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SUPPRESSION Without Resolution

The Somali Piracy Resurgence



By Loula Thiebergien

Abstract

This article examines whether the international governance response deployed after the 2008 UN Security Council resolutions structurally resolved the problem of Somali piracy, or merely produced a temporary lull. It argues that this response was tactically effective but structurally insufficient, treating the maritime symptoms of piracy while leaving its onshore roots largely unaddressed. Drawing on the relevant legal framework (UNCLOS, the 1988 SUA Convention, and successive UN Security Council resolutions), the naval and institutional architecture built after 2008, and academic and policy literature on Somali piracy, combined with recent reporting on the 2023–2026 resurgence and its links to the Houthi campaign

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> Nearly three years after the hijacking of MV Ruen, the 2026 wave of hijackings confirms indicate a gap in the effectiveness of the international intervention deployed after 2008 to defeat Somali piracy

in the Red Sea, the analysis shows that the post-2008 response concentrated almost exclusively on maritime deterrence, while state collapse, poverty, illegal fishing, and toxic dumping — the structural drivers of piracy onshore — remained largely untouched. Econometric evidence further suggests that naval pressure displaced piracy rather than eliminating it, a dynamic obscured by the dramatic decline in attacks recorded after 2012. The article demonstrates that when institutional and naval retrenchment coincided with the 2023 Houthi campaign, emerging cooperation between Houthi networks and Al-Shabaab, and, from 2026, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz alongside deep cuts to Somalia's development assistance, the conditions for resurgence had already reassembled. The article concludes that the 2012–2023 lull reflected changed tactical conditions rather than a resolved structural problem, and that each resurgence should be read as a pause between crises rather than a solved threat. It recommends institutionalizing clear thresholds for scaling naval presence, reforming and broadening regional coordination mechanisms, and, most critically, investing sustainably in the economic viability of Somali coastal communities.

Introduction

On August 17, 2026, eight armed men boarded the cargo ship Lutuf off Mareeyo, Somalia, and seized control of the vessel, the fourth merchant ship hijacked off the Somali coast since April (Howard, 2026; Captain, 2026). The incident is the latest marker in a resurgence of piracy that began quietly in December 2023, when the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) recorded the first successful hijacking off Somalia since 2017 (ICC IMB, 2024). Somalia's 3,300-kilometer coastline facing the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean sits astride one of the world's most strategically vital maritime corridors. The Somali coast became a prime target for piracy during the 2000s and 2010s, with more than 200 vessels attacked in 2011 alone (Paes et al., 2026, p. 14). A decade of reinforced international security measures produced a dramatic decline; from 2012 onward, the incidents of piracy fell sharply, and by 2015 none were recorded in Somali waters or the Gulf of Aden. Nearly three years after the hijacking of MV Ruen, the 2026 wave of hijackings confirms indicate a gap in the effectiveness of the international intervention deployed after 2008 to defeat Somali piracy.

This article argues that international maritime security efforts proved tactically effective but structurally insufficient. The maritime security programs left the onshore roots of piracy largely unaddressed, thus produced a fragile suppression rather than a durable solution, and made the current resurgence possible. The article proceeds in three parts: it first examines the structural conditions that enabled Somali piracy to emerge and persist; it then maps the international governance architecture deployed after 2008 and assesses why it failed to produce durable results; and finally, it turns to the 2023 resurgence and its links to the Houthi campaign in the Red Sea and Al-Shabaab, before drawing out policy implications.

State Collapse, Poverty, and the Making of a Pirate Economy

Piracy off the Somali coast took root in a political and legal vacuum left by nearly two decades of state collapse. The 1991 overthrow of Mohamed Siad Barre's authoritarian regime left Somalia without a functioning central government; war and famine killed an estimated 250,000 people and displaced a million more and by 1995, Somalia descended into armed confrontation with local militias (Menkhaus, 2007, p. 81). Successive attempts were made at central governance, including the 2004 Transitional Federal Government, but failed to extend authority across the country; it was within this vacuum that piracy took root and the coastal towns became pirate bases where captured vessels could be anchored and ransom negotiations conducted (Elmi et al., 2015, p. 154).

However, state collapse alone does not explain the emergence and persistence of Somali piracy (Elmi et al., 2015). Three compounding grievances turned coastal communities toward piracy. The first, is poverty; with GDP per capita around USD600 at the height of the piracy surge in 2009, a single ransom payment averaging USD1–2 million, with individual pirates earning up to USD10,000 per operation, represented an incomparably more lucrative alternative to any legal activity, particularly

for young men with few viable means of subsistence. Piracy was thus perceived locally less as a criminal choice than as a rational economic response (Middleton, 2011, pp. 17-19). The second, is illegal fishing; following the 1991 collapse, Somali waters became an open-access zone for foreign fleets. The Food and Agriculture Organization documented up to 700 vessels engaged in illegal fishing in Somali waters in 2005, corresponding to roughly 300,000 tons of seafood stolen annually and an estimated USD300 million in losses per year (Elmi et al., 2015, p. 156).

Foreign vessels routinely used violent tactics to drive out local fishermen, prompting the earliest forms of piracy as fishermen began attacking foreign trawlers to expel them from traditional fishing grounds. Former UN Special Envoy Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah (2009, as cited in Ehiane & Uwizeyimana, 2023, p. 3133) described this as "a form of resource control, and the pirates see themselves as protecting their resources from exploitation". The third, is toxic dumping; Somalia's unprotected coastline became a disposal site for industrial and potentially radioactive waste from industrialized nations, in direct violation of the 1989 Basel Convention, with extensive documented damage to public health, marine ecosystems and coastal livelihoods (United Nations, 2011). Elmi et al. (2015, p. 155) argue that these cumulative pressures created a "culture of despair" in coastal communities, in which piracy emerged not as isolated criminality but as a means of survival in the face of institutional abandonment.

Operationally, the Somali piracy is driven primarily by profit rather than violence, with hostage-taking for ransom as its core mechanism. Pirates typically operate low-tech, high-speed skiffs, and increasingly rely on captured motherships that extended their operational range beyond 1,000 nautical miles from shore. The model is as much land-based as maritime: to maintain access to the coast, pirates relied on relationships with government officials, clan elders, businessmen and militia leaders, who are estimated to have absorbed between 70 and 86 percent of piracy proceeds in exchange for anchorage and protection (World Bank, 2013). By 2011, piracy generated 31 ransom payments worth an estimated EUR150 million, and cost the global economy over EUR6 billion annually, the scale of threat that prompted an unprecedented



French frigate FS Floréal seized 2,042 kg of illicit drugs in four counter-narcotics operations during an Operation ATALANTA patrol in the southern Somali Basin from April 14-18, 2022 (Photo Credits: EU/NAVFOR)

international mobilization (Gosalbo-Bono & Boelaert, 2014, p. 83).

Tactical Success: The International Security Response

According to the IMB, attacks on shipping vessels attributed to Somali pirates rose from 31 in 2007 to a peak of 237 in 2011, the highest figure recorded for any single country in the IMB's annual reporting, and by 2008 Somalia already accounted for nearly 40 percent of piracy incidents worldwide (Ehiane & Uwizeyimana, 2023, p. 3129; ICC IMB, 2012). Under Article 101 of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), piracy is defined as an illegal act of violence, detention or depredation committed for private ends on the high seas. The 1988 SUA Convention extends jurisdiction to acts committed beyond a state's territorial sea. Building on this framework, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1816 in June 2008 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, determining that piracy off Somalia "exacerbate[d] the situation in Somalia which continues to constitute a threat to international peace and security in the region," and authorizing states cooperating with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government to enter Somali territorial waters and use "all necessary means to repress acts of piracy" (UN Security Council, 2008a). Resolution 1851, adopted in December 2008, extended this authorization onshore (UN Security Council, 2008b). Renewed annually, these resolutions authorized foreign naval intervention in Somali waters without formally treating it as a violation of Somali sovereignty, framing it instead as a response to the effective absence of Somali maritime authority.

Two institutional mechanisms coordinated the response; the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), created in 2009, brought together 45-member governments and 7 regional organizations around six core tasks, from operational coordination to tracking piracy-related financial flows. Somalia itself participated through three separate delegations, from the Transitional Federal Government, Somaliland and Puntland, a fragmentation that itself complicated cooperation, since the international community did not formally recognize these authorities as equivalent. Second, the Djibouti Code of Conduct, adopted in January 2009, committed regional signatory states to intelligence-sharing, interception and capacity-building. However, because it was non-binding and excluded key Indian Ocean actors such as India and Pakistan, it lacked both strong political backing and full regional buy-in.

At sea, three multinational coalitions were deployed alongside national operations. The EU's Operation Atalanta, launched in December 2008, was the EU's first-ever naval operation under its Common Security and Defense Policy, mandated to protect humanitarian shipping and deter, prevent and repress piracy (EUNAVFOR, 2015; European Union Council, 2008). NATO's Operation Ocean Shield ran from 2009 to 2016 (NATO, n.d.), while the US-led Combined Task Force 151, established in January 2009, operated as an open-participation, multinational framework with rotating command from more than a dozen nations (Şahiner, 2026).

These coalitions, together with the Internationally Recognized Transit Corridor in the Gulf of Aden and the shipping industry's own Best Management Practices (BMP), vessel hardening, enhanced watchkeeping, and increasingly the use of privately contracted armed security teams, formed a layered defense that altered pirates' cost-benefit calculations. Tactical coordination between the three coalitions was managed through regular "Shared Awareness and Deconfliction" (SHADE) meetings in Bahrain, bringing together military representatives alongside the UN, INTERPOL, the IMB and the IMO. BMP guidance itself continued to evolve well beyond the piracy surge: BMP4 and BMP5, together with other regional documents, were consolidated in March 2025 into a single BMP Maritime Security manual, a sign that industry self-protection remains an adaptive layer of deterrence rather than a static one. The results of this combined effort were measurable: by 2022, Atalanta alone had transferred 171 suspected pirates to regional authorities for prosecution, escorted or monitored more than 2.3 million tons of humanitarian aid, and helped achieve a voluntary shipping registration rate approaching 90 percent in the Gulf of Aden (EUNAVFOR, 2022). The dramatic decline in attacks recorded from 2012 onward reflects this cumulative deterrence effect, with no single intervention able to claim it exclusively.

A Fragile Victory: Why Suppression Was Not Resolution

Despite its scale, the post-2008 response was overwhelmingly maritime in nature while the roots of piracy remained firmly onshore. The international community spent an estimated USD2 billion annually on naval operations, against just USD3 million in

total expenditure on development-oriented onshore projects; by mid-2011, the principal Trust Fund for counter-piracy initiatives had not sponsored a single onshore development project (Bueger, 2012, p. 26). As Bueger (2012, p. 16) observes, although the common wisdom in counter-piracy discourse holds that piracy is "a problem that needs to be tackled onshore," most measures actually implemented were maritime ones. He identifies four general approaches through which piracy has been framed internationally: as an existential security threat, as deviant behavior requiring law enforcement, as a technical problem addressable through defensive measures, and, the most neglected, as a development problem rooted in state failure, and he argues that the response was dominated by the first two.

Bueger (2012) further identifies five structural reasons for this imbalance: donor reluctance to fund preventive projects, compounded by limited knowledge of effective prevention in post-conflict settings; the practical difficulty and risk of operating onshore in Somalia, which forced many NGOs to withdraw; fears that assistance could do more harm than good, as some donated fishing equipment was reportedly used in piracy operations; tension between law-enforcement and development logics, since reintegration programs risk being perceived as rewarding piracy; and the broader securitization of aid, which consistently subordinated development priorities to short-term security ones.

