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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICTS BETWEEN NOMADIC CLANS IN SOMALIA'S MUDUG REGION

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COVER PHOTO

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OVERVIEW SUMMARY

- In recent years, climate change and variability have intensified the frequency and severity of droughts in Somalia, depleting vital natural resources such as water and pasture. As a result, nomadic herders have suffered massive livestock losses, which in turn have eroded household incomes, deepened food insecurity, and forced families into displacement in search of relief.
- Somalia has also experienced recurring and deadly inter-clan conflicts, primarily among nomadic clans competing over scarce water and pasture resources. These conflicts have driven large-scale displacement, with an estimated 250,000 people forced to flee their homes in 2024 alone.
- Mudug is among the regions most affected by inter-clan conflicts in Somalia. It is also one of the driest and faces severe scarcity of water and pasture during droughts. The region is highly diverse in terms of clan composition and is administratively divided between the Galmudug and Puntland authorities — a division that weakens social cohesion and heightens the risk of conflict.
- The establishment of new settlements and water points is the primary trigger of conflicts between nomadic clans. Customarily, if a clan controls rural settlements or water points situated within a particular grazing land, that clan is considered to own that grazing land. Thus, constructing such infrastructure is perceived by nomadic clans as staking a territorial claim. When this occurs in disputed grazing land, it provokes violent resistance.
- Nomadic clans often construct new settlements and water points in dry-season grazing areas. These locations are strategically chosen because having water and nearby rural markets allows them to access water and basic supplies without travelling long distances. However, dry-season grazing lands are frequently located in peripheral border zones between clans — areas that are often disputed.
- Grazing land disputes are often prolonged and difficult to resolve through existing legal or customary mechanisms. Legally, grazing land is considered public property, a position which contradicts Somali customary norms, where ownership is based on historical use and ancestral presence.

3. INTRODUCTION

Somalia is a country characterized by its arid and semi-arid landscapes, which account for over 80% of its territory.ⁱ Rainfall is erratic and inconsistent, making it difficult to predict when and how much rain will fall. When rain does fall, it often comes in the form of heavy downpours rather than steady, moderate precipitation, leading to recurrent droughts and floods.ⁱⁱ The country is projected to experience a significant temperature increase by 2030, with temperatures likely rising between 1.4 and 1.9 degrees Celsius.ⁱⁱⁱ

Somalis share common cultural, linguistic, and religious traits, yet are divided by clan affiliations and sparsely scattered over harsh and dry terrain.^{iv} Traditionally, they have always been livestock-keeping communities known for their mobility in search of water and pastures, particularly during dry seasons.^v They rear cattle, sheep, and goats, but the camel holds primary importance as a symbol of wealth and status.^{vi} Camels serve as a traditional form of compensation for homicides and are an integral part of customary dowry practices.

Pastoral land and water are critical resources for nomadic pastoralists. Although resource sharing is a common practice among Somali clans,^{vii} conflicts over access and control still occur. As the state started to unravel in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Somali herders were increasingly compelled to rely on force to secure access to dry-season fodder and water. This was a necessity for their survival, as the alternative was the loss of their livestock, which posed a threat to their survival.^{viii} Figure 1 illustrates inter-clan conflict events related to disputes over pastoral land and water resources in Somalia between July 2017 and April 2025.

Inter-Clan Conflicts over Pastoral Land and Water Resources in Somalia

(July 2017 — April 2025)

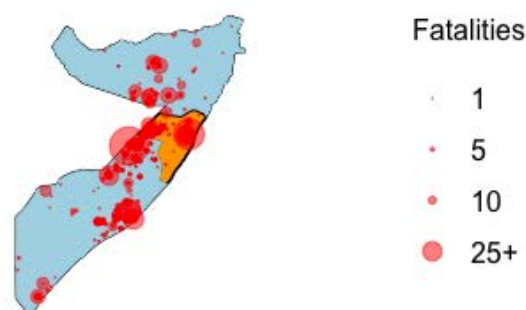


Figure 1: Inter-Clan Conflicts over Pastoral Land and Water Resources in Somalia. On the map, the Mudug region is in Yellow. Data Source: ACLED. Map and analysis: Said Abdullahi

