ASSESSMENT OF THE UNITED STATES' CONTRIBUTION TO THE REBUILDING OF THE SECURITY SECTOR IN SOMALIA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to assess the US's contribution to the rebuilding of Somalia's security sector. The state of Somalia has become a central concern for most scholars of political science and international studies due to its strategic importance. The state witnessed activities that led to a vacuum of authority, allowing non-state actors and militant groups like Al-Shabaab to thrive. For more than three decades, Somalia's inability to build a functional security apparatus has been a key obstacle to its stability and development. To this end, the study used qualitative data collection to analyze the intensity and deadly nature of the conflict in Somalia. The study employed security sector reform theory as its analytical framework. The study found that the causes of conflict in Somalia include the colonial legacy, corruption, and poor governance. The study's findings also revealed that US contributions to rebuilding Somalia's security sector include training and capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, and counterterrorism support. The study advanced the following recommendations: The United States should prioritize long-term engagement in Somalia's security sector reform rather than short-term interventions, and should support broader governance reforms to address the root causes that enable violent extremism.

Keywords: Contribution, Security Sector, United States, Somalia

Introduction

The collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991 created one of the most protracted cases of state failure in modern African history. Since then, the country has struggled with civil war, clan-based conflicts, terrorism, piracy, and humanitarian crises (Menkhaus, 2014). The disintegration of state institutions led to a vacuum of authority, allowing non-state actors and militant groups such as *Al-Shabaab* to thrive. For more than three decades, Somalia's inability to build a functional security apparatus has been a key obstacle to its stability and development (Williams, 2020).

Throughout the early 2000s, the international community made several attempts to rebuild Somalia's political and security institutions, but progress was slow and uneven. The United States initially approached Somalia with caution, focusing mainly on counterterrorism after the 11 September attacks in 2001 (RAND Corporation, 2018). Washington was deeply concerned about the rise of extremist groups that could turn Somalia into a haven for terrorists. However, due to the absence of a legitimate central government and the chaotic situation on the ground, the US was hesitant to commit to large-scale reconstruction efforts during this period (Menkhaus, 2014).

One of the most notable aspects of US involvement in Somalia's security rebuilding was the creation of the *Danab* ("Lightning") Brigade, an elite commando unit trained and equipped by US forces to combat *Al-Shabaab* insurgents (Stimson Center, 2023). The brigade was seen as a symbol of renewed hope for Somalia's army, representing a disciplined and professional force capable of reclaiming territory from militants. The US also provided logistical support, intelligence sharing, and targeted airstrikes to weaken extremist networks (Williams, 2020). Between 2010 and 2020, the US invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Somalia's security programs (RAND Corporation, 2018).

However, despite these significant efforts, the impact of U.S. assistance on Somalia's overall security sector remains debatable. Several scholars argue that U.S. involvement has been heavily focused on short-term military gains rather than long-term institutional development (Menkhaus, 2014; Soyemi, 2023). For instance, while *Danab* forces achieved tactical successes on the battlefield, Somalia's broader security institutions — such as the police, judiciary, and defense ministry — have remained weak and fragmented (Human Rights Watch, 2015). This imbalance has raised concerns about the sustainability of U.S.-led reforms.

Another major challenge has been Somalia's fragmented security institutions. Clan divisions, competition among political elites, and dependence on foreign funding have undermined cohesion and professionalism within the army and police (Menkhaus, 2014). Although the US provided training and equipment, many units still lacked proper command structures, logistics systems, and sustainable financing mechanisms (Stimson Center, 2023). As a result, progress often depended more on external support than on internal reforms. When US or donor attention shifted elsewhere, many programs stalled or collapsed.

Nonetheless, US contributions have not been without achievements. The training of specialized forces, support for AMISOM operations, and intelligence cooperation have helped push *Al-Shabaab* out of major urban centers and protect key government institutions in Mogadishu (Williams, 2020). US security assistance has also played a crucial role in reducing large-scale terrorist attacks and supporting humanitarian access in some areas. These gains, however, remain fragile and unevenly distributed across Somalia's regions.