This maritime focus may also have been less effective than it appeared. Econometric analysis by Shortland and Vothknecht (2010) of piracy incidents between January 2008 and June 2010 found that naval counter-piracy measures did not deter Somali pirates overall, but instead produced a strategic substitution effect. As international naval presence intensified in the Gulf of Aden, attacks shifted toward the more thinly patrolled Somali Basin, with pirates adapting tactics, such as attacking in larger groups, selecting less-prepared vessels, avoiding coalition-flagged ships, rather than abandoning operations. As the authors conclude, naval efforts "have therefore not been counter-productive, but they have failed to deter (an increasing number of) pirate crews" (Shortland & Vothknecht, 2010, p. 22). If naval presence displaced rather than eliminated the threat, the post-2012 decline should be read as a conjunctural suppression rather than a resolved problem.

The consequences of this fragility became visible once institutional attention receded. Operation Ocean Shield was terminated in December 2016, the same year the CGPCS was dissolved and restructured under a broader, less Somalia-specific mandate. In December 2022, the UN Security Council did not renew the resolution authorizing naval operations within Somali territorial waters, formally ending them. Shipping companies correspondingly reduced their incentive to maintain heightened vigilance and private security measures (EUNAVFOR, 2022). Yet none of this retrenchment was matched by progress onshore: Somalia ranked first out of 179 countries on the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index in 2024, having never fallen below a score of 110 out of 120 throughout the entire 2012–2023 period, a variation of just 1.3 points over a decade of naval withdrawal (Fund for Peace, 2024).

The 2023–2026 Resurgence: A Permissive Environment

By late 2023, the conditions for resurgence had quietly reassembled: naval presence had thinned, the legal perimeter of intervention had contracted, and industry self-protection had scaled back on the assumption that the threat was durably resolved. It was at this moment that the Houthi movement, in a show of solidarity with Hamas, began targeting commercial shipping transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait from November 2023, striking dozens of vessels over the following two years. This campaign affected the Somali piracy situation through two mechanisms: attentional displacement, as naval and intelligence assets were redeployed from the Gulf of Aden toward the Red Sea; and operational opportunity, which Somali pirate networks seized. Earlier, in 2022, the Indian Ocean High Risk Area designation had been

The EU's Operation Atalanta, launched in December 2008, was the EU's first-ever naval operation under its Common Security and Defense Policy, mandated to protect humanitarian shipping and deter, prevent and repress piracy



Map showing Somali pirate attacks between 2023 and 2025 (Source: International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre/Khadija Mamouni-policy Center for the New South)

removed (ICS et al., 2022), relaxing the industry's own protective posture. IMB data confirms this trajectory: Somalia recorded one piracy incident in 2023, rising to seven in 2024 (ICC IMB, 2025).

The pattern accelerated sharply in 2026. On 28 February, the United States and Israel struck Iranian targets, and Iran responded by closing the Strait of Hormuz to foreign shipping, a corridor carrying roughly a fifth of the world's oil and gas trade. Repeated ceasefires broke down through the spring and summer, and by July the strait remained, in practice, closed to routine commercial traffic (Reuters, 2026). To avoid it, shipowners rerouted hundreds of vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks of transit time and an estimated USD1 million in additional cost per voyage, while naval assets that might otherwise have patrolled the Gulf of Aden were redirected toward the Gulf and the Red Sea (CNN, 2026; Cyprus Mail, 2026). Somali pirates seized the opening: between April and August 2026, five merchant vessels were hijacked in the region, four of them off the Somali coast (Kimani, 2026).

The reduced risk offshore has been compounded by a shrinking legitimate alternative onshore. U.S. development and humanitarian assistance to Somalia fell from USD467 million in 2024 to USD70 million in 2025, and to just USD3 million in the first quarter of 2026 alone, as the current U.S. administration sharply cut non-security aid (The Conversation, 2026). This contraction offers a striking, real-time illustration of the onshore deficit this article has identified as the structural core of the piracy problem: as legitimate coastal livelihoods narrow further, the relative appeal of piracy widens.

The resurgence also has a regional dimension that extends beyond mere attentional displacement. In February 2025, the United Nations documented direct contacts between Houthi and Al-Shabaab representatives, involving the transfer of equipment and training from Yemen to Somalia in exchange for expanded piracy operations and arms trafficking. This relationship is described as "transactional or opportunistic, and not ideological," with complementary benefits: the Houthis gain access to Al-Shabaab's smuggling networks across Somalia and northern Kenya, while Al-Shabaab receives advanced weaponry and drone technology, supplementing an estimated USD200 million in annual revenue from piracy taxation (Paes et al., 2026, p. 17). Arms-smuggling routes reinforce this picture: between September 2015 and January 2024, 18 vessels carrying weapons, ammunition and missile components were intercepted near Somali territorial waters, with crews facilitated by Houthi-affiliated networks (Paes et al., 2026, p. 19).

Analytical caution is nonetheless warranted. The IISS notes that most shipping-industry representatives describe the piracy resurgence as opportunistic rather than centrally coordinated with the Houthis, whose objectives, disrupting shipping for political purposes, versus seeking ransom, differ fundamentally from those of Somali pirates (Paes et al., 2026). The case of the MV Central Park, boarded by likely Somali pirates on 26 November 2023 while Houthi ballistic missiles were simultaneously fired at the US destroyer responding to the incident, illustrates this ambiguity: suggestive in its timing, but without confirmed evidence of coordination. The relationship is best understood as one of mutual enablement rather than operational integration. In response, the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU-led Operation Aspides were launched in late 2023 and early 2024, respectively, and Atalanta's mandate has been extended through February 2027. Yet as the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025) concludes, "significantly degrading this threat will require more than maritime action": a statement that echoes with striking precision the structural critique developed throughout this article. The 2023 resurgence is not merely a tactical setback: it is empirical confirmation that a response built overwhelmingly on maritime deterrence, without addressing onshore conditions, produces suppression without resolution, and that suppression, once the conditions sustaining it erode, is always reversible.

Conclusion

The Somali piracy crisis reveals a recurring paradox in international governance: the capacity to mobilize unprecedented multilateral resources while remaining structurally unable to address the conditions that made the threat possible in the first place. The response deployed after 2008 was tactically effective, it drove a dramatic decline in attacks between 2012 and 2023, but structurally insufficient, concentrating resources at sea while the onshore roots of piracy went largely unaddressed. The 2023 resurgence confirmed what several scholars had warned throughout the years of apparent success: the post-2012 decline reflected changed tactical conditions, not resolved structural ones.

Four re-orientations would help avoid repeating this cycle:

- At the maritime level, the lessons of 2016 must not be repeated. The dismantlement of Operation Ocean Shield and the dissolution of the CGPCS, on the basis of a premature declaration of victory, created the very vacuum the 2023 resurgence exploited. Future governance should institutionalize clear, pre-established thresholds for scaling naval presence up or down, restore the Indian Ocean High Risk Area designation, and formalize Best Management Practices as binding contractual standards rather than voluntary guidance.
- At the institutional level, a reformed and narrower contact group should be re-established, with full integration of India and Pakistan, whose absence from the Djibouti Code of Conduct has consistently undermined its regional logic, and greater African Union ownership. Effective counter-piracy governance cannot be imposed from outside; it must be anchored in local legitimacy.
- Most critically, durable suppression requires investment in the economic viability of Somali coastal communities, legal fisheries, micro-credit schemes, vocational training, alongside satellite surveillance and binding bilateral agreements to hold accountable the foreign fleets whose illegal fishing and toxic dumping were never seriously addressed as original drivers of piracy.
- Finally, the Houthi-Al-Shabaab dynamic should be treated as an economic and political phenomenon, not merely a security threat. It cannot be resolved through naval interdiction alone but requires a coherent regional strategy linking counter-piracy efforts to Yemen's stabilization and the containment of Al-Shabaab's revenue networks.

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Security Without Sovereignty: The Limits of Regional and International Organizations in the Horn of Africa

By Hossamaldeen Ibrahim

Abstract

This article examines why regional and international organizations struggle to deliver lasting security in the Horn of Africa. Using the wars in Sudan (since April 2023) and the fragile post-Pretoria process in Ethiopia as cases, it argues that the core problem is structural: organizations such as IGAD operate under a consensus-based, non-interference model that prioritizes state sovereignty over collective action. In Sudan, membership suspension (2024-early 2026), overlapping mediation tracks, and competing external patronage diluted coherence and prolonged the conflict. In Ethiopia, incomplete implementation of the 2022 Pretoria Agreement and rising internal and regional tensions exposed similar limits. The location of IGAD's headquarters in Djibouti, economic interests in gold, ports and the Nile, and parallel weaknesses in the Arab League and UN Security Council further constrain effectiveness. Drawing on intergovernmentalism, regional security complex theory, constructivism, and critical perspectives on external influence, the article concludes that durable outcomes require stronger institutional autonomy, coherent mediation architecture, reduced external resource flows, and investment in regional identity. Without these shifts, organizations will continue to manage crises rather than resolve them.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa remains one of the most complex security environments in the world. Conflicts that begin inside one state routinely spill across borders, pull in neighboring governments, and attract sustained external involvement. Regional bodies, above all the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), together with the African Union (AU), the United Nations, and successive ad-hoc coalitions, have been repeatedly asked to mediate and stabilize. Results have been uneven at best. The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the still-contested peace process in Ethiopia, illustrate a recurring pattern: mediation multiplies while decisive progress remains elusive.

The central question this article poses is straightforward: why do these organizations struggle to produce durable security outcomes, and how do sovereignty constraints, institutional design, external interventions, and economic interests interact to create those limits? The argument advanced here is structural rather than purely political or resource-based. IGAD and similar bodies function as intergovernmental clubs in which member states retain effective veto power and place national interests first (Weldesellassie, 2011; Adino & Abebe, 2025). External powers exploit this openness. High-value economic stakes, gold, ports, agricultural land, and strategic maritime access, raise the costs of compromise. The location of IGAD's headquarters in Djibouti, a small state hosting multiple foreign militaries bases, adds a further layer of institutional and perceptual complexity. Parallel weaknesses appear in the Arab League's limited capacity to manage conflicts among its members and in the selective enforcement of international law by the United Nations Security Council.

The article first sets out a conceptual framework that combines intergovernmentalism, regional security complex theory, constructivism, and critical perspectives on external influence. It then examines the Sudan and Ethiopia cases in detail, focusing on mediation trajectories, membership dynamics, and external patronage. Subsequent sections assess the effects of IGAD's headquarters location, the role of economic interests, overlapping global agendas, and the broader limits of international law and organizations. The article closes with concrete recommendations aimed at policymakers and institutional reformers.



Member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), comprising Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Eritrea, and South Sudan. (Source: HORN Institute/eOmbisa)

Conceptual Framework

Most regional economic communities in Africa, including IGAD, operate on an intergovernmental model. Decision-making rests with heads of state and government, consensus is required, and non-interference remains a foundational principle. This arrangement protects sovereignty and reduces the risk of capture by any single member, yet it also limits autonomous action when conflicts involve the member states themselves (Weldesellassie, 2011). The European Union's partial supranational features, binding legal order, independent institutions, and qualified majority voting in certain domains, have allowed deeper integration and more consistent enforcement. No equivalent authority exists in the Horn. IGAD's Assembly of Heads of State and Government remains the supreme organ; the Secretariat in Djibouti largely implements rather than directs; and specialized mechanisms such as CEWARN or the IGAD Security Sector Programme lack independent enforcement powers.

Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory helps clarify the regional dynamics. The Horn forms a distinct security complex in which the security of one state is tightly linked to that of its neighbors through shared borders, ethnic ties, refugee flows, arms routes, and competing claims over resources and ports (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). External powers enter this complex not as neutral stabilizers but as actors with their own economic and strategic stakes, turning local conflicts into arenas of multipolar competition.

Constructivist insights add another layer. Identities, norms, and shared understandings shape what actors regard as legitimate or possible. In the Horn, the relative absence of a strong shared regional identity, unlike the linguistic and historical ties that have eased cooperation in parts of the East African Community, or the anti-colonial solidarity that once underpinned aspects of SADC, weakens the social foundations of collective action. Sovereignty is treated not only as a legal principle but as a deeply held norm that makes governments reluctant to cede authority even when collective security would serve them. External patrons, for their part, construct narratives of partnership, stability, or counter-terrorism that legitimize their involvement while often masking underlying economic and strategic interests.

