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Somalia

Instability and humanitarian crises have beset Somalia for decades. After the authoritarian Siad Barre regime fell amid civil war in 1991, the country became a “failed state.” The formation of a federal government in 2012 was a turning point, and, with international support, Somalia made halting progress against the violent Islamist insurgency led by Al Shabaab. Political infighting, clan rivalries, and corruption, however, threaten to reverse hard-won gains. Despite losing some territory, Al Shabaab has grown into Al Qaeda’s largest and wealthiest affiliate, and a local Islamic State (IS) cell has become a central node for the IS global network. Alongside conflict, drought and flooding fuel displacement and widespread food insecurity.

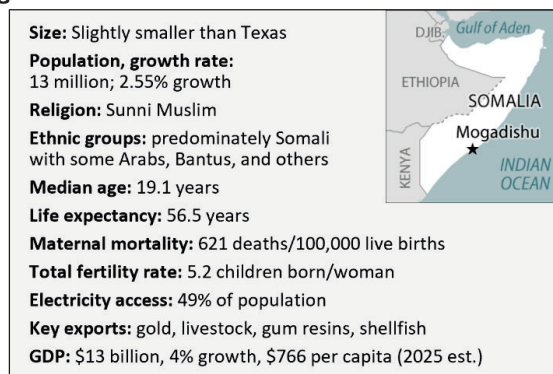
The United States has conducted episodic counterterrorism operations in Somalia since 2003 and supported Somali and African Union (AU) forces fighting Al Shabaab since 2007. Hundreds of U.S. military personnel are deployed in Somalia to advise and assist Somali and AU forces; other U.S. personnel support counterterrorism operations from neighboring Djibouti and Kenya. The United States is not only a prominent security actor in Somalia, it has been the country’s largest humanitarian donor, and was, until 2024, its largest bilateral creditor. Congress has weighed U.S. strategy toward Somalia, provided appropriations and oversight for foreign aid, security cooperation, military efforts, and debt relief, and debated the U.S. military presence and the use of military force in Somalia.

From Failed to Fragile State

In 2013, the United States officially recognized Somalia’s government for the first time in 22 years, underscoring tenuous political improvements and advances against Al Shabaab. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) followed, enabling IMF technical assistance. In 2016, the United States sent its first ambassador to Somalia since 1991 and, in 2008, reestablished a permanent diplomatic presence. With support from donors, AU forces, and other security and development partners, the country has transitioned from a “failed state” to a “fragile state.” Somalia is serving a two-year term (2025-2026) on the UN Security Council.

Political and clan rivalries, competing visions for sharing power, and corruption complicate the way forward for Somalia. The country, which has not held direct elections since 1969, has held clan-based indirect elections since 2000. A transition to direct multiparty elections has been repeatedly delayed. An electoral impasse in 2021 sparked fighting in the capital and fueled fears of civil war. When presidential elections were finally held in May 2022, former President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012-2017) defeated President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, aka “Farmajo,” and returned to office. President Mohamud has pledged to hold one-person, one-vote elections in 2026, when his term expires, but challenges to direct multiparty polls abound. Political tensions are rising as election season approaches.

Figure 1. Somalia Facts



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

Security Challenges

Somali authorities face substantial challenges to securing and stabilizing the state. Operations in 2011-2012 by AU, Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian forces pushed Al Shabaab out of Mogadishu and other cities and ports, reducing its access to revenue and giving the government control of the capital. Subsequent offensives reclaimed more ground, but Al Shabaab has been resilient. With up to 12,000 fighters, it still controls parts of the country and reportedly collects as much as \$200 million annually through taxes and “mafia-like” extortion. UN monitors assess that Al Shabaab has a transactional relationship with the Houthis in Yemen and is receiving weapons and technical expertise from the group.

Al Shabaab continues to wage terrorist attacks in the capital and other areas, likely seeking to undermine confidence in the government and its security measures, and it sometimes launches mortars at the heavily guarded Mogadishu International Airport complex where the U.S. embassy and other diplomatic facilities are based; gunmen breached the perimeter in 2022. For more on the group and the regional threat it poses, see CRS In Focus IF10170, *Al Shabaab*.

After his election, President Mohamud declared “total war” against Al Shabaab. Building on a clan uprising against the group in central Somalia, a Somali offensive in 2022 made the most important territorial gains against Al Shabaab in a decade. The army struggled to maintain momentum under the government’s ambitious timeline, however, and the offensive stalled. A resurgent Al Shabaab has since retaken some territory, and security conditions have deteriorated.

Meanwhile, an IS cell that split from Al Shabaab in 2015 has reportedly evolved into an operational, logistical, and financial hub for the IS global network. By some accounts, its emir has become the network’s leader, and with an influx of foreign fighters, IS-Somalia may now have as many 1,500 fighters. State forces in Puntland, the where the IS cell is based, launched a new offensive against the group in 2025, aided by a major uptick in U.S. airstrikes.

