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Policy Paper

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The Virtual Battlefield

Digital Clanism and Conflict in Somalia



KEY MESSAGES



Somalia's conflict dynamics are increasingly shaped by digital clan mobilisation.



Social media transforms clan identity into a rapid mobilisation tool across regions and the diaspora.



Political elites and online influencers use digital platforms to frame conflict and mobilise support.



Diaspora networks amplify narratives, funding, and engagement that sustain conflict.



Online mobilisation has direct offline security consequences.



Misinformation and polarising content erode trust and weaken governance.



Current responses focus too much on traditional security and neglect digital drivers.



Effective stabilisation requires digital governance, platform accountability, and federal–regional coordination.



OVERVIEW

Digital platforms are no longer neutral spaces in Somalia. They actively shape conflict dynamics, clan mobilisation, and political contestation across communities and borders. This paper examines how online narratives, networks, and technologies drive violence and undermine governance—and why policy responses must address the online dimension of conflict to achieve lasting stability.

Introduction

In all contexts where there is conflict, the nature of the violence is becoming more focused on digitally influenced surroundings, quickly, and more dynamically integrating the elements of the social and political realm. Digital media, especially social media, are rapidly evolving to be the primary venues for building narratives, collecting and mobilizing identities, and even catalyzing the expression of social grievances. These forms of media have a nearly instantaneous and far-reaching ability to make a global audience aware of previously local happenings, which enables conflict to spread well beyond its primary borders. As a result of the influence of media on contemporary social and political relations, conflicts are becoming more complicated and the violence that is a part of them is undergoing a transformation.

Within Somalia, this transformation complements a political structure that emphasizes clan identity, accompanied by a distribution of fragmented authorities. The advancement of mobile communications and the usage of Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), have supplied new arenas of engagement for political participants, clan groupings, and diaspora communities. These mediums are not neutral; they shape the articulation of identity and the construct of conflict. Clan identity, which has been the constituent part of political organisation in Somalia, can now be digitally constructed, rapidly disseminated, challenged, and mobilised. Social media is increasingly used by the political elite and local power-holders to define events, build support, and construct their rivals as illegitimate. Moreover, diaspora members, who are often removed from the immediate local constraints, have a disproportionate role in mobilising extreme and divisive narratives, providing financial support, and concentrating the diaspora's

interest on particular cases of conflict. A transnational feedback loop is formed in which digital narratives create local conditions that lead to new local conditions that reinforce the narratives.

The relations between actors in the Horn of Africa and the international community have changed greatly from 2023 to 2026. The Las Anod conflict demonstrates the integration of digital mobilization in conflict. This case reveals the use of the internet to develop real-time mobilization of participants in civil society for clan and diaspora networks, the synthesis of the legitimacy of actors, and the dissemination of real-time information updates. The heated competition of narratives and the rapid dissemination of unverified, emotional, and hostile messages caused the conflicts to escalate and narrowed the potential for de-escalation. Most of the current political trends follow the same pattern. The rapid investment of the digital economy in electoral competition and governance disputes has created an arena where the digital platforms have become tools for mobilizing clan constituencies during electoral competition and governance disputes. Politicians, influencers, and specially organized groups use these platforms for immediate mobilization, and for this reason, there is a focus on producing digital mobilization at the expense of political truth. The direct relationship between digital participation and political and security outcomes is a growing feature of politics in the Horn of Africa.

Somalia's fragmented political system and digital platform integration creates a unique situation. Weak institutional controls, a lack of recognized authorities, and a shortage of accountability creates an environment where digital mobilization can happen freely. Polarized messages in the information space are dominated by competing actors where

there is a lack of trusted, consistent national narratives. Unconstrained digital narratives can call upon a segmented populace to do the previously inconceivable. The digital environment does not merely show current situations; it creates and incorporates tension among a broader range of the involved actors.

This paper argues that digital clanism is not merely a by-product of Somalia's ongoing conflicts; it has become a major mechanism through which political grievances are framed, clan identities are mobilized, and security outcomes are intensified.

