Chapter One

The Background and Root Causes of the Conflicts in Somalia

1. Introduction

Somalia has been the scene of devastating internal armed conflicts of varying magnitudes and intensities since 1988 when armed opposition movements waged guerrilla wars against government forces. In January 1991, after 30 years of independence (1960-1990), the Somali State collapsed as the conflict between government forces and clan-based armed opposition groups finally reached Mogadishu, resulting in the downfall of Siad Barre’s 21 years of repressive military rule. The fall of Barre’s regime brought to an end two decades of violations of international human rights law and sporadically humanitarian law, but ushered in a new era of conflict. The resulting power struggle between clan-based armed groups led to a war marked by serious violations of IHL, which continues to this day. The collapse of the Somali state and its subsequent disintegration into anarchy contrasts sharply with the country’s description as one of the most homogeneous societies – ethnically, culturally, and linguistically – in Africa.¹ Faction leaders, lacking both the vision and competence to establish a suitable alternative to their predecessor, have resorted to the cynical manipulation of the clan system.

The result was political chaos, as Somalia descended into a fractious mosaic of independent and unstable clan fiefdoms characterised by protracted inter- and intra-clan conflicts of clan-based marauding warlords. As political power over most of Somalia fell into the hands of feuding warlords, some regions declared so-called independent or autonomous states. In May 1991 the northwest regions declared the independent Republic of Somaliland, but this was not, and at the time of writing still has not been, recognized by any international body. In March 1998, the northeast provinces, demanding autonomy within a federal system, declared

¹ Somalia is often described as a unique country in Africa, being a state founded on one ethnic group, sharing many social and cultural traits, such as language, mode of economic production, and religion. The Somali pastoral nomadic clans estimated to represent more than 80 percent of the population, share a common language and culture are believed to descend from a common Somali ancestor. These clans i.e. the Hawiye, Darod, and Dir represented the dominant political culture since independence in 1969. The Somali agro-pastoral Rahanweyn clans of the inter-riverine areas speak a dialect distinct from that of the pastoral clans. In addition, Somalia has minority communities that do not belong genealogically to the Somali clan families.
the *Puntland State of Somalia*, adding to the crisis. The Hawiye clan took control of the central regions, including Mogadishu, as well as parts of the south. In April 2002, a new autonomous *Southwest Somali State* was established in parts of the southern regions. These fissiparous tendencies continue to this day.

These centrifugal national tendencies were supplemented by a series of overlapping and fluid local authorities including militias, traditional clan elders, and religious groups; some of which provide a degree of security and administration but all competing to take over important functions of the state. Somalia remains divided into fiefdoms led by warlords, radical Islamists and localised forms of power. The mandate of its fragile Transitional National Government which was created in October 2000 in Arta, Djibouti ended in August 2003. In August 2004 after almost two years of debating in Kenya, delegates from Somalia’s warring clans selected 275 members of a new parliament, which elected Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as President of Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government. Following confrontations with the parliament and the Prime Minister Yusuf resigned in December 2009. However, Somalia is still classified as a “collapsed state” lacking a government, a functioning judiciary, a system of taxation, social services, refuse collection, public schools, a public health system, and a police force. Insecurity reigns in large sections of Somalia, as there are on-going disputes over both political control and the exploitation of resources in local areas down to the sub-sub-clan level. This results in extortion, kidnappings, assassinations, and endemic fighting.

Somalia’s conflict is extremely complex with both multiple and interconnected roots. This chapter addresses the necessity of examining the underlying causes of the ongoing armed conflicts. As no single factor can explain the background causes of the conflicts, it examines such factors as the legacy of colonialism, the Somali clanship system, Cold War politics, militarisation, marginalisation, uneven development, the consequences of human rights abuses by the military regime and other events leading to the collapse of the Somalia state. First, it is necessary to understand the background of the conflict and the form that the fighting has taken.

2. Somalia and Its People

The people who inhabit present-day Somalia have a long continuous history. Ancient Greeks and Romans called the Somali people Berbers. The Hawiye, the largest clan-family in Somalia, are amongst the tribes enumerated by Arab geographers. Ibnu Said, the fourteenth century Arab geographer, wrote that the city

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3 Touval, Saadia., *Somali Nationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1963), p. 9. The use of the terms of tribe or tribalism is misleading in reference to Somali people. Although some scholars use the terms of tribe and clan in an interchangeable manner, the term clan is a more appropriate term to describe the Somali society.