



Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Conflicts Globally

Analysis, Research and Resolution



ISSN 2373-6615 (Print); ISSN 2373-6631 (Online)

**Ethnicity as a Tool to Pacify Religious Extremism:
A Case Study of Intrastate Conflict in Somalia**

John R. Kisilu

National Defence University-Kenya

Abstract

The clan system and religion in Somalia are the two most salient identities that define the fundamental social structure of the Somali nation. This structure has been the main unifying factor of the Somali people. Unfortunately, the same system is perceived to be a stumbling block to the resolution of the Somali intrastate conflict. Observably, the clan stands out as the central pillar of social structure in Somalia. It is the entry point into the livelihood of the Somali people. This paper explores the possibility of transforming the dominance of clan kinship into an opportunity for neutralizing the negative effect of religious extremism. The paper adopts the conflict transformation theory propounded by John Paul Lederach. The philosophical outlook of the article is positive peace as advanced by Galtung. Primary data were collected through questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interview schedules involving 223 respondents with knowledge about conflict issues in Somalia. Secondary data were collected through a literature review of books and journals. The study identified the clan as the potent outfit in Somalia which can engage the religious extremist group, Al Shabaab, in negotiation for peace. It is impossible to conquer the Al Shabaab as it operates within the population and has high adaptability by employing asymmetrical warfare tactics. Additionally, the government of Somalia is perceived by Al Shabaab as man-made and, therefore, an illegitimate, unworthy partner to negotiate with. Furthermore, engaging the group in negotiation is a dilemma; democracies do not negotiate with terror groups lest they legitimize them as the voice of the population. Therefore, the clan becomes the legible unit to handle the responsibility of negotiation between the government and the religious extremist group, Al Shabaab. The clan can also play a key role in reaching out to the youths who are targets of radicalization campaigns from extremist groups. The study recommends that the clan system in Somalia, as an important institution in the country, should be partnered with to provide a middle ground in the conflict and serve as a bridge between the state and the religious extremist group, Al Shabaab. The clan system is likely to bring homegrown solutions to the conflict.

Keywords: ethnicity, religious extremism, clannism, conflict transformation, Al Shabaab, intrastate conflict

Introduction

The origins of the fall of the Somali government could be traced to the targeting and discrimination of clans that opposed the regime of president Siad Barre. Politically, his government was dominated by the Darod clan, mainly his sub-clan, Marehan, together with Ogaden and Dulbahunte sub-clans. Following the defeat of his army during the 1977-1978 Ogaden war with Ethiopia and the subsequent weakening of the government, the aggrieved clans were motivated to form their clan-based militia groups against the government. The Isaaq clan of Somaliland was the biggest casualty of the Siad Barre aggression. In 1981, the clan started a dissident party, Somali National Movement (SNM), to overthrow Barre's government. In retaliation, President Barre responded with arbitrary arrests and executions of the Isaaq clan members, aggravated by indiscriminate bombing and destruction of the biggest cities in Somaliland, Hargeisa, and Burao. The government-sponsored terrorism against the Isaaq clan members led to a massive refugee crisis when about 300,000 fled to the small border town of Harta Sheikh in Ethiopia. At the same time, the dead were buried in hundreds in unmarked mass graves in Somaliland (See *In the Valley of Death: Somaliland's Forgotten Genocide*, n.d.).

In 1989, the Hawiye clan formed the United Somali Congress under General Mohammed Farah Aideed of Habr Gedir sub-clan of the Hawiye clan. In response, Siad Barre ordered his Darod clan to rise and fight against the Hawiye clan in Mogadishu. The clan groupings led to the spiraling of clan-based conflict, which spread to Kismayo town between the Marehan and Ogaden subclans of the Darod clan. Elsewhere, the Marjeeten sub-clan of the Darod clan also attempted a foiled coup against the government of Siad Barre. In the ensuing scenario, Somalia was engulfed in uncontrollable clan-based conflicts within themselves and with the government. Eventually, the state collapsed, leaving a void with no central power or law and order. Each clan fought to salvage itself from the crisis (See *Understanding Civil Militia Groups in Somalia – ACCORD*, 2016).

