



SOMALIA IN THE TRANSFORMING HORN OF AFRICA – CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

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Abstract

In recent years, Somalia has experienced both continuity and change. The primary challenge to the country's stability remains al-Shabaab. Despite the efforts of the Ma'awisley militias and the Somali army during their offensive in 2022-2023, the jihadist group continues to maintain a presence even near Mogadishu. Additionally, the swift rise of the Islamic State in Somalia has raised concerns among external actors. While Mogadishu continues to grapple with the al-Shabaab insurgency and ongoing conflicts between federal member states and the central government, Hargeisa is moving closer than ever to gaining international recognition. These developments are closely linked to the increasing involvement of foreign actors in Somali and regional politics, which not only leads to economic investment and humanitarian assistance but also creates competition and tension. In this context, Somalia appears to be more of a loser than a winner in the new global era in the Horn of Africa, while Somaliland seeks to maximize its advantages with the ultimate aim of achieving international recognition – so far, with limited success.

Keywords

Somalia, Somaliland, al-Shabaab, ISIS, foreign interference

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1. Introduction

Somalia is a profound example of how the new global era shapes dynamics in the Horn of Africa while leaving other features untouched. On the one hand, it seems that little has changed in the last decade. The country, which fell apart in 1991, is still facing schism (Somaliland), terrorism and insurgency (al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia – ISS), organized crime (piracy, arms- and human-smuggling) and poisonous – and sometimes violent – clan struggles. On the other hand, Somaliland's push for secession gained new momentum in the context of the modern Cold War era. Meanwhile, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) has implemented some elements of modern governance and development. Additionally, significant changes have occurred in maritime security along the Gulf of Aden, the rapid emergence of Islamic State Somalia as a new financial hub for global ISIS networks, and the initiation of new offensive operations against al-Shabaab. These developments are closely linked to the involvement of new external actors and the responses of established ones, which have played a crucial role in reshaping the landscape of the Horn of Africa in the 2020s. This paper will focus on the internal and external factors that have contributed to continuity and change in Somalia since 2020.

The primary research questions are:

1. What have been the main characteristics of Somalian politics and security since 2020?
2. How have external actors contributed to the transformation of Somali security and politics in recent years?

To answer these questions, the paper will follow an analytical and comparative approach, analyzing the main pillars of security and politics in Somalia, including Somali (clan) politics, the role of Jihadi movements and the fight against them, maritime security, foreign interference, and last but not least, the case of Somaliland.

The methodology of the paper includes both desktop research and more than 100 semi-structured Chatham House Rule interviews conducted in Addis Ababa, Budapest, Hargeisa, Mogadishu, Nairobi, and Washington, D.C., between 2012 and 2025. This timeframe is essential for exploring the differences between pre-2020 and post-2020 conditions and for explaining the necessity of a comparative approach. Interviewees were recruited by snowball methodology and cold call approach by email. The author utilized random possibilities as well (e.g. conferences). The participants were experts, researchers, university people, military personals, politicians, (former) diplomats, and community leaders. Each discussion took at least 30 minutes, or more.

Since the paper covers a politically sensitive issue, the author would like to underline that he does not argue either for or against Somaliland's independence. This is an issue whose resolution must be hammered out between Somali politicians and people in Mogadishu and Hargeisa. The paper addresses Somaliland merely as an academic case of international relations.

2. Somali domestic politics – from the clans to the sects

In the last decade, Somali internal politics has been unable to break the vicious circle of corruption, clan politics, and the never-ending debate over competence between Mogadishu and the federal member states (FMSs) – which is also determined by clan affiliation. According to several experts (Williams, 2017: 203; Hiiraan, 2021; Bryden, 2025), the biggest challenge facing Somalia today is not al-Shabaab but rather the zero-sum political game played by certain political actors who show no willingness to compromise and disregard national interests and unity. This situation is not new; since gaining independence, Somali politics has been characterized by efforts to centralize for unity and the struggle for local autonomy and ownership. Unfortunately, both goals have often been undermined by selfish political agendas, clan rivalries, and personal interests (see Lewis 2002; Menkhaus 2004; Menkhaus 2005). Centralization has sometimes led to authoritarianism, as experienced under Siad Barre, while the push for local autonomy has resulted in increased clannism and the fragmentation of government structures.

