

TRANSFORMING TURBULENCE INTO TRANQUILITY: CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN SOMALIA, 1991–2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the evolution of Somalia's protracted conflict from the collapse of the state in 1991 to ongoing peacebuilding efforts as of 2025. It identified the key drivers of instability as politicized clan dynamics, warlordism, violent extremism—particularly the rise of Al-Shabaab—and recurrent foreign interventions, all compounded by systemic governance failures, socio-economic marginalization, and unresolved historical grievances. Anchored in Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997) and Protracted Social Conflict Theory (Azar, 1990), the research explored how identity-based cleavages and entrenched inequalities have sustained cycles of violence. Employing a qualitative case study approach and document analysis, the study evaluated peacebuilding strategies such as federalism, national dialogue forums, African Union missions (AMISOM and ATMIS), and indigenous reconciliation mechanisms, especially Xeer-based mediation. The findings revealed that while international interventions have contributed to territorial gains and institutional stabilization, they often fell short in addressing grassroots legitimacy and the structural causes of conflict. In contrast, community-driven initiatives—particularly those involving traditional elders, women, and youth—proved more effective in fostering sustainable peace. The study concluded that durable stability in Somalia requires Somali-led governance reforms, strengthened coordination between federal and local authorities, a calibrated reduction in reliance on external peacekeepers, and strategic investment in inclusive, locally rooted development efforts.

Key Words: Somalia, protracted conflict, peacebuilding, federalism, clan dynamics, Al-Shabaab, AMISOM, ATMIS, reconciliation, Xeer, conflict transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The enduring nature of intrastate disputes and unstable governance has emerged as a significant concern of the 21st century. Armed conflicts are no longer confined to interstate combat; they are increasingly influenced by identity-based violence, insurgency, and prolonged civil wars inside fragile or failed governments. The 2023 Global Peace Index indicates that over 50% of current armed conflicts occur inside nations, many of which have lasted for more than a decade. Notwithstanding international peacekeeping efforts, multilateral diplomacy, and substantial humanitarian investments, some conflicts remain intractable owing to their deeply ingrained structural and relational foundations (GPI, 2023; World Bank, 2022). These advancements have resulted in the growth of peacebuilding frameworks that prioritize not just the cessation of violence but also the transformation of root causes, social healing, and sustainable governance systems. Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997) and Protracted Social Conflict Theory (Azar, 1990) have become significant for providing extensive frameworks that emphasize enduring peace, social equity, and inclusive engagement.

The Horn of Africa has become a focal point for interconnected political, ethnic, and economic crises. Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Somalia face concurrent crises, including territorial conflicts, ethnic marginalization, resource depletion, and transnational insurgencies. These processes have produced a convoluted network of regional instability, marked by feeble state institutions, disjointed political power, and entrenched identity differences. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) have been instrumental in mediation and peace enforcement, executing missions like the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and brokering peace agreements in Sudan and South Sudan (De Waal, 2015; ISS Africa, 2022). Nevertheless, these regional structures often grapple with limited budgetary resources, conflicting sovereign interests, and inadequate implementation capabilities. The geopolitical objectives of foreign parties, like the U.S., Turkey, UAE, and Ethiopia, complicate the regional peacebuilding picture, often leading to fragmented or ephemeral interventions (Harper, 2012; Williams, 2018).

The disintegration of the central government in Somalia in 1991, with the removal of President Mohamed Siad Barre, initiated an extended era of state failure and violent disintegration. The nation descended into a civil war, characterized by clan-based warlords, militias, and subsequently extremist factions like as Al-Shabaab vying for dominance over territory and resources (Menkhaus, 2006). The disintegration of the Somali state was not just a political failure but also a collapse of the whole governance framework, including the courts, security, economy, and social services. The absence of an inclusive post-conflict transition framework and the systematic marginalization of many clans and identity groups exacerbated a zero-sum political climate. Somaliland and Puntland proclaimed autonomy, whilst the south-central area emerged as the focal point of violence, lawlessness, and humanitarian disasters. Somalia rapidly became a symbol of a "failed state," with over 2.6 million people internally displaced, and foreign interventions proving ineffective in establishing enduring peace (Lewis, 2002; Bradbury & Healy, 2010).

Sequential peacebuilding initiatives—from the Arta Process (2000) to the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government (2004) and the Federal Government of Somalia (2012)—have sought to restore governance and political stability. International and regional entities significantly contributed, particularly via AMISOM, which facilitated the reclamation of key cities from Al-Shabaab and offered essential assistance for transitional institutions (Williams, 2018). In 2022, AMISOM transformed to ATMIS, with the objective of passing security duties to the Somali National Security Forces (SNSF) by 2024 (ATMIS-AU.org, 2023). Notwithstanding these security advancements, Somalia continues to be profoundly fragmented along clan divisions, characterized by persistent political strife between the federal government and federal member states, halted constitutional reforms, and extensive marginalization of youth and women in political affairs (Farah, 2021; Höglund & Jarstad, 2011). Furthermore, foreign assistance often circumvents Somali institutions, undermining local control and sustaining reliance. Asymmetric threats posed by Al-Shabaab, together with socio-economic instability, persist in hindering stabilizing efforts.

Consequently, converting Somalia's persistent instability into peace necessitates a shift in peacebuilding techniques from top-down, externally imposed frameworks to Somali-led, inclusive, and contextually relevant approaches. Conflict Transformation Theory emphasizes the need of restoring societal trust, altering inter-clan dynamics, and investing in local institutions such as xeer (customary law), traditional reconciliation meetings (shir), and grassroots government structures. The Protracted Social Conflict Theory asserts that enduring peace relies on resolving the fundamental causes of identity-related grievances, marginalization, and socio-economic exclusion (Azar, 1990; Lederach, 1997). This research aims to examine the conflict dynamics in Somalia from 1991 to 2025, assess the limits and effects of previous interventions, and identify locally relevant policies that might foster inclusive government, social cohesion, and sustainable peacebuilding. This research aimed to examine the conflict dynamics in Somalia from 1991 to 2025, assess the limits and effects of previous interventions, and identify locally relevant policies that could foster inclusive government, social cohesion, and sustainable peacebuilding.