The populations retreating to their patrilineal lineages, clans, and strengthening them into social insurance groups highlighted the power of ethnicity in Somalia. The lack of centralized government leadership provided fertile ground for the emergence of localized leadership mechanisms spearheaded by clans. Retrogressively, the clans competed to control Somalia's political and economic space, resulting in a protracted intrastate conflict. The stalemate was because no single clan could dominate Somalia's political and economic landscape. The lacuna became an opportunity for the transnational religious extremist groups to find a footing in Somalia, where they featured under various identities, with the latest being the religious extremist group, Al Shabaab. However, the clan maintained its significance as the only key entry point for any religious or political ideologies in Somalia.

Notwithstanding the importance of the clan entity in Somalia, it is also a notable cause of conflict. Conflict in Somalia has revolved around contestations over critical infrastructure, economic bases, and state power. According to Musau (2013), the infighting of the clans has exacerbated the protracted nature of the conflict. To attempt to resolve the never-ending Somali conflict, domestic and international actors intervened to neuter the dominance-seeking feature of clans in Somalia. The various approaches by the actors did not bear any fruit as they never resonated with the fundamental structure of Somali society, which is the clan and Islamic religious identity.

The regime of Siad Barre exemplified the significance of clan support in Somali politics. Muthuma (2007) enumerated that after the assassination of the second president of the Republic

of Somalia, Abdi Rashid Ali Shermarke, and the subsequent overthrow of the civilian regime, Siad Barre rose to power under a socialist ideology that discouraged clannism. However, as his political legitimacy and, subsequently, his authority and power started a downward spiral for the worst, the then strongman increasingly resorted to using clannism as a basis for holding onto power.

According to Gateretse and Buzanski (2014), Al Shabaab had been “pursuing a most militant and violent form of Islamist activism, with killings of Somalis (and foreigners) who do not subscribe to its brand of Islam, and rejecting any form of democracy—seen as religiously unacceptable because it is man-made. On the other hand, Al Shabaab emerged as a successor movement to the Islamic Courts Union. This non-state alliance had tried to install law and order in Somalia in the post-1991 chaos (state collapse) using religious (sharia) precepts” (p. 213). The Islamic Courts Union was inclined to restoring normalcy in Somalia but on the contrary, “the Islamist militia which later became Al Shabaab claimed religious and political supremacy and did not accept any effort to rebuild a new Somali government and state” (Farole, 2018, p. 51).

Al Shabaab had negotiated its entry into the Somali population and endeared itself to the people by maintaining law and order, providing health and medical services, famine and hunger relief, and individual and clan dispute resolution mechanisms. It had formed itself into a government based on religious ideology. Unfortunately, “their ideology of Islamist supremacism led them to use crude violence to impose their version of Islam on all people and to attack or drive out their rivals, Sufist clerics, and representatives of Somali government” (Gateretse & Buzanski, 2014, p. 214). Violence, extortion, and child soldier recruitment tarnished the legitimacy of Al Shabaab governance (Ingiriis, 2018).

In Somalia, clan kinship and religion are the two essential components of the Somali society. The dynamics underpinning the two have contributed to the repeated failure of Somalia’s peace processes. The collapse of the Siad Barre government led to the perpetual struggle for dominance between the clans over economic and political space. It also led to armed conflict between groups with different religious ideologies. The fight worsened the parity between clans, significantly disadvantaging minority clans (Greene, 2011). The leading cause of conflict, clan kinship and religion, can also be turned into an opportunity to resolve the protracted intrastate conflict in Somalia.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the conflict transformation theory by John Paul Lederach (1997). In the conflict transformation theory, three levels divide society. These three levels are top leadership which he refers to as level 1; middle-range leadership, which he refers to as level 2; and grassroots leadership, which he refers to as level 3 (Lederach, 1997). In his analysis, Lederach referenced divided societies. In this case, Somalia is one of the societies divided based on clan. He argues that in such divided societies like Somalia, the primary actor in the peace process is the local Somali, not the foreign hand. Clans and sub-clans define identity in Somalia. Negotiating for peace from the bottom level would ensure long-term effects on the conflict management effort in the country. Because there is no clear middle-level leadership in the country, there is a need to emphasize conflict transformation at the grassroots to influence the top-level leadership. Former warlords or leaders from the diaspora who lacked links with the local Somali formed the subsequent governments in Somalia. Foreign forces brought and maintained the government, with little or no contribution from the local Somali population,

