

BRIEFING | MARCH 2023

Defining the endgame

Civil society voices on how to build a just, stable Somalia

This briefing presents the perspectives of Somali analysts and civil society organisations (CSOs) on the current security situation and challenges in Somalia, highlighting their recommendations relating to international security assistance and engagement. It is based on interviews conducted in November and December 2022 with highly knowledgeable representatives from CSOs, along with businesspersons, elders and analysts.

The briefing considers the gendered dynamics of conflict and insecurity, with a special focus on the impact of gender norms on violence and insecurity, including how women and girls are affected by the ongoing government offensive against al-Shabaab. It presents the human security concerns, needs and priorities of a number of communities in Somalia, including the views of women and marginalised groups. Furthermore, it captures a representative cross-section of perspectives of Somali CSO members and analysts on international engagement in Somalia, including lessons learnt. The report brings forward a variety of Somali voices on how international engagements could better support conflict transformation, peacebuilding and reconciliation in Somalia.

In the following sections, we discuss the current situation in Somalia and the security and social concerns (including the clan campaigns) which emerged during discussions. We also highlight the gendered impacts of conflict, exploring the challenges it presents to women, including gender-based violence (GBV), and how these challenges further contribute to violence and instability. Finally, we examine the potential for future conflict and the need for a political plan that deals with the issues people face and brings them on board to tackle them.

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Overview of the current situation

The security situation in Somalia remains a significant challenge for the Somali people, with ongoing conflict and violence creating instability and uncertainty in the country. While the government has continued its offensive against al-Shabaab, it has struggled to stabilise and hold territory.

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One of the main problems with the Somali Government's approach is that it continues to rely first and foremost on military responses without a sufficient corresponding focus on issues of state legitimacy and the longer-term drivers of conflict and instability. Furthermore, the Somali Government's security forces are hindered by a lack of resources and training. The government has struggled to build a well-functioning military and police force, which has limited its ability to effectively counter al-Shabaab and hold territory.

Security and social concerns

There are significant gendered impacts of conflict in the region, which, along with clan dynamics and the impact of droughts, further exacerbate the security situation. Government-held areas in Somalia have better services and government infrastructure, from the perspective of some Somalis; however, by their own (brutal) standards, the provision of security and justice under al-Shabaab was arguably more robust. While al-Shabaab heavily curtailed women's and girls' freedoms (including the freedom from forced marriage) in some cases they did provide a form of protection (previously absent) from sexual violence and kidnapping.¹ The Somali Government therefore needs to ensure that security in newly liberated areas does not worsen, and that measures to protect women and girls are adapted and improved.²

There is a need for external support to enable Somali security agencies to address concerns, but it is important that the Somali Government retains control of its own security operations and develops a sustainable domestic security infrastructure that is not overly reliant on external powers.

The clan campaigns

The clan campaigns, whereby the government has enlisted the support of clans and their militias in the fight against al-Shabaab, **have been a game changer**, finally giving people hope that the group can be defeated. People have realised that al-Shabaab is not as powerful as it always projected itself to be, and so the aura of fear which has surrounded the group has been weakened.

Whether or not this can be sustained over a long period, however, remains to be seen – and is a question that some clans, reluctant to join the uprising, have been asking.³

Emboldened by its early successes, the government has set high expectations for the future, working up the public – most of the respondents were carried along by the excitement in the air, believing that al-Shabaab would be defeated and that life would go back to normal. For instance, one interviewee told us they expected to see fewer bombings, and looked forward to a reduced security presence in everyday life.

Another respondent was more cautious, warning that if the current campaign runs out of steam, Somalis might see a resurgence of al-Shabaab or the rise of another group. Al-Shabaab, they argue, rose to meet a set of circumstances and demands that the government had failed to address through peaceful means. **If there is no**

political plan in place to deal with these issues after liberation, al-Shabaab's former supporters will grow restless and the group will reorganise and hit back. There is already evidence of this happening, with al-Shabaab attacking a group of soldiers and clan militia fighters in Mogadishu on 21 February 2023.⁴

The respondents were aware of the potential for future conflict after this round of war is completed. The campaign is largely dependent on clans being armed and expected to fight and police liberated areas. But clan rivalries are still an issue, and the government has decided not to intervene until they have managed to significantly reduce al-Shabaab's control of territory and its access to resources. This leaves open the potential for old grudges to erupt into violence in the future – made deadlier by the presence of government-supplied arms.⁵ Suppressing clan conflict is another area where al-Shabaab enjoyed some success. For example, it enforced a truce between clans in Adan Yabal and Moqokori districts, Hirshabelle, and in Galmudug it has punished elders whose clan members engage in clan warfare. With al-Shabaab out of the picture, it is not clear how long this uneasy peace will last.^{6,7}

