Chapter Two

Characteristics of Conflicts in Somalia

1. Introduction

In the year 2001, there were 15 armed conflicts around the globe all of which were fought within state borders by regular armed forces and identifiable armed groups, or armed groups fighting one another in the territory of a given state.\(^1\) Somalia was, and continues to be, one of those states affected by internal armed conflicts. As discussed in chapter one, since 1988 Somalia has been in a constant state of fluctuating and complex emergency situations, characterized by internal armed conflicts. It has experienced a succession of four conflicts, each marked by its own specific characteristics. The first wave of hostilities between state and non-state entities, namely the Somali National Army and clan-based militias, started in May 1988. This culminated in the ousting of Barre’s regime in January 1991 and the implosion of national institutions, authority, and law and order. His departure triggered a second wave of devastating armed conflicts among clan-based factions. The third wave of hostilities involved the multinational UN troops and the late General Aidid’s forces.\(^2\) The conflict between the UN forces and General Aidid is beyond the scope of this chapter, which will be limited to the conflict between the Somali state and non-state actors. The fourth is the ongoing series of more localised, unpredictable inter and intra-clan fighting for the control of territory and resources. Broadly, the conflicts that have blighted Somalia can be divided into two categories – those before the collapse of the state between

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\(^2\) The hostilities between the UN and General Aidid’s forces started on 5th June 1993 after an inspection of a weapons storage site led to the massacre of 24 Pakistani soldiers by General Aidid’s forces in Mogadishu. The Security Council of the United Nations issued an emergency resolution calling for the apprehension of “those responsible” for the massacre. Admiral Howe, the special representative to the UN Secretary General for Somalia, ordered Aidid’s arrest and US troops began attacking various targets in Mogadishu. On 12 July 1993, the US forces attacked a meeting of clan leaders, destroying the building and killing over one hundred elders. Between 3-4 of October 1993, the hunt for General Aidid resulted in a bloody battlefield in which over 1,000 Somalis and 18 US soldiers were killed.
governmental and non-governmental actors and those after the state collapse, involving inter-factional fighting between clan-based warring parties.

In the preceding chapter, the background causes of the armed conflict were extensively discussed. The focus of the many analyses of the conflicts in Somalia has led to a simplistic characterisation of the conflicts as merely clan warfare resulting from traditional clan conflict. If this characterisation was accurate, one would expect the current conflict to be triggered by traditional causes of tension in Somali society and the form of the fighting to conform to traditional Somali patterns of warfare. In light of the analysis in chapter one as well as this chapter itself, it should be possible to evaluate the extent to which the features of the current hostilities are attributable to traditional, Somali-specific elements. This chapter will examine both the immediate causes of the current conflict and their resulting conduct.

2. The Segmentary Lineage System

In order to comprehend the character of the conflict, it is necessary to understand the segmentary lineage system, in which the clan has always occupied an important position. The clan-based social structure has been characterized by intense competition and conflict between descent groups.3 Thus, the civil war is generally understood as resulting from features of the clan system. As noted:

Power is exercised through temporary coalitions and ephemeral alliances between lineages. A given alliance fragments into competitive units as soon as the situation that necessitated it ceases to exist. In urban settings, for example, where relatively large economic and political stakes are contested, the whole population may be polarized into two opposing camps of clan alliances. To varying degrees, the poles of power in the politics of independent Somalia generally have tended to form around the Darood clanfamily and a confederacy of the Hawiye and the Isaaq clanfamilies.4

Samatar analyses the segmentary lineage system in terms of the material culture of traditional pastoral societies:

In the interminable search of the ever-elusive pasturelands and water holes for the herds, the clans traditionally continuously segmented into component units or amalgamated into larger ones, depending on the prevailing conditions of war and peace among blood related lineages. Clan coalitions instantaneously formed to face a certain emergency, only to disband just as instantaneously.