The establishment of the 4.5 formula, which set official quotas for both larger and minority clans at the national level through the Arta Agreement in 2000, aimed to bring balance to the system. This formula sought to create political space for local political groups and mitigate clannism (Hiiraan 2025a). Meanwhile, the introduction of federalism during reconciliation talks in Eldoret (2002) and Mbagathi (2004) in Kenya, along with the subsequent creation of federal member states, led to a form of de facto clan-federalism in the Horn of Africa. This approach intended to enhance the influence of grassroots traditional political movements and mechanisms (Menkhaus 2004, 17-42).

Yet, instead of being the solution, it seems increasingly that federalism is part of the problem. In the last two decades, regional capitals and their clans utilized the federal system to challenge the authority of the central government in Mogadishu and act as quasi-independent states, while the Federal Government of Somalia was ready to deploy troops against its own political opponents in the countryside – instead of fighting al-Shabaab (see Marsai 2025).

Since 2020, both Somali presidents in office, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmajo’ and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, have made efforts to strengthen the power and influence of the FGS against the FMSs – by either fair or foul means. Farmajo was elected as a national hero in 2017 with huge celebrations not only in Mogadishu but also in the diaspora. Yet, after three years, he was blamed for authoritarian tendencies. Farmajo conducted a strong campaign against FMSs and opposition groups in the capital, primarily targeting the Mudulood clan, and sought to extend his mandate (International Crisis Group 2020; Hiiraan 2020). Farmajo obviously tried to emulate the efforts of his close ally, Abiy Ahmed, the prime minister of Ethiopia, to break down the resistance of the FMSs and build a unified Somalia, but this ultimately failed (Marsai 2025). In April 2021, clashes erupted between opposition groups and government troops in Mogadishu, leading to the displacement of thousands from the capital (Reuters 2021). Following May 2021, the Somali president found himself

politically isolated and largely ineffective, while his prime minister, Mohamed Hussein Roble, assumed a caretaker role and oversaw the upcoming elections.

It seemed that the 2022 election of Hassan Mohamud, who had held the position between 2012 and 2017 before Farmajo, brought new dynamics and cooperation into Somali politics. Mohamud gained broad support from political groups and was considered a more cooperative figure than his predecessor (Al Jazeera 2022). Furthermore, the Ogaden-dominated Jubaland and the Majerteen-dominated Puntland, as well as the Mudulood clan in the Benadir region, backed the new president. It soon became evident that Mohamud intended to continue the centralization efforts initiated by Farmajo. Meanwhile, the Federal Member States believed that after Farmajo's defeat, they would have the opportunity to pursue their own agendas and expand their competencies. However, less than two years after Mohamud's election, Puntland declared its rejection of the Federal Government of Somalia and ceased all cooperation with Mogadishu in March 2024, following disputed constitutional changes (Reuters 2024). Additionally, certain decisions made in Garowe, such as the implementation of a new e-visa system (Hiiraan 2025b), directly contradicted the constitution and undermined Somalia's unity.

The relationship with Jubaland was even worse. On 28 November 2024, the FGS issued an Interpol Red Notice request for the arrest of Jubaland President Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madobe' (Hiiraan 2024a). In December 2024, the FGS deployed troops to Ras Kambooni to remove Madobe, but the Somali National Army (SNA) suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Jubaland soldiers (Hiiraan 2024b). Since al-Shabaab had increased its military operations around Mogadishu in the previous months, the fact that the FGS launched an offensive against one of the FMSs instead of fighting against terrorists sparked harsh criticism of the priorities and intentions of the government. Despite pressure from the international community and efforts for reconciliation, such as President Hassan Mohamud's visit to Kismayo in October 2025 (Sonna 2025a), there have been no significant developments in this area. The opposition, which includes anyone not holding strong positions in Villa Somalia, continues to accuse the President of attempting to extend his mandate. Meanwhile, the Federal Government of Somalia questions why the Federal Member States reject any forms of cooperation with Mogadishu. They argue that the regional capitals are pursuing their own selfish agendas, which ultimately undermine Somali unity (Bryden 2025, 2-4). To complicate the situation further, there is strong antagonism between the diverging approaches to the next election: while the FGS insists on the one-person-one-vote model and has begun registration in Benadir (Sonna 2025), other FMSs have rejected the current electoral framework. For instance, Galmudug, South West, and Hirshabelle joined the process, but Jubaland and Puntland refused outright, claiming that the FGS had not consulted them and that such decisions required consensus. In the meantime, they refused to join negotiations with the FGS on possible solutions, so it seemed to be a dead end (Hiiraan 2024c; 2025c).

