



## Somalia: The security situation in northwestern Somalia (Somaliland)

- How is the general security situation in Somaliland?
- To what degree are al-Shabaab and the Islamic State active in this part of Somalia?

### Introduction

This response provides a brief overview of the general security situation in northwestern Somalia, i.e. the regions of Awdal, Woqooyi Galbeed, Togdheer, Sanaag and Sool. As shown below, the self-declared state of Somaliland considers these areas to be part of its territory. In the response, ‘Somaliland’ is used both as the name of the state of Somaliland and as a geographical reference synonymous with the areas discussed in the response, without this having any political intention. (Neither Norway nor any other state has recognised Somaliland as a sovereign state.) The Somali government views Somaliland as a federal state, but it is unclear where the border between Somaliland and the neighbouring federal state of Puntland runs. Puntland considers parts of Somaliland as its territory. Somaliland has gradually expanded its power eastward but does not control eastern parts of Sool and Sanaag.

The response is mainly based on information from openly available sources, but Landinfo has also obtained some information from oral sources, including the German researcher Markus Höhne (see the reference list), who specialises in northern Somalia and follows developments in the area closely through local sources.

### Area and population

Somaliland has an area of approximately 137,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Höhne 2018, p. 5), which is about the size of Greece.<sup>1</sup> No one knows how many people live in Somaliland, but according to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA 2014, p. 31),

<sup>1</sup> Other sources indicate a somewhat larger area (see, for example, Felter 2018).

there are an estimated 3.5 million people as of 2014.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Table 1 below, the vast majority of the population lives in the central regions of Woqooyi Galbeed and Togdheer, as well as the western region of Awdal. The biggest cities in Somaliland, Hargeysa (the capital of Somaliland), Burco and Boorama, are located in these regions.<sup>3</sup>

Somaliland is dominated by the Issak clan, which comprises about two-thirds of the population (Höhne 2018, p. 7). Other prominent clans in Somaliland are the Dir clans Issa and Gadabuursi, as well as the Daarood clans Dhulbahante and Warsangeli. The Dir clans have their home territories in the westernmost part of Somaliland, while the Daarood clans have their home territories in the easternmost part (see clan map in Höhne 2015, p. 32).<sup>4</sup>

## Background and development

Until 26 June 1960, Somaliland was a British protectorate. On 1 July 1960, after five days of independence, Somaliland was unified with formerly Italian-administered territory into present-day Somalia. In 1988, the Issak-dominated rebel group Somali National Movement (SNM) conquered the two largest cities in Somaliland, Hargeysa and Burco. The dictator Siyaad Barre responded by bombing both cities, which resulted in extensive civilian casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees. In 1991, other rebel groups captured Mogadishu and drove Barre from power.

SNM then captured central parts of Somaliland. While the civil war continued in southern Somalia, Somaliland declared itself independent from the rest of Somalia on 18 May 1991. The non-Issak clans also supported the declaration of independence, not necessarily because it was something they wanted, but in order to avoid conflict with the Issak clan (Höhne 2015, p. 42–43).

Although no state has recognised its independence, Somaliland currently functions as an independent state with its own territory, population, laws and institutions. Except for the years 1992 and 1994/1995, when conflict between different clans resulted in civil war-like conditions (see Bradbury 2008, p. 4, 87–90 and 115–117; Höhne 2015, p. 51), the security situation in Somaliland has generally been peaceful and stable. This is illustrated by the fact that there exist travel guides to Somaliland for tourists (see, for example, Briggs 2019). Consequently, the security situation in Somaliland stands in stark contrast to many other parts of Somalia, which are still characterised by armed power struggles.

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<sup>2</sup> Höhne (2018, p. 5) estimates only 2–2.5 million people.

<sup>3</sup> According to Briggs (2019, p. 70, 121 and 146), about 1 million people live in Hargeysa, 300,000 in Burco and 230,000 in Boorama. The figures must be regarded as uncertain estimates.

<sup>4</sup> The clans Issa, Gadabuursi, Issak and Dhulbahante also extend their home territories into Djibouti and/or Ethiopia (see clan map in SEM 2017, p. 27–28).