affirming the perception that the government is not for the Somali people, an argument the religious group, Al Shabaab, rides on. The top and bottom levels are disjointed, with no capable middle tier to unite the two. The bottom would endeavor to overthrow the foreign-imposed top level leadership. The loyalty of the Somali people is with the traditional clan elders at the bottom level. They are the opinion shapers and, consequently, the best joint to link the bottom and top levels. Positioning the clan elders in the middle tier can achieve conflict transformation in Somalia.

The Philosophical Perspective

This paper adopts the positivist philosophy in which the researcher focuses on positive peace as an essential aspect of getting lasting solutions to the Somali conflict. According to Galtung (1996), positive peace could be achieved by dismantling indirect and structural violence. Positive peace mainly relates to the outlook, organization, and establishment needed to have lasting peace within the society (Galtung, 1996, p. 192). The concept of positive peace developed by Galtung, and applied in this research, sought to confirm that a long-lasting peace in Somalia was on sustainable conflict management pillars.

Methodology

The study used historical and descriptive research designs based on both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The primary data were collected using questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interview schedules. The researcher carried out a documentary review to gather secondary data. Further, the researcher interviewed a population with knowledge of Somalia issues, including Somali government officials, Somali nationals from the diaspora, elite Somali citizens living in Kenya, Kenya government officials working in Somalia, and actors and NGOs involved in peace negotiations in Somalia. The study used simple random, systematic random, purposive, stratified proportionate, and snowballing sampling techniques to enlist the respondents. The study managed to get feedback from 223 out of the planned 279 respondents. The quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The researcher coded and analyzed qualitative data thematically. The presentation of the data was through frequency and tabulation tables.

Findings and Discussions

Transforming Clannism as an Avenue for Conflict Management in Somalia

In this objective, the study aimed to establish how clannism could be an opportunity for conflict resolution in Somalia. Table 1 below shows that most respondents concurred that clans could form a formidable partner in resolving the Somali conflict.

Table 1

The extent to which addressing clannism is an avenue for conflict management in Somalia

	Frequency	Percent
Very Great Extent	16	7.7%
Great Extent	48	23%
Moderate Extent	97	46.6%
Small Extent	37	17.7%
No Extent	10	5.0%
Total	208	100

In Somalia, the clan is the legitimate representative of its members. The clan negotiates for the interest of its clan members with any entity, be it the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) or even with Al Shabaab. The clan mobilized its fighters to fight for its threatened interests. In this case, bigger clans controlled most of Somalia's resources and local politics. The weaker clans negotiated with bigger clans to have coalitions for survival. The focus group discussion affirmed the following:

Clan is the only entity in Somalia that has stood the test of time. It was there before colonialism, in post-independence times, after the collapse of the Somali government in 1991 and through warlordism, and now in Al Shabaab time. The clan is the only entity that has forced Al Shabaab to negotiate for space. In areas where clan has decided to resist Al Shabaab, like in Central Somalia, the clan has organized Macawisely clan militia which has been instrumental in reducing the freedom of action of Al Shabaab. It was frequently causing mass casualties to Al Shabaab in battle. (Focus Group Discussion Session, 2021, March 27)

The Somali kinship ties have demonstrated their value through participation in peacebuilding. The clan took over the responsibilities of the collapsed central government in 1991. It has featured in the power-sharing model, where the Somali Nairobi Peace Process institutionalized the clan factor in a 4.5 formula where the four major clans, Hawiye, Daarod, Rahanweyn, and Dir, shared equal power slots. In contrast, the remainder of the minority clans shared half-point. The model enabled the formation of a representative government (Ahmed, 2020). Though criticized by Western standards as falling short of universal suffrage, it is the best applicable avenue to achieving acceptable representation in line with the Somali culture.