Key Findings

The Impact of the Internet on Clan Identity

The Internet has the potential to transform vertical social hierarchies into decentralized social movements. For instance, in Somalia, the Internet has shifted an established social pillar into an instrument that enables rapid mobilization. In the online space, social identities can be continuously produced. Content that promotes grievances or threats and amplifies social responsibility will cycle through online forums. In many instances, the protection of social interests or the rights of the social group will damage the online interest in the social group. The proximity of the Internet enables simultaneous social acts. In many instances, the Internet can be used to identify or define an unresolved social or political conflict. Internet-based mobilization can undermine social and political negotiation among different clans.

Political use of the Web

Digital platforms are an essential part of contemporary political strategy. Digital spaces not only help in the structuring of political competition, but they also actively assist in shaping political legitimacy. The use of social media by political agents has increased. Social media is now used as a forum to reshape political engagement. Messaging is tailored to specific audiences. These audiences are often thought of as 'clans' or 'clan constituencies'. Political messages are often designed to frame issues in a contest. Competition, especially political competition, is often framed in terms of a contest for representation, domination, and control of resources. Institutional politics reflect parliamentary negotiations. Digital spaces are now used for political contestations. These spaces are essentially unregulated or minimally regulated. The lack of accountability is a significant problem in these spaces. The nature of digital engagement also encourages escalation and hasty responses. The speed, visibility, and emotional intensity of digital engagement increase the risk of escalation, encourage hasty responses, and reduce incentives for compromise.. Digital platforms encourage political engagement and reduce the incentive to compromise. This engagement has the potential to destroy the integrity of traditional institutions, especially those that are the authoritative sources of political processes.

War Influencers" and the Diaspora

Influencers and diaspora networks connect local aspects of a conflict to the global flow of information, resources, and policy advocacy. They work in a world separate from conflict actors, characterized by a different set of motivations and constraints. While conflict actors are subject to the immediate dangers of the situation, diaspora members may not be, and they have a great deal of political and social influence and therefore may adopt risky positions. Influencers amplify their positions, and diaspora members have significant interpretative power surrounding a situation, and they explain who is to blame and what should be done. Influencers also aid in the resource mobilization efforts— diaspora social networks may contain the most resources, and within a modern context, they provide the fastest way to mobilize resources to conflict actors. This drives a cycle of diaspora self-determination discourses, local self-determination efforts, conflict occurrence, and reiteration of diaspora narratives. Due to the international nature of diaspora and the means in which they operate, regulating their activities becomes more complicated, and local efforts in managing and resolving conflicts are rendered ineffective.

Algorithmic Escalation and Communication Disorder

The structure of digital platforms changes the nature of conflict by promoting the most engaging content, even if it is inaccurate or destabilizing. Rafts of contentious, emotionally charged, and visually appealing content dominate, and the algorithms further amplify content that is polarizing and strengthens reactions and conflict. Under

such conditions, processed and distorted information, evidence and even reliability, circulate almost instantaneously, and may become culturally embedded and accepted before they have been publicly interrogated. This creates communication disorder and the bewilderment of competing and irreconcilable perceptions of the same event, which makes the possibility of integrating and common perceptions vanish. The combination of inadequate moderation and a lack of trust in authoritative information sources enables damaging content to establish a foothold and adversely impact an actor's behavior. The digital space, rather than being a conflict-neutral channel, has become an active conflict-augmenting space when actors respond to perceived threats or grievances due to the nature of the information. The interaction between algorithmic amplification and the structure of digital platforms creates a conflict intensifying framework, which directly relates perception and action in a manner that is extremely difficult to regulate.

Conflict Implications

The effects of digital mobilization combined with political fragmentation produce changes in security with the most notable effects seen in the sustained and worsening localized violence in several regions of Somalia. The fighting in Las Anod between the forces of Somaliland and SSC-Khatumo, has become a prolonged conflict, driven by military forces and sustained by ongoing narrative digital mobilization. Competing narratives were developed around legitimacy, casualty reporting, and control of the physical and cyber domain, creating group cohesion and sustained mobilization among the various clans and diaspora, and incorporated calls for the conflict to stop and for the violence to be de-escalated. This conflict created a perpetual state of fighting and demonstrates the

negative ability of modern digital communication to prolong conflicts.

