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Somalia: January 2019 update

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 Newly elected president of Somalia, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo (centre) makes an acceptance speech after he was sworn into office at the Mogadishu Airport hangar on February 8, 2017 by [AMISOM Public Information](#) Licensed by [CC0 1.0 Universal \(CC0 1.0\)](#) / image cropped.

Summary

Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (known as Farmajo) was elected president of Somalia by the federal parliament on 8 February 2017.

Farmajo was the prime minister of Somalia between 2010 and 2011. During his campaign he promised to renew the fight against corruption and indicated that he would be open to talks with al-Shabaab. He came into office with a reputation for competence. However, two years into his term, this reputation is being severely tested.

President Farmajo faces a big challenge in consolidating the country's emerging federal system. For now, the status of the regional states remains 'interim' and the division of powers between them and the centre opaque. There have been tensions between Mogadishu and some of the regional states. Some wonder whether Western backers of the federal experiment in Somalia might begin to lose faith in it over the period ahead.

There has recently been a political crisis in one of the regional states, namely South-West State. Presidential elections were held in December 2018. During the run-up, the federal government was faced with a dilemma when former al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Robow Ali declared that he would be a candidate. Some argued (including several Western donor countries) that allowing defectors like Robow to take part in politics could weaken al-Shabaab's influence over those attracted by Salafist values.

Farmajo was hostile to this idea. Robow was arrested on 13 December, only days before the election, which automatically disqualified him from standing – leaving the way open for Farmajo's favoured candidate to win.

Robow's arrest sparked unrest, in which at least fifteen protestors died. Since then, the situation has calmed down somewhat. But the International Crisis Group has called it a "tactical victory" which could come back to haunt the federal government in the longer-term. The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, was expelled from the country earlier this month after criticising official actions in South-West State.

During 2018 opposition politicians periodically called for an impeachment motion in the federal parliament against President Farmajo – without success. At the end of the year, there was a serious attempt to get an impeachment vote following the federal government's intervention in the presidential election in South-West State, but in the end the initiative was abandoned.

More broadly, reform efforts have been making slow headway. There has been some progress on preparations for the next elections, which are scheduled for 2020. The model being proposed is multi-party elections based on the principle of proportional representation and a closed party list system. But there have been delays in putting forward

new legislation. Time is short if such arrangements are to be in place in time.

Foreign interests further complicate the political picture. Various Gulf States have been busy trying to increase their influence, including by sponsoring local politicians. In terms of the wider confrontation between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other, the Farmajo government has sought to remain neutral. In retaliation, the UAE and Saudi Arabia stopped giving support to the federal government. But some regional states have taken the side of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The ascent to power last year of Abiy Ahmed in neighbouring Ethiopia has had an unambiguously positive impact on Somalia. His rapid moves to end Ethiopia's frozen border conflict with Eritrea have allowed Somalia finally to escape from being the site of a proxy war between them. All three countries are now committed to increased cooperation.

The credibility of the Farmajo government heavily depends on its ability to deliver security. Since 2016, after several years of fighting with the Somali National Army (SNA) and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) in which it lost control over substantial areas of territory, al-Shabaab has increasingly prioritised conducting asymmetrical attacks on Mogadishu and other urban centres. However, it retains control over substantial tracts of territory in the south of the country and supply routes between towns.

2018 saw further major al-Shabaab attacks across the country. September was a particularly bad month for attacks in Mogadishu. In October it attacked an Italian military convoy of the EU's training mission, killing three civilian bystanders.

2019 has begun in a similar vein. On 1 January al-Shabaab carried out a mortar attack on a UN base in Somalia. Three people were injured. On 15 January al-Shabaab confirmed that it retained the ability to carry out attacks against neighbouring allies of the Farmajo government when militants attacked a hotel in Nairobi, killing at least 21 people. This was the largest attack in Kenya since the one on Garissa University in 2015, in which close to 150 people died.

The US has become increasingly involved in the war against al-Shabaab since Donald Trump became president at the start of 2017. A few months ago it was reported to have about 500 special forces in Somalia. An American soldier was killed in an operation in May 2017. Another died in an operation in June 2018. US drone strikes have been deployed increasingly often in tandem with SNA and AMISOM operations against al-Shabaab.

During President Farmajo's first year in power, the issue of AMISOM's future began to be posed more sharply. The plan is for AMISOM, currently 22,000 strong, to hand over responsibility for security to the SNA and the Somali police in December 2020. However, there is still not much optimism about the SNA's ability to fill the gap if/when AMISOM does finally depart. Indeed, if the security situation does not improve

and/or the next elections are held up, it is possible that its departure date may be further delayed.

President Farmajo took office in February 2017 amidst a severe drought. Two years on, although the threat of famine has so far been averted, drought remains an ongoing threat. Over four million people still need humanitarian assistance. After good rains earlier in 2018, the latest rainy season was disappointing, meaning that there is a heightened risk of drought in the northeast and centre of the country for at least the next few months.

President Farmajo has so far had no success in improving relations with the self-declared independent state of Somaliland. After several postponements, Somaliland held presidential elections in November 2017. The victor was Muse Bihi Abdi of the ruling Kulmiye Party. The defeated candidate, Abdirahman Irro of the Waddani Party, claimed there had been fraud but the Supreme Court upheld the result.