Critical perspectives on contemporary forms of external influence further illuminate the structural context. Influence today frequently operates through economic

leverage, selective military support, and control over strategic resources and maritime routes rather than formal colonial administration. Competitive patronage by Gulf states, middle powers, and great powers can therefore be read as a modern expression of power projection in which weaker states and fractured societies become arenas for external agendas. The result is rarely stable order; more often it is the reproduction of dependency and fragmentation. Resource extraction, port concessions, and security partnerships function as mechanisms through which external actors secure advantages while local institutions remain weak.

Historical parallels with Libya after 2011 and Yemen since 2015 show how external patronage can prolong civil wars and produce hybrid political orders that resist centralization. Similar patterns appear in the Arab League's limited effectiveness in managing conflicts among its members - from Syria to Libya and Yemen - suggesting that the problem is not unique to the Horn but reflects broader weaknesses in regional and international institutional design under conditions of multipolar competition.

The Case of Sudan: Membership Volatility, Fragmented Mediation, and External Patronage

The war that began in April 2023 between the SAF under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the RSF under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) rapidly became the region's most destructive conflict. By early 2026, available conflict data indicated tens of thousands of direct deaths, more than eleven million people internally displaced, and millions more forced into neighboring countries. Famine conditions were declared in parts of North Darfur and threatened additional areas, while the economy contracted sharply (Crisis Group, 2026; ACLED data cited in contemporary reporting).

IGAD initially sought to lead African mediation. High-level talks planned in Djibouti in late 2023 collapsed when one party withdrew. When IGAD invited Hemedti to a summit in Kampala in January 2024, the SAF-led authorities suspended Sudan's membership, accusing the organization of violating sovereignty and showing bias toward the RSF (Abdeen, 2026). The suspension



Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) preparing food following attacks on the Zamzam displacement camp and shelters in Tawila, North Darfur, Sudan. (Photo Credits: REUTERS/Stringer)

constrained IGAD's legitimacy and operational capacity for nearly two years. Sudan returned to full participation in early 2026 after diplomatic efforts involving Djibouti, then holding the IGAD chair under President Ismail Omar Guelleh, and a more cautious approach by the Secretariat. In July 2026, Executive Secretary Workneh Gebeyehu visited Khartoum, met senior leaders, and formally reopened the IGAD mission, an important symbolic step that nonetheless came more than three years into the war (IGAD, 2024 - 2026).

Throughout this period, mediation tracks multiplied. The Jeddah process, initially led by the United States and Saudi Arabia, focused on humanitarian access and ceasefires. The Quad format (United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates) later emerged as a high-level political track. A Quintet of multilateral organizations (AU, IGAD, UN, League of Arab States, European Union) sought coordination. Bilateral initiatives added further layers. Rhetorical coordination improved - IGAD and the AU publicly welcomed Quad statements - yet operational coherence remained limited. Each track reflected the preferences of its sponsors regarding the preferred end-state of Sudanese politics and the relative weight of the SAF versus the RSF. The result was classic forum-shopping by the conflict parties and diluted collective leverage.

External military and financial support sustained both sides and altered conflict incentives. Successive United Nations Panel of Experts reports and investigative journalism linked the United Arab Emirates to the RSF through arms, logistics, and political cover, often routed via third countries (United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan, 2024 - 2026). Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others provided varying degrees of support to the SAF, driven by concerns over Nile waters, Red Sea security, and ideological alignment. Gold smuggling networks, agricultural concessions, and Red Sea port access formed the economic underpinnings of these alignments. Local actors calculated that continued fighting, backed by external patrons, offered better prospects than negotiated compromise under regional auspices. The limited role of the Arab League, despite Sudan's membership, further illustrated the broader pattern of institutional weakness across Arab and African regional bodies when powerful external interests are engaged. Political dimensions of the conflict - elite power struggles, the militarization of economic networks, and competing visions of state authority - were continuously reshaped by these external alignments, making purely domestic solutions increasingly difficult.

> The Horn forms a distinct security complex in which the security of one state is tightly linked to that of its neighbors through shared borders, ethnic ties, refugee flows, arms routes, and competing claims over resources and ports

The Case of Ethiopia: Incomplete Peace, Rising Internal Pressures, and Regional Ambitions

Ethiopia's trajectory after the November 2022 Pretoria Agreement between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) reveals a related set of limitations. The AU, with support from IGAD and international partners, facilitated the agreement that ended the 2020 - 2022 war. Heavy weapons were handed over under AU supervision, an interim regional administration was established in March 2023, and large-scale hostilities largely ceased.

Implementation, however, remained partial and contested. Western Tigray stayed disputed, with Amhara forces refusing full withdrawal. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of Tigray Defense Forces lagged. Political inclusion of the TPLF was constrained, particularly around the 2026 national elections from which the party was effectively barred. Mutual distrust between Mekelle and Addis Ababa deepened. By mid-2026, sporadic clashes, reported drone strikes, factional splits within Tigrayan forces, and the reported formation of multi-group alignments involving Fano militias and other armed actors raised fears of renewed large-scale conflict. Tensions with Eritrea over Red Sea access and historical grievances complicated the picture further, while simultaneous insurgencies in Amhara and Oromia strained federal capacity (International Crisis Group, 2025 - 2026).

IGAD's role in the post-Pretoria phase remained secondary to the AU's. Member-state sensitivities - Ethiopia's considerable weight within both IGAD and

the AU, and the presence of the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa - constrained assertive collective action. External actors again played significant roles. The UAE maintained close economic and security ties with the Ethiopian federal government. Egypt continued to view Ethiopia primarily through the lens of Nile waters and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others pursued parallel partnerships. Ethiopia's search for diversified sea access, including earlier understandings with Somaliland that generated strong opposition from Mogadishu, produced additional regional friction and drew further external interest.

In both Sudan and Ethiopia, regional organizations possess convening power and residual legitimacy but lack the autonomous authority, enforcement tools, and insulation from member-state and external interests needed to compel compliance or reshape conflict incentives. Earlier IGAD successes in South Sudan mediation highlight that outcomes depend heavily on the degree of internationalization and the intensity of competing external stakes (Magara, 2025). When external patrons are deeply invested and local parties retain viable alternatives to negotiation, intergovernmental mechanisms struggle to alter the fundamental cost-benefit calculations of war.

Headquarters Location, Neutrality Perceptions, and Institutional Autonomy

IGAD's headquarters have been located in Djibouti since the organization's founding in 1986 (initially as the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development). Djibouti's relative stability, its strategic position at the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and its willingness to host made it a logical choice. The small state has repeatedly offered its good offices for talks, including early contacts on Sudan in December 2023, and has held the IGAD chair during critical periods under President Ismail Omar Guelleh.

The same geography that makes Djibouti useful also complicates perceptions of neutrality. Djibouti hosts the densest concentration of foreign military bases in Africa - United States (Camp Lemonnier), China, France, Japan, Italy, and others. These bases generate significant revenue and diplomatic leverage for the host government, yet they also embed the IGAD seat within a dense web of great-power and middle-power interests. When Djibouti holds the rotating chair, questions arise about whether institutional priorities align too closely with host-state preferences or with those of the powers that maintain bases there. Critics have noted inconsistencies in IGAD's responses to different border disputes involving Djibouti versus those involving other members, reinforcing perceptions of uneven application of principles.

Institutional design reinforces these constraints. The Secretariat depends heavily on external donor funding from the European Union, the United States, and other partners. Decision-making remains firmly intergovernmental. Membership volatility, Eritrea's repeated withdrawals (most recently in December 2025) and Sudan's 2024 - 2026 suspension, further erodes continuity, institutional memory, and credibility (The East African, 2026; Abdeen, 2026). The result is an organization that is diplomatically necessary and often the only viable regional convening platform, yet structurally under-equipped for the demands of highly internationalized conflict. Without greater insulation from both host-state dynamics and donor priorities, IGAD's capacity to act as a truly autonomous security actor remains limited.

Economic Interests, Overlapping Global Interests, and the Political Economy of Intervention

Security outcomes in the Horn cannot be separated from economic stakes. Sudan's artisanal and small-scale gold production, much of it concentrated in areas under RSF influence in Darfur, has become a major source of conflict financing. Significant volumes move through regional networks before reaching refining and trading hubs, particularly Dubai. Agricultural land along the Nile Valley, livestock trade, and control of Red Sea ports (Port Sudan and potential sites such as Swakin) add further incentives

In Ethiopia's search for diversified sea access, including earlier understandings with Somaliland that generated strong opposition from Mogadishu, produced additional regional friction and drew further external interest

for both local armed actors and external patrons. Ethiopia's gold sector has similarly expanded in recent years, while its ambition for diversified maritime access and the strategic value of the GERD continue to attract external interest and raise the costs of compromise with neighbors (World Bank, 2023 - 2025).

External powers rarely intervene solely for ideological or security reasons; they pursue concrete economic and geostrategic returns. When these returns align with the interests of one conflict party, mediation that seeks balanced outcomes faces steep resistance. Regional organizations, lacking independent economic leverage or enforcement capacity over resource flows, struggle to alter this calculus. Competitive patronage thus becomes constitutive of the conflict rather than merely an external overlay. Gold, ports, and agricultural concessions do not simply fund war; they reshape the political economy of violence, creating stakeholders with vested interests in continued fragmentation.

These dynamics are reinforced by overlapping global interests. The Red Sea corridor carries a significant share of global trade and energy shipments. Great powers and middle powers, including the United States, China, Russia, Gulf states, Turkey, and others, view the Horn as a strategic arena for influence, basing rights, and resource access. The result is a dense web of competing agendas that regional organizations lack the capacity to regulate or transcend. From a critical perspective, these overlapping interests represent contemporary mechanisms of power projection that keep local institutions weak and dependent. Addressing security without confronting these economic and strategic underpinnings is unlikely to produce sustainable results.

Weak Application of International Law and the Limits of International Organizations

The United Nations Security Council has repeatedly demonstrated selective engagement and limited enforcement capacity when the interests of permanent members diverge. Resolutions on Sudan have often been delayed, diluted into short technical rollovers, or left without robust implementation mechanisms, while the Council has struggled to take meaningful action on Ethiopia (Security Council Report, 2026; Oxfam, 2024). The principle of the Responsibility to Protect has been invoked unevenly, and arms embargoes and sanctions regimes have proven porous in the face of determined external support for conflict parties (United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan, 2024 - 2026; United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan, 2026). This selective application of international law reinforces perceptions among local actors that power, rather than legal obligation, remains the decisive factor in determining outcomes.

The Arab League offers a parallel example from the broader Arab world. Despite formal commitments to collective security and non-interference, the organization has struggled to produce coherent responses to major conflicts among its members, from Syria to Libya and Yemen. Consensus requirements, competing national interests, and the influence of powerful external actors have repeatedly constrained effective action. These patterns suggest that the problem is not unique to African regional bodies but reflects deeper structural features of a sovereign-centric international order in which powerful states retain the capacity to shape outcomes while weaker institutions absorb the responsibility for failure. Constructivist analysis highlights how the absence of strong shared normative commitments beyond formal sovereignty further weakens collective responses.

