



Weak Governance and Conflicts in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa is currently experiencing high levels of political violence and instability, owing to civil conflicts, violence by militias and militant Islamist groups, and armed insurgencies. The region typically includes Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, with Kenya, Sudan, and South Sudan incorporated under a broader definition. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) power shift in 2018 sparked intense political rivalry among state and non-state actors and has driven the country's ongoing multi-front conflicts. Clan conflicts and the al-Shabaab insurgency, contested by Somali forces alongside regional and international partners since the mid-2000s, are two of the many complex elements that have fueled decades of armed violence and socio-political instability in Somalia. Al-Shabaab operatives have been active beyond Somalia's borders in Kenya, a nation that also combats violence by pastoralist militias. This study examines how these long-standing conflicts have exacerbated governance systems across the region, drawing on qualitative secondary analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and conflict-monitoring data. The study argues that the governance-conflict relationship in the Horn is recursive and self-reinforcing: governance failures produce the conditions for armed conflict, while armed conflict destroys the institutions needed to manage it.

Keywords: Horn of Africa, Governance, Conflicts, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, Al-Shabaab, State Fragility, IGAD

1. 0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Horn of Africa occupies a geopolitically critical location at the intersection of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. Despite its strategic and natural endowments, the region ranks among the most politically volatile and institutionally fragile in the world. The four core states; Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, alongside the broader grouping incorporating Kenya, Sudan, and South Sudan, share a legacy of protracted armed conflict, externally imposed colonial boundaries, and deep governance failures. Since the end of the colonial period, the Horn of Africa has been affected by a large number of inter-state and intra-state wars. Wars and famines have triggered massive displacement within countries and across borders, making the Horn one of the primary regions generating refugees and internally displaced persons globally¹.

The region's contemporary crises cannot be understood without appreciating this deep historical context. The ill-defined nature of the borders in the Horn of Africa has contributed to two high-intensity inter-state wars, the 1977–1978 war between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden region, and the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, as well as sustained inter-state disputes between Djibouti and Eritrea and between Sudan and South Sudan. Environmental factors including recurring droughts and the movements of pastoral groups across borders compound political instability and have repeatedly triggered humanitarian crises. These structural vulnerabilities provide fertile ground for non-state armed actors, ethnic militias, and jihadist organizations to entrench themselves within governance vacuums¹.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on governance and conflict in the Horn of Africa. A critical gap in existing scholarship is the limited number of studies that examine how the state fragility–conflict dynamics nexus shapes, and has implications for, the contemporary security of the sub-region. While research on natural resource- or ethnic identity-based conflicts is widely available, the mechanisms by which governance failures create, sustain, and are sustained by armed conflict remain undertheorized. This study fills that gap by adopting a holistic, multi-country perspective that examines governance across the Horn's

major conflict theaters simultaneously, enabling comparative analysis of structural patterns that cross-national studies often miss. The findings carry direct policy implications for national governments, IGAD, the African Union, and international partners engaged in peacebuilding and state-building efforts in the region².

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical and structural roots of conflict and governance failure across the Horn of Africa.
2. To analyze the specific mechanisms through which governance failures generate and sustain armed conflict in Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan.
3. To assess the role of external actors, including the Gulf states, China, and Western powers in exacerbating or mitigating regional instability.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of regional institutions, particularly IGAD and the African Union, in managing conflict and supporting governance reform.
5. To identify pathways toward sustainable peace through governance transformation, inclusive political institutions, and enhanced regional cooperation.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Governance and Conflict: Theoretical Framework

The relationship between governance failure and armed conflict has attracted sustained scholarly attention. A leading theoretical position holds that the root cause of political instability in the Horn of Africa is a crisis of governance caused by extreme centralization of power, weak institutions, and the failure to institutionalize the responsible use of authority. State fragility, in this theoretical context, refers to the weakness of state institutions to provide physical security, legitimate political authority, and the basic social services that populations require. When states fail to fulfill these functions, non-state actors fill the resulting vacuum, levying taxes, delivering justice, providing security, and embedding themselves as alternative governance structures²³.

The concept of the "regional security complex" (RSC) provides a useful framework for understanding how fragility in one state generates insecurity in neighboring states. In the Horn, the RSC framework reveals that conflict dynamics feed and fuel state fragility across the sub-region, with extra-regional actors, geopolitical competition, and the spillover of violence compounding the problem. A comparative analysis of Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia demonstrates that all four cases failed to properly solve the problem of state construction and build systems of power balance among ethnic and social groups, which constitutes the shared structural root of their respective conflicts. This theoretical framework, linking state construction failure, governance collapse, and armed conflict, provides the analytical lens for the findings presented in this study^{2,4}.