Having come to blows on several occasions in the past, in January 2018 there was renewed confrontation between Somaliland and Puntland over a contested border area. Somaliland troops violently forced out Puntland troops from the town of Tukaraq in Sool. In May 2018 there was another outbreak of violence. Puntland launched an offensive to try and re-take Tukaraq. Dozens were killed as fighting continued into July. Efforts to negotiate a formal ceasefire have been unsuccessful. Since then there have been several further low-level clashes. The situation remains a stalemate.

1. Somalia under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012-17)

Somalia's post-civil war 'transition' officially came to an end in August 2012 when the mandate of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) expired. The following month, [Hassan Sheikh Mohamud](#) was elected president by a new parliament. However, within a couple of years, the president was declaring that Somalia was once again in a "[political crisis](#)".

1.1 His performance in office

President Mohamud was president between 2012 and February 2017. His tenure was marked by continuing allegations of large-scale official corruption. The country remained in a condition of almost permanent humanitarian crisis. While progress was made in combating the Islamist terrorist group al-Shabaab, it continued to be a significant security threat. Al-Shabaab increased its attacks in neighbouring Kenya, which sent troops into southern Somalia in 2011.¹ There was a spike in large-scale attacks in Kenya by the group during 2014 and 2015.

The African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) force experienced successes but also some big set-backs. For example, in January 2017 al-Shabaab attacked a Kenyan military camp and reportedly killed at least 21 soldiers (Kenya claimed that nine of its soldiers and dozens of terrorists died). The fact that Kenya had national elections later in the year made their troops a particularly attractive target for Al-Shabaab.

At the end of President Mohamud's term of office, AMISOM was short of morale and funds. Ethiopia had withdrawn from participation and Burundi had indicated that it might do so too. Despite donor efforts to strengthen it, the Somali National Army (SNA) often remained ineffective.

1.2 Creating regional states

Under President Mohamud, the Federal Government also made some progress towards establishing district and regional administrations in areas under its control, with four new regional states (known officially as Federal Member States) created: Galmudug, Jubaland, South-West State and Hir-Shabelle. Critics argued that the foundations of some of these states were often distinctly shaky, with some of them reflecting the interests of Somalia's neighbours more than those of its people (for example, Ethiopia and Kenya's strong influence over Jubaland in the far south of the country).²

¹ "How KDF's Entry into Somalia changed Security Situation in Northern Kenya", *Garissa News*, 6 July 2016

² "More states, less unity", *Africa Confidential*, 11 July 2014

The much longer-established polities of Puntland and Somaliland are officially included as regional states by Somalia; in practice Mogadishu has little or no purchase over them.

The process of regional state formation inevitably created losers as well as winners. In some cases, this led to violence on the ground. One such flashpoint was between Puntland, formed in 1998 and therefore by far the longest-established regional state in Somalia, and Galmudug regional state in central Somalia over north Mudug, to which both made a claim.³ In December 2015 a peace deal was signed, but clashes continued.⁴ There were also tensions over the regional state formation process in the middle Shabelle and Hiraa regions of central Somalia.⁵

During 2015 and 2016 there were clashes between the SNA and supposedly pro-federal government private militias linked to these regional state structures.⁶ These tensions sometimes played into the hands of al-Shabaab (see below).

1.3 Somalia-Somaliland-Puntland relations

There were several rounds of high-level talks in Djibouti and Turkey between the Federal Government and its Somaliland counterpart during President Mohamud's tenure, but there was no meaningful progress towards bringing Somaliland back into the federal fold.

Somaliland and Puntland were unable to resolve a long-standing territorial dispute over the Sool, Sanaag and Ceyn areas which had led to military clashes in the past. However, Somaliland and Puntland had a shared hostility towards another, more recently announced, 'state' called Khatumo. This state drew on territory that straddled both polities. Somaliland forces clashed with Khatumo forces on several occasions.⁷

1.4 Controversy over the 2016 (s)elections

Hopes that the 2016 elections would be held on a 'one-person-one-vote' basis proved unrealistic. However, President Mohamud promised that they would more "legitimacy" than they did in 2012.⁸ To this end, there were negotiations aimed at increasing the number of people involved in the electoral process as compared with the 2012 elections, when parliamentarians in the lower house were selected by a Council of 135 Elders based on a power-sharing formula between Somalia's main clans. The parliament then elected the president.

After a period of negotiation and consultation, it was eventually agreed that, for the lower house (275 seats), the Council of 135 Traditional Elders would not select parliamentarians this time around. Instead they

³ J. Mosley, "Somalia's federal future: layered agendas, risks and opportunities", Chatham House Research Paper, August 2015, pp13-14

⁴ Somalia, *Crisis Watch Database*, 1 July 2016

⁵ "President Hassan arrives in Beled Weyne to resolve southeastern Somalia impasse", *BBC Monitoring Africa*, 25 March 2016

⁶ "A federal farrago", *Africa Confidential*, 10 July 2015

⁷ "Somaliland Accused of Fueling Deadly Clan Fighting", *Shabelle Media Network*, 30 June 2016

⁸ "Division all round", *Africa Confidential*, 8 January 2015

would nominate 50 members for each of 275 'Electoral Colleges' – that is, one College for each parliamentary seat. This College would then elect the MP. Nominations to the Colleges would reflect the principle of 'power-sharing' between the main clans. This arrangement in effect created an 'electorate' of 13,750 people.⁹

For the upper house (54 seats), regional presidents would nominate two candidates for each seat, from which regional assemblies would elect one.¹⁰ Here again, the principle of power-sharing would apply. As they did in 2012, parliamentarians would subsequently elect the president.