Besides mismanaged clannism, the last four presidents of Somalia were also responsible for the rising political and economic power of Islamist sects in Somalia.

Sharif Ahmed, who served between 2009 and 2012, belonged to the Ahlu Sheikh movement rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood. The group behind Hassan Mohamud, Damul Jadid, also originated from the Brotherhood (Interview A 2014). In the meantime, the administration of Farmajo was highly influenced by al-Itisam, a Salafi sect. The influence of Islamist political groups was well demonstrated by the provisional constitution and other legal changes in Somalia: by the 2020s, the country became an Islamist state ideologically. Islamism

strengthened the tension between Mogadishu and the FMSs since “all major Somali Islamist movements aspire for a centralised, unitary Somali state” (Bryden 2025, 8).

Given that Hassan Mohamud’s mandate expired in May 2026 and there is no meaningful roadmap or consensus-based legal framework for the upcoming elections, many fear an escalation of political struggles and violence in the Horn. And even if there were no significant armed clashes by September 2026, political competition, as happened in the past years, could easily distract from the most burning issue of the country – how to defeat radical Jihadism.

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3. The fight against al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia

The evolution of the struggle against jihadi groups in Somalia since 2020 can be divided into three key periods. Firstly, in mid-2022, a new offensive against al-Shabaab began. Somali National Army (SNA) troops, along with local Ma’awisley militias, achieved significant territorial gains, comparable only to those achieved during the AMISOM/SNA operations from 2010 to 2014. In mid-2023, the situation shifted into a new phase characterized by a decline in military successes and a counter-attack by al-Shabaab, which eventually led to the de facto siege of Mogadishu in early 2025. Lastly, we witnessed the rapid rise of the Islamic State Somalia (ISS) in the Ceel Miskaad mountains of Puntland, prompting another anti-jihadi offensive initiated by Garowe and its international allies.

The first phase, the new offensive against al-Shabaab, started with the uprising of local, mainly Hawadle-clan-based Ma’awisley militias in the Hiiraan region, which took up arms against the heavy taxation regime of the Jihadists and their attacks on local communities (Cruickshank 2022, 13-14). Hassan Mohamud, who was inaugurated in May 2022, took the opportunity to declare an all-out war against al-Shabaab and sent troops to help the local uprising. Unlike previous military operations, it was mainly an ad hoc decision by FGS, which sought to exploit the moment to defeat al-Shabaab. Another important difference was that the main drivers of the operation were not the African Union (AU) but Mogadishu and the Somali forces. The AU provided mainly logistical and intelligence support for the fighting, while other international partners, such as the US and Turkey, conducted airstrikes to assist the SNA.

By early 2023, the Somali army and the Ma'awisley militias had liberated over 200 towns and villages in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, killing hundreds of al-Shabaab combatants. According to FGS's estimations, they captured 600 square kilometers between August 2022 and August 2023, including villages which had been under al-Shabaab control for decades (UN 2023). Nevertheless, the SNA could not consolidate its gains. Despite its efforts, the Somali army could not gain a permanent foothold in the liberated areas. Hassan Mohamud struggled to persuade other Hawiye clans to join the offensive, and the Abgal chose to stay out of the fighting. Meanwhile, the Jajele, Gaaljeel, Murosade, and Duduble clans were split between supporting the Jihadists and the Federal Government of Somalia. Al-Shabaab exploited pre-existing grievances among these clans, as well as with the Hawadle, to fuel tensions and distance them from Mogadishu (Interview B, 2025). Operations continued over the following months, but the pace of action slowed. In late August 2023, al-Shabaab successfully overran the positions of the Somali National Army and the Ma'awisley in Osweyne, Galmudug. The government forces suffered significant losses, with at least 100 troops killed and dozens of military vehicles destroyed, prompting a retreat from the area (Africa Confidential, 2023).

