative cross-border trade and local resources. There are ongoing accusations that such interventions, rather than resolving clan conflicts, often deepen them by aligning with local factions to maintain external footholds.

Gulf states have added yet another layer of complexity to Somalia's fragile landscape. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar have poured considerable investment into Somalia's political and economic spheres, frequently backing opposing factions. The UAE's port deals in Berbera and Bosaso, its security cooperation with breakaway regions like Puntland and Somaliland, and its funding for local militias have fed widespread concerns that control of shipping lanes, fisheries, and untapped offshore oil reserves lies at the heart of its engagement. Meanwhile, Qatar's financial and diplomatic support for Somalia's federal government has turned parts of Somali politics into a proxy stage for wider Gulf rivalries.

Western powers including the United States and European Union members have focused primarily on counter-terrorism and maritime security. The U.S. maintains a robust counter-terrorism presence through drone strikes, special forces operations, and training Somali commando units, aimed at disrupting Al-Shabaab's leadership and preventing Somalia from becoming a safe haven for transnational jihadist networks. European naval missions, such as Operation Atalanta, have helped suppress piracy off the Somali coast, yet have done little to address the land-based drivers of piracy and insurgency.

For many Somalis, these overlapping interventions often appear less like coordinated peacebuilding efforts and more like a fragmented scramble for influence and economic gain. Critics argue that foreign involvement frequently reinforces the very fault lines it claims to mend by empowering factional elites, incentivizing corruption, and sustaining parallel structures that erode genuine Somali ownership of security and governance.

Unless these contradictions are addressed, external interventions risk perpetuating the cycle of conflict rather than resolving it. Many Somali stakeholders argue that lasting peace will require a fundamental recalibration of foreign engagement shifting from narrowly military operations and transactional partnerships to consistent, principled support for Somali-led reconciliation, institution-building, and equitable economic development.

2-3 Resource Competition and Economic Stakes

At the heart of Somalia's protracted instability lies an intense contest over its vast and largely untapped natural resources. Stretching over 3,000 kilometers, Somalia's coastline along the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden is among the longest in Africa, positioning the country at a crossroads of vital global shipping lanes that link the Suez Canal, the Arabian Peninsula, and the wider Indian Ocean trade network. This unique geography alone makes Somalia a site of enduring maritime, economic, and geopolitical interest for both regional players and global powers.

Somalia's coastal waters contain some of the richest fishing grounds in the world, teeming with high-value marine species such as tuna, lobster, and shrimp. Yet decades of state collapse and weak maritime governance have left these resources vulnerable to rampant illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing by foreign vessels particularly from Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Europe. The unchecked plunder of Somali waters has cost local coastal communities vital livelihoods and deprived the national economy of significant revenue. The absence of strong maritime oversight has also contributed to the surge in piracy that, at its peak, threatened international shipping lanes and triggered costly naval patrols by multiple global actors.

Beyond its fisheries, Somalia is believed to possess significant untapped reserves of oil and gas both onshore and offshore. Exploration activities by international energy companies began before the civil war but were largely suspended due to persistent insecurity and governance breakdowns. In recent years, renewed interest in Somalia's hydrocarbon potential has drawn Gulf states, major Western oil firms, and emerging regional competitors back to the table, with offshore exploration blocks in the

south thought to contain commercially viable deposits. These high stakes have heightened both local and regional rivalries over who controls access and benefits.

A prominent example of how resource competition drives geopolitical tension is the maritime boundary dispute between Somalia and Kenya. At stake was a vast stretch of the Indian Ocean believed to hold lucrative oil and gas deposits. After years of diplomatic negotiations and legal arguments, the International Court of Justice ultimately redrew the maritime boundary, largely in Somalia's favor. For Somalis, this ruling was hailed as an important affirmation of national sovereignty and economic promise. For Kenya, however, it signaled potential economic losses and fueled further diplomatic friction demonstrating how resource competition can quickly spill over into broader security and political fault lines.

From a Somali perspective, the scramble for maritime wealth reinforces a persistent belief that neighboring countries including Kenya and Ethiopia benefit from a divided, unstable Somalia unable to enforce its maritime rights or fully develop its natural wealth. Many Somalis argue that a stable, well-governed Somali state capable of regulating its waters, developing its oil and gas reserves, and investing in the blue economy would significantly alter the regional balance of power. A revitalized Somali coastline could compete directly with major regional ports like Mombasa, reduce Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti for access to global trade, and position Somalia as an emerging economic force in the Horn of Africa.

These stakes also play out internally. Disputes over oil licensing, port management, and revenue sharing have fueled competition among federal member states, local clans, and political elites, often stalling attempts at national reconciliation. Semi-autonomous regions like Puntland and Somaliland have at times negotiated their own deals for port infrastructure and hydrocarbon exploration, at odds with the federal government in Mogadishu. Rival foreign backers have frequently stepped into this contested space, providing funding and political support that deepens local divisions.