International law itself remains weakly applied when it collides with the strategic interests of major powers. Norms against external interference, the diversion of natural resources during conflict, and the targeting of civilians are frequently violated with limited consequences. In the Horn, this selective application reinforces the perception among local actors that military advantage, backed by external patrons, remains a more reliable path to political survival than compliance with legal or institutional frameworks. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which institutional weakness invites further external intervention, which in turn further erodes institutional capacity.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa's security challenges reveal the limits of intergovernmental organizations operating under strict sovereignty constraints in an era of multipolar competition and high economic stakes. IGAD and its international partners retain indispensable convening power and regional legitimacy. Yet without reforms that enhance institutional autonomy, enforcement capacity, and insulation from both member-state vetoes and external patronage, they will continue to manage crises



The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) begin planning celebrations to mark its 30th founding anniversary on January 16, 2026. (Photo Credits: IGAD)

rather than resolve them. The cases of Sudan and Ethiopia demonstrate that mediation proliferation, membership volatility, headquarters-related perceptions of bias, and resource-driven external involvement interact to undermine collective action. Parallel weaknesses in the Arab League and the United Nations Security Council underscore that these problems are structural rather than merely regional. Closing the gap between ambition and capacity requires honest recognition of these structural limits and deliberate steps to recalibrate the balance between sovereignty and collective security.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, the article makes the following recommendations to Horn of Africa's countries and governments:

- ### Strengthen Institutional Autonomy and Enforcement Mechanisms

  Member states should consider targeted amendments to IGAD's foundational instruments to create limited autonomous decision-making authority in acute crises, alongside a regional dispute-settlement mechanism with clearer enforcement tools. Greater domestic financial contributions from member states would reduce donor dependence, enhance ownership, and strengthen the organization's credibility as an African-led institution.

- ### Establish a Coherent Mediation Architecture

  A standing contact group under joint AU - IGAD leadership, with clear division of labor vis-à-vis the United Nations, League of Arab States, European Union, and key external partners (including formats such as the Quad), should replace ad-hoc proliferation. One primary African-led political track, supported by specialized humanitarian and security tracks, would reduce forum-shopping by conflict parties and improve coherence.

- ### Address External Drivers Directly

  African organizations, working with the UN Security Council and major powers, should prioritize coordinated pressure to curb arms flows and illicit resource trade that sustain the Sudan war and raise risks in Ethiopia. Transparency initiatives around gold production and trade, port concessions, and agricultural deals would raise the reputational and economic costs of proxy support and help shift incentives toward negotiation.

- **Invest in Regional Identity and Social Cohesion**

  Parallel to high-level diplomacy, IGAD should expand cultural, educational, youth-exchange, sports, and intra-regional tourism programs that build a stronger sense of shared regional stake. Reducing the purely elite and security-centric character of current cooperation is essential for long-term political commitment and social legitimacy. Shared identity is not automatic; it must be deliberately cultivated.

- **Leverage Headquarters Location Constructively and Strengthen Normative**

  Djibouti's unique position can be an asset if paired with explicit neutrality protocols and greater transparency regarding the relationship between the host state, foreign military bases, and IGAD decision-making. Reinforced oversight by the Committee of Ambassadors and periodic rotation of certain high-level functions could further protect institutional independence and mitigate perceptions of bias. At the same time, African and Arab regional bodies should work to strengthen the practical application of international legal norms, reducing the space for selective enforcement by powerful external actors.

> IGAD's Assembly of Heads of State and Government remains the supreme organ; the Secretariat in Djibouti largely implements rather than directs; and specialized mechanisms such as CEWARN or the IGAD Security Sector Programme lack independent enforcement powers

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Elite Fragmentation in Somalia: The Historical Roots of Contemporary Political Contestation

By Abdullahi Abdille Shahow

Abstract

This article argues that elite fragmentation in contemporary Somalia is not a new phenomenon. It has deep historical roots in the country's political development. The article traces patterns of elite rivalry and political contestation from the early postcolonial state (1960–1969), through the Siad Barre military regime (1969–1991) and the period of state collapse and conflict (1991–2012), to the contemporary federal system established under the 2004 Transitional Federal Charter and the 2012 Provisional Federal Constitution. Across these periods, political competition among elites has been shaped by personal ambitions, clan-based interests, patronage networks, struggles over political authority, and competition for resources. In the contemporary period, these dynamics are particularly evident in persistent tensions between the Federal Government of Somalia and the federal member states over the distribution of political power, resources, security responsibilities, and constitutional authority. Rather than resolving these longstanding tensions, federalism has created another arena for elite contestation, contributing to mistrust, political stalemate, weak institutional development, and difficulties in consolidating the Somali state. Drawing on historical accounts, scholarly literature, and reports from international actors, the article demonstrates important continuities in elite competition across Somalia's political periods while recognizing changes in the forms that such competition has taken. It concludes that addressing elite fragmentation requires more than institutional reform. It requires sustained political dialogue, negotiated compromise, and inclusive power-sharing arrangements capable of managing competition between the center and the periphery.

Introduction

Contemporary Somalia is characterized by persistent political contestation among elites, particularly between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in Mogadishu and the federal member states (FMS). The fragmentation, however, is not simply a product of the post-2012 federal order; it reflects a much longer pattern of elite competition that has accompanied Somali state formation since independence in 1960. Elite fragmentation in contemporary Somalia thus has deep historical roots and has persisted across successive political orders, although its forms and manifestations have changed over time. Understanding this contestation requires examining not only the post-1991 state collapse but also the political dynamics that shaped the earlier Somali state. Scholarship on Somali society and politics provides important insights into these historical foundations. Lewis (1961) identified lineage segmentation as a central feature of Somali social organization and examined the importance of clan identity in Somali political and social life (Lewis, 2002). Lewis (1972) further demonstrated that elite competition had already shaped the Somali political order during the early years of independence. The period between independence in 1960 and the military coup of 1969 was marked by political rivalry, shifting alliances, personalized competition, clan-based mobilization, and patronage networks (Laitin & Samatar, 1987; Lewis, 1972).

The military coup of October 1969 did not eliminate elite fragmentation in Somalia; rather, it transformed the way political competition was managed. Although Siad Barre's regime initially sought to suppress clan-based political mobilization and centralize political authority, the subsequent weakening of the regime following the 1977–1978 Ogaden War increased the importance of clan and kinship networks as instruments of political survival. De Waal (2018) argues that Barre relied on clan structures to protect his position as his political power came under increasing pressure, while divisions within the military and defections to emerging insurgent movements eventually contributed to the collapse of his regime in

1991 (Kapteijns, 2013). The collapse of the state ushered in a period of intensified fragmentation, as political authority became dispersed among warlords, armed factions, Islamist movements, business interests, and emerging subnational administrations. During the 1990s and early 2000s, competing actors sought to control territory, resources, and political authority in the absence of a functioning central government. Internationally supported reconciliation efforts repeatedly attempted to reconstruct the Somali state, but competition among political elites and warlords frequently obstructed these efforts. At the same time, territorially based administrations emerged in parts of the country, most notably Somaliland and Puntland, creating alternative centers of political authority (Menkhaus, 2007).

These developments shaped subsequent debates about how the Somali state should be reconstructed. By the early 2000s, international and regional actors increasingly promoted federalism as a means of addressing the excessive centralization of political power that had characterized the pre-1991 state. A decentralized system was thus viewed as a mechanism through which political authority could be shared between the center and the regions, while existing subnational entities such as Puntland were increasingly regarded as potential building blocks of a future federal Somalia (Bryden, 1999; Ndutu, 2025). Somaliland, by contrast, pursued a separate political trajectory and sought international recognition of its independence.

The 2004 Mbagathi reconciliation process in Kenya resulted in the adoption of the Transitional Federal Charter and the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). However, the experience of the TFG demonstrated that adopting a federal framework alone could not resolve competition among political elites. The government faced internal divisions and struggled to establish itself in Mogadishu, where powerful actors resisted the extension of its authority (Menkhaus, 2007). The subsequent emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Ethiopia's military intervention in 2006, and the rise of al-Shabaab further complicated Somalia's political reconstruction. The deployment of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) from 2007 helped protect the country's fragile transitional institutions



Mohamed Siad Barre (right), Somalia's former President (1969–1991), seized power in a 1969 military coup and ruled for over two decades before being ousted in 1991, marking the onset of Somalia's civil war (Photo Credit: picryl)

> The period between independence in 1960 and the military coup of 1969 was marked by political rivalry, shifting alliances, personalized competition, clan-based mobilization, and patronage networks

and contributed to the removal of al-Shabaab from Mogadishu in 2011 (Hansen, 2013; Marchal, 2011).
These developments created renewed optimism about Somalia's prospects for political reconstruction and paved the way for the adoption of the Provisional Federal Constitution in August 2012. The establishment of the federal system represented a significant attempt to address the historical concentration of political authority in Mogadishu and create a framework for sharing power between the federal government and the regions. More than a decade later, however, the federal settlement remains incomplete, as political elites have been unable to reach agreement on fundamental questions concerning the distribution of powers and resources between the federal government and the member states. Consequently, federal–member state relations have become one of the principal arenas of elite competition in contemporary Somalia. Disputes over political authority, security responsibilities, resource allocation, constitutional interpretation, and access to domestic and external resources have repeatedly produced political confrontation and weakened cooperation between the center and the periphery. These tensions illustrate a broader continuity in Somalia's political development: although the institutional settings have changed, competition over authority, resources, and political influence has remained a persistent feature of elite relations.

This article examines elite fragmentation across three broad periods of Somalia's political development: the early postcolonial state (1960–1969), the period of state collapse, protracted conflict, and transition towards federalism (1991–2012), and the contemporary federal era (2012–present). The article argues that, although the character of elite competition has changed across these periods, important continuities remain. Personal political ambitions, clan and regional interests, patronage networks, competition over resources, and struggles over political authority have repeatedly shaped relations among Somali elites. In the contemporary federal period, these longstanding dynamics have taken a new institutional form through competition between the federal government and the federal member states. By tracing these patterns across successive political orders, the article seeks to explain how historical forms of elite contestation continue to influence Somalia's state-building trajectory.

The article further argues that federalism, while intended to diffuse political tensions and establish mechanisms for power-sharing, has also become an arena in which competing elites contest authority and resources. Consequently, Somalia's state-building challenge is not simply a matter of weak formal institutions; it also reflects the absence of sufficient political consensus among elites to make those institutions work. Addressing this challenge requires more than institutional reform. It requires sustained political dialogue, negotiated compromise, and inclusive mechanisms for managing competition between the center and the periphery. Understanding the historical roots of elite fragmentation is therefore essential to explaining the persistent difficulties of consolidating the Somali state and identifying political arrangements capable of managing competition within the federal system.

The Early Postcolonial State (1960–1991)

Elite fragmentation did not begin with Somalia's state collapse in 1991 or the adoption of federalism in 2012. Its origins can be traced to the country's first decade of independence (1960-1969), when political competition among elites emerged as a defining feature of state formation. The postcolonial period can be understood in two distinct phases: the parliamentary democratic era (1960–1969) and the military regime of Mohamed Siad Barre (1969–1991). Across both periods, elite competition weakened the institutional development of the newly independent state, although it assumed different forms over time. Early scholarship on Somali politics identifies elite rivalry as one of the principal challenges confronting the newly independent state. Laitin and Samatar (1987) and Lewis (1972) argue that political parties were weak, parliamentary coalitions were fluid, and politics was organized around shifting alliances rooted in clan interests rather than stable ideological programs. Elite fragmentation therefore emerged not only from political disagreements but also from personal ambition, patronage, and competition for access to state power.

The Somali Republic was created on 1 July 1960 through the union of the former British Somaliland Protectorate in the north and the Trust Territory of Somaliland, administered by Italy, in the south. Almost immediately after the state formation, disagreements emerged over the terms of the union and the distribution of political power. Lewis (1972) argues that the creation of the republic fundamentally altered the political position of northern elites by shifting the balance of power towards the south, with Mogadishu becoming the national capital and the center of political, administrative, and economic life. Northern political elites consequently had to adapt to a political order in which they exercised comparatively less influence. These grievances contributed to growing dissatisfaction among northern elites, reflected in an unsuccessful coup attempt by British-trained military officers from the north in December 1961. Dualeh (1994) argues that many northern elites believed they had been short-changed by the union because the first post-independence administration failed to allocate them the presidency, the premiership, or several key ministerial portfolios, including foreign affairs, interior, finance, and justice. Southern elites also occupied a disproportionate share of senior positions within the civil service, the Somali National Army, and the police service (Dualeh, 1994).