The UN Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, called these arrangements a "[political process with electoral features](#)".

There were concerns that the electoral process would escalate the already fraught relations between some regional states and Mogadishu. Somaliland did not send representatives to talks concerning the new electoral model. Puntland eventually agreed to participate in the Electoral College system after initially rejecting the proposal, on condition that the 2020/21 elections would take place on a one-man-one-vote basis.¹¹ President Mohamud agreed to this demand.

The federal parliamentary (s)elections duly took place in October and November 2016. The new parliament was inaugurated on 27 December 2016. Its first task would be to (s)elect a new president.

Africa Confidential described the process of creating a new parliament as "extremely tortuous and drenched in bribery and violence".¹²

⁹ "The National Leaders Forum Communique", 12 April 2016

¹⁰ "Somalia's Federal Future: Layered Agendas, Risks and Opportunities", *Chatham House*, 2 September 2015

¹¹ "Seeking stability in Somalia's election season", *The Africa Report*, 9 June 2016

¹² "Surviving elections and jihad", 6 January 2017

2. Somalia under President Farmajo (February 2017-)

The complex (s)electoral process finally ended with the election on 8 February 2017 of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (known as Farmajo) as Somalia's new president. Although the incumbent, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, had been the favourite to win ahead of the vote in the eyes of many commentators, he was decisively defeated by 184 votes to 80.

Power was transferred to the new president on 16 February. His inauguration took place on 22 February.

A dual US-Somali citizen, Farmajo was the prime minister of Somalia between 2010 and 2011, during which time he acquired a reputation for relative competence. During his campaign he promised to renew the fight against corruption and indicated that he would be open to talks with [al-Shabaab](#).¹³ He also benefitted from the fact that he was viewed by many as a genuine Somali nationalist, as illustrated by the suspicions he expressed about the role and motivations of Ethiopia in Somalia.

As always in Somalia, clan interests and alliances played a major role in deciding the February 2017 presidential (s)election outcome, as did the involvement of foreign powers. President Farmajo comes from one of the two biggest clans in Somalia, the Darod. Most expected that, to ensure balanced clan representation, his prime minister would come from the other largest clan, the Hawiye. This is what transpired when Hassan Ali Khayre took office on 1 March 2017, although some Hawiye expressed dissatisfaction that he did not come from one of the larger sub-clans within the group.¹⁴ Overall, the new government was larger than Farmajo had promised, reflecting this need to be sufficiently 'inclusive' of all the larger clans.¹⁵

The international community, which had bank-rolled the (s)electoral process, warmly welcomed the new president. Western governments had initially favoured the incumbent but adjusted their expectations when they saw that he was losing ground politically.

Amidst the optimism, there were voices of caution. *Africa Confidential* warned soon after he took office that Farmajo would not necessarily mark a major break with the past.¹⁶ At the beginning of 2018, it claimed that he had lost a lot of credibility during his first year in office and had become worryingly "dictatorial".¹⁷ In September it complained that Farmajo had politicised federal security and intelligence institutions and that official corruption was as rampant as ever.¹⁸

¹³ "Farmaajo begins 'era of unity' as Somali president", *East African*, 8 February 2017

¹⁴ He is a member of the Habel Gidir sub-clan.

¹⁵ "UN chief urges Somalia's new president to form inclusive government", *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 February 2017

¹⁶ "New populist hires old faces", *Africa Confidential*, 14 April 2017

¹⁷ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia, S/2017/1109](#), 26 December 2017, para 55-56

¹⁸ "Money worries", *Africa Confidential*, 28 September 2018

With Farmajo now over half-way through his term in office (the next elections are due in 2020), reform agendas have advanced painfully slowly. A little progress has been made towards ensuring that the next elections will be more genuinely democratic in character than were their predecessors in 2016/17. But so far there has not been much progress on wider constitutional reform – or, arguably, on improving security. Once again, Somalia appears to be going nowhere slowly.

2.1 Domestic and foreign challenges

Federal fault-lines on display

There was soon evidence of continuing tensions between Mogadishu and the regional states (officially known as the Federal Member States) under Farmajo. His relationship with new Galmudug president Ahmed Dualeh Gelleh rapidly became strained. Some traditional leaders in Galmudug opposed Gelleh and looked to the federal government for an ally. A power-sharing agreement was reached in December 2017 which, it was hoped, would end the political crisis there, but it has failed to do so.

For a period during 2017, the regional states came together as a group to suspend cooperation with the federal government, but mediation brought them back to negotiations. However, in September 2018 the leaders of the regional states again broke off relations, claiming that the latter was still seeking to impose its will on them.

On October 2018 supporters of Farmajo in the Galmudug state assembly elected an alternative president. However, the incumbent, Ahmed Dualeh Gelleh, rejected the vote and was backed in this by most of the leaders of the other regional states. The upshot is that rival political administrations face each other in the state. The political impasse continues to this day. In November there were clashes between rival clan militias there.

