



## Dilemma of Civil Wars and Spread of Terrorism The Case of Somalia

Dr Qasem Algharby

Researcher at the Center for Economic and Social Studies and Research,  
Tunisia

Conflicts leading to civil wars remain key drivers of the growth and spread of terrorism. According to UN data, the majority of terrorism-related deaths occur in nations with various military factions and violent disputes between them on the one hand, and with their governments on the other. According to the same data, multiple deadly attacks occur in the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, and Somalia bearing the brunt of the toll.

### Conflict Zones

According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report, conflict is the main driver of terrorism. The ten countries most affected by terrorism in 2021 are engaged in armed conflict, and 92% of the fatalities of terrorism from 2000 to 2021 occurred in conflict zones. The percentage has increased over the past three years to 95.8%, then to 97.6% in 2021 .

Those alarming figures call for more attention to civil wars and their relationship to the spread of terrorism, as was the case in Somalia. Decades ago, this country was an example of tolerance and coexistence. It has vast natural resources, great wealth and a strategic location on open seas, which makes it a model for food security and economic prosperity. However, these opportunities were squandered by the political vacuum from which terrorist groups originated and spread. This has led to the emergence of major threats to the unified entity of the regular State capable of establishing security and stability throughout Somali territories.

### Historical Background

Somalia consists of multiple tribes, the most important of which are the Hawiye, the Dir, and the Rahanweyn. The State dates back to ancient times; it was known to Ancient Egyptians as the "Land of Punt". From the second to the seventh centuries AD, parts of

it belonged to the Land of Seven Kingdoms. Some Arab tribes settled on the coast of the Gulf of Aden in the seventh century AD, and Arab migrations to the region succeeded one another in the thirteenth century .

Somalia, situated in the eastern part of the African continent within the Horn of Africa region, shares borders with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean to the east, Ethiopia to the west, Djibouti to the northwest, and Kenya to the southwest. Its path to independence in 1960 was marked by a unique historical context of division and colonial exploitation. Somalia had been partitioned among several colonial powers. Southern Somalia was under Italian occupation, northern Somalia and southeastern Somalia were controlled by Britain, western Somalia (Ogadenia) was under Ethiopian rule after independence and with the help of colonial powers, and French Somalia achieved independence as the State of Djibouti. This history highlights the extensive colonial scramble for Somalia's wealth and natural resources.

The unique Somali situation is not only about the multiplicity of occupations. It is exceptionally characterized by an almost whole ethnic, religious and linguistic unity, as in almost no other country. However, this complete harmony did not withstand the scars of colonialism that led to the establishment of the tribal and clan order and the strengthening of the tribe's status in the structure of the Somali state. Tribal loyalty and clan affiliation were a stumbling block to a strong nation state.

### **Civil War**

In the 1980s, Somali tribes' isolationist tendencies increased significantly, which sparked the civil war (1991-1996). Some previous practices have resulted in increased political and economic corruption, the consolidation of tribal values, the widening of the societal divide, and the emergence of opposition movements such as the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), which carried out military attacks on the central government, resulting in a government backlash and the outbreak of the civil war to serve factional interests. Somali tribes that felt marginalized formed several armed factions to seize power, and each faction was led by a military commander from the tribe. Among them are the Democratic Front for the Salvation of Somalia (DFSS), the Somali National Movement (SNM), the United Somali Congress (USC), the Somali National Front (SNF), the United Somali Party (USP) the Somali Democratic Movement (SDM), the Somali National Democratic Union (SNDU), and the Somali Islamic Movement (SIM). Tribal conflict has raged, central authority has fallen, and Somalia has entered the dark tunnel of civil wars.

The multiplicity of armed factions that were founded on tribal foundations within the Somali state in the early 1990s weakened the structure of the single national army capable of power projection and enforcing security, and significantly contributed to the outbreak of the civil war, which resulted in many civilian casualties. They paved the way for the deadliest and most vicious terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, to spread and polarize among the factions. Somalia has become a perfect environment for training criminals and a springboard for the execution of crimes and inhumane acts.

### **Courts and Al-Qaeda**

Following these events, Islamic courts emerged in 1997 among the tribes of the Somali capital, after the fall of the central government and the rule of chaos, to apply Sharia and maintain security after the failure of individual initiatives to establish separate courts between 1991 and 1994. The international community has been concerned about this expansion. Such a concern was confirmed by US reports that al-Qaeda-affiliated cells have infiltrated into and out of Somalia to bomb its embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, with the support of prominent leaders in courts, in addition to what was reported in the media after the 9/11 events that al-Qaeda fighters are fleeing the US bombing in Afghanistan to Somalia, which has become a safe haven for terrorists.

