

# Shifting sands in Somalia

Scenarios for the near-term future  
and policy options for the EU

Clingendael Report

Guido Lanfranchi



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Cover photo: Somali residents dismantle their house to salvage materials after being forced to leave as part of a government push to reclaim public land in the Hodan district of Mogadishu, Somalia, September 27, 2025. © Reuters

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# Executive summary

Somalia currently stands at a crossroads, amidst major changes taking place in the country's domestic political system (i.e. ongoing constitutional reforms) and in patterns of international assistance (i.e. a decreasing appetite by Western countries to provide large-scale support). At this pivotal juncture, it is essential for Somalia's international partners to reassess how they can best promote long-term stability in the country. Over the past two decades, large flows of international assistance have fed into a highly exclusionary political system, whereby a restricted circle of elites have leveraged their position as gatekeepers of international engagement to advance their own political and personal interests, at the expense of those of the country. As such, this approach has failed to result in the systemic changes that it was supposed to generate, such as significant improvements in terms of stability, governance, and state-building, as well as efforts to defeat Al Shabaab's insurgency. As this combination of large-scale investments and limited results drags on, several of Somalia's foreign partners are facing increasing internal pressure to scale back their support, making the status quo unsustainable in the long term.

The scenario analysis conducted in this report suggests that the key determinant of the country's future lies in making Somalia's political system more inclusive, reducing the power of current elites. In order to move in this direction, Somalia's international partners – including the EU and its member states – should focus on how to best leverage their foreign assistance to encourage a shift towards a more inclusive, accountable political system. To this end, EU policy makers should: (i) leverage electoral support and general budget support (including in coordination with the World Bank) to promote genuinely inclusive political processes and outcomes; (ii) strengthen their support for civil society entities (e.g. journalists, researchers, NGOs), including by providing them with diplomatic backing if needed, so that they can act as effective watchdogs against power abuses by political elites; and (iii) use the lessons learnt from past decades to strengthen the mitigation measures needed to avoid the international aid system from entrenching the power of established elites. In addition, at this time of pivotal changes for Somalia, donors should also reassess some of the more fundamental elements of their approach, including how to approach Al Shabaab and how to make the international aid system more effective and accountable. Further details on actionable recommendations are included in the last section of the report.

# Abbreviations

<b>AMISOM</b>	African Union Mission to Somalia
<b>ATMIS</b>	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>AUSSOM</b>	African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia
<b>EU / MS</b>	European Union / Member State
<b>EUCAP</b>	European Union Capacity Building Mission
<b>EUTM</b>	European Union Training Mission
<b>FGS</b>	Federal Government of Somalia
<b>FMS</b>	Federal Member State
<b>HSM</b>	Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud
<b>IACC</b>	Independent Anti-Corruption Commission
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>JOR</b>	Joint Operational Roadmap
<b>NCC</b>	National Consultative Council
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OAG</b>	Office of the Attorney General
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>OPOV</b>	One-Person One-Vote
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNOCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>UNSOS</b>	United Nations Support Office in Somalia
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

# Introduction

When starting a conversation on current political developments in Somalia,<sup>1</sup> be it with Somali political analysts or with foreign diplomats, the odds are high that one of the first sentences will be along the lines of: “**Somalia currently stands at a crossroads**”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, momentous developments are currently taking place in the country. On the domestic front, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) is pressing ahead with major changes to the country’s Constitution in the face of widespread opposition. This is leading to deep political divisions, which risk compromising the viability of the federal structures of governance, as well as the fight against Al Shabaab. On the international front, the aid structures that for the past two decades have contributed to keeping the federal project alive are being called into question, as aid cuts by the US have already taken their toll, and further cuts in many other Western capitals loom large on the horizon.

**This report explores how ongoing changes can impact Somalia, with the aim being to inform the policy engagement of the European Union (EU) and its member states (MS).** To do so, the report first zooms in on developments in these two critical domains (section 1) in order to provide the background information needed to understand the different scenarios. Then, it sketches simplified scenarios (section 2), outlining how diverging trajectories in the two critical domains could impact the country over a 3-year timeframe. Finally, the scenarios are used to inform the choice for a strategic policy approach by the EU and its members, which serves as a basis for a set of concrete recommendations (section 3). It should be noted that the aim of this exercise is not to provide detailed predictions of future events or to assess the most likely future outcomes – rather, it is to understand the key uncertainties that may drive future developments and, consequently, to think through policy options. The report has been developed on the basis of previous in-depth

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- 1 This report focuses on the regions that since 2012 have been part of the federal state project centred around the Mogadishu-based Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). On the other hand, it does not focus on developments in Somaliland, which despite a lack of international recognition enjoys de facto independence from the FGS.
  - 2 This was indeed an often repeated starting point raised by many of the interviewees consulted for this study, which included a mix of Somali political analysts and European diplomats and researchers working on/in Somalia.

research conducted on Somalia's political economy, complemented by additional ad hoc research focusing on these scenarios, including desk research and 10 key informant interviews with Somali political analysts and European diplomats and researchers working in/on Somalia, conducted in the summer of 2025.

# The moving pieces: Major changes in domestic politics and international assistance

In order to map out scenarios, **the report focuses on potential changes concerning two key dimensions: (1) the nature of Somalia's political system; and (2) patterns of international assistance** to the country. The choice of these two specific dimensions is due to two considerations. First, both dimensions have a high degree of uncertainty, as significant changes are taking place in terms of both domestic policy and international assistance trends. Second, both dimensions have a strong potential to impact Somalia's future: a country's political system is a key determinant of its future, and so is foreign assistance in a context like that of Somalia, where government structures have long been dependent on external support for their survival. This combination of uncertainty and impact makes these two dimensions particularly suitable for the development of potential scenarios (for a brief explanation of the scenario methodology, see box 1).<sup>3</sup>

## Box 1 Using scenarios to inform policy options

Scenario planning is a particularly useful tool when dealing with a significantly uncertain environment such as that of Somalia. Clingendael's scenario planning methodology is a means to envision, analytically evaluate, test and adjust policy and programming options in light of a 360-degree scan of potential future developments. Although the future is inherently uncertain, it is not fully indeterminate nor is there an infinite variation of equally plausible potential outcomes. Rather, future developments are largely driven by a limited set of critical uncertain factors, thus limiting the variation of potential outcomes. For example, while any political situation is subject to change over time, not all

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3 The two domains are also relatively independent from each other, which makes it possible to develop a meaningful set of four scenarios.

combinations of political actors are capable of forming a stable coalition which is able to share resources and exercise political power.

Scenario planning is not about predicting the most likely future trajectory, but a way of thinking through the most relevant uncertainties that may drive future developments, considering the impact of such developments, and subsequently thinking through the policy and programming implications.<sup>4</sup> Based on Shell's approach to scenario planning,<sup>5</sup> the Clingendael method focuses on generating multiple alternative futures, exploring the limits of a range of possibilities that takes recognisable trends and other contextual knowledge into account, bringing together what is known and what is, in principle, knowable.<sup>6</sup> As such, this scenario methodology provides relatively concrete entry points to adjust policy while considering critical potential future developments, and also serves as a process to help align the range of stakeholders from different teams and departments involved in the instrument portfolio around a common understanding and strategy.

## 1. Domestic political developments

**Somalia is characterized by a highly exclusive political system**, known in political settlement theory as a "limited access order" settlement.<sup>7</sup> In this arrangement, a restricted circle of political elites (within both the government and, to a lesser extent, the opposition) use their power to serve their personal interests (i.e. remaining in power, enriching themselves, and to some extent empowering

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4 Postma, T. and Liebl, F. 2003. 'How to improve scenario analysis as a strategic management tool?', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* (72), pp. 161–173.

5 Wilkinson, A. and R. Kupers. 2014. *The Essence of Scenarios: Learning from the Shell-experience*, Amsterdam: AUP.

6 Meijnders, M., van der Lijn, J., van Ham, P. and de Bruijne, K. 2017. *Clingendael Strategic Foresight: A Practical Guide to Scenario Planning*, The Hague: Clingendael Institute (Internal handbook).

7 North, C. D., Wallis, J. J., Webb, B. S. and Weingast, R. B. 2007. *Limited Access Orders in the Developing World: A New Approach to the Problems of Development*, Policy Research Working Paper n. 4359, Washington D. C.: The World Bank Group, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/906591468315558892/pdf/WPS4359.pdf>. For a discussion on political settlement theory, see: Bell, C. 2015. 'What we talk about when we talk about Political Settlements. Towards Inclusive and Open Political Settlements in an Era of Disillusionment', Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP), Paper 1, Edinburgh: Global Justice Academy, [https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/201509\\_WP\\_1\\_Bell\\_What-We-Talk-About.pdf](https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/201509_WP_1_Bell_What-We-Talk-About.pdf).

their constituencies, often defined on the basis of clan affiliation), rather than to promote the public good.<sup>8</sup> Somali state institutions are generally weak and struggle to provide basic services for the population at large. While foreign (or foreign-funded) actors often step in to plug this gap, this not only creates a degree of dependency on international support, but also risks discouraging improvements in state capacity (see more details below). Moreover, this situation leads to a particularly **weak social contract between the state and the population**: the state is arguably more accountable to its international backers than to its citizens, while the population relies more on social capital (particularly on a clan basis) than on the state for its welfare.<sup>9</sup> These conditions create **fertile ground for Al Shabaab**, which positions itself as an alternative to the state by providing a degree of governance and basic services (particularly security and justice) – although within the context of a fundamentalist ideology and the widespread use of violence.<sup>10</sup>

It is in this context that the ongoing political dispute about the reforms proposed by the incumbent government is taking place. While serious political disputes have been a hallmark of Somalia's politics for decades, **the current political tensions are particularly relevant, as they centre around proposed changes to the core arrangements that shape the country's power allocation.**<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the

