FSM İlmî Araştırmalar *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi*
FSM Scholarly Studies *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*
Sayı/Number 27 Yıl/Year 2026 Bahar/Spring

DOI: 10.16947/fsmia.1753947 - http://dergipark.org.tr/fsmia - http://dergi.fsm.edu.tr
Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article - Geliş Tarihi / Received: 30.07.2025 Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 03.04.2026 - FSMIAD, 2026; (27): 151-180

The Psychopolitics of Violence: Warlordism, Clan Mobilization, and the Making of the Somali Civil War

Abdirashid Diriye Kalmoy*

Abstract

The Somali civil war precipitated one of the most brutal and protracted episodes of inter-warlord violence and power contestation on the African continent during the early 1990s. In the wake of the Somali state's collapse, political authority fragmented, giving rise to a violent patchwork of clan-based militias led by warlords - figures who, as Max Weber classically theorized, derive legitimacy from charismatic authority and emerge in contexts where formal state institutions have either weakened or disintegrated altogether. The downfall of the military regime of Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 marked a turning point, unleashing a wave of clan-based vendetta, mass killings, and violence that rapidly escalated into a systematized and internecine communal conflict. What initially began as a rebellion against an authoritarian military regime in the late 1970s evolved into a devastating cycle of clan vengeance, mass killings, and large-scale displacement of Somalis. This study interrogates the politics of warlordism in Somalia by examining how warlords mobilized kinship networks and clan solidarities in the vacuum of state authority. Drawing on both psychoanalytic theory and ethnographic fieldwork, the research seeks to uncover the emotional and symbolic dimensions of violence, authority, and belonging

* Research Fellow, Ibn Haldun University Department of Sociology, Istanbul/Türkiye, Abdirashid.kalmoy@stu.ihu.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0003-0634-937X.

that animated this dark chapter in Somali history. Importantly, this study foregrounds the voices and memories of those who lived through the war - former fighters, civilians, and survivors - granting them epistemic agency to narrate their experiences under warlord rule. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how power, identity, and violence coalesced in the making of Somalia's warlord era and offers critical insights into the psychosocial legacies of civil war.

Keywords: Warlordism, clan cleansing, civil war, state collapse, Somalia.

Şiddetin Psikopolitikası: Savaş Ağalığı, Klan Seferberliği ve Somali İç Savaşı'nın İnşası

Öz

Somali iç savaşı, 1990'ların başlarında Afrika kıtasında yaşanan en acımasız ve uzun süreli savaş ağaları arası şiddet ve iktidar mücadelesi dönemlerinden birine yol açtı. Somali devletinin çöküşünün ardından, siyasi otorite parçalanarak savaş ağalarının önderlik ettiği, klan temelli milislerden oluşan şiddetli bir yapı ortaya çıktı. Max Weber'in klasik teorisinde belirttiği gibi, bu tür figürler karizmatik otoritelerinden meşruiyet kazanır ve resmi devlet kurumlarının zayıfladığı ya da tamamen çöktüğü koşullarda ortaya çıkar. 1991'de askeri diktatör Muhammed Siad Barre rejiminin devrilmesi, klan temelli intikam cinayetleri ve toplu şiddet olaylarını tetikleyerek, sistematik ve içsel bir toplumsal çatışmaya dönüşen bir süreci başlattı. 1970'lerin sonlarında otoriter askeri rejime karşı başlatılan isyan, zamanla klan intikamlarına, toplu katliamlara ve milyonlarca Somalilinin yerinden edilmesine neden olan yıkıcı bir döngüye evrildi. Bu çalışma, Somali'deki savaş ağalığı siyasetini; savaş ağalarının devlet otoritesinin yokluğunda akrabalık ağlarını ve klan dayanışmalarını nasıl seferber ettiklerini inceleyerek ele alıyor. Psikanalitik kuram ve etnografik saha çalışmasına dayanan araştırma, bu karanlık dönemi harekete geçiren şiddet, otorite ve aidiyetin duygusal ve simgesel boyutlarını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, savaş dönemini yaşamış eski savaşçılara, sivillere ve hayatta kalanlara söz vererek, onların savaş ağası yönetimi altındaki deneyimlerini anlatmalarına epistemik bir yetki tanımaktadır. Böylece bu çalışma, Somali'nin savaş ağası döneminde iktidar, kimlik ve şiddetin nasıl iç içe geçtiğini daha derinlemesine anlamamıza katkı sunmakta ve iç savaşın psikososyal mirasına dair eleştirel bir perspektif geliştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş ağalığı, klan temizliği, iç savaş, devletin çöküşü, Somali.

Introduction

Clan warfare, violence, and the dominance of warlords reshaped the political landscape during the protracted period of violent fragmentation that began with the fall of Somalia's central government in 1991. As rebel groups and elements broke apart along clan lines after General Mohammed Siad Barre was overthrown, Somalia descended into internal political strife, and efforts for a cohesive post-dictatorship transition were swiftly dashed by the ensuing violence. This research critically examines the origins and political dynamics of warlordism in Somalia, contending that the emergence of warlords was a major factor in shaping the course of the civil war and the sociopolitical misery and violence it caused, rather than merely a result of state breakdown or collapse. By focusing on warlords as political agents operating within - and capitalizing on – clan identity and consciousness, this research departs from conventional analyses of conflict causation or peace processes to foreground the lived realities of power, violence, and memory in Somalia. Drawing on 27 in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted between October 2023 and May 2024, this study presents new insights into how warlordism reconfigured authority, mobilized identity, and entrenched chaos in a society struggling to survive and maintain coherence after state collapse. Due to security concerns, some interviews were conducted via WhatsApp.

"Clan warfare"[1] and warlords defined Somalia during the early phases of the internecine and tumultuous civil war in the early 1990s. After the ouster of General Mohammed Siad Barre and his military regime, the victorious rebels failed to reach a political consensus to jointly govern and stabilize the country, and engaged in clan vendetta-based warfare that rendered Somalia one of the "first states to crumble in the post-Cold War world political disintegration"[2] witnessed in the African continent. But why did Somalia collapse? Was this a case of failed scientific Socialism in a Muslim country? And how did the different social segments respond to it? Different Somali clans and communities responded to Siad Barre's socialist policies in divergent ways. Clans that benefited from Barre's patronage network - particularly those linked to his Marehan, Ogaden, and Dhulbahante (MOD) alliance - tended to support his vision of "scientific socialism," viewing it as a means of political and economic empowerment. In contrast, "rival" clans,

1 Richard Shultz, "State Disintegration and Ethnic Conflict: A Framework for Analysis", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 9 (541), 1995, p. 85.

2 Catherine Besteman, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: The Dissolution of the Somali Nation-State", *American Ethnologist,* 23 (3), 1996, p. 579.

especially the Isaaq, Hawiye, and Majeerteen, increasingly perceived the regime's socialist rhetoric as a mask for clan favoritism and authoritarian control.[3] This unequal distribution of power and resources deepened mistrust and resentment among clans, undermining national cohesion. Over time, the ideological conflict between Barre's state-led socialism and the clans' traditional structures of authority fractured the social fabric, fueling armed resistance and contributing to the Somali state's eventual collapse in 1991. While numerous peace and reconciliation conferences were held during this early phase of the civil war to stabilize Somalia, they all failed as powerful warlords emerged with hordes of clan militias. In the ensuing catastrophic civil war, the clan warfare spearheaded by powerful warlords morphed and turned into "clan cleansing," where communities and grazing settlements were targeted with impunity, leading to mass deaths and displacement. By 1994, 300,000 Somalis lost their lives either in conflict or famine as the country disintegrated.[4]

From a sociological perspective, the Somali state's collapse cannot be attributed simply to the incompatibility of scientific socialism with Muslim society. Still, it can be understood as resulting from the erosion of social legitimacy stemming from contradictions among ideology, power distribution, and kinship structures. Siad Barre's socialist project attempted to reorganize Somali society by subordinating clan authority, Islamic moral frameworks, and pastoralist social organization to a centralized developmentalist state claiming scientific rationality and revolutionary modernism. While official discourse promoted egalitarianism, secularism, and national unity, resource allocation, military appointments, and institutional access became deeply enmeshed with clan patronage, particularly favoring groups within the MOD alliance. For communities including the Isaaq, Hawiye, and Majeerteen, socialism was experienced less as an emancipatory ideology than as coercive governance masking systematic repression, surveillance, and collective punishment. This disjuncture between ideological promise and lived experience fractured the moral contract between state and society, provoking resistance that mobilized both clan solidarities and Islamic discourse against the regime. The 1991 collapse thus reflected not an inherent incompatibility between

3 Here while I mention clans and communities, one has to bear in mind that this is a generalization and not every member of the clan supported or rejected the policies of the military regime in the absolute sense. Many Marehans, Ogadens and Dhulbahantes opposed the Siad Barre totalitarianism, many were purged from the military and my own grandfather Kaalmoy Jeelle was jailed for 30 years for his political dissent.

