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Somalia

Rebuilding the State

Somalia has been plagued by instability and humanitarian crisis for decades. Since the collapse of the authoritarian Siad Barre regime in 1991, there have been numerous attempts to reunite Somalia's regions, clans, and sub-clans under a credible central authority capable of exerting territorial control and providing services and security for the Somali people. The formation of a federal government in 2012 was a turning point, but Somalia still faces considerable challenges on the path to stability.

Over the past decade, international donors have expanded their engagement and increased their focus on development aid, seeking to build resilience to drought; bolster economic growth, access to government services, and political reconciliation; expand critical infrastructure; and improve governance and the rule of law.

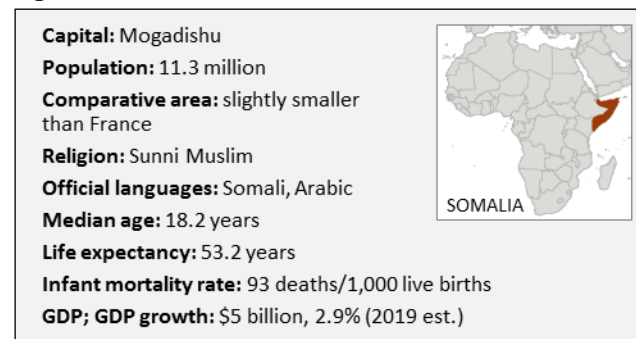
With the support of donors and an African Union (AU) stabilization force (known as AMISOM), the country has made progress: U.N. officials now describe Somalia as a fragile state, rather than a failed one. Political infighting, clan competition, corruption, and contradictory visions for Somalia's system of government all complicate the way forward, however, as does an enduring Islamist insurgency.

Somalia has not held direct one-person one-vote elections in decades. Foreign officials nevertheless viewed the 2012 presidential election, in which parliamentarians elected the president after an internationally supported selection process and the adoption of a provisional constitution, as a credible effort to reestablish central governance.

In 2013, the United States officially recognized the Somali government for the first time in 22 years, highlighting fragile improvements, both in terms of political developments and advances against Al Shabaab, an affiliate of Al Qaeda. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) also adjusted their positions on Somalia, making the country eligible for policy advice and technical assistance. The UK was the first Western country to reopen its embassy in Somalia, followed by China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and most East African countries. The United States reestablished a permanent diplomatic presence in the capital, Mogadishu, in late 2018.

Somalia experienced a peaceful political transition in 2017, when the parliament elected former prime minister and dual U.S.-Somali national Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, aka "Farmajo," to the presidency over the incumbent. Farmajo's government has been hamstrung by infighting, corruption, and tensions with Somalia's federal states. Competition among Arab Gulf states, which are among Somalia's largest investors and trade partners, has exacerbated frictions between the federal and state governments. These tensions may undermine U.S. policy interests in Somalia as the country moves toward elections expected in late 2020/2021.

Figure 1. Somalia Facts



Source: CRS map. Data from CIA and IMF reference databases.

Recent Security Developments

Challenges to stabilizing and securing the Somali state are substantial. Military offensives by AMISOM and allied Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian forces facilitated critical gains against Al Shabaab in 2011-2012, pushing the group out of Mogadishu and other major southern cities and ports and depriving it of valuable revenue sources. Subsequent offensives reclaimed additional towns and key bases.

Al Shabaab has proven resilient, however. It still controls parts of the country, earning revenue through "taxes," including of the illicit trades in charcoal and sugar. Experts warn of "mafia-style" extortion by the group in government areas, including Mogadishu. Complex assaults on AMISOM bases have killed hundreds of troops and prompted the mission to realign forces, pulling back from some areas that insurgents have since reoccupied.

Al Shabaab conducts frequent attacks in Mogadishu, likely seeking to undermine confidence in the government and its security measures. In 2016, a suicide bomber on a Somali airliner taking off from Mogadishu detonated a bomb concealed in a laptop computer (it did not destroy the aircraft). In October 2017, a truck bombing in Mogadishu killed over 500 people. Al Shabaab has demonstrated its ability to hit targets inside the heavily guarded Mogadishu International Airport complex with mortars, striking the U.N. compound twice in 2019. Many diplomatic facilities and residences are located in the complex, including the U.S. embassy. The assassination of Mogadishu's mayor in August 2019 by a suicide bomber who had infiltrated his office underscored Al Shabaab's ability to penetrate the government. See also CRS In Focus IF10170, *Al Shabaab*.

Thirteen years after AMISOM's deployment, the timeline for its exit is uncertain. AMISOM and international partners are working to help build the Somali security sector so the mission can gradually transfer responsibilities. Various factors constrain the effort, including funding and donor coordination shortfalls, disputes between federal and state authorities, institutional underdevelopment, and corruption.

Work on the transition plan is nevertheless underway. The government has taken some notable steps to address corruption in the army: several senior officers have been replaced, troops have been biometrically registered to eliminate “ghost soldiers” from the payroll, and salaries are now directly deposited in soldiers’ accounts to ensure consistent payment and reduce theft. Elite infantry units trained, equipped, and mentored by the United States launched a new offensive in 2019 to retake territory from Al Shabaab south of Mogadishu. Whether regular forces can hold reclaimed territory will be a key test.