This same scenario can be seen in Southwest State when a modern example of an internal regional conflict in the Somali federated state of Southwest State taking a violent form occurred in 2026 between the regional and the federal level of government. This example illustrates the negative ability of a modern digital communication to prolong conflicts.

In Puntland, conflict remains relatively contained, but the region shows how digital mobilization leads to fragmentation instead of confrontation. Puntland's refusal of the federal government's authority and its independent military actions, particularly against ISIS, is the result of messaging frameworks created in the media and among the diaspora. These narratives reinforce and legitimize Puntland's actions to the public and further entrench the development of a parallel security system outside of the control of the federal government. This form of digital support maintains internal stability while further fragmenting the rest of the country.

In Somaliland, the digital information campaigns of the competing political factions have influenced the protests in cities like Hargeisa and Borama. These campaigns have created political disputes based on identity and have influenced the protests taking place in these cities. Without digital support to maintain the public's political grievances, protests would end much sooner and would be less effective.

The use of digital platforms for information campaigns creates a form of protest in which the public's political grievances are bound to identity and are nearly impossible to contain. This, along with support from informal militias and the youth, creates a loss of governance and uncontrollable conflict. These campaigns undermine the government's credibility, and erode public trust in governance, creating a security environment where conflict is digitally sustained.



Somalia Conflict Case Studies and Digital–Security Outcomes

Selected conflict and political crises, 2023–2026

Case Study	Conflict Context	Digital–Security Outcome
<p>1</p> <p>Las Anod Conflict (2023–2024)</p>	<p>Armed conflict between Somaliland forces and SSC–Khatumo fighters over territorial control and political legitimacy in the Sool region. The conflict caused mass displacement and became one of the most significant clashes in northern Somalia in recent years.</p>	<p>Social media became part of the conflict infrastructure. Battlefield updates, casualty reporting, emotional imagery, and clan-based narratives circulated continuously across TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and X. Diaspora networks amplified mobilisation, fundraising, and political pressure, sustaining engagement beyond the battlefield itself.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Abudwaq–Herale Clan Conflict, Galmudug (2024)</p>	<p>Violent clashes between Dir and Marihan clan militias in central Somalia over grazing land and water resources killed dozens and exposed the fragility of local security arrangements in Galmudug.</p>	<p>Online messaging accelerated mobilisation by spreading inflammatory narratives and reinforcing clan-based grievances. Information circulated rapidly through social media and local communication networks, contributing to escalation before authorities could contain the violence.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Abudwaq Weapons Seizure Crisis, Galmudug (2024)</p>	<p>Clan militias ambushed a convoy transporting heavy weapons near Abudwaq after the lifting of the UN arms embargo, highlighting the risks of arms proliferation in fragmented security environments.</p>	<p>Digital narratives framed the seizure through clan legitimacy and security narratives. Social media discussions and diaspora commentary intensified public tensions and reinforced militia-based security logic outside formal state control.</p>
<p>4</p> <p>Puntland Clan Conflict over Elections and Political Authority (2024–2025)</p>	<p>Puntland experienced rising tensions and armed clashes linked to disputes over elections, political authority, and clan representation following constitutional and electoral disagreements. Competition between political factions and clan-based actors increased instability in parts of the region.</p>	<p>Social media amplified political grievances and clan-based mobilisation through inflammatory rhetoric, livestreams, and coordinated online messaging. Diaspora engagement and digital campaigning reinforced polarisation, hardened political positions, and accelerated mobilisation during periods of political uncertainty.</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Puntland–Federal Government Constitutional Crisis (2024)</p>	<p>Puntland rejected constitutional amendments proposed by Mogadishu and suspended cooperation of the federal government, deepening tensions over federalism and political authority.</p>	<p>Social media became a parallel political arena where competing actors framed the crisis as either a defence of federalism or an attempt at political centralisation. Clan-coded narratives and influencer messaging hardened political positions and widened distrust between Mogadishu and Puntland.</p>
<p>6</p> <p>Southwest State Crisis (Baidoa, 2026)</p>	<p>Escalating confrontation between the Federal Government of Somalia and Southwest State following disputes over constitutional reforms, mandate extensions, and federal authority. Tensions in Baidoa led to federal troop deployments, clashes, and the resignation of President Abdiiaziz Laftagareen.</p>	<p>Social media became a central arena for political confrontation. Federal and regional actors used digital platforms to frame the crisis as either a defence of constitutional federalism or an attempt at political centralisation. Clan-aligned messaging, influencer networks, and diaspora mobilisation intensified political polarisation and accelerated mobilisation beyond Baidoa itself.</p>
<p>7</p> <p>Somaliland Presidential Election and Political Tension (2024)</p>	<p>Somaliland’s presidential election intensified political competition between parties amid wider tensions connected to Las Anod and broader questions of political legitimacy and governance.</p>	<p>Online campaigns, influencer networks, and diaspora engagement amplified political polarisation and identity-based mobilisation. Digital narratives helped sustain protests, reinforce factional narratives, and increase tensions beyond formal electoral processes.</p>
<p>8</p> <p>Mogadishu Constitutional and Electoral Disputes (2024–2026)</p>	<p>National political disputes over constitutional reform, elections, and federal authority increased tensions among political elites and Federal Member States.</p>	<p>Social media platforms functioned as political battlegrounds where elites, influencers, and aligned networks mobilised supporters, delegitimised rivals, and intensified public confrontation through rapid narrative warfare and misinformation campaigns.</p>
<p>9</p> <p>Al-Shabaab Resurgence and Fragmented Security Environment (2025–2026)</p>	<p>Al-Shabaab exploited political fragmentation and weakened coordination among Somali actors to regain territory in parts of central and southern Somalia.</p>	<p>Digital propaganda, fear narratives, and fragmented information environments contributed to declining public trust and confusion. Competing political narratives weakened national cohesion and complicated</p>