## Contested border areas

The easternmost part of Somaliland is disputed. This primarily applies to the eastern parts of the regions of Sool and Sanaag, but also the Buuhoodle district in the southeastern part of Togdheer (see map in ICG 2018, p. 8). Both Somaliland and Puntland claim these areas as their own. Somaliland bases its claim on the areas falling within Somaliland's borders when it was a British protectorate (ICG 2018, p. 4). Puntland, for its part, argues that the two largest clans in these areas, Warsangeli in eastern Sanaag and Dhulbahante in Buuhoodle and Sool, belong to the same clan family (Daarood) as the Majeerteen clan, which is the dominant clan in Puntland. Dhulbahante and Warsangeli have divided loyalties (Höhne 2018, p. 24).<sup>5</sup>

The self-declared state of Somaliland has never had control over the easternmost part of the territory it claims. While central and western parts of the state were consolidated, the eastern part of Somaliland remained outside the influence of the authorities in Hargeysa until well into the 2000s (Höhne 2019, p. 48). From 2007, Somaliland began expanding eastward through a series of military offensives aimed at cities and villages in Sool, including the regional capital of Laascaanood (ICG 2018, p. 4). Most recently, in January 2018, Somaliland forces pushed eastwards and captured the village of Tukaraq from Puntland (ICG 2019, p. 3).

The “front line” in Sool, as seen from the viewpoint of the authorities in Hargeysa, lies currently somewhere southeast of Laascaanood and east of Tukaraq (Höhne, email 23 March 2020; see map in Höhne 2015, p. 26–27). In Sanaag, the “front” lies somewhat east of Erigabo (see also Mahmood 2019, p. 13). This means that parts of Sool and the eastern part of Sanaag, including the coastal city of Laasqoray, are outside of Somaliland's control. In these areas, there are mainly clan-based militias with various and shifting loyalties who operate, but Puntland also has troops in some places.

## Registered violent incidents and people killed in 2019

There are no complete statistics on the violence in Somalia. The organisation Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) collects information on violent events in Somalia from media and local organisations in a database. The database is publicly available and continuously updated (ACLED 2020). Landinfo considers that ACLED's information provides an *indication* of the level of violence in

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<sup>5</sup> The Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans experienced the developments in Somaliland differently than the Issak clans. While members of the Issak clans in Somaliland experienced the period after Barre's downfall as a period of peace and rebuilding from ruins (literally speaking), members of the clans of Dhulbahante and Warsangeli experienced 1991 and the period after as a collapse of the state and the end of the Daarood clan's dominance in Somalia (Höhne 2015, p. 48–49). According to Höhne (2015, p. 123), the majority of them want a unified Somalia, as represented by Puntland, but they are also content to co-exist with Somaliland for the sake of peace and economic gain.

northwestern Somalia, but the figures from ACLED should be viewed as *estimates*.<sup>6</sup> The information from ACLED is presented in table 1 below. The registered number of people killed include both civilians and members of armed groups. For comparison, ACLED recorded 2,519 violent incidents and 4,038 people killed throughout Somalia in 2019.

Table 1: Registered violent events and people killed in northeastern Somalia in 2019

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Population estimate</b>	<b>Registered violent events</b>	<b>Registered people killed</b>
Awdal	670,000	11 <sup>7</sup>	10
Woqooyi Galbeed	1,240,000	29	9
Togdheer	720,000	18 <sup>8</sup>	17 <sub>10</sub>
Sool	330,000	32 <sup>9</sup>	8
Sanaag	540,000	41 <sub>10</sub>	67
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,500,000</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>111</b>

The table has been prepared by Landinfo based on ACLED (2020), Höhne (emails 2020) and UNFPA (2014, p. 31).

As also shown in the table, over half of the incidents and two-thirds of those killed were recorded in the eastern border regions of Sool and Sanaag, even though only a quarter of the population of Somaliland lives in these areas.

<sup>6</sup> See Landinfo (2017) for a more detailed assessment of ACLED.

<sup>7</sup> ACLED recorded 12 events in Awdal. Landinfo has omitted one of these from the table, as it is obviously an error. ACLED refers here to an al-Shabaab attack on the African Union Mission to Somalia's (AMISOM) forces in Awdal, but AMISOM does not operate in Somaliland.

<sup>8</sup> ACLED has also recorded six U.S. air strikes against IS and one U.S. air strike against al-Shabaab in the "Golis Mountains" in 2019 (causing 32 fatalities in total), but these figures are omitted from the table. ACLED has placed these attacks in Togdheer, but according to Höhne (email, 22 March 2020), this is not correct. Höhne points out that there have been no U.S. air strikes in Togdheer, but that such attacks often occur in the part of the Golis Mountains situated in the Bari region of Puntland. "Golis Mountains" is a generic term for the mountain range that stretches over much of northern Somalia (see map in Höhne 2015, p. 3). Various parts of the mountain range have various local names. For example, the mountain area around the village of Galgala southwest of the coastal city of Boosaaso in Puntland is called the "Galgala Mountains". The Galgala Mountains are part of the Golis Mountains.

<sup>9</sup> ACLED recorded 34 events in Sool. Landinfo has omitted two of these from the table, as, according to a local source in Sool (Höhne, email 31 March 2020), these are not correct. ACLED here refers to an al-Shabaab attack against a military base in "Qoriley" and to al-Shabaab losing control of a village named "Bad Weyn".

