

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

REFUGEES FROM SOMALIA



INTRODUCTION

During the years 2017-2019, 1,058 refugees from Somalia were resettled in EU-27 countries through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement programme, with most people resettling in Sweden, France and Germany.¹ Over the same period, 43,555 asylum seekers from Somalia applied for asylum in EU+ countries.²

Need for Resettlement

In 1960, British Somaliland (which was at the time a protectorate of the British Empire) and the Trust Territory of Somaliland (at the time a territory administered by Italy, as part of its empire) were united, forming the Somali Republic.³ In 1969, the country's then President, Abdirashid Ali Shermake, was assassinated, after which the military seized power in a coup d'état led by Major General Mohamed Siad Barre.³

Barre renamed the country the Somali Democratic Republic and remained in power until 1991.⁴ His rule was initially marked by ties with the Soviet Union, although Barre began aligning himself with the United States following the Ogaden War in 1977-8, when his army attempted to invade the Ogaden area of southeastern Ethiopia.⁴ In return for the use of the Berbera port in Somalia, the U.S. gave military and economic aid to the country. However, a decade later,

foreign aid declined sharply and Barre faced increasing diplomatic isolation once human rights abuses by his government were exposed,⁵ including arbitrary arrests, ill treatment, and summary executions of civilians who were suspected of collaborating with rebels who were fighting for a more democratic government.⁴

In 1990, Barre announced a number of measures and reforms within the country, including the release of dozens of suspected rebel sympathisers who had been held without charge since 1989; the promise of a referendum on a new constitution and local multiparty elections; and, in political cases, the reintroduction of the right to habeas corpus.⁵ However, Barre was forced out of office in 1991 as a civil war broke out in Somalia,⁶ which saw rival militias fighting for control of the capital, Mogadishu,⁷ and the area of Somaliland declaring unilateral independence from the rest of the country.⁸

Intense fighting broke out in late 1991 between the forces of self-appointed acting President Ali Mahdi and those of his rival, General Mohamed Farah Aidid.⁹ 350,000 Somalis are estimated to have been killed by 1992 as a result of the civil war, disease and starvation.⁷ Moreover, an unknown number of people were permanently disabled, and thousands of people were psychologically scarred because of the horrors they endured.⁹ The U.N., which supported a cease-fire and aid deliveries to the country in late 1992 and was backed by troops from the U.S. and other countries, finally withdrew from Somalia in 1995, having failed to support an agreement between different faction leaders in the country.¹⁰

In 1998, the region of Puntland declared itself an autonomous state;⁸ however, unlike Somaliland, the region still wishes to remain part of a federal Somalia.³ In 2000, the interim Transitional National Government was formed, although it failed to establish adequate governing institutions.¹¹ A peace process supported by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development led to the election of Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as President of a second interim government, known as the Transitional Federal Government, in 2004. In 2009, a new Transitional Federal Government was installed under President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, who remained in power until 2012.¹¹ That same year, the Federal Republic of Somalia was established, replacing the Transitional National Government with the adoption of the Constitution of Somalia.¹² Four Presidents have served since then, with Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed being elected as the current President in 2017.¹³

The ongoing violence and armed conflict and recurring droughts — which the U.N. explicitly linked to climate change, amongst other causes¹⁴ — that have impacted Somalia for the past few decades have led to millions of people being displaced from their homes and facing malnutrition and extreme poverty.⁷ A lack of state protection also leaves Somali civilians vulnerable to serious abuse.¹⁴ In 2019, there were an estimated 2.6 million internally displaced people in the country, many of whom were living unassisted and vulnerable to harm.¹⁴

The extremist group Al-Shabab, which was formed in 2006,¹⁵ continues to carry out both targeted and indiscriminate attacks across the country¹⁴ and in neighbouring countries. In 2019, inter-clan and intra-security force violence, often over land control and revenge killings, led to civilian displacement, injuries and deaths, as did military operations against Al-Shabab by Somali and foreign forces.¹⁴ Al-Shabab continues to impose its own judgments of Islamic practices and sharia on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and has been known to threaten to execute anyone converting to Christianity, harass secular and faith-based aid organisations, and target and kill federal government officials and their allies.¹⁶

Both regional and federal authorities, especially in Somaliland, continued to restrict freedoms of expression and of the media. All parties involved in the ongoing conflict have been reported to commit serious abuses against children, including maiming, killings, and recruiting them as child soldiers.¹⁴ Internally displaced women and girls remain at risk of sexual and gender-based violence both by civilians and armed men. As of September 2019, the U.N. estimated that 2.1 million Somalis faced acute food insecurity, many of whom were internally displaced people and children.¹⁴

2.6 million Somalis
are internally displaced

Many suffer malnutrition, extreme poverty and are vulnerable to harm.