Statement of the Problem

Somalia's descent into prolonged conflict and state collapse began in 1991 with the ousting of President Siad Barre, which marked the start of a three-decade crisis defined by violent power struggles, humanitarian emergencies, and the absence of a functioning central government. In the aftermath, the country fragmented into clan-controlled territories, with warlords and militias competing for power and resources. The vacuum created by the disintegration of formal state institutions severely weakened governance structures and allowed insurgent groups, including Al-Shabaab, to gain traction. While several peace processes and transitional administrations were initiated over the years, most efforts lacked sustainable frameworks, leaving Somalia trapped in cycles of violence and recovery. Despite numerous peace accords and international interventions, the fundamental issues of exclusion, mistrust, and fragmented national identity persisted, thereby stalling long-term peacebuilding.

International and regional actors, including the United Nations, African Union (through AMISOM and later ATMIS), and IGAD, invested considerable resources in stabilizing Somalia. Their efforts often prioritized security stabilization and state institution rebuilding. However, many of these interventions were externally conceived, top-down, and failed to sufficiently engage local communities or integrate indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms such as Xeer (traditional customary law). As a result, the initiatives lacked legitimacy and often reinforced elite power dynamics rather than resolving grassroots grievances. Furthermore, critical issues such as clan-based marginalization, the politicization of federalism, youth radicalization, and unequal resource distribution remained insufficiently addressed. This limited the ability of the Somali state to gain widespread legitimacy and effectively govern, even in areas liberated from insurgent control.

There remained a significant gap in understanding how Somalia could shift from short-term stabilization to long-term peace. Previous research had mostly examined military outcomes, counterterrorism strategies, or international peacekeeping performance, overlooking the complex interplay of historical injustices, social fragmentation, and identity-based grievances. As such, there was a need for a comprehensive analysis of Somalia's conflict dynamics from 1991 to 2025 that explored not only the root causes and evolution of violence but also the limitations of past interventions. This study aimed to fill that gap by critically assessing conflict trajectories, evaluating the impact of national and international responses, and identifying context-sensitive, Somali-led strategies for inclusive governance, reconciliation, and durable peace.

Research Objectives

This study explored Somalia's conflict dynamics from the 1991 state collapse to projected peacebuilding efforts by 2025. It examined the roles of clan politics, warlordism, extremism, and foreign interventions in shaping the conflict. By analyzing the evolving nature of these dynamics, the research aimed to identify challenges and opportunities for sustainable peace, offering insights for both theory and policy in fragile state contexts.

The study pursued four interlinked objectives:

- Analyzed the causes and evolution of Somalia's conflict from 1991 to 2025, emphasizing clan structures, state failure, and the roles of neighboring states.
- Evaluated peacebuilding approaches employed during this period, including community-based conflict resolution, federalism, and international missions.
- Examined the contributions of diverse stakeholders—including traditional elders, women, youth, the diaspora, the African Union, and the United Nations.
- Assessed the principal challenges to sustainable peace amid ongoing instability, terrorism, and institutional weaknesses.

Scope of the Study

This study examined Somalia's conflict trajectory from 1991 to 2025 using a comprehensive chronological and thematic approach to provide a holistic understanding of the country's political instability and peacebuilding efforts. It assessed key conflict drivers, actors, violence patterns, and peace interventions by incorporating both grassroots and institutional perspectives. Chronologically, it traced the conflict from the 1991 state collapse, through the clan-based violence and warlordism of the 1990s, the rise of Islamist movements like Al-Shabaab in the early 2000s, to the deployment of AMISOM in 2007 and subsequent governance and reconciliation efforts. Thematically, the study explored conflict triggers such as historical grievances, political fragmentation, extremism, and resource competition, while analyzing the roles of actors including warlords, militias, political elites, traditional elders, women, youth, and international stakeholders. It investigated violence patterns ranging from urban warfare to regional spillovers and evaluated peace initiatives such as federalism, hybrid governance, and international mediation. Geographically, the study focused on key conflict zones including Mogadishu, Kismayo, Baidoa, Puntland, and Somaliland, as well as cross-border dynamics involving Kenya and Ethiopia. By integrating case studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical analysis, the study highlighted both the challenges and opportunities in Somalia's post-conflict reconstruction and offered policy-relevant recommendations to support lasting peace in Somalia and other fragile states.

Justification for the Study

This study was justified by the persistent complexity of Somalia's prolonged conflict, which, spanning over three decades, reflected a multidimensional interplay of historical, political, and socio-economic factors that continued to hinder sustainable peace. Despite numerous peace initiatives, governance reforms, and international interventions, the country remained entrenched in cycles of violence, institutional fragility, and societal fragmentation. The study addressed a critical gap in existing literature by providing a comprehensive chronological and thematic analysis of Somalia's conflict trajectory from 1991 to 2025, unlike earlier works that often-examined isolated events or actors. By synthesizing grassroots experiences with national-level processes, it captured the full range of conflict drivers, stakeholders, and intervention strategies. Additionally, the research responded to increasing calls for context-sensitive, locally grounded peace frameworks by examining formal and informal mechanisms such as federal reforms, international mediation, and traditional conflict resolution, thereby emphasizing the significance of hybrid governance and bottom-up approaches. Given Somalia's strategic location in the Horn of Africa and its deep linkages with regional actors like Kenya and Ethiopia, the study offered insights relevant not only to Somalia but also to broader regional security and cross-border cooperation. Ultimately, through the integration of case studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy-relevant analysis, the study aimed to support more effective and adaptive peacebuilding strategies informed by empirical evidence and Somalia's unique socio-political realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Conflict Transformation theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, developed by John Paul Lederach, offered a profound shift from traditional conflict resolution approaches by emphasizing the need to address the underlying causes of conflict rather than focusing solely on immediate cessation of violence. Lederach (1995, 1997) argued that sustainable peace could only be achieved through restoring relationships, addressing social injustices, and promoting structural change. Unlike conventional peace processes that concentrated on elite-level negotiations and short-term agreements, Conflict Transformation sought long-term engagement with the root drivers of conflict, including historical grievances, inequality, and social exclusion. The model also prioritized the involvement of multiple levels of actors—top political leaders, mid-level influencers like religious figures, and grassroots communities—recognizing their collective roles in building durable peace (Lederach, 2003). This approach was particularly relevant to Somalia, where top-down peace efforts often failed to resonate with local realities (Mac Ginty, 2011).