Without a credible, transparent, and equitable framework for managing natural resources, Somalia's wealth risks remaining more a source of conflict than a catalyst for inclusive development. Many Somali policymakers, civil society actors, and international partners now argue that any viable

path toward sustainable peace must place fair, accountable resource governance at its core. Protecting coastal resources, securing fair revenue distribution, and ensuring that local communities genuinely benefit from fisheries and energy development are essential if the country's natural endowment is to support stability rather than perpetuate cycles of competition and conflict.

3. Regional Powers and Their Calculations

3-1 Kenya: Security Buffer or Economic Rival?

Kenya's engagement in Somalia must be understood through the dual lens of legitimate security imperatives and deeper geopolitical and economic calculations that have shaped its policy toward its northeastern neighbor for decades.

The persistent threat posed by Al-Shabaab Somalia's most entrenched insurgent movement has been Kenya's principal justification for maintaining a military presence inside Somalia since 2011, when Kenyan Defence Forces crossed into southern Somalia under Operation Linda Nchi ("Protect the Country"). This mission was later integrated into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), aligning Kenya's unilateral operations with wider regional and international counter-terrorism efforts.

Kenya's vulnerability to cross-border attacks has been underlined by devastating incidents like the Westgate Mall siege and the Garissa University College attack, which demonstrated how Somalia's instability poses a direct threat to Kenyan national security. The long, porous, and under-governed border region especially the semi-arid expanse of Kenya's North Eastern Province, historically known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD) has for decades provided insurgents with routes for movement and refuge, complicating Nairobi's border security strategy.

Beyond the fight against Al-Shabaab, Kenya's Somalia policy reflects deeper historical and political anxieties about irredentist sentiments within its own borders. The NFD is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Somalis whose secessionist aspirations date back to the early years of independence, most notably during the Shifta War of the 1960s, when local Somali nationalists sought to break away and join the Somali Republic. While that insurgency was suppressed, grievances over

marginalization, underdevelopment, and questions of identity still resonate among Somali-Kenyans today. These dynamics fuel Nairobi's enduring wariness of a strong, unified Somali state that might rekindle pan-Somali ambitions and inflame calls for greater autonomy or even secession in its north.

Kenya's military operations and political investments in southern Somalia are therefore driven by more than counter-terrorism alone. By backing the regional administration in Jubaland, which directly borders Kenya's North Eastern counties, Nairobi has sought to create a stable buffer zone that pushes militant threats further from its borders. Supporting a friendly leadership in Jubaland also helps Kenya secure influence over local political dynamics, manage clan rivalries near its frontier, and maintain a measure of control over lucrative cross-border trade routes.

This approach, however, has been the source of friction with Somalia's federal government. Somali authorities and civil society actors have frequently accused Kenya of deepening clan divisions and undermining Mogadishu's sovereignty by favoring certain factions and regional power brokers. Many argue that this interference has complicated efforts to build an inclusive Somali state and resolve tensions between the center and federal member states.

Kenya's calculus is not purely about security economic interests are equally significant. Mombasa, Kenya's principal port, has long been East Africa's maritime gateway, but new or revitalized Somali ports such as Kismayo, Bosaso, and Berbera are emerging as competitive alternatives for regional landlocked states like Ethiopia and South Sudan. A stable, resource-rich Somalia capable of enforcing its maritime boundaries and modernizing its port infrastructure could threaten Mombasa's dominance and shift trade flows that Nairobi currently benefits from.

The prolonged maritime boundary dispute between Kenya and Somalia has further exposed the economic dimension of this rivalry. The contested area in the Indian Ocean is believed to hold significant oil and gas deposits as well as valuable fisheries. Although the International Court of Justice ruled largely in Somalia's favor, Kenya's rejection of the decision underscores the high stakes involved and the potential for maritime resources to become flashpoints for wider diplomatic and security tensions.

Taken together, Kenya's role in Somalia illustrates the reality of overlapping security concerns and economic ambitions that define regional politics in the Horn of Africa. Many Somalis argue that lasting peace will require Kenya to move beyond short-term buffer zone strategies and transactional alliances. Instead, a more cooperative approach based on respect for Somalia's sovereignty, fair resource-sharing, and mutually beneficial cross-border security, trade, and development could transform Kenya and Somalia from uneasy neighbors into genuine partners for regional stability and shared prosperity.

3-2 Ethiopia: Strategic Depth and Internal Calculus

Ethiopia's relationship with Somalia is shaped by a long, complicated history of rivalry, occasional open conflict, and pragmatic co-existence. At the heart of Addis Ababa's policy toward Somalia lies a strategic imperative: securing its vast and often porous eastern frontier and managing the internal dynamics linked to its own large Somali population.