Conflicts often start as disputes between individuals or groups and gradually escalate into full-scale armed clashes between clans, with clanmen from the two sides intervening to side with their relatives.^{ix,x} The inter-clan conflicts then further intensify with the provision of financial and material support by other clanmen and militias.^{xi} In traditional Somali society, people are organized into a hierarchical system of patrilineal descent groups, each tracing back to a shared male ancestor. There are six main clan-families in Somalia, which are divided into clans and then further into lineages and smaller sub-lineages.^{xii} Hence, the social order of Somalis has been characterized by rivalry and frequent armed conflicts, not only between different clans but also between lineages.^{xiii}

In recent years, Somalia has faced recurring and deadly inter-clan conflicts that have displaced hundreds of thousands of people. In 2024 alone, approximately 250,000 individuals were displaced across the country as a result of inter-clan violence.^{xiv} The Mudug region, located in central Somalia, has been particularly affected. In one week (26 June – 2 July, 2024), clashes between rival nomadic clans displaced more than 26,000 individuals from the rural districts of Galdogob and Jariiban.^{xv} Despite repeated peace agreements, conflicts between nomadic clans in Mudug continue to recur, particularly during the dry seasons. As shown in Figure 1, the conflict events over pastoral land and water resources are spatially concentrated in Mudug, followed closely by the neighboring Galgaduud region.

This report examined the key drivers of these conflicts and proposed actionable, context-specific solutions to strengthen peacebuilding efforts in Mudug and across Somalia. It drew on 25 key informant interviews with nomadic pastoralists, clan elders, government officials, humanitarian actors and security experts. The interviews were conducted in Mudug in March 2025, with follow-up interviews conducted by phone through April 2025. To enrich the findings, the interviews were complemented by a review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles, official government documents, policy briefs, and media reports. The Mudug region was selected for this study because, along with neighbouring Galgaduud, it ranks among the top two regions most affected by inter-clan conflict in the country.

4. OVERVIEW: GEOGRAPHY AND CONTEXT OF THE MUDUG REGION

The Mudug region is situated in central Somalia, and it is one of the 18 official regions in the country. It is divided administratively between the Galmudug and Puntland states. Galmudug governs the southern part of the region, while Puntland administers the northern part. The region comprises five districts: Galdogob, Jariban, Harardhere, Hobyo, and Galkayo. Galkayo district is the regional capital and is similarly shared administratively between the two states.^{xvi,xvii} Harardhere and Hobyo exclusively fall under Galmudug, while Galdogob and Jariban are exclusively administered by Puntland.^{xviii}



*Figure 2: Galkayo, the regional capital of the Mudug region (19 March 2025).
Photo by Said Abdullahi*

Furthermore, the region is divided along clan lines.^{xix} The Sa'ad sub-clan of the Habar Gedir clan (Hawiye) predominantly inhabits the Galmudug side, while Omar Mohamud subclan of the Majerteen clan and Leelkase clan (Darood) primarily reside on the Puntland side.^{xx} Additionally, the region is home to other clan groups, such as Surre (Dir) and Sheikhal.