Source: Human Rights Watch

Asylum Country Conditions

At the end of July 2020, UNHCR estimated the number of refugees from Somalia to be 762,064.¹⁷ In 2020, the top three countries which hosted refugees were Kenya (265,911 refugees), Yemen (255,188 refugees) and Ethiopia (200,073 refugees).¹⁷ Many refugees from Somalia have been living in refugee camps for nearly 30 years.¹⁸

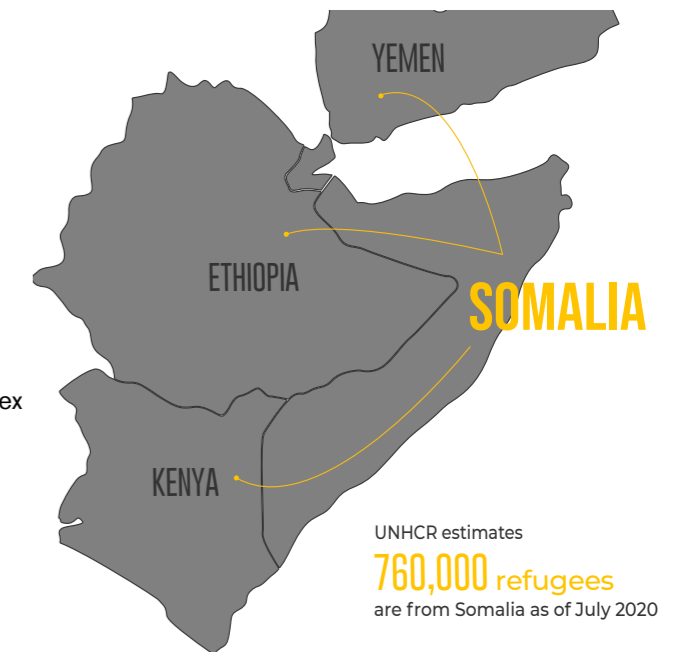
Kenya

Most refugees from Somalia live in the Dadaab refugee complex on a semi-arid plot of land near the Somali border. UNHCR estimated in April 2017 that approximately 245,000 refugees from Somalia lived in Dadaab, whilst other sources estimated the number was between 300,000 to 350,000, since many refugees are not registered with UNHCR.¹⁹ As of April 2017, approximately 40,000 refugees from Somalia lived in Kakuma camp in northwestern Kenya.¹⁹ Dadaab comprises three camps,²⁰ and the majority of its residents are from Somalia.²¹ Dadaab is overcrowded, with new shelters consisting of only plastic sheeting²² and inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene services. Somali refugees in Kenya face additional frustration because durable solutions remain out of reach: local integration cannot be freely discussed and employment is difficult to obtain.²⁵ Since refugees in Dadaab are constrained by being unable to move freely around Kenya, and work permits are seldom issued to refugees,²⁷ a majority of Dadaab residents are solely dependent on extremely limited humanitarian aid, which leave many feeling hopeless.²² Dadaab is officially overseen by the Kenyan Government and UNHCR, although in practice, democratically elected community volunteers work hand-in-hand with aid agencies on the ground to implement their programmes.²³

As noted in a 2016 report partly produced by UNCHR,²⁴ the delivery of education in Dadaab is a challenge. All schools were reported to follow the Kenyan curriculum, and every child who wishes to enroll in school is admitted. However, this has led to classes being overcrowded and increased pressure being placed on teachers. As noted in the report, only 13% of young people can access a post-primary education, and girls only make up 25% of secondary school students.

A report published by the International Refugee Rights Initiative in 2017 found that many Somalis fleeing violence associated with Al-Shabab are wrongly associated with the group once they reach countries of asylum.²⁵ This was found to be the case in Kenya in particular, which has itself witnessed terrorist attacks by Al-Shabab. This has led to refugee policy discussions being increasingly driven by security concerns and dominated by the rhetoric of 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism'.²⁵

As the report notes, negative political rhetoric in Kenya has left Somali refugees feeling marginalised and discriminated against.²⁵ In 2012, when the Kenyan government announced that all Somali asylum seekers and refugees living in urban areas should move to Dadaab, NGOs reported cases of xenophobic attacks, arbitrary arrest, police harassment, and abuse against women.²⁶ Refugees who have thrived in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, have done so despite the hostile policy context.²⁵ In 2013, an agreement was signed by Kenya, Somalia and UNHCR to repatriate refugees from Somali, but only in cases where this was carried out on a voluntary basis; however, the Kenyan government has repeatedly attempted to forcibly repatriate people.²⁷ Later, in 2015, the Kenyan government announced its intention to close Dadaab and repatriate its residents following an attack by Al-Shabab in the country, although it withdrew its plans following pressure from the international community.²⁷



Source: UNHCR

Meanwhile, return to Somalia remains difficult due to active militias, corruption and insecurity. Further, many Somalis who are refugees in Kenya were born in Kenya and have little to no familiarity with Somalia.