Ethiopia's Somali Regional State commonly referred to as Ogaden is home to millions of ethnic Somalis who share deep kinship, cultural ties, and historical connections with communities across the border in Somalia. For much of the 20th century, the Ogaden region has been a center of strong secessionist sentiment, symbolized most visibly by the long armed struggle of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which campaigned for self-determination for decades until a peace deal was signed in 2018. For successive Ethiopian leaders, the fear that a strong, nationalist Somali government could rekindle separatist ambitions in the Ogaden has profoundly shaped Ethiopia's posture toward Somalia's statehood and governance.

This internal security concern was a central driver behind Ethiopia's direct military involvement in Somalia's affairs. During the Cold War, Ethiopia and Somalia fought a full-scale interstate conflict known as the Ogaden War, when Somalia under Siad Barre attempted to annex the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region. The defeat left a legacy of suspicion and hardened the strategic rivalry that endures today.

In the decades that followed, Ethiopia has consistently acted to prevent the emergence of a strong, centralized Somali state that might embolden pan-Somali nationalism or inspire calls for greater autonomy within Ethiopia's own Somali region. This doctrine has translated into direct military interventions, intelligence operations, and active proxy engagement in Somalia's internal politics. For example, Ethiopia's military intervention in 2006 to oust the Islamic Courts Union from Mogadishu backed tacitly by other external powers reshaped Somalia's internal conflict landscape and inadvertently paved the way for Al-Shabaab's rise as the dominant insurgent force.

Ethiopia's strategic calculus also includes powerful economic drivers. Since Eritrea's independence in the early 1990s deprived Ethiopia of its Red Sea coastline, the country has relied almost exclusively on Djibouti for maritime trade. This dependency has long been seen in Addis Ababa as both costly and strategically constraining. Securing alternative routes to the sea has therefore become a central part of Ethiopia's regional economic strategy. Somalia's extensive coastline, dotted with underdeveloped ports like Berbera in Somaliland or Bosaso in Puntland, offers crucial potential alternatives. Recent agreements to co-develop ports and trade corridors underscore how access to Somali ports is seen as essential for Ethiopia's economic diversification and growth.

Many Somalis view Ethiopia's engagement through this dual lens: as a powerful neighbor intent on keeping Somali nationalism in check while also positioning itself to benefit economically from Somalia's ports and trade corridors. This perspective has fueled deep suspicion that Ethiopia's involvement whether through troop deployments, political mediation, or alliances with regional Somali leaders and clans is designed to keep Somalia fragmented and pliant, ensuring it poses no irredentist threat and remains open to Ethiopian economic interests.

Critics point to Ethiopia's historically shifting alliances with Somali warlords, federal states, and clan militias as evidence of a deliberate strategy to manage Somalia's internal divisions. While Ethiopia officially supports Somalia's federal government and contributes troops under the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), many Somali policymakers and civil society actors argue that genuine stability will require Ethiopia to move beyond a security-first approach. Building a durable, mutually beneficial relationship will depend on Addis Ababa demonstrating respect for Somalia's

sovereignty, supporting Somali-led nation-building, and investing in cross-border cooperation that addresses security, trade, and development as shared regional interests rather than zero-sum calculations.

3-3 Djibouti: A Small State with Outsized Leverage

Despite being one of Africa's smallest states by both land area and population, Djibouti has positioned itself as a pivotal player in the Horn of Africa's shifting geopolitical landscape. Its strategic location at the southern gateway of the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—one of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints has enabled Djibouti to turn its geography into economic and diplomatic capital.

Central to Djibouti's success is its carefully cultivated role as a stable and neutral host for competing foreign military powers. Today, the country is home to an array of major international military installations, including the United States' only permanent base in Africa, France's largest overseas base, China's first overseas naval base, as well as facilities used by Japan, Italy, and the European Union for anti-piracy and counterterrorism operations. By providing secure basing rights to rivals who might otherwise compete for influence, Djibouti has turned its land and ports into a strategic commodity, generating significant revenue and ensuring consistent diplomatic relevance.

Djibouti's appeal as a logistics hub extends beyond its military utility. The country is the primary maritime outlet for landlocked Ethiopia, handling the vast majority of Ethiopia's international trade through its modern port facilities and free trade zones. This economic interdependence gives Djibouti leverage over Ethiopia's trade flows while binding its own fortunes to Ethiopia's continued reliance on its ports.

However, this dependency also makes Djibouti highly sensitive to any regional developments that might offer Ethiopia alternative routes to the sea. Many Somali observers argue that Djibouti's economic interests are indirectly served by Somalia's enduring weakness and underdeveloped maritime governance. If Somalia were to regain political stability and develop its extensive coastline with modern, competitive ports in places like Berbera, Bosaso, or Kismayo it could present a serious alternative to Djibouti's near-monopoly over Ethiopian trade. Recent investments by Ethiopia in the

Berbera port corridor, in partnership with international operators, have already highlighted the real potential for such a shift.