4 Cawo Mohammed Abdi, "Convergence of Civil War and the Religious Right: Reimagining Somali Women", *Signs,* 33 (1), 2003, p. 190.

Islam and socialism but rather the state's failure to mediate competing moral economies encompassing revolutionary modernism, clan-based authority, and religious legitimacy, ultimately unraveling the social foundations necessary for national cohesion.

This study interrogates the genealogy of warlordism in Somalia and examines how what I call "the politics of warlordism" shaped Somali politics and suffering during the civil war. While numerous studies focus on what caused the Somali civil war or the experiences of peace, reconciliation, and state-rebuilding processes in Somalia, this study is unique in focusing on warlords: a group of political actors with agency and interests to protect in a chaotic civil war context. This study will delineate how warlords benefited from the prevalence of "clan consciousness," which is prevalent in Somali societies where "clan consciousness dominates politics".[5] This study is significant because it offers first-hand accounts grounded in ethnographic interviews and narratives. As the dust slowly continues to settle in Somalia, many interlocutors are willing and ready to share their experiences of the civil war's brutalities. The arguments and findings of this study are based on 27 face-to-face oral interviews conducted between October 2023 and May 2024.

This research provides important theoretical insights into how warlordism became ingrained in Somalia's post-state-collapse history. The research shows how warlords exploited clan ties, and group grievances, and established themselves as power brokers in the absence of a centralized authority by tracing the history of warlordism and emphasizing the lived experiences of those who suffered its atrocities and violence. This ethnographic investigation places warlords within the emotional, political, and material realities of daily life during the civil war, in contrast to traditional interpretations that abstract them into structural or ideological categories. It demonstrates that social legitimacy, negotiated survival, and the redrawing of community borders through violence and relocation were all important aspects of warlord politics, alongside armed authority, in specific towns like Marka, Barawa, and Kismayo. In the end, the research emphasizes the importance of understanding the politics of warlordism to envision a lasting peace in Somalia's fractured present and to interpret the past.

5 Hussein M. Adam, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 54, 1992, p. 15.

Commanders Without a State: Warlordism and the Collapse of the Somali State

After the central government fell in 1991, warlordism became one of the most distinctive, ubiquitous, and damaging aspects of Somalia's political landscape. A constellation of warlords and regional power brokers quickly filled the void left by the Somali state's collapse due to internal security collapse and civil unrest. These individuals, who were frequently previous political elites or military leaders, took control of divided regions, exercising independent military authority and inciting violence for their own political and financial benefit. These warlords, rooted in clan loyalty and supported by rapacious war economies, were both products of and creators of Somalia's protracted instability. This study examines the complex nature of warlordism in Somalia, the sociopolitical circumstances that enabled its flourishing, and its disastrous effects on civilian life, government, and national cohesiveness. It does this by drawing on theoretical ideas from scholars such as Max Weber, Diana Lary, and Roland Marchal. From my perspective, warlordism is a unique political formation with its own logic, strategies, and effects, rather than just a sign of state failure.

One feature that defined Somalia after the civil war in 1991 was the prevalence of a plethora of warlords and regional kingpins that acted as what Ariel Ahram and Charles King called "arbitrageurs" but also became the sources and instigators of instability, chaos, brutalities, and violations of individual rights and dignity in the country. Somalia had numerous warlords who emerged after the state's collapse in 1991 and captured global media attention. By nature and circumstance, warlords "are byproducts of state weakness." If the state is weak and lacks the capacity to use violence alone, other actors, such as warlords, would contend with the state for power. Moreover, Stig Hansen explains that "warlords are created due to the special circumstances in a dissolved or dissolving state".[6] And when the Somali state collapsed in 1991, the civil war conditions enabled warlords to occupy the political space vacated by the Somali state and its security and institutional apparatuses.

Max Weber is one of the foremost theorists to have contemplated and reflected on warlordism and its relation to the state and politics. In "Politics as Vocation," Weber noted that "elected warlords" aspire to charismatic authority and that his followers "live off booty, plunder, confiscations, contributions and the imposition of worthless and compulsory means of tender".[7] Warlords, in the eyes of Max

6 Stig Hansen, "Warlords, Patrimonialism and Ethnicity", *Peace Research,* 35 (2), 2003, p. 82.

7 Ahram - Charles, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur", p. 171.

Weber, were stubborn, headstrong, and obstinate political actors who usurped the legitimacy of the state, if it existed, and its sovereignty. For Weber, the warlord has:

> The authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion, and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership. This is 'charismatic' domination, as exercised by the prophet or, in the field of politics, by the elected warlord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader.[8]

Diana Lary, in her studies of Chinese warlordism in the early twentieth century, observed that "warlordism meant intolerable interruption and harassment" and it "created an atmosphere of great instability".[9] Moreover, she noted that "for its victims, warlordism was a profound tragedy, an endless menace and degradation".[10] As for the Somali case, it is not different from what Diana Lary describes of Twentieth Century China: Warlords were the main perpetrators and culprits of civilian mass murders, rapes, and lootings in Somalia.

How can we define and describe warlords and warlordism? Who qualifies as a warlord and not? Diana Lary offers descriptions that capture the defining elements of warlords. She argues that a warlord has "the possession of autonomous military force, the control of a base region, the use of force as the final arbiter, the reliance on personal rather than impersonal patterns of rule, and a ruthless and extractive attitude towards society and the economy".[11] Moreover, if a state collapses, numerous political figures and warlords emerge, creating a political space saturated with diverse personality types. Some warlords are powerful and independent of any influence, while other warlords pay their allegiance to other, more powerful warlords. Gordon McCormick and Lindsay Fritz analyze that "a single failing state can spawn a large number of rump regimes, each controlled by a different local kingpin".[12] Furthermore, these regional kingpins or warlords could be violently contending for power, prestige, and control.

---

8 Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology,* eds. H. H. Gerth - C. W. Mills, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1946. p. 138-139.

9 Diana Lary, "Warlord Studies", *Modern China,* 6 (4), 1980, p. 440.

10 Lary, "Warlord Studies", p. 443.

11 Lary, "Warlord Studies", p. 441.

12 McCormick - Fritz, "The Logic of Warlord Politics", p. 81.

Inter-warlord violence exacerbated the Somali state's collapse and civil war. The rebel leaders who led the armed uprising against the military regime morphed into warlords who fought each other for political hegemony and power. Stig Hansen posits that "some of the hardest inter-warlord fighting has been fought over such places as Shanghai in China and Mogadishu in Somalia" (Hansen, 2003, s. 82). Moreover, Hansen theorizes that "a warlord's organization is weak; it often lacks ideational legitimacy, and it is open to fractionalization".[13] This was the case in Somalia, where numerous warlords emerged and gained power, while others disappeared and lost power. The politics of warlordism was such a dynamic sphere that warlords "invaded" one another's territories and fought daily battles.