This table highlights how digital ecosystems shape conflict dynamics, political mobilisation, and security outcomes across Somalia between 2023 and 2026.



Necessary Changes and Strategic Focus Areas for Enhancing Digital Conflict Management in Somalia

Responses to Somali conflict have historically prioritized physical security and politically based responses, with little focus on the digitally fueled elements of conflict, including mobilization, escalation, and polarization. Fragmentary, reactively focused responses to the online dimension of conflict have been overly concerned with content removal, neglecting the mechanisms of production and amplification of harmful content. The largely unregulated, inconsistently collaborative, and poorly aligned responses of the federal government, regional authorities, and the private sector, have constrained the potential for effective conflict management. A combination of rapid digital network responses and the lack of a widely trusted, unifying national narrative mean that polarizing digital actors have little to no restraint on their rapidly evolving digital monopolies. This, coupled with the unprecedented speed with which digital networks facilitate conflict escalation, outpaces the ability of formal systems to respond in a coordinated manner.

To meet these challenges, a strategic national framework that combines governance, security, communication, and management of

digital conflict, must be adopted. To mitigate overlapping or conflicting responses, clear-cut institutional obligations must be defined for federal and regional authorities. Commitments with tech companies through Somali-language content moderation, crisis coping mechanisms, and transparent procedures for escalation should be strengthened. Increased financing for mitigation of misinformation, online conflict, and digital moderation, should be an immediate priority. Meanwhile, constructive participation and divide-narrative-facilitation should be addressed with organized methods of engagement for the Somali diaspora, focusing on the reduction of divide. To combat political fragmentation, the Somali Government must balance external support to overcome the digital politics of conflict and control the narrative. Without such measures, the Somali Government will not be able to counter the digital politics of control and conflict.

Existing measures to address conflict in Somalia are heavily reliant on negotiations and traditional methods of security, while the mechanisms that drive digital conflict, escalation, and polarization are largely absent. Online conflict measures are poorly designed and focused on reactive, and conflict, rather than on the systems that generate and amplify dangerous narratives. A lack of digital engagement, reactive regulatory structures, and a combination of minimal commitment and engagement with tech companies impedes conflict management in Somalia.

Simultaneously, the absence of numerous trusted national narratives enables many polarising actors to exploit the digital space almost unimpeded, as digital networks function more quickly and efficiently than formal institutions. This results in an even greater potential for rapid escalation that

outpaces the capacity for an organised, unified response.

