



## Somalia

Somalia has been plagued by instability and humanitarian crises for decades. After the authoritarian Siad Barre regime fell in 1991, the country was characterized for years as a failed state. The formation of a federal government in 2012 was a turning point, and with international support, Somalia has made progress including battlefield gains since 2022. Among considerable challenges on its path toward stability, however, is a long-running Islamist insurgency led by Al Shabaab, which U.S. officials term Al Qaeda's largest and wealthiest affiliate. A catastrophic drought, Somalia's longest on record, has exacerbated the country's problems, fueling displacement and widespread acute food insecurity.

The United States plays a key role in Somalia, as a major security partner and the largest humanitarian donor. The United States has conducted episodic strikes against terrorist targets there since 2003 and has provided support to Somali and African Union (AU) forces fighting Al Shabaab since 2007. Roughly 450 U.S. military personnel are deployed in Somalia to advise and assist Somali and AU forces; U.S. officials say they are not directly engaged in combat operations. Additional U.S. personnel support counterterrorism operations from neighboring countries.

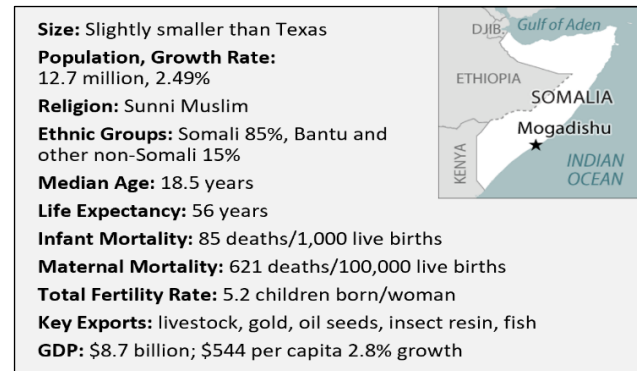
### From Failed to Fragile State

In 2013, the United States officially recognized the Somali government for the first time in 22 years. The decision highlighted tenuous improvements, both in terms of political developments and advances against Al Shabaab. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) followed suit, making Somalia eligible for technical assistance and policy advice. The United Kingdom (UK) was the first Western country to reopen its embassy there, followed by China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and most East African countries. In 2016, the United States sent its first ambassador to Somalia in decades and reestablished a permanent diplomatic presence in Mogadishu in late 2018.

International donors have expanded their engagement in the past decade, seeking to help Somalia foster economic growth; expand infrastructure and access to services; improve governance and rule of law; and build resilience to drought. With support from donors, an AU stabilization force, and other security partners, Somalia is now described by UN officials as a "fragile state," rather than a failed one.

Political and clan rivalries, corruption, and contradictory visions for sharing power still complicate the way forward. Somalia, which has not held direct one-person one-vote elections in decades, has held indirect elections since 2012. Elections in 2017 resulted in a peaceful transfer of power, but an electoral impasse in 2021 sparked fighting in the capital and fueled fears of civil war. When presidential elections were ultimately held in May 2022, former President *Hassan Sheikh* Mohamud (2012-2017), defeated his successor, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, aka "Farmajo," and returned to office.

### Figure 1. Somalia Facts



Source: CRS map. Data from CIA and IMF reference databases.

### Security Challenges

Somalis face substantial challenges in stabilizing and securing the Somali state. Military offensives by AU and allied Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian forces in 2011-2012 pushed Al Shabaab out of Mogadishu and other major southern cities and reduced its access to revenue. Subsequent offensives reclaimed additional ground.

Al Shabaab has proven resilient, however. It still controls parts of the country and reportedly earns revenue of up to \$150 million annually through illicit taxes and "mafia-style" extortion, including in Mogadishu and other government-held areas. UN monitors say the group's ability to carry out complex asymmetric attacks is "undiminished."

Al Shabaab conducts frequent attacks in Mogadishu, likely seeking to undermine confidence in the government and its security measures. In 2017, a truck bombing there killed over 500 people. A suicide bomber killed the city's mayor in 2019. In late 2022, the group killed over 120 people in car bombings outside the education ministry. Al Shabaab periodically fires mortars at the heavily guarded Mogadishu International Airport complex (where many diplomatic facilities and residences are located, including the U.S. embassy); gunmen briefly breached the perimeter in 2022.

The AU mission, which first deployed to Somalia in 2007, has been described as "the deadliest peace operation in modern history." Known as AMISOM until 2022, when it was renamed ATMIS, the mission has served primarily as a counterinsurgency force. Al Shabaab has killed hundreds of troops in complex assaults on its forward bases. The AU does not report casualty figures, but per a senior AU official over 3,500 AU troops have been killed since 2007.

Beyond Somalia, Al Shabaab has conducted terrorist attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti. In mid-2022, an estimated 2,000 fighters launched an offensive deep into Ethiopia, where hundreds reportedly remain. For more on the group, see CRS In Focus IF10170, *Al Shabaab*.