The theory proved highly applicable in Somalia's context, where decades of civil war, clan-based divisions, and weak state institutions had eroded trust and cohesion. Efforts such as the Arta and Djibouti peace processes largely excluded local communities, traditional elders, and marginalized groups, contributing to repeated breakdowns in peace (Menkhaus, 2006; Bradbury & Healy, 2010). Conflict Transformation Theory emphasized rebuilding social relationships, healing trauma, and empowering communities through inclusive dialogue and local ownership of peace processes. Regions like Somaliland and Puntland demonstrated the success of incorporating traditional mechanisms into governance and conflict resolution, validating Lederach's focus on hybrid peacebuilding models (Hoehne, 2011; Walls, 2009). Moreover, the presence of customary law (xeer) and active local reconciliation initiatives underscored the importance of grounding peacebuilding strategies in local cultural and institutional contexts.

Despite its strengths, the theory also faced certain limitations. It required long-term commitment, which often conflicted with the short-term focus of international donors and political actors (Paris, 2004). Additionally, while it promoted local ownership, it sometimes underestimated the exclusionary practices of certain local actors, such as clan elders or religious leaders who resisted reforms around gender equality or minority inclusion (Menkhaus, 2007; Ingiriis, 2016). The model also struggled to offer practical tools for dealing with armed extremist groups like Al-Shabaab, whose ideology and tactics rejected dialogue and pluralism. Nevertheless, Conflict Transformation remained a valuable framework for understanding and responding to Somalia's complex conflict. Its emphasis on inclusivity, relational change, and context-specific strategies made it particularly suited for societies emerging from prolonged violence and state collapse.

Protracted Social Conflict Theory

Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) Theory, developed by Edward Azar in the 1970s, provided a compelling explanation for prolonged, identity-based conflicts that resisted traditional resolution methods. Azar (1990) argued that such conflicts stemmed from the denial of fundamental human needs—particularly identity, security, political participation, and recognition—rather than from conventional disputes over power or territory. He emphasized that PSCs were rooted in deep communal grievances, economic deprivation, political exclusion, and the failure of state institutions to equitably serve diverse populations. This framework was especially applicable in post-colonial societies like Somalia, where artificial borders and weak governance structures contributed to internal fragmentation. Somalia's conflict since 1991 illustrated Azar's model clearly: it was not merely a political crisis, but a persistent social conflict fueled by clan-based marginalization, identity struggles, and an exclusionary state. Clan identities became militarized, minority groups such as the Gabooye were systematically excluded, and successive regimes were accused of favoritism (Menkhaus, 2007; Harper, 2012). Even efforts at transitional governance, including the federal system, struggled to overcome

these deep divides, validating Azar's view that state incapacity and identity denial sustained long-term conflict.

The core elements of PSC Theory—communal content, human needs deprivation, weak governance, and international linkages—were highly evident in Somalia's experience. The collapse of the central government in 1991 left a vacuum filled by warlords, militias, and later extremist groups, while efforts at federalization often lacked legitimacy across clan lines. Azar (1990) highlighted how elites could exploit identity grievances to mobilize support and consolidate power, a pattern visible in Somalia's elite-driven, clan-based political competition (Ingiriis, 2016). The failure of the state to act as a neutral arbiter forced communities to rely on self-help mechanisms, reinforcing cycles of violence and mistrust. Additionally, external actors, including regional powers and diaspora communities, played both constructive and destabilizing roles. PSC Theory emphasized that sustainable peace required structural transformation—not just negotiations, but reforms addressing economic inequality, political exclusion, and institutional legitimacy. In Somalia, where youth unemployment, poverty, and service deficits remained widespread, these structural drivers continued to fuel radicalization and instability. Thus, PSC Theory offered a holistic and context-sensitive framework that urged policymakers to prioritize inclusive governance, equitable development, and local legitimacy in peacebuilding efforts, making it a vital tool for understanding and addressing Somalia's long-standing conflict.

Historical Overview of Somalia

Breakdown of the State Collapse in 1991

The collapse of Somalia's central government in January 1991 was the result of decades of authoritarian rule, clan favoritism, and institutional decay under President Mohamed Siad Barre. His regime, dominated by the Marehan clan, marginalized rival clans and governed through repression, corruption, and coercion (Lewis, 2002). The 1988 bombing of Hargeisa, which killed thousands of civilians, significantly eroded the regime's legitimacy and galvanized opposition movements like the USC, SNM, and SPM (Menkhaus, 2007). When Barre was ousted, no transition mechanisms were in place, leaving a dangerous political vacuum. State institutions collapsed swiftly, and warlords emerged to fill the void, carving territories along clan lines. This ushered in a period of anarchy, with the judiciary, police, healthcare, education, and economic systems disintegrating (Rotberg, 2002). With no centralized authority, the country descended into chaos, violence, and mass displacement.

In the power vacuum, traditional clan systems—previously mechanisms of social order—were militarized and politicized, contributing to fragmentation and prolonged conflict (Compagnon, 1998). Regions like Somaliland and Puntland broke away from the national framework, forming autonomous administrations that, while locally stable, hindered national reconciliation (Hoehne, 2011). The resulting humanitarian crisis, compounded by drought and blocked aid delivery, prompted UN and U.S. interventions under UNOSOM and UNITAF, but these efforts were largely ineffective due to their misunderstanding of clan dynamics and reliance on militarized strategies (Barnett, 2001; Menkhaus, 2006). The infamous 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident led to international withdrawal, leaving Somalia to deal with the long-term consequences of state failure. This breakdown aligns with Azar's Protracted Social Conflict theory, which underscores that exclusion, identity suppression, and governance failure fuel enduring conflict. Lasting peace in Somalia, therefore, requires inclusive governance, reconciliation mechanisms, and recognition of clan-based grievances (Azar, 1990; Bradbury & Healy, 2010).