In 2005, leaders of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) formed a supreme “Shura Council”, challenging the Somali transitional government and Washington. The presidency of the Council—the highest legislative authority—went to Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who was designated as a terrorist, and was accused in Ethiopia of carrying out military operations on its territory. This has assured the international community that the Council’s objectives do not stop at establishing security or declaring a Somali Islamic State that would rule all parts of the country, but also extend to destabilizing this strategically critical region. Reportedly, the ICU military forces took control of the capital on June 5, 2006, the same month when an agreement with the transitional government was concluded to recognize each other and end the violence. However, the rapid rise was followed by a faster decline, disintegration and collapse after the Ethiopian military intervention in December 2006 at the behest of the transitional government whose militants fled abroad in 2007 and which was disbanded in January 2010. However, this did not resolve the Somali crisis as the new government engaged in a renewed conflict with al-Shabaab jihadist movement.

## Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI)

AIAI is a Somali movement which was designated as terrorist by the United States just two weeks after the 9/11 attacks. It took the lead in raising arms to establish a religious emirate by force in Somalia in 1991 after the collapse of the central government, and witnessed mass defections within its ranks in the 1990s. Fierce battles were fought to establish the emirate in the wake of the chaos that swept the country after 1991, in which they were all defeated by the tribal militia and Ethiopia. This ended by AIAI dismantling its camps and demobilizing its militias. Its relationship with al-Qaeda dates back to the same date in the early nineties, when it seized the city of Luuq, declared it an Islamic emirate, and established training camps for al-Qaeda. The emirate is believed to have been destroyed after Ethiopian forces had carried out a fierce attack on the city in 1996.

## Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab is one of the deadliest terrorist movements in the Horn of Africa, which split from ICU. It declared its quest for an Islamic State, then pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, and waged an open war against the transitional government. It took over several strategic towns and cities, and with successive gains on the ground, the US administration intervened and launched surgical airstrikes against it. On March 13, 2008, it was designated as a terrorist organization.

Despite the numerous terrorist crimes committed by Al-Shabaab inside Somalia, the attacks carried out in neighboring countries (Uganda and Kenya) confirmed the information received by some security services about their involvement in the physical and logistic training of members of the two groups (Boko Haram and Al-Hidjra). These crimes demonstrated the scope of its operations, its recruitment capacity, and its skill at concluding transnational alliances that enabled it to carry out crimes on larger scales, destabilizing the entire African continent.

Al-Shabaab has engaged in fierce battles in which Somalia has suffered from civil war and difficult living conditions. Its activity declined in early 2011 after its fighters had been forced to withdraw from the border areas of "Gedo", and after engaging in conflicts with tribal militias and other organizations, such as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ), which caused defections among Al-Shabaab's leaders, and a significant retreat of its forces from the main cities. However, it still operates in vast rural areas in central and southern Somalia and poses a significant threat to the authorities. The current

government, therefore, announced on June 15, 2022, a military and popular campaign against it, which led to its defeat and the liberation of many regions from its clutches, particularly Hirshabelle and Galmudug.

## ISIS-Somalia

The Islamic State in Somalia (ISIS-Somalia) is a group affiliated with the terrorist organization Daesh and it is one of the cells defecting from Al-Shabaab. It is based in the mountainous regions of Puntland, founded by Abdul Qadir Mumin, who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2015, and managed to take over a small area in the remote mountainous regions of northern Somalia. The group gets a lot of its funding through extortion. It retaliates against businessmen and civilians who do not support it financially or who do not provide it with supplies by kidnapping and assassinating them. It carried out many crimes, claiming responsibility for 32 attacks in Mogadishu and Afgoye in 2022. Its operatives have been charged, among other things, with arms transfers to Yemen and East Africa, and engaging in illegal activities, including piracy and environmental crimes. The US military, with the help of the local authority, was recently able to deliver a precision strike on a mountainous cave complex in northern Somalia, killing leader Bilal al-Sudani, who was accused of supporting the operational capacity of Daesh elements around the world, and forming a transnational network deployed in Central and East Africa.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the emergence of many armed entities in different areas of Somalia is a fundamental consequence of the civil war that began in the early nineties. It has created a perfect environment for the growth and spread of large terrorist groups, such as Daesh and al-Qaeda. What triggered the civil war in Somalia is essentially no different from what ignited conflicts in any other African country. The absence of a single state with its own national army, the spread of chaos, the destruction of infrastructure, the multiple split allegiances, the spread of tribal and religious intolerance, the lack of development, the widespread poverty, and the diversity of military factions and militias, are essential factors that perpetuate the collapse of the country and pose a real challenge to the international and regional communities that require a free will to rebuild the state at all levels away from private agendas.