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- 8 For a brief but poignant description of this system, see: Wasuge, M. 2022. 'Milking the Somali government: the politics of the status quo', Mogadishu: Somali Public Agenda, <https://somalipublicagenda.org/milking-the-somali-government-the-politics-of-the-status-quo/>. For a more in depth analysis, see: Menkhaus, K. 2018. 'Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study', Stabilisation Unit, London: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c191358ed915d0c3d63f6ab/Somalia\\_case\\_study.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c191358ed915d0c3d63f6ab/Somalia_case_study.pdf).
- 9 For an overview of Somalia's social contract, see: Cloutier, M., Hassan, H., Isser, D. and Raballand, G. 2022. 'Understanding Somalia's social contract and state-building efforts. Consequences for donor interventions', WIDER Working Paper 2022/123, UNU-WIDER, Brussels: European Commission, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2022-123-understanding-Somalia-social-contract-state-building-efforts.pdf>.
- 10 Kluijver, R. 2025. 'Al Shabaab governance: illiberal modernization?', Canadian Journal of African Studies, pp. 1-22, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00083968.2025.2512722?src=Still>. Still, some observers note that Al Shabaab's use of violence has recently become less indiscriminate (see below in section 3, point 4) and that state actors, too, are often responsible for violent and coercive practices.
- 11 For more details on the proposed reforms and the controversies surrounding them, see: Somali Public Agenda (SPA). 2025. 'Bridging Divides: Options for Resolving Somalia's FGS-FMS Disputes, Constitutional Review and Elections', Policy Paper, Puntland Development and Research Center, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Mogadishu: Somali Public Agenda, <https://somalipublicagenda.org/bridging-divides-options-for-resolving-somali-fgs-fms-disputes-constitutional-review-and-elections/>.

government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud (HSM) portrays the reforms as a required step to complete a long-sought constitutional reform process, and to move towards a fully-fledged democracy. On the other hand, however, these reforms are seen by many (including not only opposition politicians, but also political analysts) as an attempt to centralise power and secure the re-election of HSM and his associates, rather than laying the ground for a just and inclusive political system (for more details, see box 2). The contestation concerning the constitutional reforms has also reignited longstanding debates on the allocation of power between different levels of governance, pitting supporters of a strong central government against those preferring a looser (con)federation of relatively autonomous regional states.<sup>12</sup>

### Box 2 Political reforms proposed by HSM's government and the debate surrounding them<sup>13</sup>

**Much of the recent political debates in Somalia have revolved around the government's proposed reforms to Somalia's Constitution, and particularly the sensitive subject of elections.** Since the approval of Somalia's provisional Constitution in 2012, when the current federal structure was established, the country's political elites have repeatedly tried to draft a permanent Constitution – so far without success. After returning to power in 2022, HSM has made a renewed push in this direction. In March 2024, after a long and politically divisive process, the Somali Parliament approved amendments to the first four chapters of

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12 Interviews with two Somali political analysts; online, July-August 2025. This political divide was already evident in the lead-up to the establishment of the FGS in 2012, but is currently becoming more polarized: while both sides agree that the current federal structures have failed, one advocates for a shift towards a stronger centralization, while the other advocates for an even looser form of federalism.

13 For a comprehensive overview of these political debates, see: Somali Public Agenda (SPA). 2025. 'Bridging Divides: Options for Resolving Somalia's FGS-FMS Disputes, Constitutional Review and Elections', Policy Paper, Puntland Development and Research Center, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Mogadishu: Somali Public Agenda, <https://somalipublicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Bridging-Divides-Options-for-Resolving-Somalias-FGS%E2%80%93FMS-Disputes-Constitutional-Review-and-Elections.pdf>; International Crisis Group. 2025. 'Electoral Showdown in Somalia: Averting Another Round of Turmoil', Africa Briefing 208, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/somalia/b208-electoral-showdown-somalia-averting-another-round-turmoil>.

the Constitution, which include provisions related to elections.<sup>14</sup> However, this approval has not put an end to controversies in relation to the reforms.

**The main criticism levelled against HSM's reforms is that they may lead to a centralization of power under the guise of a shift towards direct democracy.** Some of the most prominent points of criticism in this regard include the increased powers of the president (who would be able to dismiss the prime minister without the need for a parliamentary vote of no confidence),<sup>15</sup> and the centralization of elections management under a single federal-level body (particularly given that some of the members of this body, including its head, are seen as being associated with the president).<sup>16</sup> These fears have been exacerbated by the FGS' decision to **push ahead with these fundamental changes despite serious security and logistical challenges**, including insecurity in many areas of the country, as well difficulties in the registration of voters (not least due to widespread displacement).

Overall, **the reforms have faced widespread opposition across Somalia's political spectrum.** The presidents of the two most powerful federal member states (FMSs), Puntland and Jubaland, have boycotted meetings of the National Consultative Council (NCC) in protest at the planned reforms.<sup>17</sup> Opposition has been widespread also among the Mogadishu-based political scene, with two former presidents, three former prime

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14 Hassan, O. M. 2024. 'Somalia's Parliament Approves Historic Constitutional Amendments', VOA Africa, March 30, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-s-parliament-approves-historic-constitutional-amendments/7549916.html>.

15 This specific issue was addressed in the deal signed between the HSM administration and a faction of the opposition in August 2025 (see below for more details).

16 Yusuf, A. 2025. 'Vote for Food: Mogadishu IDP Women Speak Out on Forced Registration by Disputed Electoral Commission', Mogadishu: Horn Observer, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/3337/Vote-for-Food-Mogadishu-IDP-Women-Speak-Out-on-Forced-Registration-by-Disputed-Electoral-Commission>.

17 Puntland has boycotted NCC meetings since late 2022, after disagreements on power-sharing arrangements between various levels of governance. Jubaland followed the same path in late 2024, after disagreements on elections. The presidents of both FMSs are from the Darood clan, one of the two dominant clans in Somalia – alongside the Hawiye, which is HSM's clan.

ministers, and other veteran politicians speaking out against the reforms.<sup>18</sup> This opposition front cuts across clan lines, and includes former allies of HSM.<sup>19</sup> In this context, critics (including both opposition members and various political analysts) **accuse the HSM's administration of being more focused on ensuring its own access to power, rather than laying the ground for a sustainable political system.**<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, **the HSM administration portrays the electoral changes as a long-overdue step to move away from clan-based elections and towards universal suffrage.** Under the current electoral system, grounded on an informal power-sharing agreement among clans (known as the “4.5 system”), selected clan elders elect members of parliament, who in turn elect the president.<sup>21</sup> This system has long been criticized for empowering a restricted set of clan elites (rather than the population at large), for being subject to political manipulation by incumbent leaders, for fostering widespread corruption during electoral cycles, as well as for marginalizing the youth, women, and minority clans.<sup>22</sup> Moving towards one-person, one-vote (OPOV) elections has thus been a longstanding objective of successive FGS administrations, as well as their international partners.

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- 18 Radio Dalsan. 2025. ‘Somali Opposition Accuses President Hassan Sheikh of Undermining Unity, Federalism Through New Political Party’, Radio Dalsan, May 15, <https://www.radiodalsan.com/somali-opposition-accuses-president-hassan-sheikh-of-undermining-unity-federalism-through-new-political-party/>; <https://shabellemedia.com/somalias-president-faces-backlash-over-new-party-as-opposition-warns-of-federal-rift/>.
- 19 The opposition front includes both members of HSM’s Hawiye clan (e.g. the former president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed) and members of the Darood, the other major clan in Somalia (e.g. the former president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmaajo’). In 2019, HSM and Sharif Sheikh had joined forces to counter Farmaajo’s attempt to gain re-election.
- 20 Nor, S. M. 2025. ‘Somalia: President Mohamud’s new party could centralise power, critics warn’, the Africa Report, May 21, <https://www.theafricareport.com/384358/somalia-president-mohamuds-new-party-could-centralise-power-critics-warn/>. Interviews with three Somali political analysts; online, July-August 2025.
- 21 For an overview of the 4.5 system, see: Somali Public Agenda (SPA). 2023 ‘The role of 4.5 in democratization and governance in Somalia. Implications and considerations for the way forward’, Policy Brief, Somali Dialogue Platform, Mogadishu: Somali Public Agenda, <https://somalipublicagenda.org/the-role-of-4-5-in-democratization-and-governance-in-somalia/>.
- 22 Ibid.

However, **these changes threaten to weaken the position of existing power brokers, including clan elders and FMS leaders**, who in the current system hold a significant degree of influence in the selection of clan representatives.<sup>23</sup> In this context, it can be challenging to assess the real motives driving political elites to oppose the reforms: while their position may be driven by genuine concerns about the centralization of power as noted above, it may also reflect a self-interested desire to preserve their own position of power. Overall, **the tendency of Somali political elites to work towards their own interests (see above) creates fertile ground for suspicion towards the real intentions of both the government and the opposition.**

**In late August 2025, the FGS struck a deal with a faction of the Mogadishu-based opposition.**<sup>24</sup> While the deal addresses some of the concerns raised by critics of the reforms (e.g. limiting changes to parliament–prime minister relations, and retaining an indirect method of election for the president), it does not address many sensitive political issues (e.g. on the management of elections, particularly in terms of the distribution of power between federal and regional-level bodies, as well as on security and logistical challenges associated with universal suffrage). Perhaps even more consequentially, the deal has not included the main political figures within the opposition camps, either in Mogadishu or in the two most powerful FMSs. As such, **the deal can be seen to some extent as a limited compromise with the demands of the opposition, but also as a tactic to divide and weaken the opposition front.**

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23 Somali Public Agenda (SPA). 2023. 'The role of 4.5 in democratization and governance in Somalia. Implications and considerations for the way forward', Policy Brief, Somali Dialogue Platform, Mogadishu: Somali Public Agenda, p. 10, [https://somalipublicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SPASDP\\_Brief\\_23\\_2023\\_ENGLISH-.pdf](https://somalipublicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SPASDP_Brief_23_2023_ENGLISH-.pdf).