Civil War, Warlordism, and Foreign Interventions

The outbreak of Somalia's civil war in the early 1990s, following the collapse of Siad Barre's regime, triggered intense intra-clan conflict, particularly in Mogadishu, where rival warlords like General Aidid and Ali Mahdi fought for control (Menkhaus, 2007). The absence of a central government plunged the country into lawlessness, marked by massive civilian displacement, infrastructure collapse, famine, and disease—with up to 300,000 deaths by 1992 (De Waal, 1997). Initial international responses, including the U.S.-led

"Operation Restore Hope" under the UN, attempted to manage the humanitarian crisis but ultimately failed, especially after the "Black Hawk Down" incident led to the withdrawal of U.S. and UN troops by 1995. In the power vacuum, warlords dominated through violence and clan-based patronage, often diverting humanitarian aid to consolidate their power. With no effective peacebuilding framework, Somalia's territory fragmented further, leaving local sharia courts and clan elders to maintain minimal order in some areas while others descended into total anarchy (Menkhaus, 2004).

In the 2000s, attempts to restore governance emerged through the Transitional National Government (TNG) and later the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), supported by IGAD and foreign actors. However, their limited territorial control and elite-driven processes undermined legitimacy among ordinary Somalis (Hansen, 2013). In contrast, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) gained grassroots support by offering judicial and security services but was toppled by a 2006 U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion, which inadvertently led to the rise of the extremist group Al-Shabaab. From 2007, international military engagement—especially via AMISOM and U.S. operations—achieved key victories, reclaiming cities from Al-Shabaab. Nevertheless, the insurgents adapted through guerrilla warfare and control of rural areas, where they provided strict governance and services. Despite tactical successes, foreign interventions have not addressed the structural causes of conflict—governance failure, poverty, and inter-clan rivalry—and have even undermined Somali sovereignty and self-reliance. Thus, while international forces brought temporary stability, sustainable peace remains elusive without Somali-led solutions and institutional development (Mahmood & Ani, 2018; Williams, 2018).

Role of Clans, Warlords, and Extremist Groups

The role of clans in Somalia's protracted conflict has been both foundational and transformative. Traditionally, patrilineal clans and subclans served as the bedrock of Somali society, facilitating conflict resolution, social welfare, and pastoral resource sharing (Lewis, 2002). However, after the 1991 state collapse, these clan structures were militarized and politicized, morphing into tools for exclusion and violent power consolidation (Menkhaus, 2006). Political processes like the 4.5 power-sharing formula institutionalized clan divisions and elite-driven negotiations, marginalizing minority groups and weakening national cohesion (Elmi & Barise, 2006; Farah, Muchie, & Gundel, 2007). Warlordism emerged as the dominant political order, with former regime insiders seizing control of infrastructure and territory through clan-based militias, often undermining humanitarian aid and sabotaging reconciliation processes (Marchal, 2007). While some warlords transitioned into politics or business, their embedded influence obstructed disarmament, institutional reform, and state reconstruction.

The emergence of extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab further complicated Somalia's conflict landscape. Originating from the ICU's youth wing, Al-Shabaab capitalized on local grievances and Ethiopia's 2006 military intervention to evolve into a formidable jihadist movement (Hansen, 2013). Though ideologically distinct from clan-based actors, the group strategically manipulated clan dynamics to gain legitimacy and territorial access, offering rudimentary governance in neglected areas and filling vacuums left by weak state institutions (Bryden, 2014). The blurred lines between formal state actors, clan-based militias, and warlords have undermined security sector reforms and judicial development, as loyalty to clan often supersedes allegiance to the state (Menkhaus, 2018). International actors have at times reinforced these power structures by engaging warlords or clan leaders for logistical support, inadvertently legitimizing exclusionary systems (Ingiriis, 2016). Sustainable peace demands a deeper understanding of Somalia's political economy of power, including support for traditional reconciliation mechanisms such as shir and a shift toward inclusive, accountable governance that transcends narrow clan interests (Gundel, 2009).

International vs. Local Peacebuilding Initiatives.

Somalia has seen many international peacebuilding efforts, including UN missions, AU-led military operations (such as AMISOM), donor-funded programs, and bilateral interventions from nations such as Turkey, Qatar, and the United States. These approaches have resulted in significant achievements, including

the recovery of cities from Al-Shabaab, the formation of federal institutions, and re-engagement with global financial systems. Nonetheless, they often encounter criticism for being externally motivated, hierarchical, and inadequately coordinated.

A primary constraint of multinational initiatives is their disconnection from local reality. Programs are often formulated in donor capitals with little participation from Somali communities. This may result in unproductive or unsustainable consequences. Furthermore, rivalry among donors and organizations often leads to redundant mandates and resource duplication. In several instances, foreign entities have unintentionally exacerbated corruption by directing resources via unaccountable middlemen (Menkhaus, 2014).

Conversely, local peacebuilding efforts have shown durability and adaptation. Traditional elders, religious leaders, women's organizations, and youth groups have arbitrated clan conflicts, aided the reintegration of former soldiers, and fostered societal cohesiveness. Community dialogues in Galmudug and Jubbaland have mitigated the escalation of inter-clan conflicts. These projects benefit from profound contextual understanding, social legitimacy, and cultural proficiency.

Nevertheless, local entities sometimes lack the financial and technical resources necessary to sustain such initiatives or broaden their impact. Moreover, in heavily militarized environments, community projects may be compromised by armed factions or governmental meddling. This underscores the need for foreign entities to adopt a supporting rather than prescriptive role—offering resources, security, and policy latitude for local leadership to flourish.