On this basis, the study assesses the US contribution to the rebuilding of Somalia's security sector.

Conceptual Review

Peace Building

The long-term, post-conflict process of establishing the framework for sustainable peace is known as peace-building. It sustains efficient and peaceful political and social order, rebuilds institutions, infrastructure, and civic life, and increases host nations' (HN) ability to address the underlying causes of conflict (Peace operations, 2019). Additionally, it emphasizes the role of

restricted armed forces in promoting peace by aiding other players in cultivating the components of a stable state. These include societal interactions, political settlement, infrastructure and economic growth, governance and the rule of law, and security (Peace operations, 2019).

According to Miller (2005), peace-building is a peace endeavor that aims to address the underlying causes of conflict as well as the triggers, which are the immediate sources of conflict that cause violence to emerge in the parties' conflict behavior. The primary structural or underlying reasons of conflict are known as root causes, and while they play a role, they are insufficient to prompt the parties to resort to violence. Following a war or other devastating or catastrophic event, peace-building entails "policies, programs, and associated efforts to restore stability and the effectiveness of social, political, and economic institutions and structures" (Miller, 2005).
Peace building generally aims to create and ensure the conditions for 'negative peace', the mere absence of violent conflict engagement, and for 'positive peace', a more comprehensive understanding related to the institutionalization of justice and freedom." The definition above discusses the aims and objectives of peace-building. `
Following events in Somalia, where conflict disrupted the country's activities, the US and other countries participated in rebuilding the security sector as part of peace-building.

Security

According to the European Journal for Security Research (2019), security is the perceived or actual capacity to anticipate, adapt to, resist, and recover from threats and crises arising from people's willful, malicious, and intentional actions, such as organized crime, terrorism, sabotage, or hacking. This definition of security sees it as the preparation for war or the taking of precautions against anything that may cause insecurity in any given situation.
According to Meerts (2018), security is the absence of many threats and hazards, such as war, unemployment, disease, or accidents. The majority of threats to human life worldwide fall under the definition above. Bodunde, Ola, and Afolabi (2014) define security as the process of ensuring that people and their valuables are protected from threats. According to the description above, security is commonly understood as the perception of safety and the absence of danger to those values.
According to William (2008), security can also be defined as the reduction of threats to values, particularly those that jeopardize the existence of a specific reference point. According to Imobighe, security is the absence of danger or other obstacles to a nation's ability to protect and develop itself, further its fundamental principles and legal interests, and enhance the well-being of its people. To this end, internal security can be defined as the absence or freedom from tendencies that threaten internal cohesiveness, as well as the corporate existence of a nation and the maintenance of its essential institutions for the advancement of its fundamental goals and sociopolitical and economic objectives, as well as the fulfillment of the justifiable aspirations of its citizens (Ogaba,2010). According to the aforementioned definitions and analysis, security is the process of preventing harm to both living and non-living resources, regardless of whether it is state-centric, traditionalist, or non-traditionalist (Abolurin, 2010).

To this end, security in Somalia was affected by the activities of various groups, prompting the African Union to intervene to restore security and peace.

Peace

The concept of peace is difficult to define because scholars hold differing opinions. Some scholars view peace as a graveyard, while others see it as a force. This school of thought holds that if you want peace, prepare for war; many have engaged in it, thinking it will bring about the desired peace, but it has not. Paul (2019) believes that peace is a nebulous idea with a wide

range of definitions. It has historically been associated with the lack of conflict or bloodshed. However, this negative definition of peace is useless since it combines extremely dire circumstances like rivalry (India-Pakistan) and intimate political ties (such as the European Union) together. This concept of peace ignores all other forms of peace while focusing on the negative ones. The way it is articulated is biased. According to Anderson (2014), peace is characterized by low levels of violence experienced by individuals, families, groups, communities, and/or nations.