Somalia's warlord politics ravaged and destroyed the country and rendered futile the numerous peace conferences held to build a functioning state. Since the United Nations (UN) and the United States (US) listed the warlords as wanted criminals for their war crimes, they undermined all efforts of peace and state-building in Somalia. It was only after their defeat by the Islamic Courts in 2006 and 2007 that the Somali government could relocate to Baidoa and then to Mogadishu. The politics of warlordism that ravaged Somalia was "primarily based on the use of force and the (implicit and explicit) threat of force, rather than on political consensus".[14] Moreover, these warlords' political practices were "based on either predatory or parasitic war economies" that looted, robbed, and confiscated the civilian and government properties and wealth. Alongside the arbitrary killings and abductions, this led to the mass exodus of the Somali people from their country.

Catherine Besteman explains that "Somalia was one of the first states to crumble in the post-Cold War world political disintegration".[15] And after the state collapsed, the Somali society disintegrated along clan lines, and powerful warlords and militias devastated the whole country. In Somalia, "clan consciousness dominates politics".[16] Moreover, both the military regime and the rebel groups instrumentalized the clans for political ends. Hussein M. Adam argues that the "former dictator Mohammed Siyaad Barre used every opportunity to poison clan relations to prolong his rule. The armed opposition groups adopted the short-term policy of utilizing clan-recruited volunteers to combat Siyaad's state-manipulated

13 Hansen, "Warlords, Patrimonialism and Ethnicity", p. 82.
14 McCormick - Fritz, "The Logic of Warlord Politics", p. 83.
15 Besteman, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence", p. 579.
16 Adam, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?", p. 15.

clanism".[17] The state, the rebel groups, and the warlords that emerged after the state's collapse all utilized and employed clanism to further their political interests and needs.

The figure of the warlord is "an entrepreneur in a failed state,"[18] according to Roland Marchal. And as the military regime was ousted from the capital city, Mogadishu, "Somalia degenerated into a war between resistance leaders and their followers over power and among a dozen factions over food, water, and political alliances".[19] Moreover, the whole country descended into chaos, as armed groups and militias contested for power and control. Hussein M. Adam observes that "apart from the territories controlled by warlords, most of the rural hinterlands are under the control of clan councils and clan-recruited militia".[20] With no functioning government after the state's collapse in 1991, Somalia was at the mercy of warlords and Al-Shabaab terrorists who used clan relations and dynamics to exert power. Al Shabaab altered inter-clan relations in southern Somalia by reshaping traditional structures of power and loyalty. Initially, the group sought to transcend clan divisions through its "Islamist" ideology, attracting members from diverse clans who shared a vision of religious governance over tribal identity. However, in practice, Al Shabaab's rigid rule and selective alliances often deepened mistrust among clans. Some clans cooperated with the group for protection or political advantage, while others resisted its authority, leading to cycles of retaliation and displacement. Al-Shabaab's control over resources, taxation, and justice systems further disrupted traditional clan-based mechanisms of mediation and solidarity, replacing them with fear, coercion, and shifting alliances that fragmented local communities even further since 1991.

From a Sociological perspective, Al-Shabaab's engagement in inter-clan relations in southern Somalia constitutes a process of reconfiguring rather than abolishing clan politics through the imposition of moralized and militarized governance structures, I will argue. The movement's Islamist ideology explicitly condemned *qabiil* (clanism) as incompatible with Islamic principles. Yet, its actual governance practices subordinated clan identities to a novel hierarchy of loyalty organized around obedience to the movement's authority, ideological discipline, and differential access to power and resources. Traditional institutions, including

17 Adam, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?", p. 11.

18 Roland Marchal, "Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis? The Case of Somalia", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-),* 83 (6), 2007, p. 1094.

19 Besteman, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence", p. 582.

20 Adam, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?", p. 22.

elders (*odayaal*), customary law (*xeer*), and lineage-based mediation mechanisms, were systematically displaced as Al-Shabaab instituted centralized judicial courts, mandatory taxation regimes (*zakat* and *ushr*), and security apparatuses that circumvented negotiated consensus in favor of unilateral coercion and command structures. This transformation eroded horizontal solidarities within and across clan networks, substituting them with vertical relations of dependence on the movement's administrative and military hierarchy. Furthermore, the selective incorporation of particular sub-clans as administrators, intelligence operatives, or combatants generated asymmetric distributions of protection and vulnerability, reactivating dormant and historical clan grievances and intensifying inter-communal mistrust, especially in the Gedo region. Al-Shabaab thus did not transcend clan politics but rather rearticulated them within an authoritarian moral order where organized violence became the primary modality through which belonging, exclusion, and survival were negotiated within the fragmented sovereignty landscape characterizing post-1991 southern Somalia.

Moreover, most of the Somali warlords that emerged during the civil war were political figures and military commanders and officers during the military regime. Roland Marchal lists that the Somali warlords "some were at one point leaders with large constituencies (Ali Mahdi Mohamed, Mohamed Farah Aydiid) while others emerged as defecting military commanders with no political background (Omar Finish, Abdi Qaybdid)".[21] Furthermore, some, like Abdullahi Yuusuf, who became the President of Somalia's transitional federal government in 2004, founded the Puntland state in the summer of 1998.[22] While others remained coercive and brutal warlords: "Mohammed Qanyere Afrah coerced his own clan to avoid any contest. He was very much disliked because he was a brutal thug".[23]

These warlords are war criminals who committed mass atrocities against civilians and nature. Here, we could invent a new conceptual term to capture the brutalities and atrocities these warlords and the militias committed. Clan cleansing (which has similar dimensions to ethnic cleansing) would be apt to describe what happened during the civil war in Somalia. Warlords and militias targeted societies and individuals based on their clan identities and affiliations. For instance, Catherine Besteman documents that:

21 Marchal, "Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis?", p. 1079.

22 Marchal, "Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis?", p. 1078.

23 Marchal, "Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis?", p. 1099.

> "The people of the agriculturally productive Jubba Valley were 'repeatedly victimized by the scorched-earth tactics of the SNF, SPM and USC (Habr Gidir) militias as their forces looted livestock, seeds, tools and grains, destroying water resources, raped women and killed the men'".[24]

Clan cleansing and the destruction of the environment to wipe out whole societies and clans were prevalent in Somalia during the civil war (especially during the early years of the 90s).

The wider dynamics of state breakdown, armed politics, and the instrumentalization of clan identity were inextricably linked to the warlord problem in Somalia. Warlords and pirates used force, resource looting, and ruthless "clan cleansing" operations to solidify their hold on power by exploiting the absence of centralized authority and manipulating communal dynamics and clan allegiances. Instead of being transient players during a moment of transition, Somali warlords established a system of administration that benefited from violence and division, defeating all efforts at peace and reconciliation. In the piracy-riven regions of Puntland and Galmudug, pirate networks and warlords relied on strong intra-clan loyalty for recruitment, logistics, and protection, thereby reinforcing clan bonds. On the other hand, competition over lucrative piracy routes, ports, and ransoms intensified rivalries between clans, fueling disputes and sometimes violent confrontations. These dynamics both strengthened internal cohesion in some groups and exacerbated inter-clan tensions, contributing to broader fragmentation of social and political authority along Somalia's coastline. Hence, Somalia's internal power struggles and its international image as a failed state are both shaped by the legacy of warlordism and piracy, which still haunts the country's political culture. In addition to understanding Somalia's history, it is crucial to appreciate this legacy - its causes, workings, and effects - to imagine future directions for justice, accountability, and sustainable state-building.