Scholars and practitioners increasingly argue for a coordinated form of "locally led, internationally supported" peacebuilding (Donais, 2012). This would include strengthening district councils, facilitating grassroots reconciliation, and investing in education and economic growth in Somalia. International entities must acknowledge that legitimacy cannot be externally acquired but must be cultivated through authentic local involvement. Effective peacebuilding is not an isolated occurrence but a protracted process requiring trust, adaptation, and reciprocal responsibility.

Key Conflict Dynamics in Somalia.

Somalia's prolonged instability is underpinned by persistent political fragmentation, contested governance structures, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, efforts to establish a cohesive national government have been hindered by deep-rooted clan rivalries and competing regional autonomies, with transitional and federal institutions struggling to assert legitimacy and provide basic services (Menkhaus, 2006; Höglund & Jarstad, 2011). This governance vacuum has allowed warlords and militant groups like Al-Shabaab to exploit state weaknesses and entrench alternative power structures. External actors, including the UN, AU, IGAD, and states such as Ethiopia and the United States, have significantly shaped the peacebuilding landscape—sometimes facilitating stabilization but also exacerbating internal divisions through military interventions and aid strategies that bypass Somali institutions (Williams, 2018; Harper, 2012; Hammond & Vaughan-Lee, 2012). Simultaneously, resource-based conflicts and entrenched socio-economic instability—driven by competition over land, water, and trade routes—fuel recurring violence. Armed groups sustain operations through shadow economies such as illicit charcoal exports and taxation of road checkpoints (Berg, 2018), while widespread youth unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity deepen public discontent and increase vulnerability to extremist recruitment (World Bank, 2023; FSNAU, 2022). Addressing these intertwined dynamics requires a comprehensive peace strategy that couples political reconciliation with inclusive governance and long-term economic transformation.

AMISOM/ATMIS Military Interventions and Their Impact.

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was launched in 2007 under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1744, following the growing threat posed by insurgent groups such as Al-Shabaab and the weakening of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). AMISOM was tasked with supporting political

dialogue, protecting transitional institutions, and enabling humanitarian operations (ISS Africa, 2022). It marked a turning point in African-led peace enforcement, given its offensive combat mandate. Over time, AMISOM's operations expanded into large-scale counterinsurgency efforts, especially in urban centers. In April 2022, AMISOM transitioned into the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), guided by the Somali Transition Plan and UN Security Council Resolution 2628. Unlike AMISOM's broad combat role, ATMIS focused on transferring security responsibilities to Somali National Security Forces (SNSF) by 2024, emphasizing training, mentoring, and governance support (ATMIS-AU.org, 2023).

AMISOM achieved significant military successes, notably liberating Mogadishu from Al-Shabaab between 2011 and 2012—a turning point in Somalia's political stabilization (Williams, 2013). Follow-up operations saw the recapture of Kismayo, Baidoa, and Beledweyne, allowing for the re-establishment of federal authority and resumption of electoral processes. By 2023, ATMIS continued joint operations in regions such as Lower Shabelle and Galmudug, helping to sustain these hard-won gains (The Guardian, 2023). However, Al-Shabaab remains resilient, resorting to asymmetric tactics like suicide bombings and assassinations. These persistent threats reveal the limits of military intervention alone and highlight the need for a multidimensional strategy that aligns security with institution-building, reconciliation, and socio-economic development. Ensuring Somali forces can secure liberated areas, protect civilians, and earn public trust remains a key priority under ATMIS.

To bridge the gap between military action and local needs, both AMISOM and ATMIS have implemented Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) initiatives to support peacebuilding and strengthen community trust. These include the provision of clean water, mobile clinics, road rehabilitation, and education support in liberated regions (Stimson Center, 2022). In Mogadishu, AMISOM supported national exams and vaccination campaigns, while engaging with civil society groups to address gender-based violence (ResearchGate, 2022). These CIMIC activities have been instrumental in countering Al-Shabaab's portrayal of peacekeepers as foreign occupiers. Positive community feedback from towns like Jowhar and Belet Weyne indicates improved civil-military relations (APA News, 2022). Still, these gains remain inconsistent due to resource limitations and ongoing insecurity, reinforcing the importance of localized, inclusive, and sustainable peacebuilding efforts alongside military interventions.

Reconciliation Efforts: National Dialogue Conferences & Clan-Based Mediation.

Somalia's reconciliation landscape since 1991 has been shaped by a series of national dialogue conferences aimed at restoring central governance. Key initiatives such as the Arta Conference (2000), which birthed the Transitional National Government (TNG), and the Djibouti Process (2008–2009), which led to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), were critical in formal peacebuilding (Menkhaus, 2009). However, these processes have been criticized for privileging elite negotiations while excluding civil society, youth, and women—thus reinforcing pre-existing political marginalization (Bradbury & Healy, 2010). While these forums provided initial frameworks for transitional governance, their top-down nature often limited their ability to address root grievances or build durable legitimacy.

Beyond elite-driven national processes, Somalia's customary legal system, known as *xeer*, has played a central role in grassroots conflict resolution. Mediated by clan elders, *xeer* governs inter-clan relations and enforces social norms, especially in rural and semi-urban areas (Gundel, 2006). In places like Puntland and Jubaland, *xeer*-based mediation has helped settle disputes and enforce temporary ceasefires (Accord, 2017). Nonetheless, scholars note that this traditional system can be exclusionary, particularly toward women, youth, and minority clans, thus perpetuating patriarchal and hierarchical social dynamics (Kapteijns & Arman, 2021). Despite these limitations, *xeer* remains a resilient and legitimate mechanism in Somalia's pluralistic legal environment.

In addition to traditional mechanisms, community forums and peace committees have emerged to address localized conflicts, particularly over land and water resources. These initiatives, often supported by NGOs and local authorities, have effectively reduced tensions between pastoralist and farming communities in regions like Lower Shabelle (SomTribune, 2022). Their participatory and inclusive nature has made them effective tools for fostering local-level reconciliation. However, their impact has remained fragmented due to weak integration with broader national peace frameworks, limiting their scalability and long-term influence (Menkhaus, 2014). A lack of coordination between local and federal structures continues to hinder cohesive state-building efforts.