Al Shabaab negotiated for entry into Somali society through the clan system by engaging the local clan elders (Abbink, 2020). Somali local culture and clan loyalties take precedence over anything else. In this regard, any religious ideology is locally acceptable as long as it conforms with the locally endorsed values (Bruton, 2011). It is worth noting that Al Shabaab has never engaged the Somali Federal Government or any other civil authority for any talks, but it often engages with the clan leadership. Hence, the researcher deduced that the Al Shabaab group better understands the local psychological terrain.

Further, an interview session with a key informant revealed the following:

Al Shabaab usually negotiates with clans for support. Wealthy clans raise money, while others raise fighters. A contribution assessment meeting

between Al Shabaab and clan elders drawn from various clans within a particular region determines what each clan is to pledge towards the Al Shabaab cause. In return, Al Shabaab supports the population with services a formal government provides. Al Shabaab takes a portion of the collected Zakat to help the poor; they have medical facilities and provide Criminal Justice System complete with police, courts, and a prison. Al Shabaab treats all clans equally; therefore, weak clans feel protected. Weak and marginalized clans contribute most Al Shabaab fighters. (Telephone interview with a key informant in Central Somalia, 2021, March 16)

The clan elders hold exclusive authority over their clan members. In the pre-colonial period, the clan existed as the local government providing administration and governance over its people. The clan created the necessary bond among relatives as a force to defend common agricultural land. During inter-clan conflicts, the clan elders would convene and discuss ways of resolving the disputes and compensation which may have arisen from the conflict (Ahmed, 2020). Most research views the clan from a negative perspective, and it is essential to look at it from the value it has added to the Somali culture and embrace it.

In propping up negotiations with extremist groups such as Al Shabaab, clans and clan elders will be critical in resolving the protracted conflict bearing in mind the fierce and fragile Somali conflict context. Moreover, clan mediators and negotiators can use Islam's pluralistic nature to temper the extremist approach adopted by terror groups in Somalia (Wennmann, 2014).

Peacebuilding advocates can use the bottom-up approach to build a stable post-conflict Somali society, enhancing the clan structure by refining the existing formula of 4.5. The clan is the only respected best mobilization avenue in times of need. Ahmed (2020) supports the argument by enumerating that during natural disasters like drought, famine, and floods, mobilization is along clan identity, which takes the nationalist nature of the government. Musau (2013) further supports this view by stating that in calamity, any Somali can migrate and settle anywhere to shield themselves from the prevailing disaster. Thus, the Somali identity stands out over all other political or religious considerations.

The success story of applying clannism in peacebuilding was witnessed in the Jubaland regional administration reconciliation conference when clans assembled and formed the Jubaland Federal Member State (FMS) (Gateretse & Buzanski, 2014). Clans mapped their estimated strength and the geographical region they were occupying. They agreed on the constitution of the regional administration and, later, the representation formula for each clan in the regional government. The clan population within the regional government boundaries determined the formula for the distribution of government positions.

Negotiating with Extremist Groups as an Avenue for Conflict Management in Somalia

The study also sought how negotiating with terror groups such as Al Shabaab could be explored in conflict management in Somalia. From the findings in Table 2, 49% of the respondents believed that negotiating with terror groups such as Al Shabaab could be explored in conflict management in Somalia to a small extent. Conceivably, it was a common thought that the Federal Government of Somalia and Al Shabaab could engage in a constructive negotiation, but the field data indicated otherwise.