Other Nation-Building Challenges

The Somali federal government has struggled to overcome contentious clan and regional dynamics and extend its authority beyond Mogadishu. After more than 20 years without central authority, the sharing of power, revenue, and resources is subject to considerable national debate. Many clans see a decentralized system of governance as the best way to share power among clans and sub-clans, but competition over power in Mogadishu remains a flashpoint.

Federalism is enshrined in the provisional constitution, but the charter is vague on how it should work. A constitutional review process is due to conclude in mid-2020. Strains between federal and state authorities worsened in 2018–2019, and allegations of interference by Mogadishu in state elections have stoked tensions ahead of elections expected by early 2021. A draft electoral law is under consideration, while a new petroleum law, opposed by semi-autonomous Puntland, aims to resolve contentious revenue-sharing deliberations. Meanwhile, Somaliland, which declared itself independent in 1991, maintains its autonomy from Somalia.

Somalia’s efforts to rebuild are complicated by pervasive corruption and spoilers opposed to the consolidation of state authority. The government’s public financial management reforms, however, have won praise from the IMF and have helped pave the way for Somalia to reach the decision point in early 2020 for multilateral debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Somalia owes almost \$5 billion in external debt (most of it accrued under Siad Barre), and the United States is its largest creditor. In late 2019, Congress approved in P.L. 116-94 up to \$35 million for the first phase in canceling Somalia’s \$1.1 billion bilateral debt.

Humanitarian Situation

Humanitarian conditions, exacerbated by erratic weather patterns, are poor in much of Somalia. Of the 5.2 million Somalis estimated to need aid in 2020, 1.2 million face crisis or emergency level food insecurity. Floods affected over half a million people in late 2019. A locust outbreak, the worst to hit Somalia in over 25 years, has since damaged crops and pastures. Roughly 2.6 million are internally displaced. Some 320,000 people were displaced by conflict in 2018—the highest level of conflict-related displacement in four years. By U.N. estimates, 3 million children are not in school, 1 in 7 children die before their fifth birthday, and a majority of women have undergone female genital mutilation. Funding shortfalls and attacks against aid workers threaten relief programs, and Al Shabaab restricts humanitarian aid activities in areas it controls. Many Somalis rely on remittances from family abroad, which are estimated at over \$1 billion annually.

U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

The United States seeks to promote political and economic stability, prevent Somalia from serving as a terrorist safe haven, and alleviate the protracted humanitarian crisis, according to the State Department. Support for the Somali government’s state-building agenda is part of this effort. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) identifies developing security in Somalia as one of its key lines of effort.

After recognizing the Somali government in 2013, the State Department redesignated the diplomatic unit focused on Somalia at the U.S. embassy in Kenya as the U.S. Mission to Somalia in 2015. In 2016, the United States named its first ambassador to Somalia in 25 years. A permanent diplomatic presence in the country was reestablished in 2018, and the U.S. embassy officially reopened in October 2019. Bilateral relations have been complicated by the Trump Administration’s 2017 decision to list Somalia as one of seven countries whose citizens would be barred from receiving certain types of visas to enter the United States.

The United States is Somalia’s largest humanitarian donor, contributing over \$450 million in humanitarian aid in FY2019, and almost \$49 million for Somali refugees in the region. Other foreign aid, including funding for AMISOM, totaled over \$285 million in FY2019. The Administration’s FY2020 foreign aid request proposed cuts to governance, health, education, social service, and agriculture programs.

The United States has provided substantial support for AMISOM and Somali efforts to counter Al Shabaab. U.S. support for AMISOM has totaled over \$2.5 billion in the past decade, and the United States has provided over half a billion dollars in security assistance for Somali forces. In late 2017, the United States suspended support for most of Somalia’s forces over corruption concerns. Assistance for the U.S.-mentored elite *Danab* units, meanwhile, continued. Some support to non-mentored units resumed in mid-2019. U.S. forces in Somalia—estimated at 700 in 2019—have engaged in “advise, assist, and accompany” missions. Two U.S. service members have been killed in such operations.

The United States has conducted airstrikes in Somalia against members of Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab for over a decade. U.S. strikes have killed key senior Al Shabaab operatives, including leader Ahmed Abdi Godane in 2014. The United States has also conducted airstrikes against a small Islamic State faction, led by a former Al Shabaab cleric in northern Somalia. The tempo of airstrikes has been on the rise since 2015, when President Obama broadened its justification for military action in Somalia; President Trump authorized expanded authority for strikes there in March 2017. AFRICOM reported 35 strikes in 2017 (over twice the number conducted in 2016), 47 in 2018, and 63 in 2019. Al Shabaab attempted, unsuccessfully, to attack an airfield used by the U.S. military in central Somalia in October.

AFRICOM, in response to reports challenging its long-standing assertion that U.S. strikes had not killed civilians in Somalia, commenced a review in 2019, subsequently acknowledging two civilian deaths in 2018. The command pledged to strengthen its process for addressing allegations.

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