The War Within: Psychodynamics of Clan Belonging, Mobilization and Violence in Somalia

This research offers a case study for comprehending the psychodynamics of violent warfare among fractured communities, such as the Somali civil war and its lasting effects on memory. A catastrophic combination of governmental breakdown and collective identity crises, sparked and sustained by deeply ingrained clan identity, mobilization, and the psychological dynamics they

24 Besteman, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence", p. 582-583.

produce, is at the core of Somalia's disintegration in 1991. This research examines the Somali civil war as a psychological phenomenon based on the unconscious motivations, traumatic experiences, and collective identities that shape behavior in large groups, rather than just as a political or military occurrence. To explain how identity, belonging, and perceived threats came together to cause mass violence and long-lasting societal disintegration, it presents the idea of the clan mind, a Somali-specific adaptation of large-group psychology that draws on psychoanalytic ideas by Sigmund Freud, Vamik Volkan, and others. The study highlights how clan connection serves as a mobilizing force and an existential anchor, particularly in situations of perceived danger, threat, vulnerability, or shame, and how these emotive investments result in solidarity that legitimizes aggression against alleged "others". Furthermore, it draws attention to the ways that narcissistic leaders and totalitarian figures - often former warlords or military elites - take advantage of these innate group dynamics to establish control, foster animosity across groups, and strengthen authoritarian power and control. By doing this, the article reframes Somali political violence via a psychological lens, contending that any meaningful attempt at healing and reconciliation must address the emotional economies and collective traumas that fuel conflict in addition to its material and political causes.

In the 1980s, Somalia witnessed a unique form of chaotic violence and brutalities: the contested national politics disintegrated into clan-based state violence and rebel uprising. The state and its military apparatus – dominated by the Marehan clan – claimed to protect and safeguard the Somali nation from traitorous rebels that were based, armed, and trained by Somalia's arch-enemies, Ethiopia and Kenya; the rebel groups – themselves also clan-based – claimed and mobilized to fight the military regime in the name of democracy and challenging totalitarian tyranny. Equally, in the 1990s, after the state collapsed, clan-based militias and warlords overran and controlled the country, and in the process committed heinous civil atrocities and brutalities. Consequently, clan identity, clan groupings, and clan mobilization become a defining emblematic feature of Somali politics. Olga Marlin explains that, in Sigmund Freud's theorization of group psychology and social collectivities, he considered "the group as a mirror of the family."[25] In Somalia, the clan is the "family": the clan as a social institution is where social, political, cultural, and economic life is predicated and actualized. And different clans compete, go to war, form

25 Olga Marlin, "Group Psychology in the Totalitarian System: A Psychoanalytic View", *Group*, 14 (1), 1990, p. 44.

alliances, and contest for prestige, political hegemony, economic advantages, resources, and pride.

To this effect, Michael A. Hogg and Cecilia L. Ridgeway explain that "societal beliefs about the relationship between groups guide members of the particular group in pursuing a positive sense of distinctiveness for their own group and thus for themselves".[26] While Somali pan(nationalism) is employed as a political and ideological currency vis-à-vis neighboring ethnic groups, in the intra-Somali political contestations, clans and sub-clan identities, agency, aspirations, grievances, and hostilities dominate and structure the Somali world's political landscape. Numerous psychologists and psychiatrists have employed the term "group mind" to conceptualize and study the psycho-social dynamics of large-group psychology. In the Somali context, we can coin and employ the term "clan mind".

The Somali peninsula is a vast, arid, and dry land inhabited by clans and sub-clans that compete to survive and thrive in an unforgiving, harsh geography. The clan, clan identity, and belonging to a clan are crucial for survival among the pastoralist Somalis, where war, raids, and famine are constant threats to livelihoods. Vamik D. Volkan, in the context of belonging to an ethnic group, states that:

> "The concept and experience of ethnicity is a kind of healing phenomenon, since it provides emotional buffers that protect the bruised self of the individual. The sense of ethnicity patches his sense of self, and links him to his group, which provides him with support and the means of survival".[27]

Likewise, in the Somali context, clan identity and belonging provide clan members with "support and the means of survival," as well as dignity, honor, and pride. Wars, raids, vendetta killings, politics, and rebel uprisings are all carried out in the name, on behalf of, and in the service of the clan or sub-clan's agency and grievances.

"Psychoanalytic group psychology"[28] enhances the understanding of large-group psychology and the dynamics of "collective mental life"[29] in a volatile and

---

26 Michael Hogg – Cecilia Ridgeway, "Social Identity: Sociological and Social Psychological Perspectives", *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66 (2), 2003, p. 97.

27 Volkan Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: A Developmental Approach", *Political Psychology*, 6 (2), 1985, p. 243.

28 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 226.

29 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 219-247.

violence-prone context, such as Cyprus, where the violence of Turks and Greeks is prevalent. In such a regressive and violent context, group, ethnic, or clan cohesion becomes solidified and crystallized. In their empirical psychological studies, Adam Waytz and Liane Young establish that "group cohesion appears to be strongly related to attributions of group mind".[30] The stronger the group mind and group consciousness, the stronger the cohesive, reciprocal, and mechanistic solidarity among group members, and vice versa. Sigmund Freud's thesis that "love relationships, libidinal ties, constitute the essence of the group mind"[31] holds that the cohesiveness of the group, or collectivity, is predicated on and sustained by the consciousness of belonging to a particular group. Sigmund Freud argues that man:

> The mere fact that he forms part of an organized group is enough to place a man several rungs lower on the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian - that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings.[32]

Another aspect of collectivities and large groups, such as nations, ethnic groups, tribes, and clans, is their propensity for unleashing violence against the "others" or members of the out-group. Volkan laments and argues that there is an:

> "inescapable developmental phenomenon: man's need to identify some people as allies and others as enemies. This need evolves from the individual's efforts to protect his sense of self, which is intertwined with his experience of ethnicity, nationality, and other identifying circumstances".[33]

Similarly, Carl Jung conceptualizes the relationship between group belonging and the propensity toward mass/mob violence toward the other, or "enemy". He states that "a group experience takes place on a lower level of consciousness than the experience of an individual… If it is a very large group, the collective psyche will be more like the psyche of an animal….The psychology of a large crowd

30 Adam Waytz - Liane Young, "The Group-Member Mind Trade-Off: Attributing Mind to Groups Versus Group Members", *Psychological Science*, 23 (1), 2012, p. 80.

31 Marlin, "Group Psychology in the Totalitarian System", p. 45.

32 Sigmund Freud, *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego,* trans. J. Strachey, W. W. Norton. 1940, (Original work published 1921) p. 36.

33 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 219.

inevitably sinks to the level of mob psychology".[34] Group belonging has both its positive and negative dimensions. Ibn Khaldun theorizes the functionality of *Asabiyah* as a necessity to existence and collective unity in politics and statehood. He writes, "the question arises….what causes such differences as do exist, some incitement for the desire for cooperation to exist on a larger scale among some human beings than among others. Only thus can large states have originated".[35]

Nevertheless, our capacity for violence against the "other" is a product of this group-belonging and "group narcissism,"[36] which is aimed at maintaining, furnishing, and sustaining both individual and group self-esteem and right to existence in situations of political conflict. The "other" is always seen as a source of potential threat and danger. Furthermore, the "other" can be assigned to members of the in-group who are considered challenging to authority, collective consensus, and the norms and traditions of the larger group.

Olga Marlin argues that "the more a group is disturbed, the more central to its dynamics are activations of psychotic (infantile) anxiety and defenses against it".[37] Infantile conscious and unconscious emotions such as discomfort, fear, anger, sadness, and anxiety are triggered and become manifest if group rivalry, hostilities, and enmities occasion a socio-political crisis. To maintain, protect, and establish the groups' identity, honor, pride, dignity, and self-esteem vis-à-vis other groups, horrendous violence can be unleashed and even deemed an existential necessity. Volkan observes that "from a phenomenological point of view, then members of the ethnic group may be seen to share some primal sentiments. Under stress, they kill others or die themselves to sell themselves to such sentiments".[38] More crucially, Vamik Volkan argues that due to these primal, infantile, and oedipal sentiments, large groups are vulnerable to the control and mobilization by narcissistic leaders and grandiose ideologies. He explains that "oedipal influences are sought in social institutions because of the obvious parental structure they embody; the leader of the group, be he a president, a pope, or a general, clearly represents a father figure"[39] to be obeyed, followed, admired, and emulated. The totalitarian leader, the rebel leader, and the warlord are all oedipal father figures

34 Carl Jung, *The archetypes and the collective unconscious,* trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 240.