Mediation by the UN and representatives of the federal Upper House during the final months of 2018 succeeded in reducing tensions between the leaders of the regional states and the federal government. For a while regional leaders went so far as to talk about creating a national opposition political party and their own security force. However, by the end of the year all sides were again pledging to try and find solutions to their differences through dialogue.¹⁹

This was despite the emergence of another political crisis in one of the regional states – this time in South-West State. Presidential elections were due there in December 2018 and the federal government was faced with a dilemma when former al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Robow Ali declared that he would be a candidate. With some arguing (including several Western donor countries) that allowing defectors like Robow to take part in politics could weaken al-Shabaab's influence over

¹⁹ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 21 December 2018

those attracted by Salafist values in Somalia, it appeared until nearly the last minute that his candidacy would be allowed.

If it was, some expected him to win. But Farmajo was hostile to this prospect. Robow was arrested on 13 December, just days before the election. This automatically disqualified him from standing – leaving the way open for Farmajo's favoured candidate, Abdi Aziz Hassan Mohamed, also known as 'Lafta Gareen', to win.

Robow's arrest sparked unrest in the state, in which at least fifteen protestors died. Since then, the situation has calmed down somewhat. But the International Crisis Group has called it a "tactical victory" which could come back to haunt the federal government in the longer-term.²⁰

President Farmajo faces a big challenge in consolidating the country's emerging federal system. His predecessor failed to see through a constitutional review process that might have given it a more solid legal and administrative underpinning. Farmajo has made slow progress to date on this count. Some say that by his actions he has shown that he would prefer a more centralised political system in Somalia. Some are also beginning to wonder whether Western backers of the federal experiment in Somalia might lose faith in the experiment.

For now the status of the regional states remains 'interim' and the division of powers between them and the centre opaque.²¹ With presidential elections due in other regional states during 2019, further political and security crises could lie ahead. Puntland has just completed its election. Hir-Shabelle is due next.

Elite tensions at the centre

Farmajo has faced challenges from the powerful Abgal sub-clan of the Hawiye clan, which felt under-represented in his government. During 2017 some went so far as to call for Prime Minister Khayre to be replaced by one of their own. But his did not happen.

During 2018 opposition politicians periodically called for an impeachment motion in the federal parliament against President Farmajo – but without success. At the end of the year, there was a serious effort to get an impeachment vote following the federal government's intervention in the presidential election in South-West State (see above), but in the end the attempt was abandoned.²²

Almost from the moment of his appointment, Prime Minister Khayre engaged in a campaign to force the Lower House Speaker, Mohamed Osman Jawari, with whom he was at loggerheads, to stand down. Jawari finally agreed to do so following a dramatic armed stand-off in parliament in April 2018. He was replaced by Mohamed Mursal Abdirahman.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, "[Somalia's South West State: A New President Installed, a Crisis Inflamed](#)", 24 December 2018

²¹ "Security tops list of problems for Somalia's new president", *Financial Times*, 11 February 2017; "Cracks in the federal system", *Africa Confidential*, 12 January 2018

²² [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 21 December 2018

Wider reform efforts making slow headway

As we saw above, not much progress has been made towards stabilising Somalia's federal system of government.

Efforts to agree a more democratic 'electoral model' for the 2020 elections have made some progress. The model proposed is for multi-party elections based on the principle of proportional representation and a closed party list system. In November 2018, the Ministry of the Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation presented a draft electoral law which, if approved within the government, will then be presented to the federal parliament. This was due to happen in December but has been delayed. Time is short if such arrangements are to be in place in time for 2020.²³

During a visit to Kenya in August 2018, UK Prime Minister Theresa May pledged £25 million towards building a stable and democratic political system in Somalia.²⁴

With donor support, efforts have been underway to improve the coordination between the SNA and forces loyal to the regional states. For example, in November 2017 2,400 Puntland forces were integrated into the SNA. The aim is to increase the size of the SNA to 18,000. But persistent tensions between the centre and the regional states have severely restricted progress during 2018. The SNA still looks a long way from being ready to take over the war against al-Shabaab from the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) if it bows out as planned in December 2020 (see below).

A 'national stabilization strategy' aimed at boosting reconstruction and the extension of state authority from the 'bottom-up' has also been agreed. But there was only limited work under its auspices during 2018.²⁵

There has also not been much progress on tackling official corruption under Farmajo. Within a few months of it taking office, allegations were already swirling around the new administration – for example, over the management of Mogadishu port and fisheries policy. In December 2017, the US suspended its military aid to the SNA, complaining that it was being misappropriated.²⁶

Somalia remains 180th out of 180 states in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index.²⁷ In December 2018, the federal government agreed a new anti-corruption plan with the UN Development Programme.²⁸

²³ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 21 December 2018

²⁴ ["UK urges donors to support African Union Mission in Somalia"](#), FCO press release, 27 September 2018

²⁵ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 26 December 2017; [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 21 December 2018

²⁶ "Cracks in the federal system", *Africa Confidential*, 12 January 2018

²⁷ Transparency International, [Somalia webpage](#)

²⁸ "Somalia: government passes intl resolution for combatting corruption", *African Daily Voice*, 10 December 2018

UN Special Representative expelled

The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia Nicholas Haysom was expelled from the country on 1 January 2019 for criticising the conduct of the federal government during the presidential election in South-West State. Haysom wrote to the government calling on it to carry out an investigation into the death of protestors following the arrest and disqualification of Mukhtar Robow Ali and asked for clarification about the legal basis for his arrest.