The region is a key area for pastoral communities in the country. In terms of livelihood zones, the Adun and Hawd pastoral zones cover most of Mudug, while the Deeh pastoral and fishing livelihood zone occupies a narrow land strip along the coast.^{xxi} The poor soil quality, as well as the low and erratic rainfall in the region tend to favor livestock herding by nomads and semi-nomads as a livelihood strategy.^{xxii} Somalia has the highest concentration of pastoralists on the African continent.^{xxiii}

Resource conflicts are more intense in the region because it is home to multiple nomadic clans, unlike other regions with more uniform clan compositions. Thus, this high level of clan diversity reduces social cohesion during periods of resource competition, especially as the impacts of climate change continue to increase year by year.^{xxiv} Mudug experiences the hottest and driest conditions in south-central Somalia.^{xxv} The region is predominantly semi-arid, characterized by extensive thorny scrub vegetation.^{xxvi}

5. KEY DRIVERS OF NOMADIC CONFLICTS IN THE MUDUG REGION

1. Recurrent droughts

Interviewees in the Mudug region consistently reported that recurrent droughts have severely disrupted traditional nomadic life. The drought of 2016-2017, locally termed Sima (meaning "the equalizer"), stands out as the most catastrophic recent event, triggering mass displacement.^{xxvii}

Since then, the region has faced near-annual droughts due to insufficient or failed rains, with a particularly severe multi-seasonal drought from 2020 to 2022. Livestock losses from starvation, disease, and dehydration have been widespread, forcing nomads to sell animals prematurely at low prices or lose them entirely due to scarce pasture and water. The decline in herds has also pushed many nomads to urban IDP settlements.

In the past, it was uncommon for a nomadic household to own fewer than 100 goats. Today, that's no longer the case. Many households are moving to IDP settlements in urban areas, as the few livestock that survived the droughts can no longer support them as a source of a livelihood.^{xxviii}

One nomad shared his personal loss:

I owned 300 goats, 30 cattle, and 50 camels. Now, I only own 10 goats, which I gave to my sister before leaving for this IDP settlement.^{xxix}

This local testimony is consistent with the UN News report,^{xxx} which states that following five consecutive failed rainy seasons, more than 1.4 million people were displaced while at least 3.5 million livestock died, resulting in the destruction of livelihoods and reduced access to milk for children in Somalia. This finding has significant implications for the nutrition and health of children and adults in Somalia, highlighting the compounded vulnerabilities caused by climate change in the Mudug region. The loss of livestock has made the essential animal-based foods such as meat and milk increasingly unaffordable for already poor and malnourished families.^{xxxi}

Based on the evidence proffered, for those who stayed behind, securing water and pasture became a life-and-death matter. One interviewee explained:

Water and pasture aren't enough for everyone, especially during the dry season. The few ungrazed areas during the wet season are often contested. When your livestock's survival, and by extension your family's, depends on these scarce resources, you'll fight to secure them, even if it means shutting others out.^{xxxii}

From this foregoing narrative, respondents perceive violent conflict as a survival tool, indicating maladaptation in resource-scarce communities, where climate change acts as a threat multiplier to livelihoods, peace, and social cohesion. For instance, since 2005, droughts have become twice as frequent in the East Africa region, occurring every 3 years instead of every 6 years.^{xxxiii} As droughts reduce water and pasture availability, they heighten the risk of inter-communal conflicts.^{xxxiv}

2. Grazing land

5.2.1 Grazing land access

The allocation of land and natural resources is key to understanding conflict in Somalia.^{xxxv} Due to the fragmentation of the formal state, there are no overriding policies for managing land and natural resources in Somalia.^{xxxvi} Significantly, land and natural resource management approaches are unique to the social, political, and ecological contexts of each specific area. As a result, over the years, various clans and groups have developed their own informal practices for managing natural resources. According to Farah, Hussein, and Linda, “In places where there is some level of authority, a combination of xeer, Islamic Sharia law, and the pre-1991 penal code are used to decide control over and specific uses of land and natural resources.”^{xxxvii} A key weakness is that the lack of land use policies generates uncertainty and conflict among various groups reliant on the land, including nomadic pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, and farmers.