24 Hiiraan Online. 2025. 'Somali government, opposition seal election deal after months of talks', Hiiraan Online, August 25, [https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Aug/202668/somalia\\_government\\_opposition\\_seal\\_election\\_deal\\_after\\_two\\_months\\_of\\_talks.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Aug/202668/somalia_government_opposition_seal_election_deal_after_two_months_of_talks.aspx) The deal foresees a mixed electoral system, whereby members of parliament would be elected by popular vote (as per the reforms' initial intention), and would in turn be in charge of electing the president (as in the current system). Parliament would retain the prerogative to withdraw confidence in the prime minister.

Within Somalia's political landscape, the reforms are fiercely opposed by many political heavyweights, at both the federal and FMS level, as well as across clan lines (see box 2). **These deep political divisions risk not only leading to internal tensions, but also undermining national and international efforts against extremist groups**, as attention and resources (and at times soldiers) are redeployed for domestic political purposes rather than to counter the insurgents.<sup>25</sup> Recurring clashes between FGS and Jubaland security forces in southern Somalia over the past year,<sup>26</sup> as well as disputes between the FGS and Puntland on the allocation of aid in areas reclaimed by the Islamic State,<sup>27</sup> are concrete examples of how this risk can play out.<sup>28</sup>

In broad terms, the situation can evolve in two directions:

- (a) **A new elite-based arrangement preserving the exclusive nature of the political system:** HSM's administration pushes ahead with its proposed changes, while accommodating some segments of the opposition with ad hoc political deals. Power remains concentrated in the hands of political elites, whose internal disputes continue (if not deepen), both among politicians in Mogadishu and between the FGS and key FMSs. This further weakens the (already weak) federal structures, creating an opening for Al Shabaab to further strengthen its (already strong) position.

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25 Muibu, D. and Mbengue, Y. 2025. 'Somalia at a Crossroads: Resurgents Insurgents, Fragmented Politics, and the Uncertain Future of AUSSOM', Vol. 18, Issue 5, New York: CTC Sentinel, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/somalia-at-a-crossroads-resurgent-insurgents-fragmented-politics-and-the-uncertain-future-of-aussom/>; International Crisis Group. 2025. 'Electoral Showdown in Somalia: Averting Another Round of Turmoil', Africa Briefing 208, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/somalia/b208-electoral-showdown-somalia-averting-another-round-turmoil>.

26 Hassan, A. and Sheikh, A. 2024. 'Fighting breaks out between Somalia's Jubbaland region and federal government', Reuters, December 11, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/fighting-erupts-between-somalias-jubbaland-region-federal-government-officials-2024-12-11/>; Hiiraan Online. 2025. 'Clashes erupt in Somalia's Gedoregion amid federal-Jubbaland power struggle', Hiiraan Online, July 28, [https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/July/202355/clashes\\_erupt\\_in\\_somalia\\_s\\_gedo\\_region\\_amid\\_federal\\_jubbaland\\_power\\_struggle.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/July/202355/clashes_erupt_in_somalia_s_gedo_region_amid_federal_jubbaland_power_struggle.aspx).

27 Hiiraan Online. 2025. 'Puntland rejects federal aid, fueling Somalia political rift', Hiiraan Online, August 31, [https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Aug/202744/puntland\\_rejects\\_federal\\_aid\\_fueling\\_somalia\\_political\\_rift.aspx](https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Aug/202744/puntland_rejects_federal_aid_fueling_somalia_political_rift.aspx).

28 For an overview of Al Shabaab's recent advances in the context of Somalia's internal troubles, see: Jackson, A. 2025. "Flailing State: The Resurgence of al-Shabaab in Somalia", *War on the Rocks*, 3 June, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/flailing-state-the-resurgence-of-al-shabaab-in-somalia/>.

- (b) **A broad-based political process leading to a more inclusive and accountable political system:** HSM's administration kick-starts a genuine political dialogue with broad segments of the opposition (both in Mogadishu and in the FMSs), including civil society, and potentially even with some of the more moderate elements of Al Shabaab. The process leads to a broad-based political agreement on reforms (e.g. the Constitution, elections, etc.). The new system gradually makes political elites more accountable towards (and hence representative of) the population, resulting over time in better governance – which, in turn, weakens Al Shabaab's position.

### Box 3 An inclusive political system vs. an inclusive elite pact

When discussing the potential shift of Somalia's politics towards a more inclusive political arrangement, it is critical to clarify the difference between two potential options. The first possibility is that the government and the opposition engage in negotiations, leading to an agreement that reflects a broader consensus among political actors, but without necessarily changing the fundamental nature of Somalia's elite-dominated political system. This can be defined as a more inclusive elite pact. On the other hand, **moving towards a more inclusive political system requires more than merely broadening the coalition of elites currently in power.** Rather, it requires changing the exclusionary nature of the political system, thereby loosening the control that established power brokers (from the government and the opposition alike) wield over the country. In political theory terms, this is defined as moving from a limited access order settlement to an open access order one.<sup>29</sup> In the case of Somalia, for the country to move towards a more inclusive political system what is needed are in-depth changes that make political leaders more accountable towards the population, rather than another deal that merely co-opts more factions in an arrangement that ultimately secures the survival of an elite-dominated system.

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29 Bell, C. 2015. op. cit. The move towards a (at least relatively) more inclusive arrangement within a limited access order settlement has also been defined as a "formalized political unsettlement" (for more details, see: Bell, C. and Pospisil, J. 2017. *Navigating Inclusion in Transitions from Conflict: The Formalised Political Unsettlement*, Political Settlement Research Programme, Briefing Paper 16.

## 2. Changes in patterns of foreign assistance

Somalia's political economy is heavily shaped by foreign assistance, as **the FGS is highly reliant – if not, arguably, overwhelmingly dependent – on external support for its survival.**<sup>30</sup> On the security front, over the last decades the FGS has relied on successive joint AU-UN military missions (first AMISOM, then ATMIS, currently AUSSOM), as well as bilateral deployments by a number of foreign countries,<sup>31</sup> for support in the fight against Al Shabaab. In addition, the FGS has also benefited from large amounts of foreign security assistance, provided by a wide array of external actors, aimed at strengthening Somalia's own security forces (a goal that has so far proved elusive, however).<sup>32</sup> On the financial front, the FGS' official budget relies for around 60% of its revenues on external sources of funding, and although the government's ability to mobilize domestic revenues has increased over the past few years, its relative dependency on external sources has actually increased (see Figure 1).<sup>33</sup> In addition to this budget support, an extremely large inflow of humanitarian and development aid (estimated at around USD 1.5-2 billion per year) funds the provision of various basic services for

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30 In all aspects, the FGS' relevance as a political actor largely rests on its position as the internationally recognized government, which enables it to wield influence over the massive inflows of foreign assistance (which political elites routinely instrumentalize for their own interests) despite an extremely weak power position on the ground. For an analysis of the distinction between Somalia's internal sovereignty (control over its territory, or the lack thereof) and its external sovereignty (the treatment it receives within the international community), see: Ibrahim, A.S., and Majid, N. 2024. "Questions of Sovereignty: Somalia on the UN Security Council", *ISS Blog Bliss*, 1 October, <https://issblog.nl/2024/10/01/in-this-blog-ahmed-sh-ibrahim-and-nisar-majid-consider-how-somalias-joining-of-the-un-security-council-at-a-time-when-its-nationally-recognised-government-controls-only-a-portion-of-its-t/>.

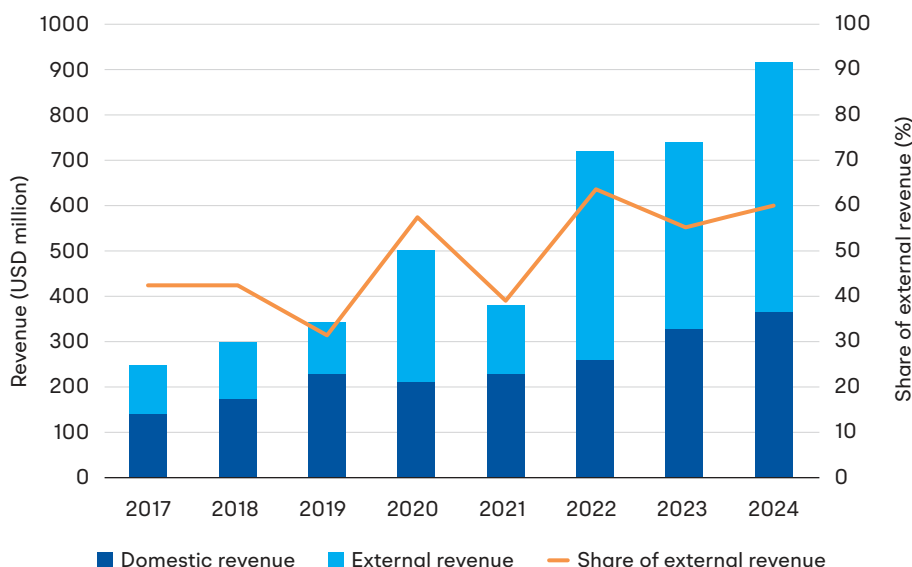
31 Ethiopia and Kenya are the two countries with the largest bilateral deployment in Somalia, although the presence of other actors – such as Uganda and Turkey – is also on the rise.

32 Williams, P. D. 2019. 'Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a failure, 2008-2018', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43(3), pp. 366-391, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2019.1575210>; Williams, P. D. 2024. 'The Somali National Army Versus al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment', Vol. 17, issue 4, New York: CTC Sentinel, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-somali-national-army-versus-al-shabaab-a-net-assessment/>.