The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres has expressed his regret at this move and has said that he will name a replacement.²⁹

Regional shifts

UAE and Qatar compete for influence in Somalia

Behind the scenes, foreign interests further complicate the political picture. Various Gulf States have been busy trying to build influence, including by sponsoring politicians. Over the last year or so, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have been jockeying for advantage in Somalia.

The UAE has been suspicious of the Farmajo government, having been closely associated with ex-president Mohamud. Qatar was and remains a strong backer of Farmajo.

The Farmajo government sought to remain neutral in the wider dispute between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Qatar. By contrast, some of the regional states have at points taken the side of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

In 2017 Saudi Arabia and UAE stopped their making regular budgetary support payments to Somalia in retaliation for not taking their side against Qatar. Amongst other things, this weakened the government's ability to pay the security forces.³⁰

Some interpreted the UAE's 2017 agreement with Somaliland to open a naval base in the coastal town of Berbera as part of a strategy to raise the costs for Mogadishu of refusing to fall into line. At that time, the UAE was also reported to be supporting impeachment efforts against President Farmajo by opposition politicians.³¹

In March 2018 tensions deepened when the Somali federal parliament voted to expel the state-owned UAE company DP World in protest at its involvement in developing the port at Berbera.³² Then in April the UAE's military training programme for the SNA was rancorously terminated by both sides. Clashes followed in Mogadishu between pro- and anti-UAE factions within the SNA and funds belonging to the UAE were seized by the Somali federal authorities. The UAE also closed a hospital in the capital that it had been running.

²⁹ "UN to replace expelled diplomat in Somalia", *Voice of America*, 4 January 2019

³⁰ "[Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack](#)", International Crisis Group, October 2017

³¹ "Any port in a storm", *Africa Confidential*, 9 March 2018

³² "Mogadishu fires broadside at UAE", *Africa Confidential*, 22 March 2018

These developments have meant that the Farmajo government today is in practice increasingly close to Qatar, from which it continues to receive significant funds. But Saudi Arabia and UAE have not abandoned their interest in the country and are dealing mainly now with regional state administrations. All in all, gulf rivalries look highly likely to continue to intersect in a volatile way with Somali politics over the period ahead.³³

Eritrea comes in from the cold

The ascent to power in Ethiopia during 2018 of Abiy Ahmed has had an unambiguously positive impact on Somalia. His rapid move to end Ethiopia's frozen border conflict with Eritrea has allowed Somalia finally to escape from being the site of a proxy war between them. This in turn has allowed Somalia and Eritrea to renew their relations. All three countries are now committed to increased cooperation.

President Farmajo visited his Eritrean counterpart, President Aferwerki in Asmara in July 2018. Somalia subsequently supported the lifting of UN sanctions against Eritrea and in December, Aferwerki visited Mogadishu.

Turkey, an ally of Qatar, also has a growing stake in Somalia. It is the country's largest foreign investor.

2.2 Security

The credibility of the Farmajo government heavily depends on its ability to deliver security.

Since 2016, after several years of fighting with the SNA and AMISOM in which it lost control over substantial areas of territory, al-Shabaab has increasingly prioritised conducting asymmetrical attacks on Mogadishu and other urban centres. However, it retains control over substantial tracts of territory in the south of the country and supply routes between towns.

Al-Shabaab was unable to prevent the 2016/17 (s)electoral process from taking place but continued to launch regular attacks on the Somali security forces and civilians during this period. At least 50 people died at its hands in December 2016.

Africa Confidential claims that many of the Elders involved in the (s)elections who came from areas where al-Shabaab was strong repudiated their involvement on returning home and apologised for participating in it. Their apologies were reportedly accepted provided they paid \$300 to al-Shabaab, significantly boosting its coffers. Nonetheless, over 20 people who had been involved in the Electoral College were reported to have been killed by al-Shabaab in June 2017 alone.³⁴

In late-March 2017 it was reported that US armed forces had been told that they could target al-Qaida linked militants in Somalia more aggressively through airstrikes without seeking prior White House

³³ "Somalia is becoming a pawn in a UAE-Qatar proxy war for influence", www.albawaba.com, 17 September 2018

³⁴ "The endless election", *Africa Confidential*, 3 February 2017

approval. According to *Africa Confidential*, at that time the US had 50 special operations advisors in Somalia, whose role was to recommend offensive strikes against militants and support ground operations by the SNA.³⁵ The numbers may have increased significantly since then. A few months ago it was reported to have about 500 special forces in Somalia. An American soldier was killed in an operation in May 2017. Another died in an operation in June 2018.³⁶

US drone strikes have been deployed increasingly often in tandem with SNA and AMISOM operations against al-Shabaab. For example, in October, US strikes were part of an operation in which 60 al-Shabaab fighters were reportedly killed.