Clans are associated with specific territorial areas, primarily defined by their circuit of nomadic migration.^{xxxviii} However, these territories lack clearly defined boundaries, leading to frequent overlaps with the territories of neighboring clans.^{xxxix} Traditionally, access to grazing lands in Somalia was tied to clan membership. While a particular clan might hold primary grazing rights over a territory, it was allowed for neighboring clans to use the land at specific times with the expectation of reciprocal access in the future.^{xl}



*Figure 3: Herd of livestock grazing in Rural Mudug in Somalia (18 March 2025).
Photo by Said Abdullahi*

5.2.2 Grazing land as a conflict trigger

During the interviews, grazing land disputes consistently emerged as a central theme and a key driver of conflict between nomadic clans in Mudug. The discussions revealed several scenarios that often spark conflict between nomadic clans.

First, the establishment of new rural settlements on shared grazing lands provokes tensions. When a clan sets up a settlement, it effectively asserts ownership over surrounding pasture land and seeks exclusive use of it.^{xli} This limits access for other clans who rely on the same grazing land for their livestock, inevitably provoking armed resistance.

Secondly, during the dry season, when nomadic herders gather in areas with limited remaining pasture, conflicts over grazing land ownership often arise because the available pasture is insufficient to support everyone. When a clan claims ownership of a grazing area, it believes this entitles it to exclude other clans from accessing the land. Generally, the ownership of grazing land means exclusive rights to its resources.^{xlii}

Third, conflicts arise when migrating clans, who were initially granted temporary access to water and pasture during the dry seasons, breach agreements by settling permanently on the host clan's land. This is frequently marked by the drilling of water wells, signaling an intent to establish long-term residency. Such actions provoke violent clashes as the host clan attempts to evict the migrating clan.^{xliii} Thus, community tensions arising from migration due to resource competition between host communities and populations on the move challenge social cohesion and disrupt peace, leading to violent confrontations.

Fourth, given the significance of land, clans strive to safeguard their grazing territories from encroachment by neighboring rival clans. This sometimes sparks new disputes and, as a result, armed confrontations. A recurring employed strategy is the establishment of settlements specifically aimed at preventing territorial intrusion. This strategy was articulated by one interviewee:

In areas where the territories of rival nomadic clans meet, new settlements are established as a defensive strategy to prevent territorial encroachment by the opposing clan. As a result, a pattern emerges where each rural town or village belonging to one clan, has a counterpart in close proximity owned by the rival clan. This creates a physical barrier that limits the expansion of each clan's territory.^{xliv}

Another interviewee lamented about the closeness of these settlements:

Sometimes you find two proximate settlements/towns with the same name. Nomads distinguish them only by numbering.^{xlv}

While such naming patterns are less documented in extant literature and research, they underscore the symbolic competition and rivalry between clans, reinforcing territorial claims in ways that are less visible to external actors but deeply meaningful locally.

Finally, conflicts tend to intensify and peak during the dry season due to scarce water and pasture resources.^{xlvi} One interviewee explained this dynamic:

During dry seasons, the remaining pasture is usually located in border areas between rival clans which remains untouched as each clan grazes its heartland during wet season. As nomads congregate in one area during the dry season, their interactions increase, leading to revenge-killings driven by old grievances. Other criminal activities such as camel rustling also occur, triggering clashes and misconceptions.^{xlvii}



Figure 4: Dry-season pasture enclosure in the outskirts of Galkayo (18 March 2025).
Photo by Said Abdullahi

This account is consistent with the findings of International Crisis Group,^{xlviii} which noted that clan grievances and conflicts frequently arise in territories better endowed with resources such as water and grazing land. It also aligns with findings by Unruh who observed that intensifying competition over resources often prompts the use of areas previously avoided, whether because they were contested or reserved for dry season use by multiple clans or their lineage units, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent conflict.^{xlix}

5.2.3 Conflict resolution challenges

Resource-based disputes are often prolonged and difficult to resolve through existing legal or traditional mechanisms, mainly due to the challenges in clearly establishing land ownership among individual clans. For instance, a judge at the Galkayo District Court framed the limitations of the formal legal system as follows:

We, as government courts, only handle individual crimes, such as injury or homicide, but do not address the root causes of conflict, which are often related to grazing land ownership. Grazing lands are public and do not belong to individual clans.ⁱ

Moreover, from a traditional perspective, customary land tenure relies on long-term use and ancestral presence instead of formal title deeds. This is noted by one interviewee below:

In the nomadic Somali society, historical habitation serves as the strongest indicator of land ownership.ⁱⁱ

Consequently, traditional mediators also do not aim to establish land ownership rights as one interviewee pointed out:

Peace agreements between clans focus on shared use of grazing lands rather than establishing exclusive ownership rights.ⁱⁱⁱ

Overall, conflict resolution efforts tend to concentrate on stopping violence and addressing immediate damages, without tackling the deeper, underlying systemic issues related to land ownership. It is precisely these unresolved land disputes that contribute to the recurring conflicts.

5.3 Water Insecurity

A historical analysis of water in Somalia indicates that between 1975 and 2000, the country experienced an estimated 15% decline in rainfall, resulting in approximately two-thirds of the country being classified as arid or semi-arid. This significant reduction in precipitation has led to acute water shortages, with certain areas facing water scarcity for up to eight months each year.^{liii}

As noted by Farah, Hussein, and Lind,^{liv} and Ali, Kassem, and Gökçekuş,^{lv} water scarcity is thus a critical issue across Somalia, frequently triggering communal conflicts over access to water points. As a source of water in the rangelands, nomadic herders rely on shallow wells, berkeds (cement-lined underground water reservoirs), and government-built boreholes.^{lvi}

5.3.1 Water as a conflict trigger

Consistent with other cited studies, interview participants in the Mudug region identified water scarcity as one of the principal drivers of armed clashes among nomadic clans. While grazing land ownership disputes underpin these conflicts, the immediate triggers often relate to the construction or control of water sources such as berkeds or boreholes.^{lvii}

For example, two recent cases vividly illustrate how the development of water infrastructure in contested grazing areas has exacerbated conflict in the region.

Case 1: Leelkase and Sa'ad Clans in Jiicboor Grazing Land

Although the conflict originally began with dispute between camel herders over grazing land, the primary trigger of the armed clashes in recent years was a borehole. The Leelkase clan sought to drill a borehole in an area they co-grazed with the Sa'ad clan. However, the Sa'ad clan opposed the project, asserted exclusive ownership of the land, and attempted to claim the borehole. This dispute escalated into a series of deadly clashes and multiple failed peace agreements.^{lviii}

Case 2: Mohamed Omar and Rer Mahad Sub-Clans in Eastern Mudug

The Mohamed Omar sub-clan is the majority in Harfo town, while the Rer Mahad sub-clan dominates Bali-Busle town. Despite these administrative divisions, the two nomadic groups from these two sub-clans share water sources and grazing lands in their respective areas. In 2023, members of the Mohamed Omar attempted to drill a borehole in grazing land near Bali-Busle town. However, the Rer Mahad strongly opposed this initiative for two main reasons:

1. Although the grazing land is communal and accessible to both clans, the Rer Mahad sub-clan considers it their own and fears that the borehole could lead to a permanent settlement belonging to the Mohamed Omar sub-clan. Customarily, the clan that controls the settlements and water points within a grazing area is considered the owner of that land.
2. The site is a crucial dry season grazing area, and a borehole could lead to overgrazing and eventual loss of the grazing land itself.

An armed confrontation erupted when members of the Rer Mahad attempted to halt the drilling, resulting in fatalities. In retaliation, members of the Mohamed Omar destroyed a borehole in Harfo town that belonged to a member of the Rer Mahad. This act of revenge and subsequent armed confrontation left four more dead and eight others injured.^{lix}

These two cases confirm observations by other researchers^{lx} that drought-induced water depletion significantly contributes to violent conflicts, especially in rural communities of Puntland and Galmudug states. The findings also bring to light the climate security risks that characterize transhumance livelihoods.