33 The FGS' domestic revenue has more than doubled between 2017 and 2024, increasing from USD 140 million to USD 370 million. However, the even steeper growth of external revenues (from USD 100 million in 2017 to USD 540 million in 2024, i.e. more than a 5-fold increase) has meant that the FGS' relative dependency on external sources of revenue has actually increased, from around 40% in 2017 to around 60% in 2024.

the population, including health and education – services which the government struggles to provide.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 1 FGS revenue mobilization, 2017-24<sup>35</sup>



While a large number of international actors are involved in supporting Somalia, **a significant share of this foreign assistance is currently channelled through multilateral initiatives.** In the security domain, for instance, successive multilateral military missions have traditionally provided an important avenue for cooperation and partnership among various external actors engaged in Somalia: while several African countries provided troops, the EU paid for their salaries

34 The latest comprehensive reports by the FGS (covering the period 2019-21) report a yearly average of USD 860 million in development aid and USD 880 million in humanitarian aid (Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development. 2021. 'Aid Flows in Somalia 2021', Mogadishu: Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development, <https://somalia.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Aid%20Flows%202020-%20June%2021.pdf>). UNOCHA's Financial Tracking Service reports over USD 1 billion in humanitarian aid in 2024 (Financial Tracking Service. 2024. 'Somalia 2024', Country Summary, Geneva: UN OCHA, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/206/summary/2024>).

35 Data from the Somali government budget reports; elaboration by the author.

and allowances, and the UN provided key logistical support.<sup>36</sup> As for aid, a large portion of humanitarian assistance has been channelled through the UN system (up to two-thirds in 2024, according to UNOCHA data),<sup>37</sup> while the World Bank has played a leading role as a provider of development aid (providing almost 30% of all development funds recorded by the FGS in 2019-21).<sup>38</sup>

**Aid cuts in many Western capitals, however, are increasingly calling into question this status quo.** For instance, the new multilateral military mission AUSSOM is currently struggling to attract the funding needed for its continuation, amidst Washington's refusal to allow the use of the UN-assessed contribution, and the EU's (long-standing) willingness to reduce its role as a key funder.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, humanitarian and development assistance are increasingly coming under pressure. Countries that have declared their intention to cut official development assistance (ODA) in 2025-27 are among the top donors in Somalia in key fields such as health, education, and governance.<sup>40</sup> Regarding humanitarian aid specifically, the impact of the cuts by the US is particularly significant, as Washington used to fund around half of the total humanitarian aid provided in Somalia.<sup>41</sup>

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36 Williams, P. D. 2018. 'Lessons Learned in Somalia: AMISOM and Contemporary Peace Enforcement', *Strengthen Through Peace*, Center for Preventive Action, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/lessons-learned-somalia-amisom-and-contemporary-peace-enforcement>).

37 Financial Tracking Service. 2024. op. cit.

38 Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development. 2021. op. cit.

39 Dersso, S. A. and Beshah, Z. 2025. 'Will the possible end of the AU mission in Somalia open new opportunities for peace?', *Ideas Indaba*, May 23, Addis Ababa: Amani Africa, <https://amaniafrica-et.org/will-the-possible-end-of-the-au-mission-in-somalia-open-new-opportunities-for-peace/>; Forti, D. 2025. 'Security Council Misses Funding Deadline for AU Mission in Somalia', *Analyst's Notebook*, May 16, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/african-union-regional-bodies-somalia/security-council-misses-funding-deadline-au-mission-somalia>. Financing the mission through the UN-assessed contribution was the favourite option for both the AU, the EU, and the UN, but the plan was blocked by the US' veto. The decrease in US funding also threatens the functioning of UNSOS (which depends on Washington for around 25% of its funds), which provides logistical support for the multilateral military mission.

40 OECD. 2025. 'Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term', *Policy Brief*, Paris: OECD, p. 15, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance\\_e161f0c5/8c530629-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/8c530629-en.pdf).

41 Financial Tracking Service. 2024 op. cit.

While the way in which these changes will play out cannot yet be clearly determined, **multilateral mechanisms seem to be particularly vulnerable to the aid cuts**. In the security domain, for instance, it is the multilateral AUSSOM mission that is currently suffering the most from a lack of funding.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, interviews with analysts and diplomats suggest that several external actors are likely to continue their security engagement in Somalia regardless of AUSSOM's future (see box 4).<sup>43</sup> Similar dynamics apply to the aid sector. In the humanitarian domain, for instance, countries that have announced cuts for the coming years are responsible for a large share of the funding for key UN agencies<sup>44</sup> – the very same agencies that currently provide a large share of the humanitarian aid distributed in Somalia.<sup>45</sup>

In broad terms, the situation can evolve in two directions (for more details on the methodological choices underpinning the choice of these two options, see box 4):

- (a) **Persisting high levels of foreign assistance through existing multilateral channels:** Aid cuts to Somalia remain limited, and international partners continue to provide a large amount of assistance through existing multilateral mechanism (e.g. AUSSOM for security support, the UN system for humanitarian aid, the World Bank for development aid).
- (b) **Decreasing levels of foreign assistance, increasingly channelled on a bilateral basis:** Western countries significantly reduce their existing contributions to multilateral mechanisms. Other actors step in to fill the gap, but their contributions remain more limited in scale and are largely channelled on the basis of bilateral agreements, leading to greater fragmentation (see box 4).

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42 Dersso, S. A. and Beshah, Z. 2025, op. cit.; Forti, D. 2025, op. cit. The funding needs of AUSSOM are estimated at USD 167 million for one year, of which only 10% is so far covered.

43 Interviews with a Somali political analyst and with two European diplomats; online, July-August 2025. This applies, in particular, to Somalia's neighbours (Ethiopia and Kenya, which also have their own bilateral deployment), but also to some of AUSSOM's troop-contributing countries (Uganda, Egypt, and possibly Djibouti), as well as Somalia's extra-regional partners (Turkey, UAE, EU, US).

44 OECD. 2025, op. cit. p. 1. These countries' contributions amount to 87% of WFP's funding and 62% of WHO's funding (at the global level).

45 Financial Tracking Service. 2024, op. cit. According to UN OCHA FTS data, UN agencies absorbed around 67% of humanitarian funding in Somalia in 2024 (with WFP alone responsible for 41% of all the funding).

#### Box 4 Relation between the level of foreign assistance and its multilateral coordination

Although the level of foreign assistance inflows (high vs. low) and their level of coordination (multilateral vs. bilateral) are theoretically two separate variables, in the analysis below they are considered as being related: either high and multilateral, or low and bilateral. This choice hinges on two considerations.

First, **the external actors currently rolling back their support for Somalia and/or their ODA contributions more at large** – chiefly the US, but also the UK and several prominent EU member states like Germany, France, as well as the Netherlands<sup>46</sup> – **are the backers of existing multilateral support mechanisms in Somalia**. In the security sector, for instance, the EU has been the main financial backer of the AU-UN military missions, spending an estimated EUR 2.7 billion since 2007.<sup>47</sup> The bloc and its member states – alongside the UK and other Western partners – also tend to channel large amounts of aid through multilateral channels (e.g. UN agencies for humanitarian aid and the World Bank for development aid), and contribute to a large share of the UN budget at large. As a result, aid cuts in Western capitals risk having a disproportionate impact on multilateral support mechanisms. In a telling example of these dynamics, the World Food Programme (WFP) in Somalia has been seriously threatened by the US cuts in early 2025, given its reliance on US funds to cover 90% of lifesaving hunger needs.<sup>48</sup>

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46 OECD. 2025, op. cit.

47 Council of the European Union. 2024. 'EU support to Somalia: Council approves further support under the European Peace Facility to the Somali National Army and to the military component of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia', Press release, April 16, Brussels: Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/16/eu-support-to-somalia-council-approves-further-support-under-the-european-peace-facility-to-the-somali-national-army-and-to-the-military-component-of-the-african-union-transition-mission-in-somalia/>.

48 WFP Somalia (@WFPSomalia). 2025. 'US funding has been the backbone of food assistance in Somalia, supporting @WFP to cover 90% of lifesaving hunger seeds', X, April 8, <https://x.com/WFPSomalia/status/1909588349255332153>.

Second, the developments so far, as well as interviews with analysts and diplomats, suggest that **although the reduction in Western aid may trigger more support from other foreign actors, this new support is unlikely to fully compensate for the shortfall, and to be channelled through existing multilateral mechanisms.** The security sector once again provides a relevant example of these dynamics. Amidst budget shortfalls for AUSSOM, there have been some new contributions from countries like Japan (USD 3 million), South Korea (1.6 million), and China (1 million), but these account for only around 3% of the mission's budget (which is estimated at around USD 167 million for one year). For comparison, the contribution of the EU is expected to be around EUR 60 million for 2025.<sup>49</sup> The AU has also reportedly tried to secure Qatar's financial support for AUSSOM, but Doha is widely seen as unlikely to shoulder a large burden by itself.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, as noted earlier, several external actors are likely to continue their bilateral engagement. Countries in the region – particularly Ethiopia and Kenya, which also have their own bilateral deployment, as well as Djibouti and Uganda – are expected to remain engaged militarily even in the absence of foreign financial backing, given their direct interests in Somalia.<sup>51</sup> Additional regional countries – most notably the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt – also seem set to continue their engagement, and in some cases they are even stepping it up.<sup>52</sup> Their security support, however, is largely channelled bilaterally – which may lead to increasingly fragmented external security support.<sup>53</sup>

49 Dersso, S. A. and Beshah, Z. 2025, op. cit.; Forti, D. 2025, op. cit. Interview with a EU diplomat; online, July-August 2024.

50 Africa Intelligence. 2025. 'Somalia: Qatar unease at future AU mission', Africa Intelligence, June 2, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/06/02/qatar-unease-at-future-au-mission,110459684-bre>; interview with a European political analyst; online, July-August 2025.