In November 2017, for the first time there were three US airstrikes against so-called Islamic State/Da'esh targets in Somalia. Al-Shabaab is extremely hostile towards Da'esh, which now has a few footholds around the country, vowing to destroy its rival. It brutally punishes any sympathisers that it finds within its ranks.³⁷ In December 2018 there were several clashes in the south and the north of the country between fighters from the two groups.

There have been numerous reports that Western countries have given their blessing to initiatives to open channels of communication with al-Shabaab leaders and sponsors. However, for now the primary intention seems to be to split the group rather than usher in peace talks with it. The Farmajo administration experienced a big success in August 2017 when Mukhtar Robow Ali, a senior al-Shabaab leader – albeit one who had been increasingly estranged in recent years – surrendered to the authorities. He did so shortly after the US had withdrawn his name from its list of foreign terrorists.

The federal government was quick to herald Robow's defection as an indication that the group was about to collapse. But this has not happened.³⁸ The limits to this strategy were revealed at the end of 2018, when Robow was prevented from standing for the presidency of South-West State (see above).³⁹

Attacks and clashes involving the SNA, AMISOM and al-Shabaab continued unabated throughout 2017 and 2018. Al-Shabaab experienced its full share of set-backs but also proved that it was still a force to be reckoned with. For example, in July 2017 it killed at least 23 AMISOM soldiers in an ambush in Lower Shabelle.

Al-Shabaab's conducted its deadliest attack ever (although it has never officially claimed responsibility) in October 2017 in Mogadishu, when bombs in two lorries killed an estimated 512 people, most of them civilians. The attack generated a wave of public anger against al-Shabaab in the capital, but there was also disillusionment with the performance of the federal authorities. The heads of police and national

³⁵ "New populist hires old faces", *Africa Confidential*, 14 April 2017

³⁶ "US strikes, Shabaab gains", *Africa Confidential*, 9 November 2018

³⁷ "ISIS's nemesis", *Africa Confidential*, 27 July 2018

³⁸ "The split that never was", *Africa Confidential*, 8 September 2017

³⁹ International Crisis Group, "[Somalia's South West State: A New President Installed, a Crisis Inflamed](#)", 24 December 2018

intelligence subsequently resigned. The International Crisis Group reported that, in the months leading up to this attack, al-Shabaab had recaptured several nearby districts to the capital.⁴⁰

2018 saw further major al-Shabaab attacks across the country.⁴¹ September was a particularly bad month for attacks in Mogadishu. In October it attacked an Italian military convoy of the EU's training mission, killing three civilian bystanders.

2019 has begun in a similar vein. On 1 January al-Shabaab carried out a mortar attack on a UN base in Somalia. Three people were injured. On 15 January al-Shabaab confirmed that it retained the ability to carry out attacks against regional allies of the Farmajo government when militants attacked a hotel in Nairobi, killing at least 21 people. This was the largest attack in Kenya since the one on Garissa University in 2015, in which close to 150 people died.⁴²

All the evidence suggests that al-Shabaab continues to be able to infiltrate the capital and other urban areas. It has also proven capable of taking some smaller towns, although it is often unable to hold them for long.⁴³

Below is a February 2018 BBC [map](#) setting out who controlled what territory in Somalia. It has not been updated since then, but the situation on the ground has not changed much:

⁴⁰ "[Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack](#)", International Crisis Group, October 2017

⁴¹ "At least 14 dead, several hurt in car bomb in Somali capital", *Associated Press*, 22 March 2018. Subsequent reports brought the death toll up to 17.

⁴² "Nairobi hotel: DusitD2 siege over as attackers eliminated", *BBC News Online*, 16 January 2019

⁴³ "Cracks in the federal system", *Africa Confidential*, 12 January 2018; "US strikes, Shabaab gains", *Africa Confidential*, 9 November 2018



2.3 Future of AMISOM

During President Farmajo's first year in power, the issue of AMISOM's future began to be posed more sharply. The May 2017 London Conference on Somalia agreed to devise a plan whereby the SNA and Somali federal police would gradually take over from it in areas where AMISOM had been leading on security.

In December 2017 a security conference took place in Mogadishu which began developing a "conditions-based" transition plan, with clear target dates, for transferring security responsibility from AMISOM to the SNA and the Somali police.⁴⁴ The plan was agreed in June 2018.⁴⁵

As things stand AMISOM, currently 22,000 strong, is due to hand over responsibility in December 2020.

AMISOM continues to be a primary target for al-Shabaab attacks across the country. Morale reportedly has been low. Funding the mission (including paying the troops) has been a constant struggle for the African Union. Some of the countries that contribute troops are keen to withdraw them. Uganda has begun doing so.⁴⁶

However, there is still not much optimism about the SNA's ability to fill the gap if/when AMISOM does finally depart. Indeed, if the security

⁴⁴ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), S/2017/1109, 26 December 2017, para 54

⁴⁵ ["Q&A: Somalia Charts Security Transition"](#), Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 17 July 2018

⁴⁶ "Cracks in the federal system", *Africa Confidential*, 12 January 2018

situation does not improve and/or the next elections are held up, it is possible that its departure date may be further delayed.⁴⁷

During a visit to Kenya by Prime Minister Theresa May in August 2018, the Prime Minister announced over £7 million of additional UK funding for AMISOM.⁴⁸ British Peace Support Training teams conduct pre-deployment training to AMISOM.⁴⁹

2.4 Humanitarian situation

President Farmajo took office in February 2017 amidst a severe drought. In January 2017 the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia said that five million Somalis – about half the population – did not have enough to eat.⁵⁰ Two years on, although the threat of famine has so far been averted, drought remains an ongoing threat.⁵¹

The latest UN reports say that there has been an improvement in the food security situation. However, over four million people still need humanitarian assistance. After good rains earlier in 2018, the latest rainy season was disappointing, meaning that there is a heightened risk of drought in the northeast and centre of the country for at least the next few months.