The AU mission in Somalia, which first deployed in 2007, has served primarily as a counterinsurgency force and been described as the world's deadliest peace operation. Known as AMISOM until 2022, when it was renamed ATMIS, the force has downsized over the past decade from over 22,000 troops to roughly 12,000 in 2025, after the UN Security Council reauthorized it as the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). AUSSOM faces a funding shortfall and uncertain prospects as the United States and other stakeholders continue to debate how it will be financed, even as AUSSOM troop contributors call for raising its troop strength by 8,000. The European Union, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, among others, are helping Somali forces build their capacity to assume full responsibility from the AU force. Funding, cohesion, and capacity challenges; security threats; and politics have delayed the security transition, now set for late 2029.

Other Nation-Building Challenges

Somalia's federal government has struggled to overcome contentious clan and regional dynamics and extend its authority, but, after over 20 years without central authority, Somalis are still debating how to allocate power and share resources. A 2012 provisional constitution enshrined federalism but is vague on how it should work; progress on a permanent constitution has been slow. Some Somalis reportedly see a decentralized system of government as the best way to manage mistrust and dynamics among clans and disincentivize conflict, but authorities in Mogadishu and Federal Member State (FMS) capitals have competing views on how authority should be divided. President Mohamud faces opposition to his proposed modalities for direct elections, which some, including FMS leaders in Puntland and Jubaland, see as an effort to centralize power.

Somalia has consistently ranked among the world's most corrupt countries, hindering efforts to rebuild. Public financial management reforms by the government have won praise from the IMF, however, enabling multilateral debt relief totaling \$4.5 billion, including the cancellation of its \$1.14 billion debt to the United States in 2024.

Somaliland

Somaliland, a former British protectorate that declared independence from Somalia in 1991, has maintained its autonomy for over three decades. The breakaway state holds direct elections: its most recent, in 2024, resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to opposition leader Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Cirro." Somalia's federal government asserts that Somaliland is part of its territory and opposes its quest for international recognition. Turkey defused tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia in late 2024 after the latter reportedly offered Somaliland recognition in exchange for sea access. Growing ties between Somaliland and Taiwan, which opened representative offices in each other's capitals in 2000, have drawn ire from Mogadishu and Beijing.

Humanitarian Situation

Conflict, drought, flooding, and disease outbreaks have fueled protracted humanitarian crises in Somalia, where, by UN estimates, almost 6 million people need aid in 2025. Roughly 3.5 million Somalis are internally displaced, and nearly a million are refugees in neighboring countries. With aid agencies facing major funding shortfalls in 2025, the UN has cut the population targeted for aid by 72%.

U.S. Policy, Operations, and Foreign Aid

Under the past two Administrations, U.S. Somalia policy focused on promoting political and economic stability, preventing the country from being used as a terrorist safe haven, and easing its humanitarian crises. The United States explicitly "recognized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia within its 1960 borders in accordance with the Somali provisional constitution, which includes Somaliland and Puntland." As the Trump Administration and Congress consider Somalia, some Members and former Trump Administration officials, among others, have urged revisiting what some term a "One Somalia" policy and recognizing Somaliland's independence, as H.R. 3992 calls for. U.S. officials, including the head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), visited Somaliland in June 2025 and discussed security cooperation; the Administration has not signaled whether it is considering a formal policy shift.

Somalia is among 12 countries whose nationals President Trump has barred from entry to the United States, citing terrorism concerns, the government's limited control of its territory, and insufficient screening and vetting measures.

The U.S. military has conducted airstrikes against terrorist targets in Somalia since 2007. U.S. ground actions, such as a 2023 raid that targeted a top IS facilitator, have been rare, per public reporting. The Trump Administration eased the rules on strikes in 2025 and increased their tempo. Successive Administrations have termed Al Shabaab an "associated force" of Al Qaeda in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF; P.L. 107-40). AFRICOM reports that the strikes are conducted in coordination with Somalia's federal government and are sometimes done in support of Somalia's military operations.

The United States has provided training, equipment, advice, logistics, and intelligence support to AU and Somali forces, including the elite special operations unit, Danab. U.S. military personnel have been deployed to Somalia to provide advise-and-assist support. At the end of his first term, President Trump ordered U.S. forces "repositioned" from Somalia; President Biden authorized their return in 2022. In 2023, Congress rejected H.Con.Res. 30, which called for the removal of U.S. forces from Somalia.

The United States allocated over \$1 billion in foreign aid for Somalia in FY2024, including security assistance for Somali and AU forces; stabilization, resilience, education, and health aid; funds for the UN Support Office in Somalia, which supports the AU mission; and over \$400 million in humanitarian aid. The Trump Administration has not published country-specific details on its aid cuts, which are a focus of congressional debate, but some U.S. assistance in Somalia has reportedly been terminated. Proposed cuts for FY2026 may have further implications for Somalia and the AU mission. S. 1583, if adopted, would restrict the use of UN assessed contributions for peacekeeping to support AUSSOM. Amid speculation about the Administration's approach toward Somalia, Congress may assess how aid cuts or other changes to the U.S. posture in Somalia could affect U.S. interests and investments in the region.

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