Gendered impacts of conflict

In the past two decades, Somali women have joined both al-Shabaab and pro-government forces as combatants and supporters, encouraging people to join the fight and raising funds for the war chest.⁸ In response, all sides are suspicious of women – al-Shabaab has executed many women, accusing them of espionage, and the government unfairly casts women, especially those who cover their faces, in the role of potential suicide bombers.⁹

With no government mechanism in place to prevent violence against women, many women suffer GBV, including from intimate partners, and some have experienced online violence. Violence against women often goes unreported due to the risk of stigmatisation and the reported lack of response from men-dominated law enforcement and justice systems.¹⁰ The Sexual Offences Bill, drafted in 2018 and praised by women activists and international institutions as progressive, was never ratified by Parliament.¹¹ Due to gender norms, women often suffer the consequences of war: becoming displaced and relocating their families, providing unpaid care to the sick and wounded, and becoming heads of household if their men relatives die in the war.



Internally displaced Somali woman Habiba Bile holds her surviving goat following severe droughts near Dollow, Gedo Region, Somalia, 26 May 2022.

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Women often have to do all of this with very little money – only 20 per cent of women are employed.¹² Minority and marginalised communities are also at risk: as territory changes hands, some areas are earmarked for specific clans – and the minorities who already live there may not be treated fairly.¹³

Al-Shabaab has chosen to retaliate against communities it perceives as having been involved in the uprising against it. This has included the burning of villages, the seizure of livestock and the destruction of water wells.¹⁴ It also “continues to abduct women and girls, to force families to give them their daughters to marry, and to occupy hospitals and maternity wards ... They target women activists and women working in local and national politics”.^{15,16} This, together with acute drought, has led to people being forcibly displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance, situations that put women and girls at risk of GBV.

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Despite this, the current government (which is dominated by men) has not consulted women meaningfully, including in its offensive against al-Shabaab. Some view women’s place as being in the home, not the public sphere, which means they are excluded from political decision-making spheres and from designing interventions by security forces. This results in their concerns and needs being overlooked, with severe negative consequences both for them and for society as a whole.

Drought

The government offensive against al-Shabaab has taken place over two rainy seasons. This has made it difficult for people to plant and harvest crops – a situation made worse by al-Shabaab tactics:¹⁷ in Hirshabelle, al-Shabaab kidnapped farmers, preventing them from making a living while their relatives were fighting the group. This has resulted in food insecurity and an increase in poverty and economic deprivation, both of which disproportionately affect women, making them increasingly vulnerable to GBV.¹⁸

With the most recent rainy season not as wet as expected, al-Shabaab is taking advantage of the dry weather, seizing livestock (and people) as a coercive tool to suppress the insurgent clans. This has worsened the humanitarian situation and forced people to flee liberated areas.¹⁹

It is essential to consider how security operations affect livelihoods and how to mitigate a humanitarian catastrophe. Federal and state governments have made some efforts to bring parties together to carry out the ongoing stabilisation plan, including supporting internally displaced communities who are trying to flee from the ongoing war against al-Shabaab, and these efforts must be strengthened.

Security assistance

Security assistance in the past decade has helped Somalia build from the ground up the security institutions that collapsed with the overthrow of the Barre government in 1991 and were not properly replaced; however, the security architecture remains unclear, with the roles and responsibilities of the federal government and federal member states as well as collaboration between different security units to be clarified. In addition to the problematic security architecture, security forces remain clan-based, undisciplined and under-equipped, and there are reports of personnel committing sexual violence.²⁰ While international support has been helpful in getting the security sector to its current state, Somalia needs gender-responsive security sector reform to build and maintain an effective, accountable and ultimately sustainable security sector that respects human rights and humanitarian standards and ensures justice and protection for all Somalis.²¹

By failing to address the shortcomings of the security sector, the current model of security assistance not only leaves Somalia over-reliant on its international benefactors; it has also opened the door to rival countries, who have intervened in Somalia’s political affairs.²² Security sector reform is therefore not just a security issue, but would also strengthen the political and social fabric of the country.

The role of the international community

The international community must support efforts to provide equal security and justice services for all, both in areas long held by the government and in newly liberated areas. This would allow the government to build legitimacy and establish a clearer contrast with al-Shabaab, who have been effective in enforcing their own brand of justice in areas under their control.²³ Continuing support for the constitutional process – for instance, supporting reconciliation and achieving political settlements at subnational levels – is needed.²⁴

Conflict transformation and stability in Somalia require a holistic approach. There are many needs that Somalis would like to see met, not only those relating to security. Respondents said that the international community should invest in jobs, fisheries, agriculture, infrastructure support, and peace and reconciliation.²⁵



Somali security officers drive past a section of Hotel Hayat, the scene of an al Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab group militant attack in Mogadishu, Somalia, 20 August 2022.