35 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history*, trans. F. Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 47.

36 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 236.

37 Marlin, "Group Psychology in the Totalitarian System", p. 48.

38 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 241.

39 Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies", p. 229.

that captivate, mobilize, and direct group members' sentiments and minds. We are all embedded in a group, be it a nation, an ethnicity, a tribe, a clan, a movement, a political party, a religion, or an academic school of thought.

Large-group psychology and psychoanalytic theory, which highlight the emotional and unconscious aspects of collective action, can provide a deeper understanding of the Somali civil conflict and its ongoing cycles of violence today. The prevalence of clan identification and sentiments in Somali society, which serves as a survival strategy in a dangerous setting and a symbolic family-communal unit, fostered the development of what I would term "clan mind" - a powerful psychological concept that promotes loyalty, aggressiveness, and social cohesiveness. As shown by Freud, Volkan, and others, the propensity to demonize the out-group and idealize the in-group is exacerbated when trauma, threat, and loss cause the fusion of individual identity with group affiliation. Violence against imagined enemies - both internal dissidents and external rivals - becomes not only feasible but also essential for maintaining psychological balance and collective dignity and identity as a result of this emotional turmoil during wars and violence. Furthermore, charismatic and authoritarian leaders frequently emerge during crises as "parental" figures who represent and channel the group's anger, fear, and need for retribution and protection. Therefore, the Somali civil war experience is not just one of failed statehood or resource rivalry; rather, it is a psychological battleground where oedipal attachments, primordial fears, and historical grievances come together to create a violent and deeply ingrained culture of group identification and targeting. Any real attempt at reconciliation and long-term peacebuilding in Somalia must take into account these psychological undercurrents from the past.

Methodology and Fieldwork

This study's methodology and fieldwork strategy were thoughtfully created to capture the intricacy, complexity, and very personal character of the lived experiences of the Somali civil war. The research's emphasis on collective narratives, memory, historical trauma, and personal narratives made a mix of ethnography and narrative analysis the most suitable method for studying historical violence. By emphasizing the perspectives and experiences of those most impacted, this multi-methodological approach enabled a thorough investigation of the sociopolitical processes of the civil conflict. Together with oral history documentation, ethnographic methods provide a framework for compiling rich, in-depth narratives of the years 1991–2006, including survivors' recollections and post-memories. By prioritizing interviewees' anonymity and emotional

safety, this methodological overlap not only deepened and authenticated the data but also ensured ethical sensitivity, allowing respondents to share even the most traumatic and agonizing experiences of the Somali civil war.

A research methodology is determined or informed by the nature of the subject matter of the research. Given the nature of the subject matter and the objectives and aims we aspire to achieve, my research methodology combines and overlaps ethnography and narrative analysis. The Ethnographic method and narrative analysis are two interrelated methodological research techniques. In their book, *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice,* Anna Sheftel and S. Zembrzceyski argue that a combination of oral history and ethnographic fieldwork is appropriate and efficient for conducting research on past traumatic historical events, in their case, Bosnia and Herzegovina.[40] Hence, the nature of our subject matter and the complexity of the research necessitate an innovative, inter-methodological approach to data collection and analysis.

While collecting the research data, we used ethnographic techniques and oral history documentation methodology. These two research methods offered ample techniques in collecting the lived experiences, accounts, stories, histories, memories, and post-memories of the civil war between 1991 and 2006. After completing the ethnographic fieldwork, narrative analysis was the most efficient approach to analyzing the collected interviews and histories. Interviewees' narratives were rigorously transcribed and documented. For ethical considerations and to protect the privacy and identity of our interviewees, we assigned each of them a new name. By informing the interviewees that their identities would be kept confidential, we encouraged them to share painful, traumatic, and tragic stories with us.

"I Joined the Militia to Protect my Clan and Our Women"

The interviews collected for this study offer a personal and complex look at people's experiences during the Somali civil war, showing how ordinary people dealt with, rationalized, and persevered through the bloodshed, mayhem, and breakdown of societal order after 1991. These 27 interviews, gathered through ethnographic fieldwork and oral history techniques, represent a diverse range of viewpoints, including those of former militia members, civilian survivors, community elders, and political advisors. Each interview provides a distinct perspective on the conflict's psychosocial and political dynamics. Their accounts

40 Anna Sheftel - Stacey Zembrzycki, *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 128-132.

reveal how involvement in and reactions to the battle violence were influenced by clan affiliation, terror, survival, retaliation, and honor. Instead of offering a single story, the interviews emphasize the communal experiences, emotional wounds, and moral dilemmas that continue to shape Somalis' understanding of their history. In a society still dealing with the effects of war, these voices are presented and examined in this part not just as historical facts but also as essential manifestations of trauma, identity, and disputed reality.

Musa, who is in his fifties, took part in the Somali civil war as a combatant. When the state collapsed in 1991, the father of eight, who now lives in Garissa, joined a militia in Kismayo. "The USC rebels were killing people, and that is when I decided to join the militia. I didn't want to kill or rob people of their wealth and property. I joined the militia to protect my clan and our women. Aideed and his men wanted to avenge what had happened to them and what Siad Barre had done to the Hawiyes. That was the condition in the country at the time. People had arms, and people were being killed everywhere in the country. There was tragedy and pain in the whole country, and there was nothing that could be done about it," he narrated.[41] Isaaq is a forex trader in Eastleigh, Nairobi. Now in his late sixties, he was quite hesitant to talk about the warlords and militias in Somalia during the civil war. "The armed rebels and the militias didn't invade Somalia, and they didn't come from other countries. These were people who were mobilized and wanted to protect themselves from the tyrannical government. And when the civil war started, everybody wanted to protect their land and their people. The whole country was chaotic and problematic at the time. You cannot imagine what the situation was". Isaaq explained in a definitive voice and aura.[42]

I asked Isaaq about the atrocities committed by the warlords and their militias in Somalia. "*Burburkii masiiboyinkii dhacay ayeey ka mid yihiin* (they are part of the catastrophes that happened during the destruction of the country). There was no government, no normalcy, and no law. They were armed and could do whatever they wanted. They were the ones who controlled the whole country, and they did many wrong things," Isaaq answered.[43] Nadiifo, a milk seller in Beled Xaawo, narrated how warlord militias murdered her younger brother in 1996. "My brother was killed. He was killed very badly by the militia of Barre Hiirale. There was nothing he did to them; he was a charcoal trader. He took charcoal all the way to Kismayo. He was killed because he refused to pay them. They killed

41 Interview with Musa, 12 January 2024.

42 Interview with Isaaq, 19 December 2023.

43 Interview with Isaaq.

him because of money and greed," she narrated as she struggled to maintain her composure and calmness.[44] Previously, I asked Nadiifo how the militias and their warlords emerged. She explained, "Our country broke down, and there was war everywhere. People and communities fought each other as clans and families. The other things, all the arms of the government, were taken and stolen by civilians. Everybody had weapons, and these warlords took advantage of that. They were people with authority and power. People will listen to them and what they say.[45] Nuux was part of the militia of Barre Hiirale, a warlord who controlled the port city of Kismayo and what is now the Jubaland federal state in the 90s and early 2000s. "In the first place, there was war and violence, there was killing and massacres everywhere. And everybody ran away to their land. Marehan was attacked and killed by all the clans. If you are Marehan, that means you could be killed. Majeerteen, Hawiye, and all of Rahanweeyn were attacking and killing us. That is when I joined Barre Hiirale and his men. There was war, and there was no government. Every community had to protect itself," he narrated in an indifferent voice and gaze.[46]