To bridge traditional and formal systems, recent efforts have focused on hybrid justice approaches, including the codification of *xeer*. These initiatives aim to align customary law with statutory and Sharia principles while addressing gender and human rights gaps (The New Humanitarian, 2019; Ismail & Regassa, 2020). Programs like the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Program (SRRP) have further introduced trauma-informed dialogue and psychosocial healing as vital components of reconciliation (Conciliation Resources, 2020). Scholars such as Bryden and Brickhill (2010) emphasize the need for a multi-level strategy that unites elite political settlements with inclusive, grassroots efforts. Without institutional coordination, community ownership, and gender-sensitive reforms, reconciliation efforts are likely to remain fragmented and unsustainable.

Comparative Lessons from Post-Conflict Transitions: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and South Sudan

Post-conflict transitions in African nations including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and South Sudan provide essential insights into the problems and prospects of reconstructing weak governments. Liberia's post-2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) experience underscored the significance of inclusive political discourse and incremental security sector reform. The involvement of erstwhile adversaries, civil society, and women's groups in the Accra discussions conferred credibility and durability onto the peace process (Sawyer, 2005). The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was instrumental in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and the professionalization of the security sector, hence enhancing public confidence in state institutions. Conversely, South Sudan's elite-focused peace accords—particularly the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan—were deficient in grassroots involvement and institutional robustness, eventually leading to the collapse of peace (Rolandsen, 2018). These divergent situations underscore that Somalia's prospective political agreements must transcend elite negotiations and stress inclusion, especially the participation of disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, and minority clans.

Sierra Leone and Rwanda provide more insights on justice and reconciliation. In Sierra Leone, the combined strategy of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) harmonized restorative and retributive justice by recording atrocities and ensuring accountability for principal offenders (Kelsall, 2009). Rwanda's Gacaca courts, while critiques about procedural deficiencies, facilitated community involvement in extensive truth-telling and reconciliation, adjudicating over 1.9 million genocide-related cases (Clark, 2010). Rwanda's concurrent effort to establish a cohesive national identity, transcending ethnic designations, also facilitated enduring unity. In Somalia, which is profoundly fragmented along clan divisions, hybrid judicial systems integrating *xeer*, Sharia, and statute law may function as contextually suitable frameworks. Furthermore, fostering a collective civic identity and historical narratives—without imposing authoritarian centralization—may mitigate clan division and enhance togetherness.

The role of civil society and women's leadership was essential in West Africa's recovery. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, spearheaded by leaders like Leymah Gbowee, played a crucial role in terminating the war and initiating the peace process (Gbowee, 2011). Likewise, women's organizations in Sierra Leone participated in post-conflict reconciliation and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives, ensuring that gender-sensitive issues were included into institutional changes.

Women in Somalia have significantly contributed to grassroots peacebuilding, however they are underrepresented in national political structures. Somalia's peace procedures, informed by West Africa, must institutionalize female quotas and civil society input as fundamental elements of legitimate government rather than just symbolic gestures. Empowering civic actors would enhance local accountability and mitigate elite domination in federal discussions.

Ultimately, post-conflict decentralization in Sierra Leone and Rwanda illustrates the capacity of local administration to enhance service delivery and mitigate concerns. Post-2004 decentralization changes in Sierra Leone improved responsiveness and public engagement at the district level (Zhou, 2009), whilst Rwanda's Imihigo performance contracts promoted responsible government and local development (Chemouni, 2014). The federal system in Somalia has often exacerbated conflicts owing to ambiguous mandates, fragile institutions, and rival clan interests. Based on comparable experiences, Somalia need to concentrate on enhancing institutional capacity at the state level, integrating local development strategies with national aims, and fostering fair resource distribution. These stories highlight that peacebuilding in Somalia must be multifaceted, including inclusive government, community-oriented justice, civil society involvement, and strong decentralization to provide a durable resolution to conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to analyze Somalia's conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts within real-world contexts. Anchored in a constructivist epistemology, the design enabled in-depth exploration of conflict patterns, governance structures, and peace initiatives through descriptive and explanatory techniques. Given the complexity of Somalia's situation, the case study approach allowed for the integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives and contextual interpretations.

Data collection relied exclusively on secondary sources due to security and logistical constraints. The study utilized academic publications, policy reports, government documents, and materials from reputable international and regional organizations such as the UN, AU, and various NGOs. Document analysis served as the main data collection method, involving systematic review and thematic coding. Triangulation ensured credibility by cross-verifying data across multiple sources. The analytical framework combined Conflict Transformation Theory and hybrid peacebuilding approaches to examine relational, structural, and institutional changes over time. While the absence of primary data was a limitation, rigorous source validation, ethical considerations, and attention to balanced representation ensured methodological integrity and analytical depth.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Roots of State Collapse

The study found that Somalia's prolonged conflict began with the collapse of the central state in 1991, rooted in decades of authoritarian rule under Siad Barre, systemic clan marginalization, and weak institutional structures. Barre's regime initially pursued modernization but increasingly relied on repression, corruption, and clan favoritism—particularly benefiting the Marehan—while violently suppressing dissent and eroding national unity (Lewis, 2002). Upon his ouster, the absence of transitional institutions left a power vacuum quickly filled by warlords who fragmented the country along clan lines, triggering humanitarian crises, displacement, and violence (Menkhaus, 2006). These findings aligned with Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict theory, which emphasized that unresolved identity grievances, political exclusion, and economic deprivation fuel long-term conflict (Azar, 1990). Marginalized clans like the Hawiye and Isaaq, long excluded from state power, became embroiled in zero-sum struggles for control, while the absence of transitional justice mechanisms—such as truth commissions or inclusive dialogue—further entrenched mistrust and division (Bradbury & Healy, 2010). The study concluded that restoring Somalia's statehood required not just institutional rebuilding but inclusive political transformation, recognition of historical grievances, and

redefinition of national identity to prevent future relapse into violence (Menkhaus, 2006; Azar, 1990; Bradbury & Healy, 2010).