These political grievances were reinforced by institutional differences inherited from the British and Italian colonial administrations. The two territories entered independence with different administrative traditions, legal systems, and military training. As Dualeh (1994) observes, officers trained under the British and Italian systems often differed even in basic military procedures, illustrating the broader institutional divide that accompanied political unification. Alongside these institutional differences, party politics provided another arena in which regional and clan-based interests shaped competition for state power. Before independence, four principal political parties dominated Somali politics. In the south, the Somali Youth League (SYL), founded in 1943, emerged as the dominant nationalist movement and represented a broad coalition of major clan constituencies (Lewis, 1972). Its principal competitor was the Hizbia Digil Mirifle Soomaaliyeed (HDMS), which represented Digil and Rahanweyn interests. In the north, politics was largely organized around the Somaliland National League (SNL) and the United Somali Party, which reflected different regional and clan constituencies (Lewis, 1972).

When the two legislatures merged in July 1960, the new National Assembly comprised 123 members: 90 from the south and 33 from the north. Adan Abdulle Osman became the republic's first president, while Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke was appointed prime minister. Although the new administration sought to balance representation across regions and political parties, competition within the ruling SYL quickly exposed underlying Darod and Hawiye clan rivalries. Dualeh (1994) notes that Darod politicians temporarily broke away from the SYL and established the Greater Somali League after accusing Hawiye leaders of dominating the party. Before independence, some Darod leaders had even petitioned the United Nations Trusteeship Council to postpone independence because of concerns over political representation. Although these divisions were eventually resolved and the dissident leaders returned to the SYL, they demonstrated that elite competition had become embedded within the country's dominant political movement. These unresolved tensions, together with growing dissatisfaction with the political leadership, contributed to the conditions preceding the military coup of October 1969. Following the assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke on 15 October 1969, parliament began preparations to elect a successor. Lewis (1972) argues that dissatisfaction with the political leadership, combined with growing instability within the parliamentary system, created an opportunity for military intervention and coup. Army officers moved swiftly to seize key institutions in Mogadishu, dissolved parliament, banned political parties, and established the Supreme Revolutionary Council under Major General Mohamed Siad Barre.

Initially, Barre's administration generated widespread public optimism. The regime promoted Somali nationalism, introduced ambitious development programs, and sought to suppress clan-based political mobilization in favor of a centralized state. During the early years of military rule, this centralization appeared to reduce overt elite competition. The regime's political trajectory, however, changed significantly following its defeat in the 1977–1978 Ogaden War against Ethiopia. As the regime became increasingly vulnerable, Barre relied more heavily on clan and kinship networks to consolidate power. Senior appointments within the government, military, and security services increasingly reflected patronage and familial loyalty rather than institutional merit (Dualeh, 1994; de Waal, 2018). Thus, rather than eliminating elite fragmentation, military rule transformed the channels through which political competition was expressed. Under the authoritarian system, competition was no longer conducted primarily through parliamentary parties but increasingly through patronage networks,



Somalia's Parliament votes to establish a permanent legislative body, marking a key milestone in the country's transition from a provisional constitutional framework adopted in 2012 (Photo Credit: TRT AFRIKA)

clan alliances, and struggles within the military and state apparatus.

These divisions intensified during the 1980s as opposition and rebel movements seeking to remove the military regime from power emerged, military defections increased, and the regime lost legitimacy. The centralization of political authority had not resolved the underlying competition for power; instead, it had concentrated that competition within the regime and the institutions through which it maintained control. By the time Siad Barre was overthrown in January 1991, elite fragmentation had once again become a defining feature of Somali politics. The collapse of the regime set the stage for the fragmentation of central authority and the proliferation of competing centers of political power, marking the beginning of a new phase in Somalia's political development.

State Collapse and the Fragmentation of Political Authority (1991–2012)

The overthrow of Mohamed Siad Barre in January 1991 marked a fundamental rupture in Somalia's political order. The collapse of the central state did not, however, eliminate elite competition. Instead, political authority became increasingly fragmented among warlords, clan-based militias, Islamist movements, and emerging subnational administrations. Between 1991 and 2012, the absence of central government created an environment in which competing political and military elites sought to control territory, resources, and populations. This period was therefore characterized not simply by state collapse, but by the proliferation of alternative centers of political authority.

In the immediate aftermath of the regime's collapse, Mogadishu and other parts of south-central Somalia experienced intense political and armed competition. Different armed groups and warlords established areas of influence, while control over neighborhoods and strategic locations became an important source of political and economic power. In Mogadishu, two warlords, Ali Mahdi Mohamed and Mohamed Farah Aideed, who had initially been part of the United Somali Congress (USC), emerged as the principal rival leaders. Although the USC had contributed to the overthrow of Barre, the movement subsequently fractured along clan lines, and the two leaders and their forces competed for control of different parts of the capital. This rivalry reflected the broader fragmentation of political authority that followed the collapse of the central state. Checkpoints, militias, and competing armed groups became important instruments through which political and economic elites exercised authority. The

absence of a functioning central state enabled armed actors to control territory and extract resources, while political competition became increasingly intertwined with clan mobilization. Kapteijns (2013) documents the extensive violence targeting civilians in Mogadishu and the displacement that accompanied the breakdown of political order. These developments demonstrated that the central challenge facing Somalia was not simply the absence of government, but the emergence of multiple competing actors claiming political authority.

Alongside the rise of warlords and clan-based militias, Islamist movements emerged as another source of political organization and contestation. Al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), an Islamist movement formed in 1984 that operated clandestinely during the final years of the Barre regime, became more active following the collapse of the state and attempted to establish territorial control in parts of Somalia (Menkhaus, 2002). Its activities challenged the authority of warlords and other armed actors. AIAI sought to establish control in the northeastern port city of Bossasso and later in parts of southern Somalia. In Bossasso, the movement was defeated by the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), led by Abdullahi Yusuf, who had previously opposed the Barre regime. Yusuf later became the first president of Puntland and, in 2004, president of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). AIAI subsequently established a presence in parts of southern Somalia, including Luuq in the Gedo region, from where it also sought to operate against the Ethiopian government. Ethiopian military action eventually weakened and dispersed the organization in 1997 (Menkhaus, 2002).

The decline of AIAI did not, however, end the role of Islamist actors in Somalia's political fragmentation. Instead, Islamic institutions began to emerge as alternative sources of authority, particularly in Mogadishu, where clan-based Islamic sharia courts appeared in parts of the city during the late 1990s. These courts initially provided mechanisms for dispute resolution and local security in an environment characterized by weak state institutions and widespread criminality (Barnes & Hassan, 2007). They were often supported by local business interests seeking greater security and relied on clan-based militias to enforce their decisions. The emergence of the courts illustrated an important shift in the nature of political authority after 1991. Whereas warlords relied primarily on armed force and territorial control, the courts sought to derive legitimacy from religious authority and their ability to provide security and resolve disputes. Their emergence therefore reflected both the continuing fragmentation of authority and the search by communities and economic actors for alternative mechanisms of governance in the absence of an effective central state.

By late 2004, the various Islamic courts in north and south Mogadishu had united under the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), with Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed becoming its chairman (Barnes & Hassan, 2007). The ICU subsequently emerged as a significant political and military force in Mogadishu. Its principal domestic opponents were a coalition of Somali warlords organized under the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), which was reportedly supported and funded by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The American objective was allegedly to identify and apprehend al-Qaeda operatives and other fugitives wanted by the United States who were believed to be hiding in Somalia, including individuals reportedly sheltered in areas under the ICU's influence. The CIA therefore worked through Somali warlords, who were expected to locate these individuals and hand them over to the United States. Fighting between the ARPCT and the ICU intensified in 2006. Supported by sections of the population and the business community, the ICU eventually defeated the warlords and took control of Mogadishu (Barnes & Hassan, 2007). Its success demonstrated the extent to which political authority had remained contested since 1991. The organization challenged warlords who had dominated the capital for years and temporarily altered the balance of power among Somalia's competing elites. However, the ICU was not a unified political organization: it contained different ideological and political tendencies, and disagreements persisted over its objectives and relations with neighboring states.

The ICU's rise heightened tensions with Ethiopia, which supported the weak TFG based in Baidoa and viewed the growing influence of Islamist forces with concern. Ethiopia intervened militarily in Somalia in December 2006, leading to the rapid collapse of the ICU's territorial control and the dispersal of its forces. The intervention also contributed to the emergence of al-Shabaab as a major insurgent organization. Al-Shabaab emerged from the more radical and hardline elements associated with the Islamic Courts and became a leading force in the armed resistance against Ethiopian troops. Its insurgency, together with the deployment of African Union peacekeepers from Uganda and Burundi in 2007, fundamentally reshaped Somalia's political and security environment. By the end of the

decade in 2010, al-Shabaab had established substantial territorial and political influence across parts of south-central Somalia (Hansen, 2013). These developments formed part of a broader pattern of shifting power among competing actors. Warlords, clan-based militias, Islamist movements, and emerging political administrations each sought, at different times, to fill the vacuum created by state collapse. Rather than producing a single alternative authority, these struggles generated a highly fragmented political landscape in which authority remained dispersed among multiple actors.

Alongside these armed and political struggles, international actors repeatedly attempted to reconstruct a Somali state. Between 1991 and the early 2000s, numerous reconciliation conferences were convened outside Somalia, including in Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Djibouti, and Cairo. Most failed to establish a durable national political settlement. Their repeated failure reflected the difficulty of reconciling competing political interests in a context where powerful elites had developed independent territorial, military, and economic bases (Menkhaus, 2007).

The emergence of Somaliland and Puntland added another dimension to this fragmented political order. Somaliland, in the north, declared its independence from Somalia and laid claim to the territory of the former British Somaliland protectorate, which had gained independence in June 1960 before uniting with the former Italian-administered territory. Although Somaliland experienced internal conflict between 1991 and 1998, it eventually established a relatively stable political order and continued to pursue independence from the rest of the Somali Republic. Puntland, on the other hand, was established in 1998 and drew much of its political support from the Harti branch of the Darod clan. Its territorial claims also overlapped with those of Somaliland in areas inhabited by Harti Darod communities. Both developed relatively stable systems of local administration compared with much of south-central, although they followed fundamentally different political trajectories. Somaliland declared independence, while Puntland positioned itself as a constituent entity within a future federal Somalia. Their emergence contributed to a growing international consensus that federalism could provide a framework for reconstructing the Somali state while accommodating the country's fragmented political landscape.

The Mbagathi peace process in Nairobi culminated in 2004 with the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government and the election of Abdullahi Yusuf as its president. The TFG incorporated many of the warlords and other political elites who had emerged during the preceding period of conflict, including some who were appointed to ministerial positions. Their incorporation into the formal political system, however, did not resolve the underlying problem of elite fragmentation. The new government struggled to establish effective authority in Mogadishu, where powerful warlords continued to control territory and resisted its attempts to establish itself in the capital. The TFG consequently operated initially from Nairobi before relocating to Jowhar and later Baidoa (Menkhaus, 2007). Its experience illustrates a central continuity in Somalia's political development: the creation of formal national institutions did not automatically translate into political authority or legitimacy. Political elites continued to compete over territory, resources, and state institutions, while the absence of a broadly accepted political settlement limited the government's capacity to consolidate authority.

The period from 1991 to 2012 therefore did not represent a complete departure from the elite competition that had characterized Somalia's earlier political history. Instead, the collapse of the central state transformed the form that competition took. Parliamentary rivalry was replaced by competition among warlords, clan-based political networks, Islamist movements, and emerging subnational administrations. International reconciliation efforts and the establishment of transitional institutions repeatedly sought to rebuild national authority, but they struggled to overcome the competing interests of political elites. Meanwhile, the emergence of territorially based administrations, particularly Somaliland and Puntland, helped shape the subsequent debate over federalism as a framework for accommodating competing political interests. Federalism was intended to provide a way of managing this fragmented political landscape within a new constitutional order. However, as the next section demonstrates, it became another arena in which Somalia's political elites contested authority, resources, and the distribution of power between the center and the periphery.