Ismail was a close advisor to the warlord, Mohamed Farah Aidid. "We took the arms to fight and remove from power the old man, Siad Barre. That was the reason. Our aim was not to disturb the peace or harm any person. But the fight against the regime turned into clan warfare. The situation changed, and people who had been allies became enemies. And if there is war, bad things happen. It is my prayer that what happened will not happen again in Somalia," Ismail narrated.[47] Muumin blamed warlords and political leaders for the troubles during the civil war. "Our country was destroyed by warlords who were crazy and bloodthirsty and politicians who couldn't agree to bring peace and share power. Siad Barre was removed from power, and he fled the country. Then what happened? Those who fought him and deposed him started killing each other. What is worse than that is that they started targeting the poor civilians," Muumin narrated.[48] Yasin explained how militias and warlords emerged in the Bay and Bakool regions. "At the beginning, the Rahaweyn clan did not have a properly armed group. We took the arms because of the crimes and injustice done to our people. Hawiye and Aidid militia massacred our people, and the Marehans also killed many of our people. These clans were armed because they took the government's weapons

44 Interview with Nadiifo, 7 March 2024.
45 Interview with Nadiifo.
46 Interview with Nuux, 8 March 2024.
47 Interview with Ismail, 22 December 2023.
48 Interview with Muumin, 25 December 2023.

and arms. They were powerful and more motivated. When that happened to our people, we resisted and also mobilized our men and took arms," Yasin said.[49]

Moreover, memories of political violence under the military regime of Maxamed Siad Barre are similarly framed through moral and social interpretations that emphasize authoritarian order rather than mere repression. Two of my recent interlocutors distinguish Barre's violence from both warlordism and insurgency by situating it within a centralized state project that sought to discipline society in the name of Somali nationalism and revolution. Abdikarin Muse, a retired civil servant from Mogadishu, recalled that "Siyaad Barre ruled with fear, prisons, and executions, but everything came from the state; violence had an address and a uniform, and it was explained that it was for order and state protection. The state continues to live by violence, which is the paradox. When the state collapses, violence becomes chaotic; violence has to be managed by a state, this is the problem we have in Somalia".[50] From a sociological perspective, such recollections highlight how state violence is remembered not only for its brutality but also for its claim to legality and modern governance. Unlike later forms of fragmented violence, Barre's coercion is recalled as bureaucratic, ideologically articulated, and oriented toward producing obedient citizens rather than extracting resources.

Another interviewee stressed the ambivalent legacy of this violence, oscillating between condemnation and nostalgia. Hodan Warsame, who grew up in Hargeisa in the 1980s, emphasized the collective trauma of aerial bombardment and mass displacement: "The government said it was defending the nation, but it also destroyed entire cities and communities. " That violence still lives in our bodies, in our memories, the reason we are divided as a people is because of that violence".[51] In contrast, Maxamed Qeys, a former teacher, remarked that "people feared the state, but there was order; you knew the limits of what to do, even if they were cruel. It is better to have a violent state than to have a broken country. Look at Ethiopia, they have a murderous state, but at least it exists and functions".[52] Sociologically, these accounts suggest that Barre's violence is remembered as a form of sovereign power that simultaneously produced fear and predictability. Its collapse is thus interpreted by many not simply as liberation, but as the opening of a moral vacuum in which violence became privatized, personalized, and stripped of any overarching political project and of widespread support.

---

49 Interview with Yasin, 16 December 2023.

50 Interview with Abdikarin Muse, 3 December 2025, Via WhatsApp.

51 Interview with Hodan Warsame, 19 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.

52 Interview with Maxamed Qeys, 17 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.

"They Robbed our Goods, and they Cut my Left Ear as a Punishment."

The interviews included here are incredibly moving and intimate accounts that shed light on the daily struggles of violence, terror, and fortitude faced by Somali people at the height of the civil war. These testimonies, which are told by shopkeepers, cab drivers, pastoralists, and victims' relatives, show how warlord militias and clan rebel groups brutally ruled over villages and towns, upsetting livelihoods and causing severe physical and mental suffering. These accounts reveal the wider social and economic breakdown that influenced life in Somalia at this tumultuous time, in addition to the widespread predation, kidnapping, and clan-based targeting that defined the conflict in the early 1990s. The interviews offer crucial insights into the human consequences of warlordism and its violence, and the long-lasting wounds inflicted on Somali society by focusing on individual tales of survival and suffering.

Abdullahi is a shoe trader in Eastleigh, Nairobi. In 1998, he and other traders were robbed of their goods, and since he was the one pleading the most, the militias cut off the upper part of his left ear. "It was the rainy season in late 1998. My father was alive, and I was the one who would accompany the lorries from Mogadishu to Beled Xaawo. The roads were unpassable, and all the lorries carrying goods were in a long line. They came to us in the afternoon, took all the money we had, and carried away any portable, valuable goods. I was young then, and I could not easily accept what was happening to us. I was arguing with them and pleaded with them. One of them, and I will never forget that man, hit the back side of his gun to my belly. I fell in pain. All I remember is that one of them sat on me to hold me to the ground. They robbed our goods, and they cut off my left ear as a punishment," Abdullahi explained.[53] Maryam's cousin was abducted by the militia of a powerful warlord in Mogadishu in 2001. "The men of Qanyara Afrah took the young lady. There was a house they used as a base and as a police station, where they held her for one month. We don't know what happened to her, and she never talked about anything. We later learned that one of them loved her, and they were talking. She refused him, because he used drugs and even alcohol. And then he abducted and took her away," Maryam narrated the ordeals of her cousin.[54]

Abdiaziz was a taxi driver in Mogadishu. After delaying the money he was supposed to pay to a local militia leader, one afternoon, he came under a hail of bullets. "We Raxanweeyns suffered a lot in Mogadishu during that time. One of them wanted to kill me. I had a good taxi, and I was making a lot of money. One

53 Interview with Abdullahi, 25 December 2023.

54 Interview with Maryam, 18 December 2023.

month, I didn't pay them. They were angry and not happy with me. I remember it was Friday. When I passed their checkpoint, they fired several times at me, and I drove away very fast . All the windows were broken, and the engine was badly damaged. Only God saved me," Abdiaziz narrated as he sipped his camel milk tea.[55] Ceebla narrated how a rival clan militia attacked her mother's shop to settle a vendetta. "We were told one of them was killed accidentally by a young man who was our close relative. That day, we even heard that somebody had been killed, but we didn't know the details of what had happened. Our shop was located on the main road; my elder brothers used to sell it, and my mother would occasionally be with them. They wanted to kill our boys. They sprayed the entrance and the front side with bullets. We thank God nobody was killed, but my mother got injured in the ankle. They wanted to massacre everybody. That miracle happened to my family,"[56] she said with a bit of a smile.

Abdirasak, who is a Kenyan citizen, was abducted by a clan militia while he was grazing his animals across the border in Beled Xaawo, Somalia. It was 1996. "In the first place, there was war between Aidiid and the Marehans. We could hear the gunfire for days, but we thought it was Marehans killing each other—Danba *kama galin anaga* (We didn't care). We took our camels to a well on the other side of the border. We found armed men and many cars in the well. They asked our clan, and I told them we were Murulle. One of them immediately slapped me. *Calaa yata xaal* (all in all), we were beaten very badly, and they took all the camels. They broke the hand of one of my young maternal nephews. All the camels, 27 of them, were taken from us,"[57] Abdirazak narrated. Fauzia's father was killed in Mogadishu when she was a teenager. According to her, Musa Sudi Yahia's militia killed her father. The warlord Musa Sudi Yalahow controlled swaths of districts in Mogadishu. "My father was killed because of his clan. He was Hawadle, and he was killed because he was Hawadle. He was a trader in Bakaare. He used to take commercial goods to Beled Weyne and Jalalaqsi. They robbed him in Balad and then shot him, because they knew he would take revenge,"[58] Fauzia narrated. I asked Fauzia if the people who killed her father had been identified, since they knew their warlord. "They never accept that they killed a person. They protect each other and what they do to people. That is the *Mooryaan* (thugs) rule and code," she added.[59]

55 Interview with Abdiaziz, 28 December 2023.
56 Interview with Ceebla, 16 March 2024.
57 Interview with Abdirazak, 20 March 2024.
58 Interview with Fauzia, 5 January 2024.
59 Interview with Fauzia.