Osweyne became a turning point. In the months that followed, al-Shabaab successfully recaptured most of the territory it had lost since June 2022. By early 2025, the jihadists were advancing closer to the capital, capturing new areas in Middle Shabelle while also overrunning allied forces in Hirshabelle (Interview C 2025; Mahmood 2025). Some even feared that the capital would fall within days. Yet, by summer 2025, the al-Shabaab offensive stalled. To stabilize the situation, in June 2025, the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and SNA launched a new offensive called "Operation Silent Storm." During the campaign, they managed to stop al-Shabaab and recapture some strategic towns along the Shabelle River, including Sabiid and Anole (UN Security Council 2025). The mobilization of all available Somali forces and the intensive air strikes by US and Turkish drones also caused significant casualties among Jihadists. In the meantime, some experts argued that al-Shabaab did not intend to conquer the capital, as this would have put a huge economic and social burden on the group (Burke-Gadobe 2025; Interview D 2025).

In conclusion, the military situation in mid-2026 resembled the circumstances before the Ma'awisley offensive. The Federal Government of Somalia retained control over Mogadishu and its surrounding areas, while Jubaland controlled Kismayo and its vicinity. Puntland, on the other hand, was largely free from al-Shabaab influence. However, significant portions of Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and Southwest State were under the control of jihadist groups, including most of the Juba Valley (refer to the map in Bryden 2025:2). Neither side was strong enough to defeat the other, and Somali politicians were unable to reach a compromise to unify their efforts against al-Shabaab. In the meantime, al-Shabaab managed to keep its 'quasi-state' profile (Marsai-Tarrósy 2022), which provided a solid foundation for the organisation. Consequently, the most likely scenario was the continuation of the civil war.

While al-Shabaab remains the dominant violent extremist organization in Somalia, it is important to take note of the surprising rise of the Islamic State Somalia (ISS) as well. Since its establishment in 2015, ISS was initially regarded as a minor force with limited objectives and capabilities (Marsai, 2018). However, over the past decade, the Islamic State has developed a significant regional hub in the Ceel Miskaad mountains in Puntland, which became home to the ISIS al-Karrar office. This office served as a financial center for ISIS, facilitating the transfer of funds to affiliated groups from Mozambique to Afghanistan. During this time, the Islamic State in Somalia has also increased its number of fighters, growing from a few hundred to between 1,500 and 2,000 (Weiss-Webber, 2024). Most fighters of ISS were foreigners from a dozen countries, including Ethiopia, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Kenya, Bahrain, Bangladesh, and even Argentina and Germany (Garoweonline X 2025). Compared with the years 2015-16, ISS kept a low profile to avoid attracting the attention of Garowe and its allies, and this strategy proved successful until late 2024, when Puntland decided to launch an offensive against the Jihadists (Interview E 2025). Garowe had spent months preparing for the military operation, including convincing external actors – mainly the US and the UAE – to provide logistical and kinetic support (airstrikes) for the offensive.

However, ISS proved to be a committed and tough adversary, and Puntland forces had to fight heavily for every inch of territory in Ceel Miskaad (Harun-Seldin 2025). Jihadist warriors used new techniques like suicide missions and combat drones, new IEDs and VBIEDs, which inflicted significant casualties on Puntland forces (Interview F 2025). At the end of December 2024 alone, at least 22 Somali soldiers were killed when ISS launched an attack on their military base (Hasan 2025). In total, hundreds of troops from Garowe were wounded or killed during the campaign.

According to the reports from Puntland, the offensive was a success. FMS forces killed almost 2,000 Jihadists and, by the end of September 2025, destroyed ISS. As Puntland's president, Said Abdallahi Deni told reporters, "the forces have defeated the militants' power by 95 percent" (Hiiraan 2025d). Deni's declaration proved to be overly optimistic. Military operations and resistance from ISS continued even as this manuscript was being finalized in late 2025, leading to an increasing number of casualties among Somali forces (Hiiraan 2025e). Although Garowe was able to significantly weaken the military power of ISS and achieved meaningful successes compared to Mogadishu, the challenging terrain of Ceel Miskaad and the nearby areas of Yemen made it nearly impossible to completely eliminate the Jihadists. According to some reports, groups of ISS commanders and warriors escaped to the Arabian Peninsula, while ISS reinforcements also arrived through the Gulf of Aden (Interview D 2025). Consequently, Puntland must remain vigilant regarding ISS, which forecasts extended military involvement.