At the same time, Djibouti has actively shaped its image as a regional diplomatic broker and a platform for Somali peacebuilding. It has hosted multiple rounds of negotiations and reconciliation conferences since the 1990s, including the landmark Arta Peace Conference in 2000, which produced Somalia's first transitional government since state collapse. While many credit Djibouti's mediation efforts with providing essential diplomatic space for Somali dialogue, some Somali analysts argue that Djibouti's peacemaking role has also served its own interests by maintaining a balance that avoids the emergence of a fully consolidated Somalia that might threaten Djibouti's economic primacy as the region's dominant port and logistics hub.

Djibouti's deep security partnerships with Western powers further entrench its status as a linchpin of foreign engagement in the Horn. These partnerships bring tangible economic benefits in the form of rental fees, infrastructure investments, and foreign aid, but they also make Djibouti an anchor for a regional security architecture that many Somalis feel focuses more on containing conflict than addressing its structural causes.

Ultimately, Djibouti's unique influence rests on its ability to maintain stability, neutrality, and diplomatic agility in a region marked by recurring turmoil. Yet its strategic position is not guaranteed forever. A stable, prosperous Somalia with functional ports could transform regional trade routes and weaken Djibouti's near-monopoly over Ethiopia's maritime access. For Djibouti, the future remains closely linked to whether Somalia can translate its coastline and resources into real economic power and whether Ethiopia will continue to rely so heavily on its neighbor's ports or diversify its options in pursuit of greater strategic flexibility.

4. Gulf Rivalries: The UAE and Economic Competition

The growing involvement of Gulf powers in Somalia's political and economic landscape has added yet another layer of complexity to an already fragmented conflict environment, effectively transforming

parts of Somalia into a proxy arena for wider Middle Eastern rivalries. The influence of Gulf states is visible in both high-profile infrastructure projects and discreet political maneuvering, often playing out along Somalia's fault lines of regional autonomy, clan loyalty, and federal authority.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as one of the most assertive Gulf actors in Somalia. Through a blend of strategic investments, port management contracts, and direct security cooperation, the UAE has strengthened its foothold in Somalia's northern regions—particularly Somaliland and Puntland. Via its global ports operator, DP World, the UAE has secured long-term concessions to develop and operate the deep-water port of Berbera in Somaliland and the commercial port of Bosaso in Puntland. These investments are frequently presented as engines for regional trade growth and local development, but many Somali and regional analysts see them as tools of political leverage that deepen divisions between the semi-autonomous northern regions and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) based in Mogadishu.

In Somaliland, which claims independence but remains unrecognized by the international community, the Berbera port deal is viewed by local leaders as an essential lifeline for economic viability and as a potential pathway toward de facto international legitimacy. In Puntland, similar port arrangements provide critical revenue streams and security partnerships that bolster the regional administration's autonomy. Both regions have used these deals to bypass Mogadishu, creating tension within Somalia's delicate federal arrangement.

The UAE's support for these regions has not stopped at commercial deals. Security training, capacity-building programs, and equipment transfers have all been part of Abu Dhabi's toolkit strengthening local security forces and parallel chains of command that often operate with limited oversight from the federal government. This dynamic has deepened mistrust between Mogadishu and regional administrations, with federal leaders viewing the UAE's activities as undermining national sovereignty.

On the other side of this Gulf divide, Qatar has positioned itself as one of the Federal Government's closest external partners. Doha's financial assistance, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic support have been instrumental in helping Mogadishu project its authority and maintain

essential services, especially during political crises. Somalia's decision to maintain warm ties with Qatar during the broader Gulf Cooperation Council rift when other Gulf states broke relations with Doha widened the split between Mogadishu and Abu Dhabi, sparking diplomatic disputes, military training withdrawals, and a suspension of Emirati budgetary support.

To many Somali analysts, the rivalry between the UAE and Qatar has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, Gulf engagement provides vital investments in ports, roads, airports, and basic services that Somalia's cash-strapped state institutions often cannot deliver alone. On the other hand, these funds frequently flow through informal channels or directly to regional administrations, bypassing national systems and reinforcing inter-regional rivalries. The result is a fragile power-sharing arrangement in which external money and influence can sway local elites and fuel competition between the federal government and federal member states.

This dynamic plays out vividly during national elections and leadership contests, where Gulf patronage has often been suspected of shaping political outcomes through covert financing of politicians, clan elders, or security actors. Such external interference has further complicated Somalia's struggle to build cohesive, transparent institutions capable of managing the country's abundant resources for the benefit of all regions.

For Somalia to move beyond this cycle of fragmented authority and externally driven factionalism, many experts argue that building robust, accountable institutions is just as critical as reconciling internal clan differences. Only through strong governance and a unified approach to foreign partnerships can Somalia transform its natural advantages such as its strategic ports and maritime wealth into engines of shared prosperity rather than enduring sources of division and outside manipulation.