In the current landscape of political violence in Somalia, many local interlocutors interpret Al-Shabaab's practices through the historical memory of the warlordism era of the 1990s, emphasizing continuity rather than rupture. As Jeelle, an elder from Baardheere, explained, Al-Shabaab's methods of killing, coercion, and expropriation resemble those of earlier militias who ruled through fear: "Al-Shabaab are not different from the warlords who used to kill people and rob them of their wealth, but they do it in the name of religion, and you cannot protest to their rule".[60] From an anthropological perspective, this comparison highlights how violence is understood locally not merely as an armed tactic but as a moral and social practice embedded in everyday life. What distinguishes Al-Shabaab in Jeelle's account is not the nature of violence itself, but its justification and organization. At the same time, warlords were remembered as "chaotic and confused," Al-Shabaab's authority is perceived as disciplined, hierarchical, and militarized, drawing legitimacy from Islamic idioms that foreclose dissent and transform coercion into an unquestionable moral order.

This view was echoed by other interviewees who framed Al-Shabaab as a continuation of warlordism reconfigured through religious governance. Asha, a middle-aged trader in Baardheere market, said that "the warlords took at gunpoint, but at least you could negotiate or flee; with Al-Shabaab, they say it is God's law, so resistance becomes a sin. And when they kill people, that is final, there is nothing you can do about it."[61] Similarly, Cabdi Yaroow, a former militia member now working as a farmer, remarked that "the warlords fought each other for clans and money. Still, Al-Shabaab fights like a state army, with rules, courts, and punishments. They say they are fighting the foreigners like the Kenyan and the Ethiopian army, but actually, they are fighting the Somali people. Because we cannot have peace because of their violence".[62] From a sociological standpoint, these observations suggest that Al-Shabaab has institutionalized violence, embedding it within bureaucratic and moral frameworks that render it more predictable yet more pervasive. Fadumo, a teacher displaced from a nearby village, added that "discipline and blind indoctrination are what make them dangerous; everyone knows the punishment, and fear becomes part of daily routine and indifference to people. They kill and beat people whenever they send assassins to kill community elders or anyone suspected of working with the government".[63] Finally, Sheekh Xasan, a local religious leader, emphasized the

60 Interview with Jeelle, 2 December 2025, Via WhatsApp.

61 Interview with Asha, 27 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.

62 Interview with Cabdi Yaroow, 3 December 2025, Via WhatsApp.

63 Interview with Fadumo, 29 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.

symbolic power of militarized piety: "They wear religion like a uniform, and that uniform gives their violence a different weight. They think they are right, but they have destroyed our religion and our country".[64] Taken together, these accounts illustrate how Al-Shabaab's authority is locally understood as a hybrid form of rule: combining the predatory logics of past warlords with the organizational coherence and mimicry of a military institution.

Furthermore, how do Somalis view piracy? Somalis' views on maritime piracy, particularly during its peak in the late 2000s, are narrated through yet another moral register, one that frames violence as opportunistic and economically driven rather than ideological or statist. Cabdi Samatar, a fisherman from Eyl, explained that "the young men who became pirates were not criminals at first. They said they were defending our seas, but money changed everything. People here are poor, and fish numbers are declining because these ships dump chemicals into the water. That is how piracy started".[65] Piracy is often interpreted locally as emerging from dispossession, that is, illegal fishing, toxic dumping, and the collapse of livelihoods, before it mutated into a predatory economy. Unlike Al-Shabaab or the Barre regime, pirates are rarely seen as seeking to rule territory or reshape society. Their violence is understood as episodic, transactional, and ransom-oriented.

This view was reinforced by other interlocutors who emphasized the social consequences of piracy for coastal communities. Nasra Adan, a women's activist in Garowe, noted that "piracy brought sudden wealth, guns, drugs, and moral breakdown. It destroyed families more than it protected them. Many poor fishermen who were not pirates were arrested by foreign military ships for piracy. Fishing in Puntland decreased, and families became poor".[66] Similarly, Abdirashid Bare, a former pirate now working as a mechanic, reflected that "we did not believe in a cause, only survival and getting money for our families after the sea was poisoned by these big ships. Many of my friends were arrested, and they are in jails in Kenya or Seychelles. We are the victims here, our land and sea have been poisoned and our lives destroyed".[67] From a sociological standpoint, these narratives position piracy as a form of violent entrepreneurship embedded in global political economies rather than local political authority. Taken together, Somali interpretations of Barre's repression and piracy reveal a nuanced moral

64 Interview with Sheekh Xasan, 4 December 2025, Via WhatsApp.
65 Interview with Cabdi Samatar, 15 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.
66 Interview with Nasra Adan, 13 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.
67 Interview with Abdirashid Bare, 11 November 2025, Via WhatsApp.

taxonomy of violence that distinguishes between state terror, ideological insurgency, and economic predation, and each is remembered through its distinct effects on social order, legitimacy, and everyday life.

Warlordism, Clan Loyalty, and Survival: Ethnographic Voices from the Somali Civil War

One of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history occurred during the Somali civil war (1991–2006), which was characterized by the disintegration of the Somali state, the disintegration of social order, and the emergence of violent warlord militias. Following the overthrow of General Mohammed Siad Barre's military rule, Somalia slipped into anarchy, with clan loyalty serving as the main source of identification, security, and survival. Armed militias quickly filled the void left by the state's absence, operating with impunity and establishing authority through economic exploitation, brutality, and fear. The lived realities of this chaotic era are shown through 27 ethnographic interviews collected through fieldwork and oral history, showing how common Somalis dealt with, justified, and survived the cruelty of clan strife and warlordism.

One of the findings of this research is that clan protection promoted the logic of militia membership. The motivation for joining militias - to defend one's tribe and community from unrelenting violence - recurs often throughout the interviews. Musa, a former Kismayo militia member, describes how he joined his local militia in a desperate attempt to defend his people - especially the weaker women – from rival militias and rebel groups, not out of cruelty or greed. His testimony shows that many combatants faced a moral difficulty because they saw their conduct as protective rather than predatory. In the same vein, Isaaq, a forex trader based in Nairobi, emphasizes that militias were internally organized groups attempting to protect themselves amid the state's breakdown and turmoil, rather than external invaders.

The clan-based social structure of Somalia, where clan loyalty and identity take precedence over national identification, is firmly rooted in this logic of defense. The first struggle was against tyranny and authoritarianism. Still, it swiftly turned into clan warfare, as Ismail, a counselor to warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid, noted, demonstrating how brittle and malleable political relationships might become after state collapse. As national unity broke down, communities turned to family and clan networks for protection, thereby exacerbating violence and division. Hence, this study shows that violence becomes both a survival and a terror tool at the same time. Although some militia members, such as Musa, saw their involvement as protecting, civilian testimonies highlight the frequently violent

results of warlordism's unbridled authority. Nadiifo, who lost her brother to the militia of Barre Hiirale, describes a needless murder driven more by extortion and greed than by political objectives. Her account strikingly contrasts the apparent protective reasoning with the violent reality of predation and exploitation. The random murders, abductions, and looting were not isolated events; rather, they were a component of a larger breakdown in which warlords and their militias used fear to maintain authority.