To tackle these problems, an integrated national approach to governance, national and human security, public communication, and digital conflict management is necessary. This should involve clearer differentials in institutional responsibilities for federal and regional authorities, in order to mitigate overlapping and contradictory responses. Collaboration with digital companies is necessary to develop Somali language moderation systems, and transparent and accountable frameworks of an escalation and a crisis response. It is essential to integrate digital conflict management with the protection of the Diaspora, to prevent the exacerbation of polarising and competing narratives. Investment in digital literacy and resilience to counter misinformation and polarisation, and to promote engagement in civil and responsible digital activities is a priority. Somalia's quest for stabilisation will, in the absence of these interventions, be undermined further by the digital dynamics that will dominate the politics and conflict of the nation, and the perceptions of its people.

Policy Recommendations

A multi-faceted and coordinated strategy is required to address the role of digital platforms in conflict, division, and escalation in Somalia. The priority in the short term should be working on the mechanisms of institutional coordination and crisis response. Through the Ministry of Information, the Federal Government and national security entities should establish a mechanism for digital monitoring and analysis that identifies online urges, attacks, misinformation, and mobilization, especially within the major digital platforms that are used in the conflict-

affected areas. This mechanism should function through close coordination among the federal and Federal Member State entities in order to reduce fragmented efforts and improve the sharing of information. Federal and sub-federal entities should also establish rapid response measures and plans for the provision of crisis communication to the public in an effective and coordinated manner. Additionally, members of the parliament and regional political leaders should be bound by a code of conduct that prohibits all forms of clan-based incitement including inflammatory speech and the willful propagation of misinformation.

In the medium term, Somalia can construct a digital governance framework to delineate institutions, set legal parameters, and specify response mechanisms to online incitement and conflict-related information. This framework should advance coordination between federal and regional institutions and should be designed to avoid overlapping and contradictory measures. Authorities should set clearer expectations and standards for accountability for technology companies working in Somalia. This includes a Somali language moderation system, transparent content review systems, and crisis communication and escalation pathways from Somali institutions to the tech companies and their platforms. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education should, in conjunction with community based and civil society actors, expand digital resilience and literacy with a focus on young and politically vulnerable community members. This should incorporate online safety and citizenship and critical thinking skills, particularly with an emphasis on the engagement and mobilization of online activism.

International actors should also provide engagement in this area. Somalia's

international partners should place the greatest priority on providing support to the government for the restructuring of its digital infrastructure. This should include the building of systems for the monitoring of digital content and the coordination of response to digital crises, as well as the provision of training support for government and civil society actors. Within this context, Meta, TikTok, and X should increase the Somali language capacity of their platforms and focus on building moderation systems and conflict-sensitive response systems. Additionally, donors and international organizations should support diaspora engagement initiatives. These should be focused on decreasing the digital spread of inflammatory content. Importantly, the support of local media and fact checking services, and independent civil society initiatives, will be critical. These initiatives should provide information to counteract conflict and serve to strengthen credible ecosystems.

Conclusion

The combination of digital mobilization and fragmented political authority has created new dimensions to the dynamics of violence in Somalia.

The use of social media is critical in the articulation of grievances, legitimizing claims, and directing political contests. In addition, social media is important in activating clan identities.

Conflict, in the contemporary sense, is no longer driven by offline events. Increased online dynamics and the continued use of offline methods are now reinforcing one another in a circular mechanism that promotes mobilization, polarization, and escalation.

The use of the traditional methods of security and diplomacy has proven inadequate, as the

online aspects of the conflicts have not been addressed.

Most interventions are reactive, focused primarily on the removal of harmful content, and are not directed to the systems that create and sustain a harmful narrative.

Ineffective responses are a result of weak institutional collaboration, inadequate regulatory capability, and a lack of cohesive engagement with technology companies.

A more integrated approach is needed that addresses the governance and security of digital platforms, diaspora engagement, and public communications.

To avoid fragmented and contradictory responses, Somali federal and regional entities need to develop clear obligations and deepen their collaborations.

Digital spaces, particularly social media, are no longer neutral in Somalia. Contestations of conflict and governance have transformed social media into battlegrounds.

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