5. Unresolved Border Issues and Historical Grievances

5-1 Ethiopia's Somali Region and the ONLF Legacy

The question of Ethiopia's Somali Region historically known by its colonial name, Ogaden remains one of the Horn of Africa's most enduring and sensitive territorial and identity fault lines. Spanning a vast stretch of Ethiopia's eastern and southeastern frontier, this arid region is home to millions of ethnic Somalis whose kinship, clan ties, and shared cultural identity transcend national borders, linking communities across Somalia and northern Kenya.

Since its incorporation into Ethiopia during the imperial expansions of the late 19th century, the Somali Region's people have maintained a strong sense of distinct identity. Over the decades, calls for greater autonomy or outright self-determination have repeatedly resurfaced, at times erupting into open conflict. Nowhere was this more visible than in the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) movement, which waged a decades-long armed insurgency seeking independence for the region. The ONLF struggle became one of Africa's longest-running separatist conflicts until a landmark peace agreement was reached in 2018 a major breakthrough, yet one that did not fully resolve the region's deep-seated grievances.

The Ethiopian state's response to the ONLF rebellion involved prolonged military campaigns, heavy-handed counter-insurgency operations, and widespread human rights abuses, leaving behind societal scars that continue to shape local perceptions of Addis Ababa's rule. While the peace accord brought an end to open hostilities, core drivers of unrest such as political marginalization, economic underdevelopment, competition over natural resources, and perceived cultural suppression remain significant sources of tension.

For many Somalis, both within the Somali Region and in neighboring Somalia proper, the struggle in Ogaden has always symbolized a larger, unfinished project: the dream of a Greater Somalia that unites all Somali-inhabited territories under one flag. This irredentist vision inspired Somalia's bold but ill-fated invasion of Ethiopia during the Ogaden War in the late 1970s, when Somalia's then-government sought to "liberate" the region but was ultimately repelled.

Today, the legacy of that conflict continues to shape Ethiopia's strategic outlook. Addis Ababa remains deeply cautious about any prospect that a stable, cohesive Somali federal state capable of projecting power and nationalist sentiment could reignite separatist ambitions in its eastern Somali

Region. This enduring fear has profoundly influenced Ethiopia's security posture and foreign policy toward Somalia for decades.

To guard against this perceived threat, Ethiopia has often adopted a strategy of both direct and indirect engagement in Somali politics. By cultivating relationships with pliant governments in Mogadishu, forging ties with federal member states, and maintaining the capacity for cross-border security operations, Ethiopia seeks to ensure that Somalia remains fragmented or internally preoccupied enough to pose no significant irredentist risk.

In this context, the unresolved status of the Somali Region remains an undercurrent in the wider Horn of Africa security puzzle a reminder that until issues of historical grievance, identity, and autonomy are addressed in ways that satisfy local communities and reassure neighboring states, the fault line between Ethiopia and Somalia will continue to cast a long shadow over regional peace and integration.

5-2 Kenya's Northeastern Province (NFD) and Irredentist Sentiments

Kenya's northeastern borderlands present a parallel case of enduring historical grievances rooted in colonial-era boundary-making and the unresolved question of Somali identity in the Horn of Africa. The area historically known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD) today called Kenya's Northeastern Province was delineated by British colonial authorities as part of British East Africa but was deeply connected, in culture and livelihood, to the wider Somali pastoralist heartland that stretches across present-day Somalia, Ethiopia's Somali Region, and Djibouti.

When Kenya gained independence in 1963, the ethnic Somalis inhabiting the NFD overwhelmingly rejected incorporation into the new Kenyan state, instead seeking union with the newly independent Somali Republic in line with the wider pan-Somali vision of uniting all Somali-speaking peoples under one flag. This aspiration was swiftly denied by the Kenyan government, triggering the Shifta War a bitter and protracted insurgency in which Somali secessionists fought to break away and join Somalia. The Kenyan state responded with harsh counterinsurgency campaigns that left a legacy of mistrust and alienation that persists to this day.

Though the Shifta War formally ended decades ago, its impacts linger across the counties of Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera, which remain some of Kenya's most economically marginalized and securitized regions. These border counties have frequently been subject to heavy-handed counter-terrorism operations, justified by the threat posed by Al-Shabaab's cross-border infiltration, arms smuggling, and radicalization networks. For many local communities, these security measures have often come at the cost of collective punishment, restrictions on movement, and stalled development.

From Nairobi's perspective, the fragile security situation in Somalia directly threatens Kenya's northern frontier. The persistent threat of Al-Shabaab attacks on Kenyan soil from urban centers like Nairobi to border towns has cemented the view that projecting military power into southern Somalia, especially into Jubaland, is a necessary strategy to safeguard national security. The creation of a buffer zone through military operations and political influence in Jubaland has therefore become a core component of Kenya's counter-terrorism and border management policy.