The horrific story of Abdullahi's ear being severed during a militia heist serves as an example of the brutality that citizens faced. These mutilation practices acted as warnings and penalties, ingraining terror into daily existence. Ceebla's account of how her mother's store was stormed to resolve a clan feud highlights how violence influenced social and economic interactions, upsetting livelihoods and endangering fundamental security. These instances of clan cleansing, comparable to ethnic cleansing, reveal how clan identities were weaponized to justify specific atrocities. Moreover, this research emphasizes the social and psychological toll of civil war conflict. Together, the testimonies highlight the severe psychological and societal harm caused by warlordism, which extends beyond acts of physical violence. Many respondents report a persistent sense of sadness, mistrust, and terror. Civilians were trapped in a never-ending crossfire, their lives hanging in the balance between survival and death, as demonstrated by Abdiaziz's near escape from a barrage of gunshots at a militia checkpoint. Fauzia's account of her father's clan-based murder demonstrates how identification itself turned into a sign of vulnerability, causing significant rifts among groups.

These incidents left a traumatizing impact that goes beyond the end of the war. Somali society was divided, leading to the erosion of social trust and the deterioration of traditional safeguards. The war's bloodshed upended families, but so too did the moral foundation that had formerly bound communities together. According to several accounts, the warlords functioned under a system of impunity known as "Mooryaan", or "thug-rule", in which there was no accountability and atrocities went unpunished. This political culture and heritage still plague Somali politics and social interactions. Furthermore, this research analyzes the interplay between clan identity and political power. The ethnographic narratives also show how clan identification evolved into a means of political manipulation as well as a source of resiliency. Instead of erasing national identity, the fall of the central state increased the significance of clans as the main political and social groupings. Numerous militias formed from certain clan constituencies and used kinship networks to gain control. This dynamic is highlighted by Yasin's analysis

of how the Rahaweyn clan armed itself to fend off massacres by rival militias. Armed organizations proliferated along clan lines, deepening social divides that made peacebuilding extremely challenging.

Warlords and political leaders used clan consciousness to rally support and justify their rule, but this often led to further division and strife. Muumin's denunciation of politicians and warlords for sustaining violence and failing to share power demonstrates a general lack of faith in leadership. Thus, the warlordism that ruled Somalia at the time was a sign of unresolved conflicts between diverse clans and regional governments, as well as a symptom of the state's collapse. Humanizing the history of war is one of the study's objectives. These interviews put the human realities of war - its hardships, conundrums, and complexities - front and center, transcending abstract political and theoretical interpretations. They make clear how survival, loyalty, retaliation, and power were linked and influenced both individual and group behavior. The stories illustrate the moral quandaries that many people torn between being a victim and a perpetrator must face, reflecting a world in which roles frequently overlapped, and moral clarity was elusive. The testimonials also show how memories of violence still shape Somali identity and politics. The trauma is a living presence that affects social relationships, political claims, and attempts at reconciliation; it is not limited to the past. Any genuine peacebuilding process must acknowledge these individual and societal wounds, since it must address the psychological and social aftereffects of violence in addition to political and security issues.

Ethnographic accounts from the Somali civil war era offer essential insight into the daily realities of violence, clan allegiance, and warlordism. These narratives show how a deadly cycle of clan-based militias that used violence and terror to establish authority, upend livelihoods, and splinter society was unleashed after the collapse of official institutions in 1991. The tales of both fighters and survivors highlight the war's human cost by illuminating the intricate relationships among identity, survival, and power amid turmoil. In addition to historical data, these voices advocate for a more complex perspective on Somalia's turbulent history, one that accounts for the social upheavals and psychological scars that now impede the country's progress toward reconciliation, healing, and rebuilding.

Conclusion

The 1991–2006 Somali civil war is regarded as one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the 20th century, leaving a lasting and profound mark on Somali society and its politics. Decades of vicious intra-clan and factional warfare, characterized by widespread atrocities committed by rebel groups, militias, and warlords, were

unleashed as a result of the violent repression under General Mohammed Siad Barre's military regime. The Somali people, particularly those who stayed in the heart of the chaos instead of escaping, were severely traumatized by this era of unrelenting violence, which was marked by killings, forced displacements, and frequent famines. Individual memories, as well as broader social and political discourse in Somalia and its diaspora, have been shaped by these collective tragedies, woven into the very fabric of Somali identity and consciousness. Clan allegiance and militia protection were frequently necessary for survival in an atmosphere where societal trust was eroded by the continuation of clan-based violence and the breakdown of official state institutions after 1991. As a result, the stories and recollections of the civil war are more than just historical accounts; they are dynamic forces that continue to shape Somali politics, identity development, and ties among Somali clans. Recognizing the profound psychological scars that people and communities bear, the ethical ambiguities that frequently exist between victims and perpetrators, and the long-lasting effects of warlordism's brutal social exploitation are all necessary to comprehend this complicated legacy. These revelations show that Somalia's historical trauma remains present today, catalyzing separation and instability, and serving as a vital focal point for any attempts to promote healing and long-term peace in the country.

References

Abdi, Cawo Mohammed, "Convergence of Civil War and the Religious Right: Reimagining Somali Women", *Signs,* 33 (1), 2003; https://doi.org/10.1086/518393.

Adam, Hussein M, "Somalia: Militarism, Warlordism or Democracy?", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 54, 1992; http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006165.

Ahram, Ariel I., - Charles, King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur", *Theory and Society,* 41 (2), 2012; http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349129.

Besteman, Catherine, "Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: The Dissolution of the Somali Nation-State", *American Ethnologist,* 23 (3), 1996; http://www.jstor.org/stable/646353.

Freud, Sigmund, *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego,* trans. J. Strachey, W. W. Norton. 1940, (Original work published 1921).

Hansen, Stig, "Warlords, Patrimonialism and Ethnicity", *Peace Research,* 35 (2), 2003; https://www.jstor.org/stable/23608051.

Hogg, Michael - Ridgeway, Cecilia, "Social Identity: Sociological and Social Psychological Perspectives", *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66 (2), 2003; https://www.jstor.org/stable/1519841.

Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history,* trans. F. Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, 1969.

Jung, Carl, *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1959.

Lary, Diana, "Warlord Studies", *Modern China*, 6 (4), 1980; http://www.jstor.org/stable/189036.

Marchal, Roland, "Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis? The Case of Somalia", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-),* 83 (6), 2007; https://www.jstor.org/stable/4541912.

Marlin, Olga, "Group Psychology in the Totalitarian System: A Psychoanalytic View", *Group*, 14 (1), 1990; http://www.jstor.org/stable/41718543.

McCormick, Gordon - Lindsay Fritz, "The Logic of Warlord Politics", *Third World Quarterly,* 30 (1); https://www.jstor.org/stable/40388103.

Samatar, Abdi, "Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention", *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 30 (4), 1992; http://www.jstor.org/stable/161268.

Sheftel, Anna - Zembrzycski, Stacey, *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Shultz, Richard, "State Disintegration and Ethnic Conflict: A Framework for Analysis", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 541, 1995; https://www.jstor.org/stable/1048276.

Volkan, Vamık, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: A Developmental Approach", *Political Psychology*, 6 (2), 1985; https://doi.org/10.2307/3790902.

Waytz, Adam - Young, Liane, "The Group-Member Mind Trade-Off: Attributing Mind to Groups Versus Group Members", *Psychological Science*, 23 (1), 2012; https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416996.

Weber, Max, *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth - C. W. Mills, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1946.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank my PhD thesis supervisors, Prof. Ramazan Aras, Prof. Irfan Ahmad, and Prof. Ali Aslan for their support, encouragements and guidance.

Funding: Not applicable

Declarations:

Ethics approval and consent to participate. Approved by Ibn Haldun University Graduate School.

Clinical trial declaration: Not applicable.

Consent for publication: Not applicable.

Competing interests: The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı

Araştırmanın her aşamasından yazar sorumludur.

Çatışma Beyanı

Araştırmada herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.