51 Interviews with a Somali political analyst and with two EU diplomats; online, July-August 2025. One diplomat noted that the Ugandan government has explicitly communicated, behind closed doors, its intention to remain engaged regardless of the level of EU financial support to AUSSOM.

52 Soylu, R. 2025. 'Turkey doubles troops in Somalia amid Al-Shabab offensive', Middle East Eye, April 25, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-doubles-troops-somalia-amid-al-shabab-offensive>.

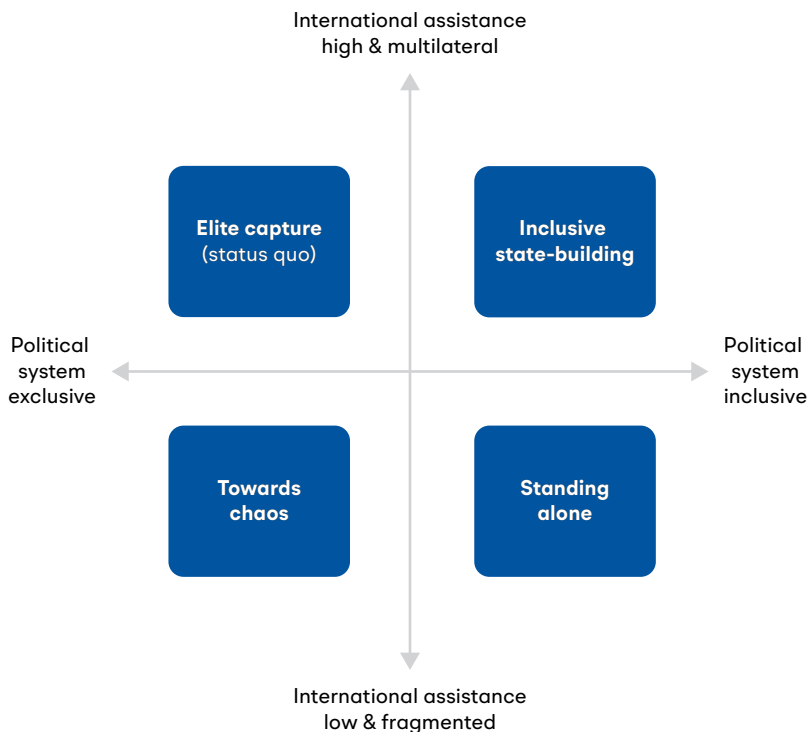
53 Marangio, R. 2025. 'Dawn or doom? The new AU mission in Somalia and the fight for stability', Brief 9, March 27, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/dawn-or-doom-new-au-mission-somalia-and-fight-stability>. Interview with a EU diplomat; online, July-August 2025.

Overall, the observation of current trends and available data, as well as the interviews conducted for this report, largely corroborate the **assumption that a reduction in Western aid would likely lead not only to an overall reduction in aid inflows in Somalia, but also to their greater fragmentation** – both in the security domain, and in terms of humanitarian and development assistance.

# Sketching scenarios: Exploring Somalia's near-term future

Based on potential developments in the two dimensions outlined above, it is possible to outline four broad scenarios sketching potential directions for Somalia over the next three years (see Figure 2). As noted earlier, the scenarios are not intended to provide detailed predictions of future developments or to assess their relative likelihood. Rather, they serve as a tool to broadly map how ongoing changes may affect Somalia's future and analyse policy options available to the EU and its member states in order to move towards a more desirable direction.

Figure 2 Four scenarios for Somalia



## Scenario A: Elite capture (status quo)

Political system: Exclusive

International assistance: High and multilateral

Amidst growing political tensions around the proposed political reforms, HSM's administration strikes a deal with segments of the opposition, rolling back some of the planned changes but securing broader political support. The result is an **elite-based deal which lowers tensions (at least partly) and appeases the FGS' international partners, but ultimately ensures the continuation of Somalia's elite-dominated political system.**<sup>54</sup> Despite growing domestic pressure on their budgets, Somalia's Western partners continue to provide support to the FGS, mostly driven by the fear of a potential Al Shabaab takeover if the government collapses, and enticed by the rapprochement between the FGS and (part of) the opposition. Sufficient funds are mobilized for AUSSOM, and large sums of humanitarian and development aid continue to flow into the country, including via the traditional multilateral mechanisms. This **external assistance, however, continues to feed into an exclusionary status quo**, as political elites instrumentalize foreign support for their own interests.<sup>55</sup>

**Three years down the line, little has changed in Somalia.**<sup>56</sup> The government in Mogadishu continues to enjoy limited legitimacy and actual power on the ground, and it struggles to become more independent from external support. The continuation of international assistance enables this status quo to drag on, allowing the FGS to survive despite its structural deficits. However, Somalia's international partners increasingly feel the fatigue of supporting a government that makes little progress towards genuine state building. This means that

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54 This course of events is in keeping with the nature of Somalia's political settlement over the past two decades (Menkhaus, K. 2018, op. cit.)

55 Once again, this course of events mirrors the trends observed over the past two decades (Hagmann, T. 2016. 'Stabilization, Extraversion and Political Settlements in Somalia', Political Settlements Research Programme, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PSRP-RVI-Report-7-Stabilization-Extraversion-and-Political-Settlements-in-Somalia-Tobias-Hagmann-2016.pdf>).

56 The choice of not delving into whether HSM will secure re-election or not is a deliberate one, and it is premised on the assumption that mere leadership changes within the FGS are unlikely to result in significant changes in how the political system works – as proven by the disappointment that has regularly followed power transfers in Mogadishu since the advent of the current political system. Wasuge, M. 2022, op. cit.

**the status quo is unsustainable. Al Shabaab is aware of this, and it is prepared to wait until international support comes to an end.** In the meantime, **Somali citizens continue to struggle** to find a way of surviving amidst a fragmented governance landscape, leading to an exacerbation of their suffering and growing popular discontent.

## Scenario B: Inclusive state building

Political system: Inclusive

International assistance: High and multilateral

**The push by HSM's administration for constitutional reforms triggers an unprecedented resistance**, not only by opposition politicians, but also by Somali civil society and by the FGS's international partners (which adopt a firmer stance vis-à-vis the FGS, making their support conditional upon a genuinely inclusive political process). As a result, the government rolls back the planned reforms and kick-starts a **national dialogue on the Constitution**, including a wide spectrum of political forces, as well as civil society representatives. While this new political process takes some time to kick off, it ultimately results in an agreement that lays out a **gradual transition towards a more representative form of voting**, with some changes already foreseen for the upcoming round of elections, and more significant ones laid out for the next one. Galvanized by this progress, **Somalia's international partners continue to provide high levels of assistance to the FGS**. As part of the effort to improve FGS-FMS ties, **a new mechanism is established to jointly manage foreign assistance**, thus reducing the 'winner takes all' mentality previously created by the centralization of foreign assistance under the government in Mogadishu.

**Three years down the line**, the shift from the old indirect election system to a new hybrid one has made Somalia's political class somewhat more representative of the interest of the population. This has led to better policies and – most importantly – to their actual implementation on the ground. Critically, this includes a higher capacity by the government to mobilize domestic revenues, and to use them to provide basic services to the population. As a result, **state structures are growing increasingly more legitimate in the eyes of Somali citizens**, who finally see the federal state institutions as a potentially viable system of governance. **This growing trend chips away at the legitimacy of Al Shabaab**, which is no longer seen as the only actor able to provide security and

justice. This translates into progress on the security front, too: although the threat of Al Shabaab remains present, the group's territorial reach and its operational capacity in government-held areas are seriously reduced. After decades of struggles, **Somali citizens see their standard of living gradually but steadily improving.**

### Scenario C: Towards chaos

Political system: Exclusive

International assistance: Low and fragmented

Despite strong opposition from large segments of the political spectrum, **HSM's administration pushes ahead with its planned reforms**, including OPOV elections. Unwilling to position themselves against a shift to universal suffrage, Somalia's international partners endorse the process. **However, growing disillusionment with the FGS leadership leads foreign actors to scale back their support for the government.** No agreement is reached on the financing of AUSSOM – what remains, instead, is a patchwork of bilateral deployments by regional countries, which struggle to coordinate with each other. Some external partners also continue to provide bilateral security support, but the FGS instrumentalizes this assistance to fight against its opponents, rather than focusing on Al Shabaab. A divisive electoral process – openly boycotted by many opposition leaders in Mogadishu and in key federal member states – leads to **tensions ahead of and during the polls, with recurring clashes** amidst rival factions of the security forces. **Al Shabaab exploits the weakening of the FGS** and the reduction in international support to strengthen its position.

**Three years down the line, Somalia is deeply fragmented.** The federal structure inaugurated in 2012 has all but collapsed, amidst a further deepening of the longstanding rivalry among political forces that want to centralize power and those that want to reduce Mogadishu's influence. Clan rivalries further polarize this political divide. In this chaos, **Al Shabaab has (re)taken several areas of the country, including parts of Mogadishu**, and has set up a parallel government – although the group has to constantly face troops from some foreign partners of the FGS, which have stepped up their bilateral deployment to prevent a full takeover. With a virtually non-existent FGS, **FMSs operate almost fully autonomously** – particularly (although not exclusively) in Puntland and Jubaland, which operate even more independently from Mogadishu than in the past.

**Somalia's international partners largely move towards further disengagement**, amidst a widespread disillusionment with previous heavy-handed efforts to rebuild the country after the state's collapse. Little to no international assistance flows into the country, exacerbating an already **dire humanitarian situation**.