2.2 Existing Literature on the Horn's Conflicts

Scholarly literature on the Horn of Africa's conflicts has evolved considerably over recent decades. Early scholarship emphasized state formation challenges and the legacies of colonial boundary-making. More recent literature has shifted attention toward the dynamics of ethnic federalism, Islamist insurgency, and the internationalization of local conflicts through the involvement of Gulf states and great powers^{1,5}. Research on Somalia has consistently identified clan fragmentation and the absence of a functioning central state as the primary enabling conditions for al-Shabaab's sustained presence^{3,6}. Studies on Ethiopia have highlighted the contradictions of ethnic federalism as both a source of institutional innovation and a mechanism for political mobilization that can fragment national unity^{7,8}.

Literature on Sudan and South Sudan emphasizes elite-level governance failure, specifically the construction of political systems based on personal loyalty, military patronage, and resource capture rather than institutional accountability. Research on Eritrea has documented the governance consequences of indefinite authoritarian rule and its regional effects through refugee production and military adventurism. Comparative studies examining governance indicators across IGAD member states confirm that low governance quality is strongly associated with conflict incidence and that improvements in governance, including devolution, rule of law, and accountability mechanisms, are associated with reduced conflict risk. This body of scholarship provides the evidential foundation on which this study's analysis rests ⁹.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite this substantial literature, several gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on individual country cases rather than adopting a genuinely comparative regional perspective that traces structural patterns across the Horn as a whole. Second, the role of external actors, particularly Gulf states, in the governance-conflict nexus has only recently attracted systematic scholarly attention, leaving important dynamics underexplored. Third, the effectiveness of regional institutions such as IGAD in conflict management has been analyzed primarily in relation to specific peace processes, with less attention to structural limitations arising from member-state sovereignty and competing interests. This study addresses these gaps through an integrated multi-country qualitative analysis^{2,10,11}.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in systematic secondary data analysis. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because the core research questions concern the mechanisms, processes, and relationships through which governance failures generate and sustain conflict, questions that require interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement. A qualitative approach enables deep contextual understanding of the political, historical, and institutional dynamics at play across the Horn of Africa, capturing the complexity and context-dependence of governance-conflict relationships in ways that quantitative methods alone cannot¹².

3.2 Secondary Data Analysis

The primary method is secondary qualitative data analysis (SQDA), which involves the systematic examination of existing textual sources, including academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and conflict-monitoring data to answer research questions distinct from, but related to, those that originally motivated data collection. SQDA is appropriate when the research objective concerns a well-established empirical phenomenon and when the existing corpus of primary and secondary sources is sufficiently rich to support independent analysis. Secondary research in this context is primarily explanatory, aiming to explain the causes and consequences of a well-defined governance and conflict problem rather than merely describe it^{13–15}.

3.3 Data Sources

Data were drawn from multiple authoritative source categories:

- **Peer-reviewed academic journals:** Including publications from African Security Review, Journal of African Studies, Comparative Political Studies, and African Affairs, providing theoretical frameworks and empirical case analyses.
- **Think-tank and policy institution reports:** Including publications from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the International Crisis Group, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Chatham House, the Brookings Institution, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

- **International organization reports:** Including documents from UNHCR, the African Union, IGAD, and the European Union Agency for Asylum, providing quantitative context and institutional analysis.
- **Historical and governmental documents:** Including peace agreements, constitutions, and government policy statements that provide primary source evidence of institutional design choices.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, consistent with established qualitative methodology for secondary analysis. First, sources were identified through systematic database searches and cross-referencing of cited literature to ensure comprehensive coverage. Second, relevant textual data were subjected to thematic coding organized around four primary analytical themes: (1) governance structure and failure; (2) conflict drivers and dynamics; (3) regional and external actor involvement; and (4) institutional responses and their limitations. Third, findings across individual country cases were compared to identify structural patterns and divergences, enabling the formulation of generalizable conclusions about the governance-conflict nexus in the region^{12,16}.

3.5 Limitations

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations. Secondary analysis is dependent on the quality and scope of existing primary sources; where primary data collection in conflict-affected areas is difficult or incomplete, gaps in the literature may affect analytical comprehensiveness. The rapidly evolving nature of conflicts in the Horn of Africa, particularly the ongoing civil wars in Sudan and South Sudan and the fluid security situation in Somalia, means that some findings may be overtaken by events. Additionally, the absence of ethnographic or interview-based primary data limits the depth of analysis at the community and sub-national levels.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Ethiopia: Governance Transition and Multi-Front Insurgency

Ethiopia's post-2018 trajectory illustrates how a poorly managed governance transition can catalyze cascading armed conflict. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 following mass protests against EPRDF rule, his early reforms including, releasing

political prisoners, lifting the state of emergency, and concluding a peace agreement with Eritrea, generated significant domestic and international optimism¹⁷. However, the dissolution of the EPRDF in 2019 and its replacement with the centralized Prosperity Party alienated the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which had wielded outsized power under the prior federal arrangement and set the stage for full-scale war. The Tigray War (2020-2022) killed over 100,000 people and displaced millions, and was marked by serious atrocities committed by all parties^{18,19}.