4. Maritime security in the spotlight – again

Maritime security in the Gulf of Aden has always been a crucial concern, not just for regional powers but also for global actors. Approximately 20% of global container traffic, 40% of trade between Asia and Europe, nearly 8% of liquefied natural gas, and 10% of seaborne oil passes through this region (European Parliament, 2024). This highlights why the rise of Somali piracy in 2008 prompted various stakeholders to intervene in order to combat armed robbery at sea and secure this vital maritime route. The EU launched EUNAVFOR Atalanta, which is one of the longest existing CSDP mission and is still operating in the area (EUNAVFOR Atalanta 2026).

While international engagement and armed contractors had reduced piracy to almost zero by the early 2010s, the rise of Houthi militias and their declaration of war against Israel brought new dynamics into the Horn of Africa. Houthis started to attack vessels that they judged to be Israeli-owned or en route to Israel in late 2023. Contrary to Somali piracy, the sophisticated weapons of the Houthis (drones, ballistic and cruise missiles) caused significant damage and forced big shipping companies to reroute their cargo around Africa, which prolonged journeys by one to two weeks and added fuel costs. In general, traffic has declined by 40% in the Gulf of Aden (European Parliament 2024; Knights 2024). In 2024, to enhance its engagement and safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis, the EU deployed EUNAVFOR Aspides as well (EUNAVFOR Aspides 2026).

Houthis were not the only ones to threaten shipping companies. In the shadow of the Yemeni militias, Somali pirates also became active. As reports emphasized, piracy was always part of the wider illicit ecosystem of the Gulf of Aden, and despite the declining number of attacks, pirates maintained their latent capabilities. When shipping routes were rerouted closer to the African shores, pirate groups sprang into action, carrying out dozens of attacks against commercial vessels (Mamouni 2025). Despite the intensity of pirate operations not reaching the level of the 2008-2011 period, it significantly contributed to the deterioration of maritime security in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

Security challenges not only affect shipping in the region; smuggling of various items also threatens regional stability. Although the exact nature of the cooperation between Houthis and al-Shabaab is not clear, the flow of sophisticated weapons such as drones and missiles from the Arabian Peninsula to Somalia shows that there is at least a pragmatic business collaboration between the parties. The arrival of suicide drones and higher-quality missiles significantly increased the military capabilities of the Jihadists, and demonstrates new threats for the Somali and allied forces (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2025).

5. Increasing regional rivalry

The Horn of Africa has always been a ground for geopolitical rivalry between regional and external actors. Yet, in the last decade, the competition reached a critical level: non-Somali actors not only pursue their own interests, but also contribute to regional tensions and the prolongation of conflicts. Ethiopia, Kenya, Turkey, Qatar, and the

United Arab Emirates supported various Somali political groups during the electoral processes, thereby reinforcing the zero-sum perception and weakening the already fragile cooperation between Mogadishu and the FMSs. For instance, during Farmajo's centralization efforts in 2019-20, Ethiopia provided military support to the President, leading to clashes in the Gedo and Jubaland regions. In the meantime, Kenya supported Jubaland's President Ahmed Madobe, who has been a significant challenge to the Federal Government of Somalia since 2013 (International Crisis Group 2020: 4-10). The UAE has maintained a strong relationship with Puntland, and Garowe has consistently relied on Abu Dhabi's support, particularly in the fight against the Islamic State in Somalia. However, this support comes at a cost: recent reports indicate that the UAE uses Bossaso port and airfield as a logistical hub for its operations on the continent,

including the transport of war materials and mercenaries to Sudan – claims that Abu Dhabi denies (Bojang 2025). The rivalry among various Arab nations even led to armed clashes in Mogadishu in 2018 between UAE-trained Somali troops and other components of the Somali National Army (Sheikh-Omar 2018; Marsai-Szalai 2023).