## Scenario D: Standing alone

Political system: Inclusive

International assistance: Low and fragmented

Amidst ODA cuts in many Western capitals and a growing disillusionment with the lack of progress of Somalia's foreign-backed state-building agenda, **Mogadishu's international partners significantly reduce their support for the FGS**. While the FGS remains the internationally recognized government, its power diminishes as more fragmented international support increasingly empowers opposition elements and some FMSs. Facing widespread political opposition at home and lacking cohesive foreign backing, the **government has no alternative but to find a political compromise with opposition leaders** in Mogadishu and in key FMSs. The administration also engages in **negotiations with some of the more moderate elements of Al Shabaab**, leading a few former leaders to split away from the group – and in some cases to join the government. The more extreme wing of the group rejects any form of negotiation, and continues to challenge the government militarily, but its popular legitimacy (and hence its power) are weakened by the split and by their shift towards even more extremist positions.

**Three years down the line, Somali federal structures continue to battle the ever-present threat from Al Shabaab**. The reduction in international assistance has made it logistically more difficult for state security forces to fight the group, but **increasing cooperation among various Somali political actors** (including former members of Al Shabaab's more moderate wing) has to some extent strengthened state structures and their legitimacy. The government retains control over Mogadishu and all major urban areas, while in rural areas control is more contested. In the absence of large inflows of international aid, the **humanitarian situation has deteriorated**. However, pressure has increased on the government to provide services, leading to **slow but promising improvements in terms of governance**, particularly at the local level.

# Looking for stability: What role is there for the EU and its member states?

Somalia does indeed stand at a crossroads. Ongoing changes in terms of the country's domestic political system and inflows of foreign assistance will shape the direction that the country will take. **These developments will be critical not only for Somalia itself, but also for the EU and its member states, which have an interest in the country's long-term stability.** While responding to Somalia's humanitarian and development needs has been (and should remain) an important driving force for the EU's approach, the country's stability is also relevant for the EU's own interests, owing to its geostrategic position on the Gulf of Aden and to the migratory flows connecting the region with Europe.<sup>57</sup>

As noted in the analysis above, **the status quo (elite capture) is becoming increasingly unsustainable.** Within the EU, political pressure is growing to roll back its engagement in Somalia, after years of large-scale economic commitments matched by limited results in terms of systemic change and genuine state building.<sup>58</sup> The situation is similar in other Western capitals – particularly in Washington, which has traditionally been a key partner for the FGS.<sup>59</sup> In this context, **prolonging the status quo risks bringing about a steady move towards a worst case scenario.** As disillusionment grows among Somalia's international partners, the risk of foreign assistance ultimately being withdrawn also increases – potentially very rapidly, as was the case in Afghanistan in 2021. This may push the country towards uncertain waters at best (*standing alone*, if

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57 For an overview of the EU's interests in the Horn of Africa region more generally, see: Lanfranchi, G. 2023. 'The European Union in a crowded Horn Africa', CRU Policy Brief, The Hague: Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/PB\\_The\\_EU\\_in\\_a\\_crowded\\_Horn\\_of\\_Africa.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/PB_The_EU_in_a_crowded_Horn_of_Africa.pdf).

58 Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023. 'Evaluation of the EU cooperation with the Federal Republic of Somalia (2014-2021)', Evaluation, Brussels: European Commission, [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/publications-library/evaluation-eu-cooperation-federal-republic-somalia-2014-2021\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/publications-library/evaluation-eu-cooperation-federal-republic-somalia-2014-2021_en).

59 According to a European diplomat consulted for this study, US diplomats in Somalia are often very explicit with their FGS counterparts about the fact that "Washington's patience is over".

a more inclusive political system is swiftly put in place to address the country's challenges), or extremely dangerous ones in a worst case scenario (towards chaos, if political rivalries persist or even escalate under the pressure created by the withdrawal of external partners).

These observations point at the **need for a major shift in the approach adopted by the EU (and other international partners) in Somalia**. An external evaluation of the EU's engagement in the country between 2014 and 2021 concluded that the bloc's approach has led to positive outcomes on a number of specific issues (e.g. peace and security, local governance, public finance management, education), but it has failed to result in the desired systemic change.<sup>60</sup> Broader assessments of the internationally-backed state-building project in Somalia point to an even more worrying picture, showing how heavy-handed external interventions (including, though not only, by the EU) have in fact enabled a dysfunctional form of state building, prioritizing the establishment of formal institutions while overlooking the absence of an actual process of state formation on the ground.<sup>61</sup> Within this system, Somali political elites have been able to establish and preserve a position of power by relying on the legitimacy and financial resources provided by foreign partners (through a system known in political theory as "extraversion"), rather than by creating a social contract with the population. In this context, **rather than focusing on how much assistance should be allocated to Somalia, EU decision-making processes should be centred on how to best leverage external assistance to encourage a shift towards a more inclusive, accountable political system.**

**This approach – less technical, and more political in nature – will have to overcome a degree of resistance from Somali political elites**, which have an interest in upholding the status quo.<sup>62</sup> These elites are likely to frame their resistance with two arguments. First, they may use the threat of Al Shabaab to persuade donors to continue their support for the FGS. Yet, as the analysis above has shown, a continuation of external support without any meaningful change in the workings of Somalia's political system is unlikely to effectively counter

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60 Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023, op. cit.

61 Hagmann, T. 2016, op. cit. The author also notes how, during certain phases of Somalia's recent history, the externally-driven state-building project has even encouraged violent attempts to produce a political settlement within Somalia.

62 For an explanation as to how it is not only the incumbents, but political elites more generally that benefit from the status quo in Somalia, see: Wasuge, M. 2022, op. cit.; Menkhaus, K. 2018 op. cit.

the threat posed by Al Shabaab in the longer term. Second, they may resort to the argument of upholding state sovereignty and resisting foreign interference, particularly over sensitive political issues (e.g. the Constitution, elections, power sharing, etc.). While it should indeed be up to Somalis themselves to decide their country's future, it is up to the EU and its member states to adjust the support they provide to the FGS, if they determine that this government serves the interests of a few elites rather than those of its citizens at large. Overcoming this resistance by political elites will not be an easy task, given their hold on Somali politics, but **the EU has the tools to do so by virtue of the large and varied support that it provides to the country.**<sup>63</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that demands for stronger accountability as to how EU assistance is used by the Somali government also come from Somalia itself, particularly from civil society actors outside of political elite circles.<sup>64</sup>

In addition, **a more political approach by the EU will also require a stronger degree of internal coordination within the EU's policy-making structures.**

Currently, political discussions are often dealt with somewhat separately from the more technical issues related to the design and implementation of aid initiatives. For instance, the political section of the EU Delegation, which handles political discussions with Somali authorities, is based in Mogadishu, while EU Commission staff, who work on development assistance, are largely based in Nairobi. This geographic separation makes close coordination more difficult, and links between different EU entities often rely more on personal ties than on institutional connections.<sup>65</sup> Strengthening and institutionalizing coordination between these levels (e.g. through regular exchanges between political and development staff) will be critical if the EU's assistance is to be used to foster a more inclusive political landscape.

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63 The amount of resources committed by the EU has been extremely large, including EUR 1.6 billion in humanitarian and development aid in 2014-21, and EUR 4.3 billion on security since 2007. This excludes the bilateral commitments of individual member states, which have also been extremely large (e.g. EUR 2.8 billion on humanitarian and development aid in 2014-21). Hauck, V. 2023. 'New hopes for Somalia: Reflections on the EU's continued support in a fragile context', June 22, Brussels: ECDPM, <https://ecdpm.org/work/new-hopes-somalia-reflections-eus-continued-support-fragile-context>; Marangio, R. 2025, op. cit.

64 Interview with a Somali political analyst; online, July-August 2025. Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023, op. cit. p. 37.

65 Interview with a European diplomat; online, July-August 2024. These coordination difficulties also apply to the EU military missions, EUCAP and EUTM.

Based on this analysis, this report offers the following **recommendations on how to structure the engagement of the EU and its member states in Somalia**. The first three recommendations are incremental in nature and can be implemented within the current framework of EU engagement. By contrast, the fourth recommendation outlines key questions that can inform a more fundamental (re)assessment of the EU's approach towards the country.

## 1. Prioritize genuinely inclusive political processes and outcomes as key conditions for EU assistance, particularly budget support

Current priorities for EU-Somali cooperation are laid out in the Joint Operational Roadmap (JOR), agreed upon in May 2023.<sup>66</sup> **The JOR's focus on "inclusive politics and democratization" as the first priority is a positive sign** of a clear prioritization of political concerns. However, translating this focus into practical action is not a straightforward exercise, and will **require EU decision makers to carefully distinguish between genuine steps towards inclusive politics and window-dressing exercises**. This is particularly important given the tendency of Somali elites to make superficial moves to appease well-meaning international partners, while ultimately continuing to advance their own interests.<sup>67</sup>

Crucially, the "milestones" foreseen by the JOR under priority 1 include many of the political issues currently under discussion, including elections and the finalization of the Constitution. **EU decision makers should consider the JOR's political milestones to have been completed only if a genuine political compromise is attained through an inclusive political process**. As noted earlier, the current process of reforms pushed through by the HSM administration

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66 European External Action Service (EEAS). 2023. 'Joint Operational Roadmap', Brussels: EEAS, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/Joint%20Operational%20Roadmap.pdf>. The JOR was expected to guide EU-Somalia cooperation for two years. However, during the interview conducted for this report in mid-2025, it was cited by EU diplomats as the guiding document.

67 An example of this took place in early July 2025, when HSM met opposition leaders for talks on key political disputes, including the elections. On the same day, however, his government was proceeding at full speed with the registration of voters based on the electoral procedures supposedly under discussion. This led some Somali political analysts to doubt the government's genuine intention to reach a compromise. The talks did indeed break down a few weeks later – although a partial solution was eventually reached with a faction of the opposition in late August (see above).