However, many Somali observers argue that Kenya's deep involvement in Jubaland's internal affairs is driven by more than just security concerns. By cultivating close ties with regional leaders like Ahmed Madobe and supporting certain clans, Kenya aims to shape the political dynamics of southern Somalia in ways that prevent the emergence of a strong, centralized Somali state that could one day revive irredentist claims to the "lost territory" of the NFD. This approach mirrors, in many ways, Ethiopia's own calculations regarding its Somali Region: both countries view Somali nationalism as a threat that must be contained through carefully managed political fragmentation and security interventions.

Ultimately, Kenya's North Eastern Province remains an enduring historical fault line a reminder that the unresolved legacy of colonial borders and the dream of a Greater Somalia continue to shape regional geopolitics. For lasting stability and trust to take root between Kenya and Somalia, this sensitive legacy must be addressed alongside more immediate security and governance challenges on both sides of the border.

6. Al-Shabaab: An Entrenched and Evolving Threat

Al-Shabaab remains the single most potent non-state armed actor operating within Somalia's fragile security landscape. Originally emerging as the radical youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union in the mid-2000s, the group has evolved into a highly adaptive insurgency that controls significant rural territory, maintains urban sleeper cells, and stages attacks not only in Somalia but also in neighboring Kenya and, at times, Ethiopia.

At its core, Al-Shabaab thrives by exploiting the very same fault lines that have long plagued Somalia: unresolved clan rivalries, chronic state fragility, and public disillusionment with corrupt or exclusionary governance. Many communities in neglected rural areas see the group as a source of rough security and dispute resolution however coercive where the federal or regional government presence is weak or predatory. Al-Shabaab's deeply embedded local intelligence networks allow it to enforce parallel justice and taxation systems that often prove more predictable, if brutal, than official structures.

Beyond its local roots, Al-Shabaab's survival is tied to complex regional and international linkages. Reports and investigations have pointed to multiple channels of support that sustain its operations, despite sustained counterterrorism campaigns by Somali forces, African Union missions, and Western partners. Some evidence suggests that Eritrean actors have, at times, provided covert assistance to Al-Shabaab as part of broader regional power plays designed to weaken Ethiopia's influence or undermine peace processes. Likewise, ideological sympathizers in the Gulf have allegedly funneled financial support to the group through informal networks, often disguised as charitable donations.

However, perhaps the most insidious dimension of Al-Shabaab's resilience is the internal complicity that allows it to operate in the shadows of Somalia's own fractured state institutions. Local officials, clan elders, and business interests sometimes collaborate with the group's parallel taxation system either out of fear, pragmatic self-preservation, or profit. In some regions, businesses pay taxes to both the official local government and Al-Shabaab, hedging their bets to avoid retaliation and keep their livelihoods intact.

Military campaigns against Al-Shabaab have achieved some tactical gains over the years, reclaiming major towns and key roads. Yet the group consistently adapts its tactics, melts back into the rural hinterlands, and launches asymmetric attacks on urban centers and security outposts. Suicide bombings, assassinations, and complex raids on hotels and government buildings remain part of its playbook, ensuring that no part of the country is entirely safe from its reach.

Crucially, many experts argue that purely military approaches cannot defeat Al-Shabaab without addressing the conditions that allow it to recruit and govern. Young people, especially in marginalized rural communities, often join the movement less out of ideological conviction than economic desperation or clan loyalty. In the absence of alternative livelihoods, education, or fair representation in local power structures, the group's promise of income and belonging remains dangerously persuasive.

For Somalia's counterterrorism strategy to succeed in the long term, it must be part of a broader effort to rebuild trust in the state, expand inclusive governance, and offer meaningful economic opportunities. Efforts to strengthen local reconciliation, resolve clan land disputes, and tackle corruption in regional administrations are equally critical. Without such structural solutions, military operations alone risk becoming a revolving door temporarily disrupting Al-Shabaab's control in one district while it re-establishes itself elsewhere.

7. Pathways Towards Sustainable Peace

Resolving Somalia's protracted conflict and stabilizing Eastern Africa more broadly requires far more than military operations or piecemeal aid. It demands a comprehensive strategy that tackles the intertwined drivers of instability at the local, national, and regional levels, while rethinking how external actors engage with Somalia's future.

Drawing on the lessons of repeated failures and partial successes over the past three decades, the following pathways outline the core building blocks for a more durable and Somali-led peace:

7-1 Inclusive and Accountable Governance:

At the heart of Somalia's challenges lies a governance system historically dominated by patronage, clan rivalries, and elite power bargains. A sustainable resolution must prioritize the construction of robust, transparent institutions that move beyond clan-based transactional politics. Power-sharing frameworks should be reformed to give all communities a stake in national decision-making whether in Mogadishu or in the federal member states. Local administrations must be empowered to deliver basic services, resolve disputes, and rebuild trust in government. Genuine decentralization, anchored in a strong but flexible federal framework, can help balance local autonomy with national unity.