Despite the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022, Ethiopia remains locked in overlapping conflicts. Two major insurgencies persist: the Fano militias in the Amhara region and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA/OLF-Shane) in Oromia. Both insurgencies reflect the failure of the federal government to accommodate ethnic political aspirations through institutional means, forcing mobilization outside the state. Scholarly analysis characterizes Ethiopia's current condition as one of state fragility in which the government retains formal authority but lacks the institutional capacity or political legitimacy to manage multi-dimensional armed challenges. The recurrence of violence in Tigray, with fresh drone strikes and armed clashes reported in early 2026, suggests that the Pretoria Agreement's implementation remains deeply incomplete¹⁷⁻¹⁹.

The Ethiopian case demonstrates a central finding of this study: governance transitions that dismantle existing power-sharing arrangements without replacing them with credible, inclusive alternatives generate armed conflict as excluded actors resort to force. Authoritarian conflict management, the use of military force, arrests, and patronage to suppress dissent rather than institutionally address its root causes, may achieve short-term order at the cost of sustained fragility⁶.

4.2 Somalia: Governance Vacuum and al-Shabaab's Parallel State

Somalia represents the most extreme case of governance collapse in the region, and its trajectory has far-reaching implications for the entire Horn. The fall of Siad Barre's government in 1991 left no functioning central authority, producing clan warfare and warlordism whose consequences persist to the present day. The successive transitional and federal governments established since 2004 have never achieved effective territorial control, relying almost entirely on external security support from AMISOM and its successor mission ATMIS to maintain even the most basic foothold in Mogadishu^{3,8}.

Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist group that emerged in the mid-2000s, has sustained its insurgency by exploiting the very governance vacuum it perpetuates. The group generates revenue in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually through taxation, extortion, and trade levies, an institutional capacity that in many respects exceeds that of the federal government it contests. It delivers security, adjudicates disputes, and provides rudimentary services in areas under its control, functioning as a parallel governing authority. After Somali forces and clan militias made significant territorial advances against al-Shabaab in 2022, momentum stalled sharply by 2024 as political rivalries at the federal level diverted attention and resources. In early 2026, Somalia faces a genuine risk of al-Shabaab consolidating control over large swaths of the country as the federal government remains paralyzed by constitutional disputes and elite competition^{3,20}.

A critical finding in Somalia is that the cyclical pattern of governance failure is structurally embedded. Every election cycle redirects the attention of political elites away from counterterrorism toward factional competition, allowing al-Shabaab to regain territory and consolidate support. The ongoing dispute over constitutional reform, specifically the replacement of the 4.5 clan power-sharing formula, has fractured relations between the federal government and member states such as Puntland and Jubbaland, further fragmenting the governance landscape. Sustainable counter-insurgency in Somalia is therefore inseparable from sustainable governance reform³.

4.3 Sudan: Elite Governance Failure and Civil War

Sudan's 2023 civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) exemplifies governance failure at the elite level with catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Following the 2019 popular uprising that ousted Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's transitional arrangement placed civilian technocrats in uneasy partnership with two competing military factions, each positioning to control a post-transition political order²¹. The failure to design and enforce institutional constraints on these actors, rooted in decades of governance under a personalized, non-accountable autocracy, made violent conflict between them a near-structural inevitability²².

Since fighting erupted in April 2023, over 150,000 people have been killed and an estimated 13.5 million displaced. The RSF, rooted in the Janjaweed militias responsible for atrocities in Darfur, has conducted widespread violence against civilians in the Darfur region, prompting genocide designations from international human rights bodies²¹. Territorial control remains

contested, with the SAF controlling the north, east, and Red Sea coast while the RSF dominates large areas of the west and south. This fragmentation of territorial authority represents a severe governance collapse: neither faction exercises the functions of a legitimate government, yet both claim sovereign authority²³.

Sudan's conflict has generated severe regional spillovers, particularly for South Sudan and Chad. It has disrupted oil export pipelines that South Sudan depends on for 90% of government revenues, contributed to the destabilization of the Ethiopia-Sudan border, and produced refugee flows that strain neighboring states' absorptive capacity. Sudan thus exemplifies how governance failure in one state rapidly becomes a regional crisis^{24,25}.