– including on the critical issue of elections – has hardly been inclusive. The JOR’s explicit reference to “reaching political settlements under NCC guidance” offers a concrete entry point for the EU to call out the FGS’ lack of compliance, given the absence of two key FMSs from the NCC deliberations. At the same time, putting pressure on the FGS should not mean fully endorsing the stance of the opposition forces – which, as seen earlier, are also often motivated by the preservation of their own particular interests (see box 2 for more details).<sup>68</sup>

In its interactions with the FGS, **the EU can leverage general budget support as an entry point to encourage a shift towards a more inclusive and accountable political system.**<sup>69</sup> This tool’s nature as an unearmarked transfer makes it easier to condition on certain political milestones as compared to other tools, such as humanitarian aid (which should remain de-linked from political considerations) or security assistance (which the EU is likely to continue providing, given its own direct interest in the country’s short-term stability).<sup>70</sup> The EU’s previous experience with suspending budget support during Somalia’s electoral crisis in 2020-22 can provide useful lessons learned on how budget support can be leveraged as a political tool.<sup>71</sup> In parallel, **the EU should also press for stronger political conditions on budget support by the World Bank.** While this may be more difficult to achieve (given the larger number of stakeholders involved and the institution’s traditional reluctance to engage in sensitive political discussions), its impact would be much more significant, given the larger scale of budget support provided

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68 A case in point is that of the electoral reforms. On the one hand, concerns about the centralization and politicization of elections management are considered legitimate also by independent political analysts. On the other hand, however, the same analysts point out that FMS leaders’ reluctance to accept the reforms also hinges on their desire to preserve the power they enjoy under the current electoral system, which gives them influence in the selection of clan delegates.

69 Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023, op. cit. pp. 43-44, 68-69. The evaluation credited budget support with helping the EU to “gain a seat at the table for key macro-policy dialogue”, while also acknowledging that the EU had managed to achieve a stronger impact in less politically sensitive sectors (especially education), and less so on more politically sensitive issues (e.g. public finance management). The evaluation also encouraged the EU to better define whether to consider budget support as a development tool (not linked to political decision making) or a political one (to be used to leverage change). The recommendation here is to use it as a political tool.

70 Interview with a European diplomat; online, July-August 2025.

71 Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023, op. cit. pp. 15, 18, 55. Although the decision was reportedly difficult to take due to disagreements within the EU and among member states, eventually it was retroactively seen as the right decision by most EU stakeholders, as well as by the members of the subsequent FGS administration. It remains unclear, however, to what extent the EU’s decision may or may not have affected political developments in Somalia.

by the World Bank.<sup>72</sup> Finally, **potential EU support for the electoral process is another direct entry point** to encourage a more inclusive political process. However, this will hinge on the FGS receiving EU funds for supporting elections – which the government seems to be planning to avoid, in order not to be bound by any of the conditions attached.<sup>73</sup>

## 2. Strengthen support for entities that act as watchdogs against elites' predatory behaviour

While recommendation 1 aims to make the ongoing political reform process more inclusive, it does not fully address the more structural problem of Somalia's political system: that **it is the political elite class at large (both government and opposition, both at the FGS and FMS level) who are largely responsible for the country's woes**, due to their failure to represent the population's interests and their widespread tendency to engage in corruption.<sup>74</sup> According to the traditional rules of international diplomacy, external actors are bound to interact with the official government. But what can be done when interactions with this government exacerbate structural problems? Existing research on international engagement in politically estranged contexts can offer useful insights for reflections on this question.<sup>75</sup> One key way in which EU engagement can reduce

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72 According to the FGS' Budget Framework Paper for the Fiscal Year 2025, EU budget support was foreseen at USD 10 million, as compared to over USD 110 million (divided into three different programmes) by the World Bank (Federal Government of Somalia. 2024. '2025 Budget. Policy Framework Paper', October 3, Mogadishu: Federal Government of Somalia, p. 24, <https://mof.gov.so/sites/default/files/Publications/FGS%20Budget%20Framework%20Paper%20for%20FY%202025%20Revisedv15.pdf>).

73 Interview with a Somali political analyst; online, July-August 2025.

74 For an interesting analysis of the political culture of Somali elites, see: Abdullahi, A. 2021. 'Somali Elite Political Culture: Conceptions, Structures, and Historical Evolution', January 28, Nairobi: Institute for Peace, Security and Development, <https://ipsed.org/somali-elite-political-culture-conceptions-structures-and-historical-evolution/>.

75 Cliffe, S., Dwan, R., Wainaina, B. and Zamore, L. 2023. 'Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings. How donors can stay and deliver in fragile and conflict-affected states', Research Paper, London and New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs and New York University-Center on International Cooperation, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023-04-03-aid-strategies-politically-estranged-contexts-cliffe-et-al.pdf>; Cheeseman, N. and Desrosiers, M-E. 2023. 'How (not) to engage with authoritarian states', Report, London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/how-not-engage-authoritarian-states>.

the negative influence of existing power holders is to **empower entities whose work contributes to keeping the power of elites in check.**

Over the past few years, **several such entities have been set up within the state's structure** – see, for instance, the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (IACC) and the Office of the Auditor General (OAG). Yet, these official institutions often struggle to effectively do their job, due to frequent politicization (e.g. the IACC was disbanded by HSM's administration upon coming to power in 2022, and no new commission has been established since then),<sup>76</sup> as well as limited follow-up on their findings (e.g. the OAG has lamented the lack of implementation of its recommended measures by the government).<sup>77</sup> Rather than supporting the establishment of new institutions, laws, or formal procedures, the EU should **focus on achieving tangible progress on the implementation of existing mechanisms**, conditioning its support (including budget support, see above) upon specific milestones (e.g. following up on the OAG's recommendations).

In parallel, **the EU should also support civil society entities that act as a watchdog vis-à-vis the power of the elites.** These entities include, for instance: journalists who work to uncover corruption in politics and in the business sector; think tanks that promote informed dialogue on key political issues; or organisations that monitor human rights violations. The EU's track record of supporting various civil society organisations offers a good starting point for further efforts.<sup>78</sup> To strengthen this support, efforts should be made to identify and back entities doing this work outside of the existing circle of actors that already enjoy donors' support. In addition, besides providing predictable funding and capacity building, the EU and its member states should also strengthen their diplomatic backing for civil society actors facing harassment from state

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76 Hiiraan Online. 2022. 'Somali President dissolves Judicial Service, Anti-Corruption Commissions', Hiiraan Online, October 9, [https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2022/Oct/188180/somali\\_president\\_dissolves\\_judicial\\_service\\_anti\\_corruption\\_commissions.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2022/Oct/188180/somali_president_dissolves_judicial_service_anti_corruption_commissions.aspx). One Somali political analyst consulted for this study noted that dissolving the Commission was the right decision, given that legal processes were being bypassed during its establishment. Yet, HSM's failure to establish a new commission indicates a lack of interest in this topic by the government.

77 Office of the Auditor General. 2024. 'Strategic Plan 2023-2027', Mogadishu: Office of the Auditor General, p. 7, <https://oag.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Strategic-Plan-2023-2027-5.pdf>.

78 Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2023, op. cit. pp. 37, 42, 65, 72.

authorities (e.g. journalists, human rights defenders, etc.),<sup>79</sup> and step up their lobbying vis-à-vis the government to curb such practices. While this is likely to trigger some political sensitivities on the government side, the **protection of these civil society actors deserves being raised during high-level discussions on key political issues**, as it is closely linked to debates around inclusive politics (see recommendation 1).

### 3. Strengthen mitigation measures to prevent aid from being instrumentalized by elites

Regrettably, **the aid system in Somalia is part and parcel of the country's elite-dominated political economy**. Besides targeting its intended beneficiaries, aid distribution creates a whole ecosystem of actors who, in return for a service, regularly take their own share of the cake. Prominent examples of these actors include (but are far from limited to): gatekeepers in IDP camps,<sup>80</sup> logistics contractors,<sup>81</sup> money transfer and mobile money operators,<sup>82</sup> and private military and security companies.<sup>83</sup> More often than not, these actors enjoy connections with powerful political elites, locking the aid system into Somalia's predatory political economy. While the workings of the aid system have changed significantly over the past decades (e.g. from in-kind to cash distribution), these

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79 Committee to Protect Journalists. 2025. 'Alarmig Escalation': At least 41 journalists targeted since March in Somalia', Committee to Protect Journalists, May 15, <https://cpj.org/2025/05/alarming-escalation-at-least-41-journalists-targeted-since-march-in-somalia/>.

80 Thomas, C. and Majid, N. 2023. 'Powerful networks impose taxes on aid in Somalia. It's time for this to end', The New Humanitarian, October 26, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2023/10/26/powerful-networks-impose-taxes-aid-somalia-its-time-end/>; Majid, N. and Adan, G. 2024. 'Role of Gatekeepers in Somalia – Final Report', Somalia Cash Consortium, May 2024, Nairobi: Evidence for Change, [https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/brcis\\_gatekeeping-in-somalia/brcis-gatekeeping-in-somalia-reports/gatekeepers-in-somalia\\_report.pdf](https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/brcis_gatekeeping-in-somalia/brcis-gatekeeping-in-somalia-reports/gatekeepers-in-somalia_report.pdf).

81 Elder, C. 2022. 'Logistics Contracts and the Political Economy of State Failure: Evidence for Somalia', African Affairs, Vol. 121, Issue 484, July 2022, pp. 395-417, <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/121/484/395/6634268>.

82 Jaspars, S., Adan, G. M. and Majid, N. 2020. 'Food and Power in Somalia: Business as Usual?', Conflict Research Programme, London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, pp. 14-20, [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103138/7/Food\\_and\\_Power\\_in\\_Somalia\\_business\\_as\\_usual\\_v5.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103138/7/Food_and_Power_in_Somalia_business_as_usual_v5.pdf).