7-2 Economic Recovery and Shared Prosperity:

Somalia's vast maritime resources, untapped hydrocarbon reserves, and rich fisheries present enormous opportunities to transform its fragile economy if harnessed transparently and equitably. A revitalized economic strategy should focus on diversifying livelihoods beyond subsistence herding and remittances, creating jobs that undercut Al-Shabaab's recruitment narrative. Investments in fisheries, renewable energy, sustainable oil and gas development, transport corridors, and regional trade can strengthen state revenues and reduce local dependence on illicit or predatory actors. The development of modern ports from Berbera to Bosaso to Kismayo must benefit all Somalis rather than fuel regional rivalries or external proxy competition.

7-3 Regional Trust-Building and Non-Zero-Sum Engagement:

Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti have long viewed Somalia's weakness as a manageable risk and, at times, an opportunity to advance their own security, economic, and territorial interests. For peace to hold, this mindset must shift. Regional forums and bilateral confidence-building measures can help neighboring states see a stable, economically vibrant Somalia not as a rival or irredentist threat, but as a vital partner in regional growth, cross-border trade, and security cooperation. Resolving sensitive issues such as maritime borders, the status of the Somali Region in Ethiopia, and the marginalization of Somali-

Kenyans in the North Eastern Province requires honest dialogue and respect for international legal mechanisms.

7-4 Constructive External Engagement:

External actors from Gulf powers to Western donors must recalibrate their role in Somalia's recovery. Too often, foreign aid, military interventions, and private investments have been shaped by short-term strategic rivalries rather than long-term stability. Instead of deepening local divisions or pursuing narrow interests in Somali ports, fisheries, or energy, partners should commit to Somali-led solutions. This means aligning assistance behind national and local priorities, supporting political dialogue rather than choosing sides, and conditioning aid on meaningful reforms in governance, anti-corruption, and human rights. International military support must be accompanied by civilian institution-building, not stand in for it.

7-5 Comprehensive and Community-Centered Counter-Extremism:

Al-Shabaab's resilience shows that no purely military solution can root out violent extremism. Lasting security demands a dual approach: continued tactical operations to disrupt insurgent command and logistics, paired with robust political and community strategies that address the grievances and conditions that sustain recruitment. Local reconciliation efforts bridging clan divides, settling land disputes, and reintegrating former fighters are critical. Rehabilitation programs for defectors, community policing initiatives, and locally led development projects can help undercut the insurgency's parallel governance model and rebuild trust where the state has long been absent.

8. Conclusion

Somalia's enduring conflict is far more than a civil war contained within its borders it is the outcome of layered historical grievances, deeply rooted clan dynamics, unresolved territorial disputes, and an ever-shifting web of regional rivalries and global power plays. From the legacies of colonial boundary-making

and the collapse of centralized rule in 1991, to the persistent interventions by neighbors and competing Gulf powers, Somalia's instability has long been both a domestic struggle and a reflection of wider strategic interests in Eastern Africa and the wider Horn.

The persistence of unresolved issues such as Ethiopia's fear of revived separatist aspirations in its Somali Region, Kenya's deep insecurity over its North Eastern Province, and Djibouti's vested interest in remaining the region's dominant trade and military hub demonstrates that the Somali question is inseparable from its regional environment. Likewise, external players, from Gulf states like the UAE and Qatar to distant global powers, have turned Somalia into a theater for proxy competition over maritime routes, untapped hydrocarbons, and ideological influence.

Against this backdrop, extremist actors like Al-Shabaab continue to exploit local grievances, governance failures, and perceptions of foreign manipulation to entrench their presence, further complicating any efforts toward stabilization. While military campaigns have weakened their territorial grip in some areas, the root causes that allow radicalization to flourish poverty, marginalization, corruption, and weak local governance remain unaddressed.

Yet, despite these formidable challenges, Somalia holds immense promise. Its long coastline, rich natural resources, resilient communities, and strategic location at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East position it to be not a perpetual battleground, but a regional anchor of trade, connectivity, and growth if peace and good governance can take root.

Unlocking this potential demands an uncompromising commitment to Somali-led solutions. Rebuilding trust among communities fractured by decades of conflict must start with strengthening inclusive governance structures that move beyond narrow clan-based patronage and power hoarding. National reconciliation must extend into genuine local power-sharing, equitable resource management, and credible efforts to integrate all communities especially historically marginalized groups.

Equally important is a coordinated regional shift. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti must abandon zero-sum calculations that view a strong Somalia as a threat to their territorial or economic interests. Instead, they must embrace the logic that a stable, prosperous Somalia contributes to regional security, unlocks cross-border trade, and reduces the costs of perpetual military interventions and refugee flows.

Transparent dialogue, trust-building, and confidence measures among Horn of Africa states must complement domestic reconciliation efforts.

International actors from multilateral agencies to Gulf partners and Western allies must also reassess their approaches. External support should reinforce Somali institutions rather than circumvent or weaken them. Foreign aid, security assistance, and investments must prioritize long-term institution-building, local ownership, and sustainable livelihoods, not just short-term security fixes or extractive deals.