<sup>10</sup> ACLED recorded 42 events in Sanaag. Landinfo has omitted one of these from the table, as, according to a local source in Sanaag (Höhne, email 22 March 2020), it is incorrect. ACLED here refers to al-Shabaab taking control of the village of Gacan Maroodi near Yubbe in November 2019 (see also Goobjoog 2019; Somaliland Monitor 2019).

The events in the table include 59 cases of clashes between clan militia and other armed actors (81 killed). Three-quarters of these clashes (67 killed) occurred in Sool and Sanaag.

The events also include 27 cases of “violence against civilians” (18 killed) perpetrated by clan militia, police and unknown actors. The circumstances and motives behind these events are unclear, but many appear to be incidents of crime and/or clan conflict. The events also include five explosions (11 killed),<sup>11</sup> 33 protests/riots (one killed) and eight other events (none killed).

In Landinfo’s assessment, the vast majority of those killed (about 80%) were members of armed groups.<sup>12</sup>

## **Al-Shabaab**

Al-Shabaab has not managed to establish territorial control in Somaliland, and has not conducted major attacks in Somaliland since 2008 (Horton 2019).<sup>13</sup> Al-Shabaab has primarily been a phenomenon of South Somalia, but gained a foothold in the Galgala Mountains southwest of the coastal city of Bosasso in Puntland, on the border of the Sanaag region, through an at the time Warsangeli clan-based militia group (Hansen 2019, p. 185–187).

The group declared loyalty to al-Shabaab in 2012 but had ties to al-Shabaab several years before this. The group at this time consisted of about 200 fighters from various clans, including clans from southern Somalia, who fought to advance al-Shabaab’s rule (Höhne 2015, p. 140-147).

ACLED has registered a total of eight events in Somaliland in 2019 that may involve al-Shabaab. As mentioned above, Landinfo considers that five of these are incorrect. The other three incidents, two clashes between armed actors and one shooting incident targeting a vehicle, according to ACLED, all occurred in the eastern part of Sanaag.

According to Höhne (emails 2020), al-Shabaab’s bases are confined to the Galgala mountain area southwest of the coastal city of Boosaaso in Puntland,<sup>14</sup> on the border of Somaliland, and the coastal city of Ceelaayo. The latter is located in the northeastern corner of Sanaag between the coastal cities of Lasqoray and Boosaaso. As mentioned earlier,

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<sup>11</sup> The majority of the explosions were related to UXO. UXO stands for “unexploded ordinance”, and refers to armed bombs, grenades and other remnants from previous battles.

<sup>12</sup> 81 of 111 were recorded in connection with clashed between armed groups. It is reasonable to assume that those killed in these events were primarily members of the groups involved. Also, according to ACLED, ten of those killed in the “explosions” category were members of armed forces who were killed in a single IED attack in the Buuhoodle area of Sool.

<sup>13</sup> In 2008, al-Shabaab attacked the presidential palace, the Ethiopian consulate and a UN office in Hargeysa (Ibrahim & Gettleman 2008).

<sup>14</sup> It is in these mountain areas that the Americans typically conduct air strikes (Höhne, emails 2020).

the authorities in Hargeysa do not have power over this part of Somaliland. Höhne does not rule out that al-Shabaab also may be active in other parts of Sool and Sanaag, but then in the form of members and/or sympathisers who operate in secret.

Both Höhne and other sources (see, for example, Mahmood 2019, p. 17) refer to rumours that al-Shabaab is responsible for assassinations of government officials, clan leaders and business people, including in Laascaanood in Sool, without this being proven or the organisation claiming responsibility. Höhne emphasises that al-Shabaab consists of fairly few fighters even in the Galgala area, that they are not necessarily supported by the local population, and that their capacity to conduct attacks therefore is limited.

Even though al-Shabaab has not gained a territorial foothold in any areas of Somaliland which the authorities in Hargeysa control, these parts of Somaliland are areas of both origin and transit for people who join al-Shabaab in other parts of Somalia (European Institute for Peace 2018, p. 32; Mahmood 2019, p. 17).

## **The Islamic State (IS)**

In November 2015, a group split from al-Shabaab in the Golis Mountains and declared loyalty to IS, and the two groups have been at war with each other ever since (Hansen 2019, p. 189–195). The IS group is probably even smaller than the al-Shabaab group that operates in this part of Somalia, and is mainly based on a single clan, namely the Majeerteen clan Ali Saleebaan (see also EIP 2018, p. 14–17). This clan has its home territory in the districts of Qandala and Iskushuban in Puntland (see clan map in SEM 2017, p. 27–28), quite distant from the border of Somaliland. It is in this part of the Golis Mountains that IS has its bases and U.S. air strikes against IS normally occur (Höhne, emails 2020).

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### **Oral sources**

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