4.4 South Sudan: The Collapse of a Fragile Peace Order

South Sudan, the world's youngest state, has experienced recurring governance failure since independence in 2011. The civil war of 2013-2018 between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and those aligned with Vice President Riek Machar killed an estimated 400,000 people and was characterized by ethnically targeted violence and the systematic looting of humanitarian aid. The 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) established a unity government but failed to create robust institutional mechanisms for its own enforcement, leaving implementation dependent on the goodwill of the same elites whose rivalry had produced the war^{26,27}.

By 2025, the R-ARCSS had effectively collapsed. Kiir dismissed multiple opposition officials, placed Machar under arrest following renewed fighting in Upper Nile State, and appointed a political newcomer, Benjamin Bol Mel, as Vice President and presumed successor in moves that observer characterized as a consolidation of personal rule²⁵. The People's Coalition for Civil Action accused Kiir's government of leading the country to its "lowest point ever," with governance systems at national, state, and local levels ceasing to function effectively. Oil revenues, already severely reduced by the Sudan pipeline disruption, are alleged to be diverted by political elites, leaving civil servants unpaid and public services effectively defunct^{28,29}.

South Sudan's crisis reflects a pattern common across the Horn: political systems built on personal loyalty, patronage, and coercion rather than institutional accountability are inherently fragile. The absence of functioning judiciary, legislature, or civil service, all institutions designed to constrain executive power and provide governance continuity beyond individual

rulers, means that governance quality is entirely hostage to the decisions of a small political elite²⁹.

4.5 Kenya and Cross-Border Security Spillovers

Kenya's experience illustrates how governance failures in neighboring states directly threaten the security of more stable countries within the region. Al-Shabaab has conducted sustained attacks on Kenyan territory since at least 2011, including the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, the 2015 Garissa University massacre killing 148 students, and ongoing attacks in border counties including Mandera, Lamu, Wajir, and Garissa³⁰. Al-Shabaab exploits the porous Kenya-Somalia border, ethnic Somali communities within Kenya, and the corruption of border security officials to maintain operational networks on Kenyan soil. Kenya's military intervention in Somalia, launched in October 2011, placed two battalions of Kenyan troops into southern Somalia and was subsequently incorporated into AMISOM³¹.

Beyond al-Shabaab, Kenya confronts significant governance challenges related to pastoralist communities in the north and northeast, where inter-clan competition over land and water resources regularly produces lethal violence. These internal dynamics are compounded by political marginalization and the historic underdevelopment of northern Kenya relative to the south²⁴. Al-Shabaab's ability to recruit within Kenyan Somali communities reflects, in part, this broader governance deficit, a failure of the Kenyan state to deliver security, justice, and development to peripheral regions. Kenya's experience thus underscores the finding that governance failures have transnational consequences and that regional stability requires effective governance not only at the national level but across the entire regional security complex³².

4.6 Eritrea and Djibouti: Authoritarian Stability and Strategic Dependency

Eritrea and Djibouti, while smaller in population, play significant roles in the region's governance and security architecture. Eritrea presents arguably the most extreme case of authoritarian governance failure in the Horn. President Isaias Afwerki has ruled without holding a national election since independence in 1993. Eritrea operates as a one-party state in which political opposition is systematically suppressed, independent media is banned, and citizens are subject to indefinite compulsory national service that human rights organizations describe as a form of forced labor³³. The governance consequences are severe: mass emigration

driven by repression and conscription has produced one of the world's largest per capita refugee outflows, and the country is ranked among the least free in the world³⁴.

Eritrea's regional behavior has compounded its governance failures. Its participation in the Tigray War, during which Eritrean forces were credibly accused of committing large-scale atrocities, deepened regional tensions⁶. Eritrea's "isolation doctrine", treating regional cooperation as a strategic vulnerability, has obstructed collective responses to shared security challenges and prevented the kind of normalization that might otherwise support economic development. As of 2026, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea remain deeply fraught, with the prospect of renewed conflict between the two countries an ongoing concern.