Federalism and Contemporary Elite Contestation (2012–Present)

The military gains against al-Shabaab after 2011 created renewed optimism about Somalia's prospects for political reconstruction. Following the deployment of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), initially

with Ugandan and Burundian contingents, the mission gradually moved from a largely defensive role to direct combat operations against al-Shabaab. AMISOM forces pushed al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu in August 2011 and subsequently helped drive the group from several other towns in south-central Somalia, including Baidoa and Kismayo. By 2014, the mission had expanded to include forces from Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. These military gains contributed to a broader sense that Somalia was entering a new political phase. Members of the Somali diaspora returned to cities such as Mogadishu and Kismayo, with some investing in businesses and bringing their families back. This optimism coincided with a major political transition: in August 2012, the Provisional Federal Constitution was adopted, and in September of that year Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected president. The establishment of the federal system was widely viewed as an opportunity to accommodate Somalia's political and regional diversity while rebuilding national institutions.

Between 2012 and 2016, four additional federal member states were established alongside Puntland, which had existed since 1998: Jubaland, South West State, Galmudug, and Hirshabelle. However, these emerging administrations were institutionally weak. They controlled limited areas of territory, particularly major towns secured through international military operations, and their ability to exercise authority and provide security remained heavily dependent on external military support. Moreover, federalism did not emerge from a settled political consensus. The Provisional Federal Constitution was itself the product of elite bargaining and left several fundamental questions unresolved, postponing contentious issues for subsequent negotiation. These included the division of powers and responsibilities between the federal government and the member states, the allocation of resources, and the broader distribution of political authority. Although the constitution was intended to be reviewed and finalized before being subjected to a public referendum, successive political leaders have struggled to reach agreement on these issues.

The persistence of these disagreements illustrates a central argument of this article: federalism has not eliminated elite fragmentation but has provided a new institutional arena in which it is expressed. Political competition that was previously manifested through parliamentary parties, military networks, warlords, and competing armed movements increasingly became institutionalized through struggles between the federal government and the federal member states. The unresolved constitutional settlement has consequently become both a product and a source of continuing elite contestation. Federal and state competition has become one of the most important arenas of political conflict in contemporary Somalia, with the federal government and member-state administrations, repeatedly disagreeing over political authority, security responsibilities, constitutional interpretation, and access to national and external resources. At different times, these disagreements have reflected personal rivalries between political leaders; at others, they have assumed regional, institutional, or clan-based dimensions (Bryden, 2025).

The federalization process has also contributed to the consolidation of political territories around dominant clan constituencies. Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (2020) and Ahmad (2015) argue that the formation of federal member states has generated concerns about the marginalization of minority groups and the concentration of political and economic benefits within dominant clan constituencies. The establishment of member states has therefore not simply decentralized political authority; it has also generated new forms of local competition over territory, political representation, resources, and access to state institutions (Mosley, 2015). These dynamics are particularly evident in states where competing clan constituencies seek to influence the distribution of political power. In Jubaland and Hirshabelle, for example, competition among different clan actors has complicated efforts to establish broadly accepted political arrangements. At the local level, federalism has sometimes reproduced the same patterns of elite competition that characterized national politics before and after the collapse of the state.

The period from 1991 to 2012 therefore did not represent a complete departure from the elite competition that had characterized Somalia's earlier political history. Instead, the collapse of the central state transformed the form that competition took

Competition over economic resources has further shaped relations between the federal government and the member states. Puntland and Jubaland, in particular, administer ports that generate significant revenue in an economy in Somalia that is heavily dependent on imports. Their comparatively greater ability to generate and retain local revenue provides these administrations with resources that can support their political institutions and security forces. South West State, Galmudug, and Hirshabelle, by contrast, have generally maintained closer relations with Mogadishu and have been more dependent on resources devolved by the federal government (Bryden, 2025). Economic autonomy therefore affects the political bargaining power of member states and contributes to differences in their relationships with the federal center. These differences in economic capacity and political leverage have reinforced wider disagreements over the distribution of authority and resources within the federal system.

Such tensions have persisted across successive federal administrations, including the government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmaajo" (2017-2022) and the administration of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who returned to office in May 2022. Federal and state authorities have repeatedly accused one another of exceeding their constitutional powers, even though the constitutional framework remains incomplete and ambiguous. Disputes have centered on resource allocation, power sharing, constitutional review, electoral arrangements, and the respective responsibilities of the federal and state governments. Attempts to resolve these disagreements have frequently resulted either in political stalemate or in agreements whose implementation has proved difficult.

The political narratives advanced by the two sides further reflect the underlying nature of the contest. Puntland and Jubaland have accused Mogadishu of seeking to centralize authority and of negotiating in bad faith, while the federal government has portrayed the two administrations as obstructing constitutional reform and seeking excessive autonomy. These competing interpretations have contributed to a persistent lack of trust between the center and the regions (Bryden, 2025). At various points, Puntland and Jubaland have



Somalia's Jubaland and Puntland leaders arrive in Mogadishu for election talks on February 10, 2026 (Photo Credit: Somali Guardian)

suspended cooperation with the federal government or announced that they no longer recognize aspects of its authority.

The consequences of this political fragmentation extend beyond constitutional politics. Disagreements between federal and member-state authorities have complicated security coordination, affected the implementation of security-sector reforms, and generated disputes over the allocation and management of international security assistance. Regional authorities have frequently complained that assistance channeled through Mogadishu does not adequately reach them, while the federal government has faced criticism over the effectiveness and deployment of national security forces (Bryden, 2025). This security dimension is particularly important because political fragmentation directly affects the state's capacity to respond to armed opposition from al-Shabaab. Where federal and member-state authorities disagree over command structures, resource allocation, or political priorities, collective action becomes more difficult. Elite competition can therefore weaken the state capacity required both to consolidate the federal system and to address the security threats confronting the country.

The contemporary federal order thus represents both a significant departure from and a continuation of Somalia's earlier political history. Unlike previous periods, when elite competition was expressed more directly through armed factionalism and competing political or military networks, contemporary contestation is increasingly channeled through formal political institutions and intergovernmental relations. Yet the underlying drivers remain recognizable across Somalia's different political periods: competition for political authority, resources, patronage, territorial influence, and political survival. Federalism was intended to provide a framework for managing these competing interests by distributing political authority between the center and the regions. Instead, the absence of agreement over the precise distribution of that authority has made federalism itself an arena of political contestation.

This history helps explain why Somalia's federal state-building project has proved difficult to consolidate. Institutional arrangements alone cannot resolve conflicts among elites who lack a sufficiently broad agreement on the distribution of political power. Without sustained political dialogue, negotiated compromise, and arrangements that provide credible guarantees to both federal and regional actors, constitutional reform risks becoming another source of competition rather than a mechanism for resolving it. The experience of the post-2012 period therefore reinforces the broader argument of this article: elite fragmentation in Somalia has changed form across different political periods, but it has remained a persistent feature of the country's political development. Federalism has altered the arena in which elites compete without removing the underlying incentives and relationships that produce fragmentation. The consolidation of the Somali state consequently depends not only on strengthening institutions but also on developing political arrangements capable of managing elite competition between the center and the periphery.

Conclusion

Elite fragmentation remains one of the most persistent and destabilizing features of Somalia's political landscape. From the postcolonial period to contemporary federal Somalia, rivalry and competition among political elites have consistently shaped the state-building project, perpetuated instability, and undermined efforts to build cohesive national institutions. This fragmentation is not a recent phenomenon but has been embedded in Somalia's political order since the establishment of the postcolonial state in 1960. It was evident in the clan-based rivalries of the early parliamentary period, persisted under Siad Barre's military regime despite efforts to centralize political authority, and became particularly pronounced during the years of state collapse between 1991 and 2012, when warlords, armed groups, and other competing centers of authority proliferated. Although the forms of competition changed across these periods, a recurring pattern remained: political elites often prioritized personal, clan, and regional interests over the consolidation of cohesive national institutions and a unified political order.

In contemporary Somalia, elite fragmentation has increasingly manifested through rivalry between the federal government in Mogadishu and the federal member states. Established following the adoption of the Provisional Federal Constitution in August 2012, the federal system was intended to address longstanding grievances, decentralize political authority, and create mechanisms for cooperation and resource-sharing. However, it has not resolved the underlying competition among political elites. Instead, unresolved questions

> From the postcolonial period to contemporary federal Somalia, rivalry and competition among political elites have consistently shaped the state-building project, perpetuated instability, and undermined efforts to build cohesive national institutions

concerning constitutional authority, resource allocation, political representation, and security responsibilities have made federalism itself an arena of continued contestation. More than a decade after the adoption of the provisional constitution, the inability of political leaders to reach durable agreement on these issues has weakened institutional development, slowed the state-building process, and consumed considerable political attention that could otherwise be directed towards security, development, and the welfare of Somali citizens.

Somalia's state-building challenge is therefore not merely institutional but fundamentally political. Institutional arrangements cannot, by themselves, resolve persistent competition among elites where there is insufficient consensus over the distribution and exercise of power. Federalism can provide a framework for managing political diversity, but its effectiveness depends on the willingness of political elites to negotiate, compromise, and accept rules that constrain unilateral attempts to accumulate power. For Somalia's state-building project to make meaningful progress, greater attention must therefore be given to political reconciliation and the management of elite competition. This requires sustained and inclusive dialogue among federal and state-level political actors, negotiated agreement on the division of constitutional powers and resources, and political arrangements that provide credible assurances to both the center and the periphery. Such efforts are necessary not only to complete the constitutional settlement but also to build trust between different levels of government and strengthen cooperation on security and other national priorities.

Ultimately, consolidating a functional federal state will depend on Somalia's ability to transform elite competition from a source of political fragmentation into a form of political contestation that can be managed within agreed and legitimate institutions. The challenge is not to eliminate political competition, but to establish a political order in which competing interests can be negotiated without repeatedly undermining national institutions and the broader state-building project.

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The Civil War in Sudan: Sub-clan Rivalries and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Defections

By Amal Hamdan, Ph.D

Abstract

In early 2026 the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) Commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan reiterated a "general amnesty" for Rapid Support Forces (RSF) members, the state military's primary opponent in the ongoing war that erupted in April 2023. General amnesties, or blanket amnesties, are tantamount to unconditional immunity without accountability: perpetrators of crimes do not need to come forward and their crimes remain shrouded in mystery. Burhan said fighters who "were misled" and willing to "lay down their arms" would be given full immunity. Notable RSF defectors who have received the SAF amnesty include Major General Nour Al-Qubba and Commander Ali Rizq Allah, known as Al-Savannah, both instrumental in the October 2025 siege and capture of El-Fasher in Darfur, which the UN's independent international fact finding mission for Sudan has said bears the "hallmarks of genocide" (Report of the international fact finding mission for the Sudan, 2026).

While some analysts and media reports have sought to portray the defections as a potentially serious blow to the RSF's military capabilities, such assessments overlook two interconnected underlying factors to account for defections: the subclan tensions within the Rizeigat tribe, where the RSF draws the majority of its fighters, and the more than two decades-long rivalry for political dominance in Darfuri and national politics between Musa Hilal and RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, widely known as Hemedti. Although Hilal and Hemedti both belong to the Rizeigat, Hilal is leader of the Mahamid, a subclan of the Rizeigat, while Hemedti belongs to the Mahariya subclan. This article examines these subclan tensions and the Hemedti-Hilal rivalry.

This is relevant because it suggests that defections are unlikely to impact the military conflict. Rather, RSF defections suggest that, first, Hemedti may be struggling to manage subclan and tribal alliances and, second, the SAF is reviving the same tactics used by military intelligence under the ousted Omar Bashir regime: exploiting subclan tensions for political gains. The article concludes that the misuse of "amnesty" is particularly dangerous because it contributes to the widely held notion amongst Sudanese that all amnesties are blanket amnesties. This fails to consider a type of amnesty that has the potential to contribute to achieving stable peace and break the cycle of impunity: conditional amnesty linked to truth telling.