The most detrimental effect of foreign involvement in Somalia is the further fragmentation of domestic politics. Local power centers, backed by external actors, are more inclined to engage in divisive politics rather than cooperation. In Mogadishu, the FGS often resorts to centralization, sometimes resorting to violence, while the Federal Member States resist the federal government's authority in favor of their own self-interests. This situation undermines the well-being and unity of the entire Somali nation. As Menkhaus (2004) pointed out in the early 2000s, many actors sought to maintain the chaos that allowed them access to the country's wealth. By 2026, little had changed: a strong, centralized Somali state could more effectively manage resources, limit local agendas, and resist foreign interference. Consequently, many scholars and experts view foreign meddling as one of the principal reasons for the prolonged state failure in Somalia (Interviews G 2014; H 2015; I 2025).

Increasing regional rivalry is also jeopardizing the possibilities of regional bodies, as IGAD or AU, to settle conflict within Somalia and beyond. In spite of their efforts (Abdullahi 2026), most Somalis consider them as ineffective or even bias actors, which limits their chance for mediation.

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6. The unrecognized state on the Horn of Africa – the case of Somaliland

Since Somaliland unilaterally declared its independence in 1991, Hargeisa has struggled to gain official recognition from an external actor. In the last decade, relative political stability, democratization, and economic and geopolitical potential have convinced external actors to establish some form of relationship with Somaliland and bring investment to the region (Bradbury 2008). Ethiopia has long served as the primary gateway for Hargeisa, with Ethiopian Airlines connecting the region to the rest of the world. In the mid-2010s, Abu Dhabi recognized the territory's potential and leveraged its strategic location for both military operations in Yemen and infrastructure projects, such as the development of the Berbera Port and corridor (DP World, 2021). In the meantime, other port projects were launched in the wider Horn of Africa region, including Djibouti, Bossaso, and Assab (Beyene 2025; Tarrósy 2020:15). However, concerns over Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, along with fears of a domino effect, have prevented any actor from seeking official recognition.

The mid-2020s brought two changes regarding Somaliland's status. The first was the rising demand of the government of Ethiopia for sea access. In 2023, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed addressed the crucial issue of sea access in a parliamentary speech, highlighting its strategic and existential significance for Ethiopia's 130 million people¹ and its growing economy. He pointed out that the country's heavy reliance on Djibouti for maritime trade – accounting for 95% of Ethiopia's import and export activities – was not a sustainable long-term solution. As a result, he stated that Addis Ababa needed to explore new trade routes. Additionally, the Prime Minister stressed the importance of maritime security and the necessity to reestablish Ethiopian naval forces (Assefa 2025).

The first option to reduce Ethiopia's dependency on ports was through an agreement with Somaliland. On January 1, 2024, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) had been signed with Somaliland President Muse Bihi. Although the MoU has not been publicly released, differing reports from various sources indicate its key provisions. It is believed that the agreement would grant Ethiopia access to the sea and lease a 19-kilometer stretch of shore for 50 years to establish a naval base for the Ethiopian navy. In exchange, Somaliland would receive official recognition from Addis Ababa and a stake in Ethiopian Airlines (Yibeltal 2024; The New York Times 2024).

The deal caused a major uproar not only in the immediate region but also in the broader international community. Addis Ababa faced severe diplomatic backlash, and by late 2024, the Memorandum of Understanding appeared to be under significant pressure and seemed to have been shelved. As one interviewee noted, "Ethiopia came under such pressure that they completely withdrew from the plan" (Interview J, 2025). The growing rapprochement between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa (Ali, 2025), along with rumors that the Ethiopian leadership abandoned the Somaliland plan for the port of Assab in Eritrea (BBC, 2025), indicated that the possibility of Ethiopian recognition of Hargeisa had vanished.