Role of Clans, Warlords, and Extremist Actors

The study found that Somalia's conflict was profoundly shaped by the militarization of clan systems, the emergence of warlordism, and the rise of extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. Following the state collapse in 1991, traditional clan structures—once central to community governance through systems like *xeer*—were repurposed by warlords to form militias, dominate territories, and control resources, leading to violent rivalries and fragmented zones of power (Compagnon, 1998). These warlords operated without legal accountability, reinforcing a culture of impunity and undermining efforts at national reconciliation. Simultaneously, extremist groups like Al-Shabaab filled governance vacuums by offering basic services, conflict mediation, and a form of ideological cohesion, which appealed particularly to disenfranchised youth facing economic hardship and identity crises (Hansen, 2013). This dynamic affirmed the relevance of Conflict Transformation Theory, as articulated by Lederach (1997), which emphasized the transformation of societal relationships and institutions rather than short-term political fixes. The manipulation of clan identity and the co-optation of *xeer* by violent actors illustrated how restorative systems had been distorted to perpetuate conflict. The study concluded that addressing extremism and instability in Somalia required inclusive grassroots reconciliation, restoration of legitimate traditional governance, and socioeconomic investment in youth and marginalized groups. Sustainable peace could not be achieved through militarized strategies alone but demanded locally driven, relationship-based approaches that rebuilt trust and restructured governance from the ground up (Lederach, 1997; Hansen, 2013; Compagnon, 1998).

Mixed Outcomes of AMISOM/ATMIS and International Peace Interventions

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), launched in 2007, and its successor, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), created in 2022, were instrumental in countering Al-Shabaab's military progress and stabilizing vital areas. AMISOM effectively recaptured key cities like Mogadishu (2011), Kismayo (2012), and Baidoa (2014), enabling the resurgence and functioning of federal institutions (Williams, 2018). These advancements enabled the formulation of a temporary constitution, the conduct of indirect elections, and constrained governance changes. AMISOM faced criticism for civilian casualties, claims of sexual assault, and insufficient accountability measures for foreign forces (Sharamo & Hussein, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2015). Moreover, the mission often lacked connection with local communities and did not include traditional and civic frameworks into its stabilization strategy. With the transition to ATMIS, the focus switched to equipping Somali security forces for responsibility transfer; nonetheless, issues of capacity, corruption, and local legitimacy persisted (ISS, 2022). International donor weariness, substantial financial burdens, and a sense of reliance on foreign assistance have all fostered pessimism over the long-term viability of peacekeeping operations in Somalia.

This discovery highlighted the constraints of top-down rebuilding strategies, especially in deeply fractured societies like as Somalia. Despite AMISOM's attainment of significant military goals, it had challenges in establishing lasting peace, mostly due to insufficient engagement with Somali sociocultural actors, including clan elders, women, youth, and civil society groups. Conflict restructuring Theory (Lederach, 1997) posits that durable peace involves more than just military triumph; it requires the restructuring of relationships, inclusive communication, and consideration of past grievances. AMISOM often functioned alongside Somali institutions instead of collaborating with them, so missing chances to foster trust and enhance local ownership. Furthermore, Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory (Azar, 1990) underscored that peace initiatives neglecting to confront fundamental identity-related grievances and systemic inequities were improbable to provide enduring stability. Al-Shabaab exploited these deficiencies by offering basic justice and services, thereby sustaining a semblance of legitimacy in rural regions. Upon reflection, peacekeeping efforts in Somalia need enhanced integration of civilian peacebuilding, the promotion of inclusive government, and the

establishment of transitional institutions to reduce military reliance. Future peace efforts in unstable nations such as Somalia need a hybrid strategy—integrating foreign assistance with Somali-led initiatives and emphasizing long-term relationship cultivation above immediate military advantages.

Effectiveness of Reconciliation Efforts and Traditional Mechanisms

Subsequent to the disintegration of Somalia's central government in 1991, many national reconciliation initiatives were implemented to reestablish governance and stability. National dialogue conferences, including the Arta Conference (2000), the Eldoret-Mbagathi Process (2002–2004), and the Djibouti Agreement (2008–2009), effectively established transitional federal institutions and facilitated the formation of the Federal Government of Somalia (Bryden, 2004; Menkhaus, 2009). Nevertheless, these initiatives were mostly elite-focused and neglected to include the perspectives of grassroots participants, such as women, youth, and oppressed clans (Samatar, 2016). The validity and longevity of these accords were scrutinized at the community level, sometimes failing to provide significant reconciliation on the ground. Conversely, conventional systems like *xeer*—the customary legal framework—and the influence of clan elders shown more efficacy in addressing local disputes. Elders arbitrated conflicts related to land, cattle, and inter-clan retribution, especially in areas like Puntland and Galmudug where official legal systems were deficient or nonexistent (Gundel, 2006; Hoehne, 2015). These traditional forums prioritized restitution, acknowledgment, and consensus formation, in accordance with culturally recognized standards. Religious leaders further aided by orchestrating ceasefires and strengthening ethical imperatives. Despite being grounded in sexism and perhaps lacking diversity, these methods were esteemed, economical, and broadly accessible. Their success underscored the significance of locally initiated peace initiatives, particularly in contexts where national institutions were either weak or lacking in confidence.

This trend validated the significance of Conflict Transformation Theory, which underscored the need of altering relationships, resolving historical grievances, and empowering local stakeholders in peace processes (Lederach, 1997). The integration of formal state institutions with traditional judicial systems exemplified a possible hybrid approach. Initiatives such as the Danish Demining Group's *xeer* codification project sought to reconcile customary and statutory norms, providing a means for inclusive justice (The New Humanitarian, 2014). Nonetheless, obstacles persisted in achieving coordination, gender sensitivity, and legal acknowledgment of these systems. The results emphasized that reconciliation in Somalia needed more than political agreements; it required a robust, diverse, and culturally valid peace framework that included both the state and society equally.