Introduction

Since early 2026, a trickle of Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanders have defected to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), each folded into a "general amnesty" that SAF Commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan announced for fighters willing to lay down their arms. (Middle East Monitor, 2026). Framed by some observers as evidence that the RSF may be fracturing under military pressure, these defections have taken on outsized political significance more than three years into Sudan's civil war. (Younes, 2026; Musa, 2026;MORE)

This article argues that the wave of RSF defections is better explained by two long-running and interconnected dynamics internal to the Rizeigat tribe than by any genuine collapse in the RSF's fighting capacity: the decades-old rivalry between Hilal and RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, more widely known as Hemedti, for political dominance in Darfur and Sudan nationally, and escalating subclan tensions between Hemedti's Mahariya and Hilal's Mahamid – fuelled both by Hemedti's promotion of his own clan within the RSF and by the RSF's own drone assault on the Mahamid stronghold of Mistariha. It further argues that SAF's use of the term "amnesty" to describe this process is itself a misnomer: rather than a policy of general, collective immunity, it functions as a targeted, transactional incentive aimed at aggrieved individual commanders, at least two of whom



Sudanese tribal leader Musa Hilal accuses RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) of fueling divisions and issuing threats against his life (Photo Credit: Sudan Tribune)

have reportedly received substantial payments financed by Saudi Arabia, to switch sides. (African Intelligence, 2026). In this sense, SAF is reviving a tactic long used by Sudanese military intelligence under ousted President Omar al-Bashir: exploiting tribal and subclan grievances for political advantage.

This distinction carries weight well beyond the battlefield. By stretching "amnesty" to describe what is, in practice, an individualized arrangement designed to peel off disgruntled commanders, SAF risks reinforcing an assumption already widespread among Sudanese: that any amnesty must be a blanket amnesty, indiscriminately absolving those responsible for atrocities committed since April 2023. This article contends that conflating the two undermines a more promising alternative – conditional amnesty linked to truth-telling – capable of supporting both accountability and a durable peace.

The article proceeds in three parts. It first traces the origins of the Hilal-Hemedti rivalry and the subclan tensions within the Rizeigat that underpin it, from their shared roots in the Janjaweed to Hilal's 2021 amnesty and 2024 realignment with SAF. It then examines the immediate triggers behind the recent Mahamid defections, including the RSF's attack on Mistariha and perceived Daglo family interference in Mahamid succession. The article then situates SAF's amnesty policy within the comparative literature on wartime amnesties, contrasting it with Uganda's experience demobilising the Lord's Resistance Army, before turning to the case of defected RSF commander Nour al-Qubba to show how amnesty is being used to exploit individual and subclan grievances rather than to induce large-scale defection. The article concludes with recommendations for the Quintet, the international mechanism tasked to focus on Sudan's political track, specifically laying the groundwork for post-conflict peacebuilding frameworks. The Quintet, which brings together the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab League, United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU), as well as Sudanese stakeholders should introduce the concept of conditional amnesty linked to truth-telling into political negotiations, and for civil society to begin community-level consultations on what conditions, if any, should attach to future amnesties.

The Hilal-Hemedti rivalry and subclan tensions within the RSF

There is a longstanding rivalry between Hilal and Hemedti for dominance in both Darfuri and Sudanese national politics. Hilal and Hemedti rose to prominence during the 2003–2004 ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity committed against the non-Arab Fur

and Massalit farming communities and the non-Arab Zaghawa pastoralists in Darfur by the Janjaweed and the Sudanese government under ousted President Omar al-Bashir. (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Hilal is widely considered a founding member and a top commander of the Janjaweed, the government-backed militias which a UN commission found responsible for perpetrating crimes under international law, including "indiscriminate attacks, including killing of civilians, torture, enforced disappearances, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement" in Darfur. (Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2008; Abdel Moneim, 2017; Baldo, 2017b; REDRESS, 2021; Abdel Fattah, 2024). Hemedti served under his cousin Hilal's command.

Hilal, as leader of the Mahamid subclan, holds a privileged position amongst Darfuri tribes, a status Hemedti has never wielded within his own subclan, the Mahariya. Hemedti has, however, proven more adept than Hilal at playing national politics. Leveraging his heavily armed militia and leadership heritage, Hilal achieved his ambition for a high political position within the Sudanese state in 2008, when he was appointed special adviser to Bashir. Having heavily armed his tribe and affiliates in Darfur, the Bashir regime was careful to accommodate Hilal. By 2013, Hilal began falling out more regularly with Bashir and that year, the Bashir regime created the RSF, appointing Hemedti its commander. The RSF initially consisted almost entirely of fighters from Hemedti's Mahariya clan (Baldo, 2017b). By 2014, Hilal formally fell out with the Bashir regime and established the Revolutionary Awakening Council (Sahwa) as a vehicle for his political and tribal aspirations. Clashes between the Mahamid and government security forces became more regular. In 2017, after years of selectively arming tribal groups to serve its interests, the Bashir regime issued a presidential decree announcing a nationwide disarmament campaign and tasked the RSF with collecting arms, beginning in Darfur. Although ostensibly a campaign to compel citizens to hand over illegal weapons and ammunition to Sudan's security forces, the presidential decree was widely regarded as a politically motivated move to rein in Hilal and other armed tribes in Darfur who had become a



Major General Al-Nour Ahmed Adam "Qubba," a founding member of the RSF, defects to the Sudanese Armed Forces and is received by Sovereignty Council Chairman Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in Dongola, Northern State (Photo Credit: Sudan Tribune)

threat to Bashir. Under Hemedti's leadership, the RSF was charged with leading the disarmament campaign. Hilal refused to cooperate and was defeated in clashes with the RSF, leading to his arrest and jailing in 2017. Hemedti absorbed many of Hilal's former allies and seized control of the then-lucrative Jebel Amer gold mines, previously under Hilal's control (Baldo, 2017a).

In 2021 amnesty was utilised as a political tool to justify Hilal's prison release. Sudan's political landscape had shifted dramatically: Bashir had been overthrown and was replaced by a joint civilian-military transitional ruling authority, the Sovereign Council, with Burhan at its helm, Hemedti his deputy and Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister. In March 2021 the Sovereign Council issued an amnesty for Hilal. Although the Sovereign Council framed Hilal's amnesty as a special pardon, it was inconsistent with Sudanese law. Article 211 of the 1991 Criminal Procedure Act specifies that a pardon may be issued by presidential decision after consultation with the Minister of Justice, who acts upon a recommendation from the Public Prosecution (Mikkawi, 2021). The amnesty issued bypassed these procedures entirely. Instead, Hemedti's brother, Abdelrahim Dagalo, appears to have sought the amnesty, according to Hilal's defence team, and Burhan endorsed it (Dabanga, 2021b). Hilal himself said that a meeting with Abdelrahim had led to his release. Some reports, however, attribute Hilal's release to Sudan's intelligence apparatus, the General Intelligence Service (GIS), on grounds that he would mobilise young men from the Arab tribes to fight alongside SAF in exchange for money.

In April 2024, a year after fighting broke out between the SAF and the RSF, Hilal announced his alignment with SAF and warned his followers not to join the RSF, accusing it of being composed of mercenaries. With this announcement, the power struggle between Hemedti and Hilal was reignited.

The RSF Attack on Mahamid Stronghold and Perceived Al-Daglo Interference in Clan Leadership as a Factor for Defections

The RSF siege of Mistariha, the historic stronghold of the Mahamid and Hilal in North Darfur, and perceptions that the Al-Daglos are interfering in the Mahamid clan leadership to impose a replacement of Hilal, are one critical factor accounting for the RSF defections to SAF. On 22 February 2026 the RSF launched drone strikes targeting Hilal's stronghold in Mistariha (Sudan Tribune, 2026d). Although Hilal survived the attack, a subsequent RSF assault on Mistariha killed at least 28 civilians and displaced hundreds, according to the Sudan Doctors Network (Sudan Tribune, 2026e). RSF Mahamid figures perceived the attack as crossing a red line that threatened subclan and tribal alliances. The attack on the Mahamid stronghold angered RSF figures hailing from the clan – including Savannah and Qubba. Shortly before his defection, Savannah had openly criticized the RSF leadership for the Mistariha attack.

> Hilal and Hemedti rose to prominence during the 2003–2004 ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity committed against the non-Arab Fur and Massalit farming communities and the non-Arab Zaghawa pastoralists in Darfur

Prior to the February drone attack, tensions between the Mahamid and Mistariya had soared after the two sides exchanged accusations over who was responsible for a drone strike on 1 January 2026 that killed RSF Darfur security adviser Hamid Ali Abu Bakr near Zalingei, Central Darfur (Sudan Tribune, 2026a). Abu Bakr, who belonged to the Mahamid, had enjoyed support from RSF Mahamid members (Sudan Tribune, 2026a). Hilal accused the RSF of killing its own advisor, accusing the group of deliberately g executing "our people," in reference to the Mahamid subclan (Sudan Tribune, 2026b; Beam Reports, 2026). For their part, the RSF accused Hilal's son, Fathi, of providing the SAF coordinates to conduct the drone strike that killed the RSF security adviser (Rakoba, 2026). Hilal's son strongly denied involvement in the attack (Dabanga, 2026a) In an effort to calm tensions within the Mahamid, a fact-finding committee of community figures was formed in North Darfur state, comprising around 40 tribal leaders and religious figures, to investigate the allegations against Hilal and Fathi. It concluded that Hilal and his son were not involved in the attack. (Sudafax, 2026). This incident, compounded by a growing perception amongst the RSF Mahamid commanders of attempts by another subclan to replace Hilal with a Mahariya-selected appointment, had fueled discontent prior the defections. In February, before the attack on Mistariha, Mahamid traditional leaders openly accused the Mahariya of interfering in

their internal structure, warning "our administration is a red line and we reject any attempts to replace our current leader and there is no alternative to the Mahamid leadership other than Musa Hilal." This coincided with Hilal openly accusing the RSF deputy commander-in-chief Abdelrahim Dagalo – Hemedti's brother – of attempting to sow divisions within the Mahamid (Sudan Tribune, 2026c).

Since then, every single RSF military defector to join SAF has hailed from the Mahamid clan. In a sign he is once again attempting to leverage his tribal base and leadership heritage as currency to elevate his political position within national politics, Hilal publicly welcomes defectors from his base in Khartoum, where he emerged in March following his escape from his North Darfur stronghold earlier this year (Sudan Tribune, 2026g). In August 2026 Hilal received RSF defector Abu Bakr Hamouda Dahloub , who had been the RSF's intelligence commander in North Kordofan state (Sudan Tribune, 2026h). These public displays, widely shared on Facebook which has become a major source of information for Sudanese since the April 2023 conflict, likely signal Hilal's attempts to reconfigure himself as a consequential figure to be reckoned with in Sudanese and Darfuri politics.

The military defections are occurring concurrently with political defections from RSF, often broadcast live on Saudi-funded channels, such as Al-Arabiya, which carried the August 2026 resignation of RSF-appointed Kordofan governor Hamed Mohammad Hamid (Al-Arabiya English, 2026). The discontent within the RSF stems from Hemedti and his brother Abdelrahim being seen as awarding the highest political and military positions to their family and subclan. This resentment is not new: a Small Arms Survey briefing in January 2025 documented frustration amongst Hemedti's Arab coalition partners as a result of being passed over for higher ranks within the RSF, which Hemedti has filled with members of his own clan (Craze and Makawi, 2025). Hemedti finds himself facing a precarious position similar to the one Bashir once faced: he must juggle tribal patronage ties and alliances to sustain loyalty.