Finally, defeating Al-Shabaab and other violent groups requires more than counterterrorism strikes; it demands sustained investment in rural development, job creation, community policing, and robust programs to reintegrate former fighters and prevent new recruitment.

Somalia's future cannot be dictated by outside interests or regional rivalries alone. Its transformation must be anchored in Somali agency, backed by neighbors and partners willing to shift from managing instability to genuinely supporting a peaceful, united, and resilient Somali state. Only then can Somalia truly harness its vast economic and geopolitical potential, becoming not a source of insecurity, but a cornerstone of peace and prosperity for Eastern Africa and beyond.

References

Anderson, D. M., & McKnight, J. (2014). Kenya at War: Al-Shabaab and its Enemies in Eastern Africa. African Affairs, 114(454), 1–27.

Baché, J. (2016). Djibouti: Strategic Hub at a Crossroads. African Security Review, 25(1), 1–10.

Bahadur, J. (2011). The Pirates of Somalia: Inside Their Hidden World. Vintage Books.

Barnes, C., & Hassan, H. (2007). The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts. Journal of Eastern African Studies, 1(2), 151–160.

Bradbury, M. (2010). Becoming Somaliland. Indiana University Press.

Branch, D. (2011). Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963–2011. Yale University Press.

Byman, D. (2021). Counterterrorism Strategies for Fragile States: Lessons from Somalia. Brookings Institution.

Clapham, C. (2017). The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay. Hurst Publishers.

Cliffe, L. (2020). Djibouti and the Changing Geopolitics of the Red Sea. Review of African Political Economy, 47(164), 1–17.

Hagmann, T., & Khalif, M. (2008). State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991. Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies, 6(1), 1–26.

Hagmann, T. (2019). The Politics of Ethiopia's Somali Region in Transition. African Affairs, 118(472), 194–206.

Hansen, S. J. (2009). Piracy in the Greater Gulf of Aden: Myths, Misconceptions and Remedies. NUPI Report.

Harper, M. (2012). Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State. Zed Books.

Harper, M. (2019). Everything You Have Told Me Is True: The Many Faces of Al-Shabaab. Hurst Publishers.

Hersi, A. (2021). Oil, Ports, and Federalism: The Emerging Political Economy of Somalia's Blue Economy. Horn of Africa Bulletin.

ICJ (2021). Maritime Delimitation in the Indian Ocean (Somalia v. Kenya), International Court of Justice.

International Crisis Group. (2018). Somalia and the Gulf Crisis. Africa Report No. 260.

International Crisis Group. (2019). Somalia and the Gulf Crisis. Crisis Group Africa Report.

Laitin, D. D., & Samatar, S. S. (1987). Somalia: Nation in Search of a State. Westview Press.

Lefebvre, J. A. (2020). The UAE, Qatar and the Horn: An Emerging Gulf–Horn Security Complex? Middle East Policy, 27(2), 108–125.

Lind, J., Mutahi, P., & Oosterom, M. (2022). Governing Kenya's Margins: Security, Identity and Conflict in the North East. Routledge.

Menkhaus, K. (2007). Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping. International Security, 31(3), 74–106.

Menkhaus, K. (2014). State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a "Functional Failed State" in Somalia. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 656(1), 154–172.

Musa, A. (2020). Gulf Rivalries and Somalia's Future: Between Competition and Compromise. Horn Bulletin.

Rift Valley Institute. (2016). Jubaland in Jeopardy: The Uneasy Path to State-Building in Somalia. Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper.

Samatar, A. I. (2016). Africa's First Democrats: Somalia's Aden A. Osman and Abdirazak H. Hussen. Indiana University Press.

Samatar, A. I., Lindberg, B., & Mahayni, B. (2010). The Dialectics of Piracy in Somalia: The Rich Versus the Poor. Third World Quarterly, 31(8), 1377–1394.

Shinn, D. H. (2011). Djibouti: The Strategic Pivot in the Horn of Africa. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Tubiana, J. (2019). The Ogaden: Pastoral Conflict and the Politics of Oil and Gas. Small Arms Survey Report.

Turton, E. R. (1974). The Shifta War in Kenya. The Journal of African History, 14(1), 91–118.

Ulrichsen, K. C. (2017). The Gulf States in International Political Economy. Palgrave Macmillan.

Whittaker, H. (2014). Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya: A Social History of the Shifta Conflict, c.1963–1968. Brill.

Williams, P. D. (2013). Fighting for Peace in Somalia. Current History, 112(754), 183–189.

Williams, P. D. (2018). Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017. Oxford University Press.

Yihun, B. E. (2021). Federalism and Minority Rights in Ethiopia: The Somali Regional State in Comparative Perspective. African Studies Review, 64(3), 543–566.

Yusuf, A. O. (2021). The ICJ Judgment on Somalia–Kenya Maritime Dispute: Implications for Regional Geopolitics. Horn of Africa Bulletin.