83 Majid, N. and Norman, J. 2020. 'Private Military and Security Companies in Somalia', CRP blogs, August 27, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/08/27/private-military-and-security-companies-in-somalia/>.

underlying dynamics of predation and capture have adapted and persisted.<sup>84</sup>

**This situation presents difficult dilemmas for donors.**<sup>85</sup> On the one hand, aid plays a critical role in supporting the needs of the population in Somalia. On the other hand, however, the aid system is marred by systemic corruption and sustains an exclusionary political economy status quo.

Over the last decade, there has been growing attention to the systemic nature of corruption and capture in the aid system – not least due to recurring scandals.<sup>86</sup> Still, more can and should be done to **learn from existing experiences and research, in order to design and implement measures that mitigate the aid system's vulnerability to elite capture.** Existing literature offers a variety of lessons learnt and recommendations on various specific topics (e.g. gatekeeping, contracting, checkpoints, etc.) – whose details go beyond the scope of this report.<sup>87</sup> In general terms, donors and implementers should carefully consider *who benefits* from the implementation of their aid programmes – not only directly, but also indirectly. A thorough **understanding of the political economy** of the specific context of implementation is key, and so are **enhanced due diligence procedures** that go beyond formal tick-the-box exercises (e.g. simple checks on sanctions lists), and instead explore the (in)formal political affiliation of the various actors involved in the delivery of aid (e.g. NGOs, businesses, private security companies, etc.).

Besides looking at these implementation-related risks, it is also important to **mitigate the risk that aid exacerbates existing political divisions.** As noted earlier, the FGS is highly dependent on international support. With no monopoly over the use of force, weak capacity to mobilize domestic revenues, and limited popular legitimacy, the government in Mogadishu relies on its position as the main interlocutor for international partners to shore up its position of power.

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84 Jaspars, S., Adan, G. M. and Majid, N. 2020, op. cit.

85 Majid, N., Abdirahman, K. and Adan, G. 2023. 'Can we (ever) have an honest conversation about corruption and accountability in Somalia?'; PeaceRep, August 7, <https://peacerep.org/2023/08/07/corruption-accountability-somalia/>.

86 Lynch, C. 2023. 'Exclusive: UN probes pay-for-aid scam in Somalia', Devex, September 18, <https://www.devex.com/news/exclusive-un-probes-pay-for-aid-scam-in-somalia-106163>.

87 For an overview of several of these discussions, see for instance the work of PeaceRep's Somalia research ('Somalia- PeaceRep's Somalia research', Edinburgh: PeaceRep, <https://peacerep.org/about/countries/somalia/>). Several of the documents referenced above with respect to specific topics (i.e. gatekeeping, logistics contractors, and private military security companies) also include concrete recommendations.

This, however, can lead to perverse effects, as aid is turned into a political bone of contention between different political factions, and particularly between the FGS and FMSs that do not align with it.<sup>88</sup> To mitigate this risk, the EU and its members should **strengthen their engagement with FMSs – alongside the FGS – regarding decisions on aid allocation**. Ideally, this would take place **through a mechanism linked to the NCC**, which is supposed to bring together FGS and FMS leaders. This approach is preferable as compared to separate engagements with individual FMSs, as it would further encourage political cooperation (linked to the first recommendation) rather than crystallizing divisions.<sup>89</sup>

#### 4. Kick-start reflections on potential fundamental adjustments to the approach of the EU and its international partners in Somalia

While the three recommendations outlined above have the potential to improve the EU's approach in Somalia, they remain largely confined to the current paradigm of engagement, and their impact is mostly incremental, rather than fundamental. However, given the seismic changes taking place not only in Somalia but also in the EU's own foreign policy, **the time is also ripe for the EU (as well as its international partners) to take a hard look at more fundamental questions regarding their engagement** in the country. While detailed reflections on specific issues are beyond the scope of this report, and would require ad hoc

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- 88 There are several instances in which this has taken place over the last few years, particularly (though not exclusively) between the FGS and various FMSs. Garowe Online. 2025. 'Somalia: Puntland Minister Denies FGS Aid Claims, Accuses SoDMA of Corruption', Garowe Online, January 9, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/puntland/somalia-puntland-minister-denies-federal-aid-claims-accuses-sodma-of-corruption>; The Somali Digest. 2023. 'Puntland Minister accused Somali government of politicizing aid', The Somali Digest, August 10, <https://thesomalidigest.com/puntland-minister-accused-somali-government-of-politicizing-aid/>; Garowe Online. 2025. 'Jubaland Accuses Somali Govt of Politicizing Aid and 'Consolidating Federal Power'', Garowe Online, February 20, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/jubaland-accuses-somali-govt-of-politicizing-aid-and-consolidating-federal-power>; Hiiraan Online. 2025. 'Hirshabelle suspends cooperation with SODMA over mismanagement of humanitarian aid', Hiiraan Online, May 25, [https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/May/201631/hirshabelle\\_suspends\\_cooperation\\_with\\_sodma\\_over\\_mismanagement\\_of\\_humanitarian\\_aid.aspx](https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/May/201631/hirshabelle_suspends_cooperation_with_sodma_over_mismanagement_of_humanitarian_aid.aspx).
- 89 Strengthening bilateral engagement with FMSs without coordination with the FGS would also be politically unpalatable for some EU member states that are reluctant to engage with regional entities.

in-depth research, the following paragraphs outline two critical questions that EU decision makers should put on the agenda for internal political discussions.

The first question is the following: **should Al Shabaab be considered as a security actor to be militarily defeated, or as a political actor to be reckoned with?** The international community's approach over the past decades has been largely centred around counterterrorism. While some changes have taken place over the past decade (including a shift from a more security-centred approach to a more comprehensive one including socio-economic and governance considerations), in the current paradigm of international intervention Al Shabaab still remains an actor which should be defeated primarily, though not exclusively, by military means. This is understandable, given the extremist, violent nature of the group. At the same time, however, a growing body of research has also shown the more political role that the group plays, particularly (though not only) in the areas under its control.<sup>90</sup> This interpretation was echoed by various Somali and foreign analysts consulted for this study.<sup>91</sup> According to two such analysts, the differences in positions within the group (including the presence of relatively more moderate voices, and their potential growing influence in recent times),<sup>92</sup> as well as recent international developments (such as the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hayat Tahrir Al-Shams in Syria) create an opening

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90 For a recent articulation of this argument (including several references to other relevant sources, available at p. 2), see: Kluijver, R. 2025, op. cit. p. 1-22. While the military element is still strong, some authors now speak of Al Shabaab as a "politico-military organisation" (Marchal, R. 2019. 'Rivals in Governance: Civil Activities of Al-Shabaab', in Michael Keating, and Matt Waldman (eds), *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, Oxford Academic, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Roland-Marchal/publication/333896647\\_Motivations\\_and\\_Drivers\\_of\\_Al-Shabaab/links/62683e81ee24725b3ec8f6d4/Motivations-and-Drivers-of-Al-Shabaab.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Roland-Marchal/publication/333896647_Motivations_and_Drivers_of_Al-Shabaab/links/62683e81ee24725b3ec8f6d4/Motivations-and-Drivers-of-Al-Shabaab.pdf), p. 6).

91 Interviews with two Somali political analysts and a foreign researcher; online, July-August 2025. One went as far as to say that a potential takeover by Al Shabaab, albeit highly problematic in several respects, could be the only way for Somalia to get rid of its corrupt political elite ("like when they got rid of the warlords after the civil war").

92 As evidence of this trend, one analyst pointed out the group's decision to release kidnapped Kenyan officials, rather than killing them (Reuters. 2025. 'Kidnapped Kenyan officials released after two months, minister says', Reuters, April 7, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kidnapped-kenyan-officials-released-after-two-months-minister-says-2025-04-07/>), and to lift the blockade previously imposed on government-held areas in Baay and Bakool (Somaliland Standard. 2025. 'Al-Shabab lifts blockade on Baay and Bakool regions', Somaliland Standard, April 14, <https://somalilandstandard.com/al-shabab-lifts-blockade-on-baay-and-bakool-regions/>).

for potential negotiations between the group on the one hand, and the Somali government and its international partners on the other. While more information is needed to assess the merit and the feasibility of the various options that are available, it is important for EU decision makers – in consultation with Somali stakeholders and other international actors engaged in Somalia – to engage in frank and honest conversations on this topic.

The second question concerns the aid system: **are incremental changes enough to reform the international aid system and its effectiveness in Somalia, or is a fundamental rethink needed?** One key point in this regard concerns the role of aid actors as providers of basic services (e.g. health, education), and how this system effectively keeps alive a government that provides little to no benefits for its population. Reflections on how to handle a transition away from this status quo and towards a more sustainable system could benefit from the sharing of experiences with other contexts of protracted crises (e.g. South Sudan). Another key point revolves around the role of the UN system. On the one hand, as noted earlier, UN agencies play a major role in delivering large-scale aid by pooling funds from various international actors. On the other hand, however, their operations have often been subject to criticism for a variety of reasons – including aid diversion, limited accountability towards affected people, excessive bureaucratic complexity and high overheads, as well as competition among different agencies.<sup>93</sup> With political pressure growing on both UN funding and ODA budgets generally, the time is ripe for donors to explore potential alternative, innovative ways of working. Potential points of reflection on this specific issue include the following: What changes are needed for the UN system to deliver aid in a way that is more effective, efficient, and accountable to the intended beneficiaries? Can these changes be spurred through reforms to the current system? If not, should the EU and its members channel an increasing share of their aid through different channels, alongside pushing for changes within the UN? While these discussions are likely to be politically complicated, they are much needed and can benefit from past experiences and existing research that provide important lessons learned in this regard.<sup>94</sup>

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93 The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (IAHE SG). 2025. 'Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Somalia', March 2025, Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/Executive%20Summary%20IAHE%20of%20the%20Drought%20Response%20in%20Somalia.pdf>; interview with a foreign researcher; online, July-August 2025.

94 'Somalia – PeaceRep's Somalia research', Edinburgh: Peace Rep. <https://peacerep.org/about/countries/somalia/>.