Grassroots Peacebuilding and Inclusion of Women and Youth

In the absence of a robust central authority, community-driven peacebuilding activities were essential in fostering localized stability across Somalia. Grassroots entities, such as women's networks, youth-led organizations, religious associations, and local NGOs, have emerged as key peace intermediaries in areas afflicted by prolonged conflict. These players adjudicated land conflicts, promoted conversation among clans, and heightened understanding about violence prevention, sometimes without official acknowledgment or financial backing (El-Bushra & Gardner, 2005; Saferworld, 2017). Women's organizations, notably, used their informal influence and familial connections to mitigate tensions, whilst youth groups included communities via innovative mediums such as poetry, theater, and social media initiatives. Despite experiencing systematic exclusion from national political processes, these individuals exhibited tenacity, adaptation, and a profound comprehension of local dynamics.

This discovery corresponds with John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory, which underscores the need of empowering all societal strata—particularly those most impacted by conflict—to engage significantly in peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997). The involvement of women in peace processes, albeit often being informal, has substantially aided conflict resolution and early warning systems. In several areas, such as Somaliland, female activists facilitated ceasefire negotiations and endorsed disarmament efforts by persuading

their male relatives (Hudson, 2012). Likewise, youth were not only listeners of peace messages but emerged as active agents of change, using music, community theater, and mobile technology to combat radicalization and foster reconciliation (Mohamed & Mohamud, 2020). These strategies facilitated intergenerational dialogue, established trust across divisions, and diminished the allure of radical beliefs. The influence of grassroots initiatives was often hindered by institutional obstacles, such as inadequate finance, gender discrimination, and the lack of legislative frameworks that facilitate their participation. National and international entities often neglected or inadequately exploited these organizations, so forfeiting possibilities to institutionalize their contributions (International Alert, 2015). To achieve enduring peace, Somalia's peacebuilding approach must integrate grassroots players into official government frameworks via policy changes, legal safeguards, and capacity-building initiatives. Gender quotas, youth advisory councils, and financial support for local peace committees might facilitate the institutionalization of their responsibilities. These grassroots initiatives were not marginal but fundamental in reshaping Somalia's war environment into a more inclusive and lasting peace framework.

Challenges to Federalism and Governance Reform

The study revealed that Somalia's adoption of federalism in 2004 aimed to resolve clan divisions, improve decentralized governance, and prevent authoritarian resurgence, but its implementation encountered persistent challenges (Hesse, 2010). Conflicts emerged between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Federal Member States (FMS) over power-sharing, electoral processes, security control, and resource allocation, often escalating tensions rather than promoting cooperation (Williams, 2018). Electoral disputes, particularly with regions like Jubaland and Puntland, exposed deep-seated mistrust and the absence of inclusive, mutually agreed frameworks for governance. Rather than mitigating conflict, federalism became a mechanism through which political elites advanced clan dominance, using the system to reinforce power at both national and regional levels (Elmi & Barise, 2006). This political dynamic validated Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory, which linked state fragility and identity-based exclusion to long-term instability. The absence of a finalized constitution and unclear federal-state responsibilities further derailed Somalia's state-building efforts, while reliance on clan allegiances over meritocracy weakened institutional legitimacy (Farah, 2021). From the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory, the situation underscored the need for relational change and inclusive dialogue across all levels of governance (Lederach, 1997). The study emphasized that successful federalism in Somalia required intergovernmental dialogue platforms, participatory constitutional reforms, and equitable resource-sharing frameworks to foster national cohesion and avoid elite-driven, zero-sum politics that risked deepening fragmentation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established that Somalia's protracted conflict was primarily driven by authoritarian legacies, militarized clan politics, and the absence of a transitional framework following the 1991 state collapse, which created a vacuum exploited by warlords, militias, and extremist groups like Al-Shabaab. While international interventions such as AMISOM and ATMIS contributed to reclaiming territory and supporting federal structures, their top-down approaches were often undermined by limited community engagement, human rights concerns, and overreliance on foreign military support. In contrast, traditional justice systems like Xeer and locally driven peace initiatives proved more effective at resolving conflicts through culturally rooted and participatory methods. The study further found that persistent governance challenges—including weak intergovernmental relations, elite-dominated politics, and the exclusion of women and youth—continued to undermine reconciliation and state-building. Drawing on Conflict Transformation and Protracted Social Conflict theories, the research emphasized the need for locally anchored peacebuilding, inclusive governance reforms, and structural interventions that address historical grievances and promote long-term national stability.

The study concluded that achieving lasting peace in Somalia required a multifaceted, Somali-led approach that moved beyond military interventions and elite-driven political settlements. While international support had played a role in stabilizing certain regions, it often fell short in addressing the underlying issues of identity-based grievances, social exclusion, and weak institutions. Sustainable peacebuilding depended on restoring trust between citizens and the state, integrating traditional mechanisms such as Xeer into formal structures, and empowering local actors—including women, youth, and elders—within inclusive governance and reconciliation processes. The persistence of marginalization, fragmented peace efforts, and politicized federalism highlighted the need for harmonized, participatory reforms that aligned national and local strategies. In the post-ATMIS context, Somalia needed to prioritize constitutional clarity, equitable development, and grassroots engagement to strengthen institutional resilience. The study emphasized that only a transformational, locally grounded peacebuilding model rooted in structural justice and collective national identity could secure long-term peace and stability in Somalia.

The study recommended the following:

- **Strengthen Inclusive Governance:** Finalize the constitution, establish independent institutions, and ensure power-sharing to enhance political stability and legitimacy.
- **Promote Local Ownership and Traditional Mechanisms:** Integrate customary justice systems with formal structures and empower local actors through training and institutional support.
- **Enhance Inclusion of Women and Youth:** Implement affirmative action, youth engagement platforms, and peace education to foster broad-based participation and prevent radicalization.
- **Link Peacebuilding with Development and Justice:** Invest in economic opportunities, adopt transitional justice tools, and develop a long-term national peace strategy aligned with reconciliation and growth.

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