Roman (2022) also describes peace as a vital condition for all aspects of our existence as individuals, as a society, and on our planet. This definition sees peace as the only condition for a good life in any given nation or community. According to Capistro (2020), peace is linked to the harmonious coexistence of individuals within their environment and depends on principles such as social justice, sustainability, democracy, and tolerance. Acoata Oidor (2021)explains that peace and violence are present in every aspect of daily life, not just in a single field such as politics. This explanation holds that there is no absolute peace anywhere in the world. Peace and conflict co-exist in our world.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous theories in the fields of political science and international studies would 100% suit the analysis of this study, but the research finds the theory of security sector reform most appropriate for a study of this kind. This theory emerged in the 1990s, promoted by international peace-building actors and scholars, including the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) in 1998 (Hänggi, 2004; Sedra, 2010). The scholars who have expanded on this theory include Nicole Ball, Alan Bryden, Mark Sedra, Roland Paris, and Timothy Donais (Hänggi, 2004; Sedra, 2010). This theory was developed in recognition that security and development are related; it holds that without a functional security sector, development will be far-fetched.

It further pointed out that this theory was established to guide international interventions in fragile states such as Somalia, Liberia, and Afghanistan. Major assumptions of this theory are as follows: security sector reform covers all sectors within the state, reform must be carried out locally, and it depicts the nexus between development and the security sector. The security sector must respect fundamental human rights, the rule of law, and observe democratic principles in its operations (Ball & Fayemi, 2004).

2.5 Relevance of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) Theory to this study

The Security Sector Reform (SSR) Theory provides the most suitable analytical framework for assessing the US contribution to Somalia's security sector rebuilding between 2000 and 2022. The theory’s emphasis on institutional transformation, democratic oversight, and local ownership of security processes aligns directly with the central concerns of this study — namely, how external assistance has influenced the capacity, legitimacy, and sustainability of Somalia’s security institutions.

From 2000 onward, US involvement in Somalia expanded through counterterrorism operations, training of the Somali National Army (SNA), and financial support for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM**)**. While these initiatives sought to restore order and combat extremist groups like Al-Shabaab, SSR theory helps interrogate whether such efforts translated into long-term institutional strengthening or merely short-term stabilization. Using the SSR framework, this study evaluates the quality and sustainability of U.S.-supported reforms in governance, accountability, and Somali ownership.

Moreover, SSR theory emphasizes the integration of security and development, suggesting that rebuilding the security sector is inseparable from improving governance, promoting human rights, and ensuring economic stability (Hänggi & Scherrer, 2008). This assumption is particularly relevant to Somalia, where insecurity, poverty, and weak institutions are deeply intertwined. Applying the SSR framework allows this research to assess whether US interventions have adequately linked security assistance with institutional and socio-economic reforms, or whether they have prioritized military objectives at the expense of nation-building.

Finally, the SSR framework helps to situate the study within a broader peace-building discourse. Rebuilding security institutions is not merely about ensuring stability but also about promoting state legitimacy, citizen trust, and democratic governance—all of which are central to Somalia's long-term recovery. The theory provides conceptual tools to measure the extent to which US interventions have contributed to the reconstruction of a functional, accountable state capable of providing security as a public good.

United States and the Rebuilding of the Security Sector of Somalia

The United States has made numerous contributions to rebuilding Somalia's security sector. These contributions of the US could be discussed below:

Financial contribution to the Peacekeeping Mission

The US contributed to peacekeeping missions mounted by the African Union, such as AMISOM and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) in 2022. This support reflects the US strategic interest in preventing Somalia from becoming a haven for transnational terrorism and promoting regional stability in the Horn of Africa. Since AMISOM's deployment in 2007, the United States has remained among its largest bilateral donors, contributing hundreds of millions of dollars annually to sustain peacekeeping operations and enhance Somali security capacity (Williams, 2013; Bryden, 2013).

Bryden (2013) noted that the success of AMISOM's offensives in some areas of Somalia was heavily dependent on US financial support and intelligence provision. The US provided real-time satellite imagery, drone surveillance, and maritime interdiction capabilities to assist the mission's combat operations. This combination of intelligence sharing and logistical backing allowed AMISOM forces to disrupt al-Shabaab's command structures, secure supply routes, and reclaim urban centers that had been under militant control for years. It also enhanced coordination among countries that contributed troops whose forces operated in porous areas (Williams, 2013). In addition, American logistics firms and defense contractors provided airlift, food, and fuel to sustain troops on the ground. The US also worked closely with the **United Nations Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA)** to ensure effective coordination of supplies and the movement of personnel (Menkhaus, 2018). US financial contributions to the Somali peace mission reduced conflict in Somalia.