Djibouti's governance model diverges from Eritrea's in character if not entirely in democratic quality. President Ismail Omar Guelleh has maintained power since 1999, but Djibouti has pursued strategic openness, hosting military bases from the United States, China, France, Japan, and Italy³⁵. This hedging strategy has generated revenue and conferred external protection but has also made Djibouti a theater of great-power competition and created dependencies that limit autonomous governance development. The Gulf states have increasingly engaged Djibouti as part of their broader Horn strategy, with strategic investments in port infrastructure and diplomatic relationships^{36,37}.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 The Governance-Conflict Nexus

The findings from across the Horn's major conflict theaters confirm the central thesis that governance failure and armed conflict are mutually reinforcing dynamics. In each case examined, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Eritrea, and Djibouti, governance deficits create the conditions for armed actors to emerge, recruit, and sustain themselves, while armed conflict destroys the institutional fabric needed to address its own root causes. This recursive relationship explains why external military interventions in the region have consistently achieved tactical successes without producing durable security improvements: they address the symptoms of governance failure without resolving its structural causes⁵

The study also identifies a consistent pattern across the region's elite governance failures: political systems built on personal rule, patronage networks, and ethnic/clan mobilization rather than institutional accountability generate conflicts that are structurally resistant to

externally brokered peace agreements. The collapse of South Sudan's R-ARCSS, the cyclical renewal of Somali factional conflict at each election cycle, and Ethiopia's recurrent armed challenges to federal authority all reflect this pattern. Peace agreements that do not restructure underlying governance incentives, eliminating patronage competition, building institutional accountability, and ensuring inclusive representation, provide only temporary respites from conflict.¹⁰

5.2 External Actors: Between Stabilization and Complication

External actors have played a deeply ambivalent role in the Horn's conflict and governance dynamics. International security assistance, including AMISOM/ATMIS in Somalia, the United States' counter-terrorism operations, and UN peacekeeping in South Sudan, has provided the minimum security floor needed to sustain nominal governance structures in some fragile states³⁸. Without AMISOM, Somalia's federal government would almost certainly not have survived the 2010s. However, external security support has also created dependency dynamics that reduce the incentive for host governments to undertake the difficult governance reforms needed to create sustainable security⁸.

Gulf state involvement has introduced new competitive dynamics. The UAE's backing of the RSF in Sudan, Qatar and UAE's competing patronage in Somalia, and Gulf construction of military facilities across the region have introduced external rent streams that reduce state accountability to domestic populations while empowering the factions receiving external support⁸. China's engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative has provided infrastructure investment without governance conditionality, appealing to governments across the region but doing little to address the root causes of instability³⁹.

5.3 Regional Institutions and Their Limitations

IGAD's role in the Horn's conflict management has been consistently hampered by structural paradoxes. The organization's most fundamental challenge is that its member states are frequently direct parties to the conflicts it is mandated to manage, creating acute conflicts of interest¹⁰. Ethiopia's prominent role within IGAD has historically meant that the institution's posture on conflicts involving Ethiopia, whether the Tigray War or the Ethiopia-Eritrea confrontation, has been shaped by the host state's preferences. The non-interference principle that IGAD formally upholds as a conflict management strategy further limits its ability to apply

meaningful pressure on member governments engaged in rights violations or democratic backsliding¹¹.

Despite these limitations, IGAD's institutional infrastructure, including its Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) and mediation frameworks, represents a potentially valuable regional asset¹¹. Fully resourcing and operationalizing these mechanisms, while reforming governance to reduce member-state veto power over decisions directly affecting their own behavior, would significantly enhance the institution's effectiveness⁴⁰.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has examined the relationships between conflict and weak governance across the Horn of Africa through systematic qualitative secondary analysis. The evidence from Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Eritrea, and Djibouti consistently confirms that governance failure, not merely poverty, ethnicity, religion, or resource competition, is the primary structural driver of the region's protracted conflicts. Where governance institutions are absent, predatory, or captured by narrow elite interests, armed actors fill the resulting vacuum and entrench themselves as alternative authorities, making their elimination through military means alone effectively impossible.

The study identifies several pathways toward sustainable peace. First, governance reform must prioritize inclusive political institutions that share power across ethnic, regional, and social lines and provide accountability mechanisms that constrain elite predation. Federal arrangements, when designed with genuine commitment to subsidiarity and accountability rather than as instruments of central control, have potential to accommodate diversity and reduce the incentives for ethnic mobilization. Second, regional institutions, particularly IGAD, must be structurally reformed to reduce the veto power of member states over decisions directly concerning their own governance failures, and must be adequately resourced to deploy early warning and mediation capacities. Third, external engagement, by the international community, Gulf states, China, and Western powers, must more systematically condition political and economic support on measurable governance improvements, reducing the rent streams that currently reward authoritarian consolidation.

The East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region hosted 26.3 million forcibly displaced persons at the end of 2024. This figure is not merely a humanitarian statistic; it is the human expression of a governance crisis decades in the making. Reversing this trend requires the

political will to restructure power in ways that serve populations rather than rulers, a transformation that no external actor can impose but that all can support.

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