Yemen

In 2019, refugees from Somalia comprised 90% of refugees and asylum seekers in Yemen, amounting to approximately 250,000 people.²⁸ In addition to refugees from Somalia embarking on dangerous journeys to reach Yemen's coast, according to the Mixed Migration Centre, migrants and refugees are exposed to serious protection risks upon arrival, as smuggling, trafficking and arbitrary and abusive detention (amongst other risks) are increasingly common.²⁹ Yemeni authorities have rounded up migrants and tortured, raped and executed people in detention centres, in addition to denying asylum seekers an opportunity to seek protection and deporting migrants to dangerous conditions at sea.³⁰

Additionally, migrants and refugees face a lack of basic access to food, water and medical services in the country, and, due to the ongoing conflict in the country,³¹ many refugees have lost livelihood opportunities. Women face high risks of sexual abuse and violence.²⁹ Of particular concern are unaccompanied and separated migrant children, especially given reports that armed groups forcibly recruit them to fight for them.²⁹

Ethiopia

The majority of refugees from Somalia are based in the Somali region of Ethiopia (in the east of the country),³² where there are 8 refugee camps. Many refugees have been in some of these camps since the early 1990s.

The Ethiopian Government passed the 2004 Refugee Proclamation, which confirmed key principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention;³³ however, refugees in Ethiopia have experienced restrictions with regards to their rights, access to education and freedom of movement. According to research undertaken by Refugee Economies in Addis Ababa in 2018, Somali refugees who were permitted to live in urban areas (rather than camps) were in positions of acute precarity: restrictions on their right to work pushed them into the informal sector and made them vulnerable to exploitation.³⁴

As outlined by UNHCR in 2015,³⁵ only 35% of primary school teachers working in refugee camps were officially qualified. Even with primary schools running on a shift system (with 3-4 hours of learning per shift), classrooms were noted as being overcrowded, and the gross enrolment rate of refugee children in primary education was much lower (51%) than the Ethiopian national average. Moreover, only 6 of 23 refugee camps were noted as having proper access to secondary education at a reasonable distance away. This has contributed to low literacy rates. According to UNHCR, in 2011, just 5% of those in the Dollo Ado Refugee Camp were literate.³⁵

Ethiopia has recently taken steps to grant greater opportunities for socio-economic inclusion to refugees.³² In January 2019, the Ethiopian government passed a new Refugee Proclamation that extends the rights of refugees in line with nine pledges it made in 2016.³² This law — one of the most progressive refugee policies in Africa — allows refugees to obtain work permits and drivers' licenses, legally register births and marriages, access primary education and begin to access financial services.³⁶



Culture

It is important to note that refugees from Somalia may never have lived in Somalia; many refugees were born and grew up in refugee camps (as noted in the section on 'Asylum Country Conditions'). The information below relates to laws, infrastructure and societal and cultural practices in Somalia.

Language

Somali and Arabic are the two official languages of Somalia.³⁷ Italian and English are also spoken in the country (particularly by older Somalis)³⁸, given the country's colonial past. English is used as a medium of instruction in some subjects in upper primary school and is the main medium of instruction in secondary school.³⁹ A number of other languages are spoken throughout Somalia, including Swahili in the south.⁴⁰

Religion

Islam is Somalia's state religion.¹⁶ The Provisional Federal Constitution allows individuals to practice their religion, although it prohibits the spreading of any religion that is not Islam, and requires laws to adhere to the general principles of Sharia.¹⁶ Over 99% of the population in Somalia identifies as Sunni Muslim, with the remaining 1% identifying as Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Shia Muslim, or Sufi Muslim¹⁶, a group that was once the majority, but nearly eliminated by Al-Shabaab. The faith is now making a resurgence. Muslim women will generally wear the hijab in order to display values of purity and modesty.⁴¹

Ethnic Groups

85% of the population in Somalia identifies as Somali, whilst the remaining 15% identifies as Bantu and other non-Somali ethnicities, including Arabs.³⁷

Food

Typical dishes from Somalia include *canjeero*, also called *laxoox*, which are pancakes usually eaten for breakfast with butter or ghee and sugar, and are often accompanied by a cup of spiced black tea. *Canjeero* can also be eaten for lunch or dinner and accompanied by curry, meat stew (*maraq*), soup, or liver and onions.⁴² Other traditional dishes include *sambusas*, which are small triangles of pastry with sweet and savoury fillings;⁴³ suqaar, made of diced meat and green peppers; and a spiced rice dish using cardamom and cinnamon called *bariis iskukaris*.⁴⁴ Those living in the coastal regions of Somalia tend to consume more fish, consumption of camel, sheep, goat, or cow's milk is common, especially inland.² Pork and alcohol is forbidden in Islam.