Counter-Terrorism Support/ Measures

US intervention in Somalia's security sector encompasses counterterrorism operations and drone strikes. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Washington's foreign policy increasingly viewed weak states such as Somalia through the lens of global terrorism. The fear that ungoverned spaces could become breeding grounds for extremist networks like al-Qaeda led to a redefinition of Somalia's instability as a security threat to the United States and its allies

(Menkhaus, 2014). Consequently, Somalia became a strategic focus for US counterterrorism initiatives under the broader framework of the "Global War on Terror."

US operations in Somalia involved drone strikes against suspected Al-Shabaab camps, especially in Southern and central Somalia. For instance, in 2019, a US drone strike killed Abdulqadir Osman Yarow, one of al-Shabaab's top commanders, thereby disrupting the group's chain of command and operations around Jilib, a major militant stronghold (US Department of Defense, 2019). These targeted strikes were often coordinated with Somali intelligence agencies and AMISOM field operations, reflecting a growing integration between US technological assets and African-led ground operations.

Training and Capacity Building

The US government participated in training and capacity-building in Somalia's security sector. This capacity-building focused on rebuilding the Somali National Army (SNA), reforming the Somali Police Force (SPF), and enhancing the professionalism, discipline, and accountability of security personnel (Bryden, 2013).

In the early 2000s, the US began to channel resources toward human resource development in Somalia's security sector. Through the **International Military Education and Training (IMET)** program, Somali officers received professional military instruction in leadership, logistics, civil-military relations, and human rights standards. The IMET program was designed not only to strengthen operational capacity but also to promote democratic civil-military relations and respect for the rule of law—a vital step given Somalia's history of military authoritarianism under Siad Barre (Bryden, 2013). These early training efforts laid the groundwork for rebuilding a professional army that could later partner with the African Union and international forces to restore stability. To this end, the US trained many Somali security personnel in various capacities, which, in turn, contributed significantly to the political and economic stability enjoyed by the people of the state.

Humanitarian Assistance

Apart from military and counterterrorism assistance, the United States' engagement in Somalia from 2000 to 2022 has placed considerable emphasis on **humanitarian and stabilization support**—a recognition that rebuilding a sustainable security system requires more than military force alone. US policymakers increasingly understood that insecurity in Somalia was both a cause and consequence of chronic poverty, food insecurity, and institutional collapse. Consequently, Washington sought to integrate humanitarian aid and community stabilization initiatives into its broader security strategy to address the socio-economic roots of conflict and build public trust in emerging Somali institutions (USAID, 2018). The US government has provided humanitarian aid through its agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development and the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Furthermore, these agencies delivered a combination of emergency humanitarian relief, development programming, and peace-building interventions in some of Somalia's most fragile regions. USAID's humanitarian programs targeted the immediate effects of conflict, including widespread displacement, famine, and public health crises. In contrast, stabilization programs sought to promote governance, livelihood recovery, and social cohesion at the local level (USAID, 2018).

Summary and Conclusion

The US contribution to rebuilding Somalia's security sector has been substantial. The areas in which she contributed include counterterrorism strategies, training of the National Army, and humanitarian assistance. The study concluded that the US performed well in its attempt to rebuild Somalia's security sector.

Recommendations

The study advanced the following recommendations:

i. The United States should prioritize long-term engagement in Somalia's security sector reform rather than short-term interventions.
ii. The US should support broader governance reforms to address the root causes that make violent extremism possible.
iii. The US should incorporate programs that address political, economic, and social conditions that fuel radicalization and recruitment; and
iv. The US must improve long-term planning for peacekeeping operations to reduce unnecessary troop losses and strengthen mission outcomes.

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