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Conclusion

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These conclusions and recommendations are from the perspectives of a range of Somali analysts and CSOs, and are grounded in current dynamics. The support the international community is giving to the Somali Government is focused on security; the government’s focus has therefore become lopsidedly security-centric. While this may be necessary to secure the country, it presents us with a paradox: going to war to claim legitimacy while, on the other hand, investing too little in earning that legitimacy – through dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation. As some of the respondents said, removing al-Shabaab from the picture does not solve the fundamental issues: clans still hold grudges; the

government continues to be weak in the provision of justice; violence and discrimination against women and minorities persist; and the ideological issues on which al-Shabaab is built have not been addressed.

Al-Shabaab leveraged existing social conditions in Somalia to make itself an integral part of the social fabric. Eliminating it without addressing all the concerns and grievances that led to its creation risks creating an opportunity for an upstart group to fill the vacuum. Still, we are getting ahead of ourselves: while the respondents mirrored the strategic communications of the government (which touts its victories over al-Shabaab), the fact of the matter is that the government is a long way from defeating the group.

The international community must invest more in gender-responsive peacebuilding, local reconciliation, power sharing between the federal government and the states, and the completion of the constitutional review process. It is possible this campaign may see more successes on the battlefield, but they will be for nothing if the government cannot govern after winning.

Recommendations for the international community

1.

Address the root causes of conflict and insecurity by promoting political solutions to longstanding grievances and disputes (for example, over land and resources), clan rivalries, and marginalisation of certain groups. This should be based on a gender analysis of conflict, as well as consultations with local communities and CSOs, and should focus on support for locally led peacebuilding. Address the gendered root causes of conflict and violence that fuel GBV, reinforce harmful gender norms, hinder women's economic and political participation and reinforce conflict and instability.

2.

Strengthen the capacity of the Somali Government and security forces to provide security and justice to the population while adopting a gender-transformative approach. This may involve improving the training of security forces (through focusing on accountability, civilian protection, international humanitarian law, international human rights law), increasing their presence in rural areas, and establishing effective systems of justice and law enforcement that provide equal support and service to all, including women and marginalised groups.

3.

Address the gendered impacts of conflict by promoting the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and decision-making, and protect women from sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination. Women should play a significant role in decision-making related to basic services, constitutional reviews, reform of the justice and security sectors, peacebuilding, state-building and humanitarian aid. Women activists and women rights organisations should be consulted in all these processes.²⁶

4.

Advocate for the reintroduction and ratification of the Sexual Offences Bill (which was praised by women's rights organisations), or support the adoption of another bill that criminalises GBV, including rape, child marriage, sex trafficking and domestic violence.

5.

Provide long-term, core and flexible funding to CSOs, particularly women's rights and women-led organisations working on gender equality and fighting to end GBV and discrimination. Ensure that this funding is accessible to allow for a diversity of organisations to access it and that it is not conditioned to the government's or donors' interests. Address the impacts of drought and other environmental factors on the security and well-being of the population, such as by promoting sustainable land use and resource management practices and providing support to the most affected communities. Ensure that women and marginalised groups are meaningfully consulted in these interventions.

6.

International partners should support Somalia's security and development needs in a conflict- and gender-sensitive manner, including through funding for development programmes and humanitarian assistance, and support for capacity building, institution building and civil society. Development programmes and humanitarian aid should include funding for gender-specific activities and ensure the integration of gender in all its activities and strategies.

7.

Support basic services and government infrastructure in liberated areas, to ensure that these areas are not left behind in terms of development and are able to provide basic services to their population.

Recognise the importance of clan dynamics and work to reconcile and engage with different clans to promote stability and reduce the risk of clan conflict. This may involve promoting dialogue, peacebuilding, and reconciliation initiatives at the local level and ensuring that clan grievances are addressed in political decision-making. Ensure that women's concerns are also considered and addressed and that women's participation in dialogues and reconciliation processes is equal, including at decision-making levels. Assess the risks of these actions and put together mitigation measures that protect women without undermining their participation.

Notes

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- 5 Interview with key Informant 1, Mogadishu, December 2022.
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- 26 Website of Beyond Consultations: <https://beyondconsultations.org/>



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

Cover photo: Armed security guards in a truck on a busy street corner in Mogadishu, Somalia.

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