Somalia continues to face a massive internal displacement crisis that affects about two million people.⁵² The agricultural sector has struggled in recent years – livestock deaths have been massive – and food prices remain high

Donors provided more than \$1.2 billion towards famine prevention during 2017.⁵³ In 2018 the figure was \$1.07 billion.⁵⁴

The British International Development Secretary, Penny Mordaunt, visited Somalia in January 2018. While there, she announced an additional £21 million in funding for famine prevention. A further £40 million was due to be provided in 2018 to sustain the relief and recovery effort, bringing the total for the year to £61 million.⁵⁵

During her recent visit to Kenya, Theresa May announced additional funding of over £60 million to provide lifesaving food, clean water and medicine, along with support to find stable jobs, to help over a million

⁴⁷ For a detailed analysis of AMISOM's record, see Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia. A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007-2017* (Oxford, 2018)

⁴⁸ "[UK urges donors to support African Union Mission in Somalia](#)", FCO press release, 27 September 2018

⁴⁹ [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: programme summaries for Africa 2018 to 2019](#), UK Government, 15 November 2018

⁵⁰ "Somalia: president appeals for assistance as drought worsens", *Africa News*, 20 January 2017

⁵¹ "Huge livestock death may worsen food security in Somalia, says UN", *Daily Independent* (Nigeria), 22 March 2018

⁵² "[Somalia: Satellite imagery reveals devastation amid forced evictions of thousands who fled conflict and drought](#)", Amnesty International, 19 January 2018

⁵³ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), S/2017/1109, 26 December 2017

⁵⁴ [Report of the UN Secretary-General on Somalia](#), 21 December 2018

⁵⁵ [International Development Secretary in Somalia: "The UK averted famine last year, but the job is not yet done"](#), Department for International Development/Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 22 January 2018

people cope with and recover from the impact of conflict and drought.⁵⁶

Following the announcement in May 2016 by the Kenyan Government that the Dadaab refugee camp, where about 230,000 Somali refugees resided at the time, would be closed, thousands of refugees have reportedly been pressurised into leaving the camp. This has happened despite the Kenyan Supreme Court ruling the camp closure illegal in January 2017.⁵⁷ At the end of October 2018 there were 208,000 refugees registered at Dadaab.⁵⁸

The Kenyan Government and the UN claim that those refugees who have returned to Somalia, which in 2017 numbered over 30,000, are doing so voluntarily.⁵⁹ Critics question this claim. There has been a decrease in voluntary returns to Somalia during 2018.⁶⁰

Amnesty International has criticised the international community's failure to provide adequate support to Dadaab, noting that as at November 2017 the UN's appeal for its refugee response in Kenya was only 29% funded. The World Food Programme announced that it had no choice but to cut food rations by 30 percent for the refugees. Nearly half of all households reported not having enough food to eat. These challenges have continued during 2018.⁶¹

Amnesty International published a report in December 2017 describing the poor conditions in which returnees to Somalia are living in urban areas or camps.⁶²

2.5 Somaliland: elections but no rapprochement with Somalia

President Farmajo has so far had no success in improving relations with the self-declared independent state of Somaliland.

As we saw above, Somaliland played no part in Somalia's 2016-17 (s)electoral process. Diplomatic efforts to persuade it to become involved were unsuccessful.

In March 2018, President Abdi postponed talks with Somalia, which had been due to restart after several years in abeyance. Since then, there has been no sign of them resuming.

⁵⁶ "[UK urges donors to support African Union Mission in Somalia](#)", FCO press release, 27 September 2018

⁵⁷ "Closure of Dadaab refugee camp ruled illegal by Kenyan court", *Irish Times*, 10 February 2017

⁵⁸ "Kenya: Half of the assessed households report insufficient access to food at Dadaab refugee complex", REACH Initiative, 31 October 2018

⁵⁹ "Kenya: Half of the assessed households report insufficient access to food at Dadaab refugee complex", REACH Initiative, 31 October 2018

⁶⁰ "Kenya: Half of the assessed households report insufficient access to food at Dadaab refugee complex", REACH Initiative, 31 October 2018

⁶¹ "Kenya: Half of the assessed households report insufficient access to food at Dadaab refugee complex", REACH Initiative, 31 October 2018

⁶² "[Somalia: Refugees pressured to leave Dadaab return to insecurity, drought and hunger](#)", Amnesty International, 21 December 2017

After several postponements, Somaliland held presidential elections in November 2017. The victor was Muse Bihi Abdi of the ruling Kulmiye Party. The defeated candidate, Abdirahman Irro of the Waddani Party, claimed there had been fraud but the Supreme Court upheld the result. There was some violence before and after the elections but clan elders, as in the past, played a part in calming the situation. Muse Bihi Abdi took office in December 2017.