Table 2

Extent to which negotiating with extremist groups such as Al Shabaab can enhance conflict management in Somalia

	Frequency	Percent
Very Great Extent	42	20.2
Great Extent	20	9.6
Moderate Extent	26	12.5
Small Extent	102	49.0
No Extent	18	8.7
Total	208	100.0

Notably, Al Shabaab is a key player in the Somali conflict; therefore, there is a need to find the right platform to engage them in negotiation. Al Shabaab lives within the population, and thus challenging to defeat it. According to Opondo (2018), Al Shabaab has survived many assaults because it is highly adaptable. First, the group claims to be the legitimate representative of some section of the Somali population. Second, their operational base is within the population, leading to the inference that the group has supporters and sympathizers from within the local population. In this regard, it is necessary to consider incorporating them into the negotiation process.

An interview with a key informant revealed the following:

Like any other extremist group, Al Shabaab has an asymmetrical approach to issues in Somalia. They live within the population. The Federal Government of Somalia and its security agencies use a conventional approach. There is no convergence between asymmetrical and conventional approaches to security issues. The religious extremism espoused by Al Shabaab cannot find a definition in the conventional approach to security. In Afghanistan, the U.S. attempted to negotiate with the Taliban for a peaceful conflict resolution without realizing tangible results. No country had engaged any religious extremist group in Africa since the entry point was lacking. There has been no attempt to have Al Shabaab negotiate with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). The challenge would be to define the rules of engagement. (Telephone interview with a key informant in Central Somalia, 2021, February 25)

However, an opportunity exists to negotiate with Al Shabaab through the clan system in Somalia. Somali people profess the Islamic faith and recognize the clan leadership. Al Shabaab derives its strength from the Islamic faith and recognizes clan leadership. Article 3 of the provisional constitution of Somalia states that the Federal Republic of Somalia is a Muslim Country, and the foundation of the constitution is on the tenets of the Holy Quran. This convergence of religion allows the clan leadership to mediate between the Somali State and Al Shabaab to have a shared understanding and agree on the common good for the Somali people.

The dilemma governments face is whether or not they should negotiate with terror groups. The primary concern is that this single act may legitimize the terror group as an authentic representative of some section of the population (Zartman & Alfredson, 2019). Further, it may be interpreted as a reward for using violence instead of engaging in peaceful means to achieve

political change (Neumann, 2007). The Somali government faces a situation that lacks the standing to engage the Al Shabaab group. However, the clan system in Somalia provides an opportunity to engage both the government and Al Shabaab.

Modern-day conflicts have an element of violent religious extremism and, therefore, the need to find a sensible way of negotiation while still appealing the conventional doctrine. However, modern protracted conflicts have an element of terrorism embedded in them. Thus, negotiators find themselves compounded by a peculiar condition, where the peace delegates cannot invite one party to the negotiation table due to the protocols of conventional doctrine (Faure, 2008).

Wennmann (2014) explores the diversity of engagement options ranging from confrontation, accommodation, and transformation to support negotiation with terror groups. Ifmann (2014) further postulates that negotiation with these groups is a strategy that has been in practice in reducing urban and civil war settings for decades to reduce crime and violence. Therefore, the literature reviewed underscores the need to engage Al Shabaab through the clan system, an approach not bound by the conventional doctrine of handling terror groups.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the clan system in Somalia, led by clan elders, can make a crucial contribution to the conflict management and transformation by playing the middle tier between the top leadership in level 1 and the grassroots in level 3. Clans can also play a key role in reaching out to the youths who constitute a significant target for radicalization campaigns from the extremist group, Al Shabaab. In this regard, the clan commands an influence needed to transform societal conflict.

Therefore, if the clan system is strengthened, militias and terror groups looking for foreign jihadist backing will isolate themselves if they do not align with traditional clan structures. Hence, the clan system in Somalia, when the clan through clan elders plays the middle tier of Lederach's three (3) levels, can help to engineer a national movement toward achieving peace within the county. The recognition of the clan system in Somalia is already in practice in the Federal Government 4.5 clan formula for political representation. The regional governments equally recognize the significance of the clan system, a good case study being Jubaland Federal Members State (FMS).