In addition, Somalia's predominantly arid and semi-arid landscape forces people and livestock to converge towards and around water sources, particularly wells, during dry seasons.^{lxi} Such proximity then triggers disputes over the allocation of water and over scheduling priorities for human consumption and livestock needs.

5.3.2 Water scarcity and quality

Interview participants consistently emphasized the acute water scarcity during dry seasons when traditional sources like berkeds and shallow wells either dry up or supply saline, unsafe water. One participant noted:

Water scarcity remains a critical issue, with most water sources drying up during the dry season.^{lxii}

Beyond scarcity, water quality poses a serious threat to health. As one interviewee recounted:

The only available borehole [in our area] provided saline water and frequently broke down. We had no access to clean water. The water was so salty that we could not drink or cook with it. Sometimes we begged for water from neighbors who had it trucked in.^{lxiii}

This perspective aligns with findings from a 2013 study by the Somalia Water and Land Information Management (SWALIM) unit of the FAO, which reported that groundwater sources across several Somali regions exhibit salinity levels that exceed international standards for human consumption.^{lxiv}

Another key finding relates to contaminated water, which has, in some cases, led to deadly cholera outbreaks, showing the interconnection between climate change, water insecurity, and health. One interviewee shared:

The water was highly saline and unsafe. Two of our family members died after drinking contaminated water from a well and contracting cholera.^{lxv}

Cholera remains endemic in Somalia, frequently worsened by drought and displacement caused by insecurity. In 2022, the World Health Organization reported treating over 130,000 cases of acute diarrhoeal disease, including about 15,600 suspected cholera cases, across Somalia.^{lxvi}

Overall, water scarcity driven by climate change poses a critical threat to public health. At the very least, the presence of cholera indicated maladaptation to climate change, owing mainly to lack of sustainable water supply and water management solutions in this region. Moreover, the scarcity and poor quality of water threaten transhumance livelihoods, making water a precious and contested resource.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report examined the key drivers of conflicts between nomadic clans in the Mudug region. The findings demonstrate that climate change does not create conflict on its own, but acts as a threat multiplier in a context already marked by weak institutions and entrenched clan and administrative faultlines. Recurrent droughts have accelerated resource scarcity to the point where survival-driven competition over grazing land and water consistently pits clans against one another. What often begins as a dispute between individuals or small groups rapidly escalates into inter-clan armed confrontation, resulting in high casualties and large-scale displacement.

Crucially, the findings reveal that current peace efforts do not resolve the structural causes, particularly the absence of robust land governance policies, unmanaged settlement expansion, and the lack of climate-resilient water and pasture management systems. The recurrent, seasonal nature of clashes demonstrates that without proactive and climate-sensitive interventions, conflict will continue to repeat in predictable cycles during dry seasons.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support climate-resilient adaptation and strengthen peacebuilding in the region.

- Develop sustainable water infrastructure and pasture management programs to alleviate resource scarcity in the region.
- Integrate climate adaptation into peacebuilding programs and develop alternative livelihoods for the nomadic pastoralists who have lost their livestock due to drought shocks.
- Establish cross-clan local peace committees composed of respected clan elders and local leaders in conflict-prone areas and equip them with training and necessary resources. This would enable rapid response to emerging disputes, prevent escalation, and facilitate dialogue between rival clans.
- Establish joint land commissions that bring together government officials, clan elders, nomads and technical experts to work together to develop culture-sensitive, climate-informed land governance policies that clearly define seasonal grazing rights and regulate the expansion of settlements and water infrastructure in pastoral areas.
- Implement disarmament programs and prevent heavy weapons from falling into the hands of nomads, reducing the casualties of conflicts between clans.
- Conduct targeted awareness campaigns for nomads on nonviolence, reconciliation, and inter-clan coexistence, cultivating a culture of peace within nomadic communities.

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