In March 2017, Somaliland gave the UAE permission to open a naval base in the coastal town of Berbera. The UAE (through the state-owned company DP World), along with Ethiopia, is also involved in the ambitious plans for the development of Berbera's port.⁶³ The Farmajo government has expressed its strong opposition, requesting mediation by the Arab League, and the lower house of the federal parliament has voted symbolically to cancel the deal and ban DP World from the country. The Somaliland authorities insist that it will go ahead.⁶⁴

In June 2017, the Somaliland government signed a unity deal with a region, Khatumo State, which had declared itself autonomous in 2012.

In April 2018 a writer, Nacima Qorane, was sentenced to three years in jail for supporting reunification with Somalia. The sentence triggered domestic and international criticism and in May she was released after receiving a presidential pardon.

2.6 Ongoing Somaliland-Puntland tensions

The longstanding dispute between Somaliland and Puntland over which has sovereignty in their contested border regions has continued to simmer in recent years. Puntland rejected the legitimacy of the June 2017 agreement between Somaliland and Khatumo State (see above).

Having come to blows on several occasions in the past, in January 2018 there was another confrontation between the two polities, when Somaliland troops violently forced out Puntland troops from the town of Tukaraq in Sool. A stand-off ensued between forces from the two sides.

In May 2018 there was another outbreak of violence. Puntland launched an offensive to try and re-take Tukaraq. Dozens were killed as fighting continued into July. In June there were also significant clashes in Las Anod, the capital of Sool.

By the end of July 2018 the level of fighting had reduced but efforts by regional organisations and Somaliland traditional leaders to negotiate a formal ceasefire were unsuccessful. Since then there have been several further low-level clashes. But the situation remains a stalemate. The new president of Puntland, Said Abdullahi Deni, who was elected at the beginning of January 2019, has given no indication that he will take a

⁶³ "Rival Arab powers take their fight to Africa", *Africa Confidential*, 9 February 2018. At the same time, the UAE and Ethiopia have taken significant stakes in Somaliland's wider plans for the development of the port at Berbera.

⁶⁴ "Somaliland DP World and Ethiopia port to go ahead", *CPI Financial*, 21 March 2018

different position over the dispute to his predecessor, Abdiweli Ali Gaas.⁶⁵

2.7 UK-Somalia relations: overview

The UK has been a strong backer of successive Somali administrations over the last decade. It has convened three international conferences on Somalia in London since 2012. The most recent was in 2017.⁶⁶

With President Farmajo and a wide range of foreign governments in attendance, a 'New Partnership Pact', comprising the next phase of reconstruction efforts and the campaign against al-Shabaab, was endorsed at the third conference.⁶⁷

Amongst other things, plans were endorsed to organise national forces and forces at the regional state-level into a coherent 'national security architecture', with a new National Security Council at its apex.⁶⁸

Whatever its private qualms, the UK has officially remained an enthusiastic public supporter of the Farmajo government since then. During a visit to Mogadishu in October 2018, Minister for Africa Harriet Baldwin said:

As a long-term partner of Somalia, the UK is committed to supporting reform efforts, from improving security, to delivering democratic elections, to helping build resilience and delivering the long-term economic development that Somalia needs to improve the lives of all its people for the benefit of all Somalis.⁶⁹

The UK has also been a supporter of Somaliland, although this stops short of endorsing its claim to independent statehood. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said in February 2018:

The UK is committed to supporting the shared prosperity and security of the people of Somalia, including in Somaliland. The UK congratulated the recently elected President of Somaliland on his election victory. We played an active role in supporting the elections, including through the deployment of a 60-strong election observation mission. The UK is working with the new government of Somaliland to support the delivery of its development plan and other crucial reforms. We are providing humanitarian assistance, supporting economic development, promoting good governance, and access to justice.⁷⁰

UK defence secretary Gavin Williamson visited Somaliland in early-January 2019. There have been unconfirmed press reports that one item

⁶⁵ "Puntland's new president calls on Somaliland to pull out its troops from Sool", *Shabelle Media Network*, 10 January 2019

⁶⁶ For full details, see the UK Government's webpage on the Conference: [London Somalia Conference 2017 \(Archived\)](#)

⁶⁷ [Speech by Theresa May at the London Somalia Conference](#), 11 May 2017

⁶⁸ "A hopeful view in London...", *Africa Confidential*, 26 May 2017. Oversight of the implementation of what was agreed in 2017 is being led by an intergovernmental body called the Somalia Partnership Forum.

⁶⁹ "[UK Minister for Africa makes maiden visit to Somalia](#)", FCO statement, 9 October 2018. In July 2018 the Department for International Development published a [country profile](#) of Somalia, which summarises its humanitarian and development priorities there.

⁷⁰ [Written question - HL5292](#), 14 February 2018

on the agenda was establishing a UK naval base in the port of Berbera.⁷¹ Doing this could be complicated by the fact that the Farmajo government in Mogadishu might strongly object.

⁷¹ "Somaliland seeks recognition by hosting naval bases", *MENA English*, 12 January 2019

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