Recommendation

The study strongly recommends that the clan system in Somalia led by clan elders should be empowered to provide a middle ground in the conflict and bridge peace between the Somali government and the extremist group, Al Shabaab. The clan system in Somalia will likely bring homegrown solutions to the conflict and even transform relations between the Somali government and Al Shabaab, leading to lasting peace.

References

- Abbink, J. (2020). Religion and violence in the Horn of Africa: trajectories of mimetic rivalry and escalation between 'political islam' and the state. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21(2), 194-215. <https://philarchive.org/rec/ABBRAV-2>

- ACCORD. (2016, August 16). *Understanding civil militia groups in Somalia*. ACCORD Conflict Trends. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/understanding-civil-militia-groups-somalia/>
- Ahmed, M. S. (2020, June 17). *Multipartism and clanism in Somalia: Breaking the vicious cycle*. Daily Sabah. Retrieved from <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/multipartism-and-clanism-in-somalia-breaking-the-vicious-cycle>
- Ahmed, M. S. (2020, October 31). *Can Somalia get beyond clan and identity politics?* Daily Sabah. Retrieved from <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/can-somalia-get-beyond-clan-and-identity-politics>
- Bruton, B. (2011). Clan and Islamic identity in Somalia. In D. Last, & A. Seaboyer (Eds.), *Clan and Islamic Identities in Somali Society*. Toronto: DRDC.
- Dirshe, A. (2013). *Manipulating clan or ethnic political identity for power*. Hiraan. Retrieved from https://www.hiraan.com/op4/2013/aug/30623/manipulating_clan_or_ethnic_political_identity_for_power.aspx
- Farole, S. A. (2018). Regional security institutions and weak states: The case of post-conflict Somalia and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). *Comparative Strategy*, 37(5), 472-484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1526582>
- Faure, G. O. (2008). Negotiating with terrorists: A discrete form of diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 3(2), 179-200. doi: 10.1163/187119108X321512.
- Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Oslo: PRIO.
- Gateretse, J., & Buzanski, M. (2014). *Support to building inclusive institutions of parliament in Somalia*. UNDP: New York
- Greene, A. L. (2011). *Re-thinking Somali national identity: Nationalism, state formation and peacebuilding in Somalia*. Kalmar, Sweden: Life & Peace Institute/Kroc Institute.
- Ingiriis, M. H. (2018). From Al Itihaad to Al Shabaab: How the Ethiopian intervention and the 'War on Terror' exacerbated the conflict in Somalia. *Third World Quarterly*, 39(11), 2033-2052. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1479186>
- Kennard, M., & Einashe, I. (2018, October 22). *In the Valley of death: Somaliland's forgotten genocide*. Pulitzer Center. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/valley-death-somalilands-forgotten-genocide>
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Lewis, I. M. (2004). Visible and invisible differences: The Somali paradox. *Africa*, 74(4), 489-515. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3556839>
- Musau, S. (2013). Clans' and clanism's control over weak political institutions. In M. Gonnelli (Ed.), *Somalia: Clan and state politics* (pp. 13-24). Nairobi: International Training Programme for Conflict Management.
- Muthuma, G. (2007). *Clans and crisis in Somalia*. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/may/06/clansandcrisisinsomalia>
- Neumann, P. R. (2007). Negotiating with terrorists. In L. B. Weinberg (Ed.), *Democratic responses to terrorism*. New York: Routledge.
- Opondo, P. (2018). Al Shabaab and peacekeeping in East Africa. In P. G. Okoth, F. K. Matanga, & K. Onkware, *Peace, security and development in 21st century Africa: Theory and practice* (pp.367-383). Nairobi: Finesse Publishing.
- Wennmann, A. (2014). Negotiated exits from organized crime? Building peace in conflict and

crime-affected contexts. *Negotiation Journal*, 30(3), 255-273.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12060>

World Bank. (2006). *Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and dynamics*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Zartman, W., & Alfredson, T. (2019). Negotiating with terrorists and the tactical question. In W. Zartman (Ed.), *A pioneer in conflict management and area studies* (p. 225). New York: Springer.