All this suggests that the RSF defections are not necessarily an indicator that the militia is being weakened or dismantled but rather the resurgence of the Hilal-Hemedti rivalry, fuelled by subclan tensions stemming from Hemedti's promotion of Mahariya members, as well as anger from the Mahamid for the attack on Mistariha. Seeing an opportunity to exploit these issues for political gain, SAF announced "amnesty" for RSF fighters. A comparative assessment of amnesties issued in other conflict settings raises questions regarding SAF's instrumentalization of the term.

Amnesties in Conflict and why SAF's "Amnesty" Policy is not incentivising widespread RSF defections

Amnesties offered during conflict are best understood as a tactic in fighting the war itself (Loyle, Binningsbø, Gates, 2026). In some cases, amnesties issued during conflict successfully motivate defections and weaken the overall fighting capacity of rebel groups, particularly in cases where defections were coming from the rank-and-file troops. Large-scale defections can signal group weakness and undermine the capacity of rebel groups to mobilise militarily. While large-scale defection may threaten a rebel group, the defection of a limited number of individuals is unlikely to turn the tide of war. (Loyle, Binningsbø, Gates, 2026) This was the case in Uganda when the government, after more than a decade of conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), offered a conditional amnesty to rebel group members. Uganda's 2000 Amnesty Act stipulated a clear process and requirements for rebels to apply for amnesty (PA-X Peace Agreements Database, 2019). It allowed individuals who renounced violence, surrendered their arms and participated in a reintegration process that helped them rejoin their communities and promoted reconciliation (PA-X Peace Agreements Database, 2019). By May 2012, a total of 26,288 rebels from 29 different rebel groups had received amnesty; of these, 12,971 were former LRA combatants (Agger, 2012). Uganda's Amnesty Act was an "indisputably effective tool for undermining the cohesion of the LRA," Ugandan lawyer and transitional

Hilal is widely considered a founding member and a top commander of the Janjaweed, the government-backed militias which a UN commission found responsible for perpetrating crimes under international law ...



Sudan has been engulfed in a devastating power struggle between SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (right), and RSF, led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (left), for control of the country (Photo Credit: AFP)

justice expert Barney Afako has argued (Afako, 2012). In Uganda, an individualised amnesty process backed by reintegration support helped erode LRA ranks, although the Juba talks that followed never produced a signed final peace agreement. The Act's declaration of amnesty was itself removed in May 2012.

Even though SAF's "amnesty" has been unconditional, it has done little to incentivise RSF rank-and-file defections: of the RSF's estimated 400,000 rank-and-file combatants, less than 500 individuals have defected. It is therefore unlikely that limited RSF defections will undermine its military capacity. Moreover, it is unlikely that the SAF amnesty will encourage rank-and-file defections. Unlike Uganda's amnesty, which had built-in incentives for rank-and-file members to defect and reintegrate, the so-called amnesty does not include any processes for reintegrating RSF combatants, particularly children, or reconciliation mechanisms. It seems unlikely that SAF's "amnesty" was designed to achieve rank-and-file defections or to decisively undermine the RSF's military capabilities. Instead, the term "amnesty" is being used as a vehicle to legitimise the defections of RSF members, some of whom have reportedly received financial compensation from SAF.

Saudi Arabia reportedly provided SAF with millions of dollars to secure the defections of two RSF commanders, according to a July 2026 African Intelligence report. Al-Savannah reportedly received between $800,000 and $2.5 million while Al-Qubba received as much as $2.5 million (African Intelligence, 2026). Saudi Arabia is reportedly trying to weaken Islamist factions within SAF and to leverage this financial support to secure future concessions over the Red Sea through Port Sudan, according to Sudanese journalist and human rights defender interviewed for this piece, who spoke on condition of anonymity. These assessments align with Riyadh stepping up support of SAF as part of Riyadh's heightened security cooperation with the Sudanese army to protect the Red Sea corridor, where Houthi attacks are jeopardizing Saudi energy exports (Akin, 2026).

Sudan's military intelligence has a history of using the term amnesty to exploit tribal, subclan or ethnic tensions to undermine armed groups while simultaneously appealing to disgruntled opponents. Examining the individual calculus underlying Nour al-Qubba's defection to SAF suggests that amnesty is being used as a tool for individual Mahamid RSF commanders, angry at Hemedti for promoting members of the Mahariya to higher ranks,

> While previous peace agreements include transitional justice clauses, Sudan has never developed a transitional justice policy, except to implement blanket amnesty which has contributed to fueling ongoing cycles of violence

to switch sides. Al-Qubba expected to be promoted to the military governorship of North Darfur after the pivotal role he played in the siege of El-Fasher. When Hemedti instead appointed his relative, Jiddu Ibnshouk, a fellow Mahariya, Al-Qubba withdrew from ground operations and returned to his village in North Darfur for over seven months, according to anonymous sources quoted in the non-partisan Sudanese news network, Darfur24. Mahamid leader Musa Hilal helped to mediate Al-Qubba's defection to SAF, according to the same report published in April 2026. Al-Qubba's defection was accelerated after he received reports that the RSF were advancing militarily on his village to capture him; SAF offered him protection. Al-Qubba's defection suggests that SAF is using the term "amnesty" as a tool to exploit subclan, ethnic or tribal tensions amongst RSF commanders harbouring ambitions for greater power and influence. If the SAF had indeed issued blanket amnesty, this would be perceived as all encompassing, with collective group immunity granted without selective incentives to individuals. The continued misuse of the term amnesty will have long-term detrimental repercussions on efforts to implement accountability mechanisms, such as conditional amnesty linked to truth-telling, that have the potential to encourage reconciliation and reduce the recurrence of violence.

More importantly, SAF's "amnesty" is laying the groundwork for blanket amnesty - or general immunity - to be incorporated into a future peace deal. There is considerable diversity in designing amnesties, namely between unconditional blanket amnesty and conditional, individual amnesty. While it may not be possible to avoid amnesties in a peace settlement and post-conflict transition, it is possible to avoid unconditional, blanket amnesty undermine efforts to post-conflict efforts

Conclusion

Sudan's warring factions are well aware of the country's history of impunity. In a comparative analysis of 75 countries that applied amnesties in post-conflict political settlements, Sudan ranked among the highest rates of amnesty use among the countries surveyed. Every single peace deal in Sudan has granted blanket amnesty, either through practice or incorporating it into peace agreement frameworks, a pattern that has likely promoted impunity and violence.

In all likelihood, any peace deal to end the current conflict will likely incorporate amnesty provisions. While it may be near impossible to avoid adopting amnesty, it is possible to avoid blanket amnesty. Conditional amnesty has the potential to create space for reconciliation and restoring coexistence in Sudan. For amnesty in Sudan to support restoring social cohesion and end cycles of impunity and future, it is imperative that amnesty policies are designed within community-owned processes.

Sudan has never had a clearly defined accountability mechanism. There cannot be a wait-and-see approach to designing accountability mechanisms. Options need to be discussed now so that decisions can be implemented when the violence halts. Although a peace deal to end the conflict that erupted in April 2023 will probably offer amnesty, it is imperative that blanket amnesty not be an option. While it may not be possible to avoid amnesties to end the current conflict, it is possible to avoid blanket amnesty and to instead introduce conditional amnesty. Conditional amnesty provides that amnesty is granted to individual applicants who meet certain conditions. This often involves perpetrators individually applying through a formal process. A conditional amnesty process that publicly names applicants and what they have done is a form of accountability and can help reduce future impunity.

As the conflict grinds on, raising awareness amongst Sudanese stakeholders around these transitional justice measures – the difference between conditional and general amnesty, linking conditional amnesty to truth telling, the contours of a future truth commission and viable options for prosecutions – constitutes a crucial pursuit of justice and accountability without having to wait for a political transition to take place or for the war to end. The time is ripe to explore conditional amnesty linked to truth telling. Options for clearly

defined and viable accountability mechanisms should be introduced in Quintet-led talks. The Quintet, comprising representatives of the African Union, the United Nations, the Arab League, the European Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), has repeatedly said that any political process in Sudan must be accompanied by tangible actions to end the conflict that erupted in April 2023.

A good starting point would be supporting a truly participatory process to discuss accountability mechanisms, beginning with conditional amnesty linked to truth telling, involving Sudanese victims and survivor groups. The survivors and families of victims in communities that experienced gross human rights violations, and Sudan's civil society, are critical in any discussions around the design and implementation of these transitional justice measures. Awareness raising and consultations should take place so that key stakeholders – the survivors and families of victims in communities that experienced international crimes and gross human rights violations since April 2023 – are empowered to contribute effectively to the design and implementation of these measures.

Although civilian Sudanese stakeholders acknowledge the need for transitional justice, they have rarely, if ever, publicly discussed specific options amongst transitional justice mechanisms. While previous peace agreements include transitional justice clauses, Sudan has never developed a transitional justice policy, except to implement blanket amnesty which has contributed to fueling ongoing cycles of violence. There is an opportunity for Sudanese civilian stakeholders, as well as warring factions, to deliberate viable transitional justice mechanisms, particularly conditional amnesty linked to truth telling, within the Quintet track talks as well as other formal and informal tracks.

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About the Authors

Loula Thiebergien

Loula Thiebergien is a Master's student in International Relations and Global Governance at the University of Geneva, where her research engages with multilateral governance, peace and security, and conflict management. She is currently doing an exchange at Sorbonne Panthéon University in Paris to follow the Master's program in International Cooperation: Africa and the Middle East. Holding a degree in Political Science from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), with a year of study at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid, she developed her interest in East Africa during an internship at the Alliance Française in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2024. This experience sparked a lasting curiosity about the region's political and social dynamics. Since then, she has pursued research on a range of topics related to East Africa, from security to regional integration and migration governance, alongside a continued interest in cultural cooperation between Europe and the region. She writes in both French and English.

Loula can be reached at Loula.thiebergien1@gmail.com

Hossamaldeen Ibrahim

Hossamaldeen Ibrahim is a political analyst specializing in governance, political violence, and security dynamics in Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. He currently serves as an Africa Analyst at the Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute (BISI), where he produces policy briefs and early-warning assessments on political and security developments across the region. Previously, he served as a Research Fellow at the International Council on Human Rights, Peace and Politics, leading applied research on conflict, accountability, and governance in fragile settings. He has also worked with the European Union Delegation to Sudan and research institutions including the University of Khartoum. His research focuses on armed actors, war economies, and the role of regional and international actors in shaping conflict trajectories. He holds an Honors degree in Economics, Political Science, and International Relations and is fluent in Arabic and English.

Ibrahim can be reached at ibrahimhossamaldeen@gmail.com

Abdullahi Abdille Shahow

Abdullahi Abdille Shahow is a Horn of Africa conflict, political, governance, and security expert with more than 12 years of professional experience conducting research and analysis on conflict, security, governance, migration, and development across the region. He currently serves as a Research Fellow at the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies. Abdullahi has worked with or consulted for several organizations, including the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), the International Crisis Group (ICG), Sayara International, and Transparency International, among others. His work has been published in *African Arguments, HORN Bulletin, The New Humanitarian, Just Security, World Politics Review, The Elephant, and Think Africa Press,* among other outlets. Abdullahi holds a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in African Studies from the University of Cambridge and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from United States International University–Africa.

Abdullahi can be reached at a.abdille@horninstitute.org

Amal Hamdan, Ph.D

Dr. Amal Hamdan is a Sudan and MENA political analyst, transitional justice practitioner and electoral systems expert, with over 15 years of experience spanning conflict journalism, political research, and media development across the Arab region. Her Sudan expertise centres on the country's transitional justice landscape, disinformation and information manipulation, and the tribal and political dynamics driving the RSF-SAF conflict. From 2020 to 2023, she provided monthly political analysis on Sudan's transition to USAID, and has briefed US State Department officials on Sudan's evolving conflict and accountability landscape. She holds a PhD in Election Systems and Laws from King's College London, alongside an MA in Conflict Resolution in Divided Societies and a BA in Journalism and Communication Arts.

Amal can be reached at Amal.a.m.hamdan@gmail.com

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