President Hassan Sheikh has declared “total war” against Al Shabaab. Building on a local uprising against the group in the central Hiraan region, an offensive by Somali forces in the latter half of 2022 made the most important territorial gains over the group in a decade. Whether that success can be replicated in the offensive’s next phase (which would focus on southern regions, where political/clan dynamics are different), is debated. AU and Somali forces have long struggled to maintain security in territory taken from Al Shabaab, and attacks in recently reclaimed areas underscore concerns about Somali forces’ ability to hold them or the government’s ability to extend services and authority.

ATMIS and international partners are working to help build Somali forces’ capacity so the AU mission can transfer responsibilities and exit at the end of 2024, in line with AU and UN Security Council decisions. A range of factors constrain the effort, including political disputes, funding shortfalls, institutional underdevelopment, and corruption. ATMIS began to draw down in June 2023, reducing its size from over 19,000 troops to 16,586. Some analysts say the withdrawal timeline is too ambitious and heightens the risk of Al Shabaab reversing recent gains.

### Other Nation-Building Challenges

The Somali federal government has struggled to overcome contentious clan and regional dynamics and extend its authority beyond Mogadishu. After over 20 years without central authority, Somalis continue to debate how to share power, revenue, and resources. While many see a decentralized system of governance as the best way to share power among clans and sub-clans, competition over power in Mogadishu and state capitals remains a flashpoint.

Federalism is enshrined in a 2012 provisional constitution, but the charter is vague on how it should work. Progress on a permanent constitution has been halting. Strains between federal and state authorities have flared repeatedly: under Farmajo, who favored centralization, allegations of federal interference in state elections stoked tensions. President Hassan Sheikh has taken steps to repair relations with Federal Member State (FMS) leaders, but frictions remain, notably with semi-autonomous Puntland. Meanwhile, Somaliland, which declared itself independent in 1991, maintains its autonomy from Somalia.

Pervasive corruption hinders Somalia’s efforts to rebuild (it ranks last on Transparency International’s corruption perceptions index). The government’s public financial management reforms have won praise from the IMF, however, paving the way for Somalia to reach the decision point for multilateral debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative in 2020. Somalia owes almost \$5 billion in external debt (most of it accrued under Siad Barre); the United States is its largest bilateral creditor. In 2019, Congress approved \$35 million for the first phase in canceling Somalia’s \$1.1 billion bilateral debt.

### Humanitarian Situation

A devastating regional drought that began in 2020 has affected over 8 million Somalis, resulting in a massive loss of livestock and widespread food insecurity. An estimated 43,000 people—at least half children under 5—reportedly died due to the drought in 2022. Increased relief efforts helped to avert a worse outcome, but over half the

population remains acutely food insecure, and a famine risk persists. In 2023, historic flooding has destroyed farmland and livestock, and displaced over 460,000 people.

Conflict, drought, and flooding displaced over a million Somalis in the first half of 2023, bringing total internal displacement to over 3.8 million. (Another 685,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighboring countries.) Of an estimated 7.6 million school-age children in Somalia, 4.8 million are out of school. As of July 2023, donors have funded 31% of the \$2.6 billion humanitarian appeal for 2023.

### U.S. Policy, Operations, and Foreign Aid

Stated U.S. foreign policy objectives in Somalia are to promote political and economic stability, prevent the country from serving as a terrorist safe haven, and alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Some observers see the U.S. approach on Somalia as largely centered on containing terrorist threats and suggest greater focus on stabilization, conflict resolution, and reconciliation is needed.

The United States has conducted military strikes against Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab targets in Somalia for over 15 years. Ground operations have been rare. U.S. strikes have killed top Al Shabaab operatives, including leader Ahmed Abdi Godane in 2014. The United States has also conducted strikes against a small Islamic State (IS) faction in northern Somalia; in 2023, U.S. forces targeted an alleged IS global network facilitator. Successive Administrations have characterized Al Shabaab as an “associated force” of Al Qaeda in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF; P.L. 107-40), which U.S. officials say also covers the IS faction in Somalia. U.S. strikes in Somalia peaked at 63 in 2019. AFRICOM reported 15 strikes in 2022 and nine in the first six months of 2023.

The United States provides training, equipment, logistics, medical, intelligence, and advisory support to AU and Somali troops. U.S. forces have mentored Somalia’s elite special operations unit, the Danab Advanced Infantry Brigade. President Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia at the end of his term. President Biden ordered their redeployment to Somalia in May 2022. Congress considered legislation in 2023, H.Con.Res. 30, that would have directed the removal of U.S. forces from Somalia. Three U.S. service members have been killed by Al Shabaab—two in Somalia, in 2017 and 2018, and one in Kenya. Two U.S. contractors were also killed in the 2020 Kenya attack, on an airfield near the Somali border. Al Shabaab unsuccessfully attacked an airfield used by the U.S. military in central Somalia in 2019. The ATMIS drawdown may raise concerns for U.S. embassy security.

The United States has provided over \$818 million in humanitarian aid in FY2022 and \$792 million to date in FY2023. The State Department and USAID provided over \$275 million in other assistance in FY2022, a majority of it military aid for Somali and AU forces and assessed U.S. contributions for the UN Support Office in Somalia, which supports ATMIS. The Biden Administration’s FY2024 budget request includes over \$285 million for Somalia, reflecting a planned increase in governance funding.

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