Another option emerged with Donald Trump's second victory in the 2024 US presidential election. Many Republican diplomats and African experts believed that Washington had been wasting over two billion USD annually on Somalia without achieving significant results (Interview C, 2025). They view Hargeisa as a more reliable and stable partner than Mogadishu, offering the same value proposition: access to an important geopolitical location and a platform for counter-terrorism operations. The Heritage Foundation 2025 Project also encouraged the recognition of Hargeisa as a counterbalance to China's regional expansion – and the utilization of the good relationship between Somaliland and Taiwan (Harper 2025). Therefore, some expected that Trump's second term in the White House would bring about the recognition of Somaliland. Even before Trump's official inauguration, powerful and influential Republican congressmen, including Scott Perry, introduced a bill to formally recognize Hargeisa (Ibid). In August 2025, Senator Ted Cruz, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy, also sent a letter to President Trump urging the administration to formally recognize Somaliland (Cruz.senate.gov 2025). Despite these initiatives, a prominent US diplomat told the author that the chances of recognition were "50-50" (Interview K 2025). Many individuals within the administration were concerned about how African states would react to this recognition, especially during a time when the continent is a focal point of global power competition. Moreover, some influential members of Trump's White House team, such as Sebastian Gorka, prioritized Mogadishu's partnership for American counter-terrorism operations over Somaliland. They feared that cooperation with Hargeisa could jeopardize their efforts (Africa Intelligence 2025). In late 2025, even Somaliland diplomats seemed a little skeptical and disillusioned with the idea of a quick recognition of their independence (Interview L 2025).

The real change happened not by the decision of Washington but Israel: the Middle Eastern country recognized the independence of Somaliland in December 2025. The establishment of diplomatic relations which was put into the context of Abraham Accords brought international uproar (Tekin 2025). Yet, by August 2026, the practical impacts of the recognition were limited: no other countries followed the Israeli move, and the arrival of investment and development assistance to Somaliland was not significant.

7. Conclusions

Since 2020, there have been no new significant characteristics of Somali politics. Clan competition, corruption, and political opportunism continue to dominate the landscape. The Federal Member States and "opposition" politicians – who had previously worked with presidents Farmajo and Hassan Mohamud – have made every effort to undermine the Federal Government's push for centralization. Meanwhile, patience has worn thin in Mogadishu, and both presidents have become willing to take unconstitutional measures and even resort to violence to achieve their goals. As Somali politicians remain focused on their conflicts, efforts toward state-building and administrative reconstruction have stalled.

In terms of counter-terrorism, the offensive initiated by the Ma'awisley militias and later supported by the FGS and the SNA started out promisingly. This operation marked the first significant Somali-initiated and -led effort against al-Shabaab in years. However, after the initial successes, Mogadishu was unable to capitalize on the momentum. The Somali army and its allied militias lacked the capacity to hold the liberated territories. Following some humiliating defeats, they ultimately halted the offensive. In the last two years, Jihadists managed to recapture most of the villages and towns that they had lost in 2022-23. In early 2025, there were concerns that al-Shabaab could even threaten Mogadishu. However, the Somali National Army and its international partners successfully stopped the group. During Operation Silent Storm in June 2025, they recaptured several areas. The terrorists lacked the capacity to take over the capital, and predictions that al-Shabaab could overpower the Federal Government of Somalia turned out to be overly pessimistic. Similar to the situation after 2011, jihadists no longer pose an existential threat to the Somali government.

What has definitely changed are the external circumstances. Somalia has become a theatre of geopolitical competition among regional and external powers, affecting various issues, including the conflict between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States and the increasing arming of al-Shabaab. Maritime security challenges and the rise of the Islamic State in Somalia, also linked to external actors, have introduced new dynamics to the region. Hundreds of foreign fighters have arrived in Somalia, turning it into one of the global hubs for ISIS. Meanwhile, the international community has struggled to find a lasting solution to Houthi attacks and the re-emergence of Somali piracy. Additionally, there is a renewed glimmer of hope for Somaliland's recognition, tied to shifting Ethiopian and U.S. foreign policies.

Since the collapse of the state in 1991 – and, in many ways, even before that – Somalia has become a playground for foreign actors who have exploited the divisions among Somali elites and the populace. If Mogadishu hopes to regain control, it should focus more on internal cohesion. Instead of pursuing narrow interests, Somali politicians need to reach a stable consensus about the future of their country.

Note

- 1 By September 2026, the population of Ethiopia is close to 140 million (Worldometres 2026).

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