Health Considerations

According to a report from the WHO published in 2015, health indicators in Somalia are amongst the lowest in the world. Only one third of all Somalis have access to safe water; one in every nine children die before turning one; and 850 mothers die per 100,000 live births.⁴⁵ The healthcare system is poorly structured, weak and inequitably distributed across the country. The immunization coverage rate is 46% for measles and lower in more remote areas,⁴⁵ and in 2015, an estimated 420,000 children in insecure areas had not been reached by the polio vaccination programme since 2009.

According to 28 Too Many, the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Somalia amongst women aged between 15 and 49 is 98% — one of the highest rates in the world.⁴⁶ In 2011, infibulation (Type III) was the most widely practiced form of FGM of Somalia.



Resettlement Considerations

Average Case Size

According to UNHCR data about refugees from Somalia who have been submitted for departure, or have departed to a third state in 2020, the majority of cases (32%) are women aged between 18-59, followed by girls aged between 0-17 (23%), boys between 0-17 (22%), men aged 18-59 (21%), and finally women and men over the age of 60 (2%).⁴⁷

At the end of September 2020, UNHCR estimated the number of refugees from Somalia to be 728,739 and the number of refugee households to be 62,609,¹⁷ with the average household estimated to include 11 or 12 people.

Families and Households

Somali families are traditionally large and multi-generational. It is common for extended family members to live together or nearby and provide support.⁴¹ Larger numbers of children are seen as desirable in Somali culture,⁴⁸ and practitioners may need to consider finding housing to accommodate larger numbers of family members and extended family structures.

Somali names do not include a family name. Instead, naming conventions generally have the following format:

[first name] [father's first name] [paternal grandfather's first name]. Moreover, it is not customary for women to change their names when they marry.⁴⁹ Nicknames are commonly used to differentiate individuals of similar names.⁴⁹

Education and Literacy

There are two main education systems in Somalia: the 9-3 system, which is generally used by private Arabic medium institutions, and the 8-4 system, which is used in public schools. Somali is used as the language of instruction, particularly in primary school, and Arabic and English are given special consideration as language subjects. In upper primary school, scientific subjects may be taught in English. In secondary school, English is the main medium of instruction, except for Islamic studies, which is taught in Arabic and Somali.³⁹

Quranic schools in Somalia provide religious education for children, focusing on the Quran and Islamic religious culture. The schools are widespread both in rural and urban areas, and are run and supported by local communities — they do not form part of the formal education system (unless they are Integrated Quranic Schools).³⁹

In 2015/16, the total gross enrolment ratio in Somalia was 32%, of which 28.9% were girls and 35.2% were boys. Enrolment levels in education decrease sharply from lower primary to upper primary school.³⁹ Barriers to participation in education include poverty, long distances to school, concerns around safety, a lack of sanitation facilities, a lack of teachers, and social norms which favour boys' education.⁵⁰

In 2015, it was estimated that only 40% of the population of Somalia is literate, with the literacy rate being 8% lower for women than it is for men.³⁹ Inequities between different groups and geographic locations is marked, with literacy rates lowest amongst Nomads (12.1%), followed by people in rural communities (27.5%), internally displaced people in camps (32.8%) and people living in urban areas (64.2%). The gap between female and male literacy rates is highest in urban locations (58.1% and 70.5% respectively) and camps (27.6% and 38.6% respectively).

Work Experience and Vocational Training

71% of the labour force in Somalia is employed in the agricultural sector,³⁷ including nomadic pastoralism,

subsistence farming and market-oriented farming.⁴⁰ The remaining 29% is employed in the industry or manufacturing sector.

When supporting women to enter the workforce, practitioners should consider their preferences with regards to wearing a hijab and a uniform. Practitioners should also take into account that people may not feel comfortable working in environments where pork or alcohol are present and commonly handled, such as in the service or hospitality industries. U.S. practitioners report that refugees from Somalia with prior entrepreneurial experience are often keen to start their own businesses when arriving in their new communities. Finally, as with many refugee communities, Somalis will be eager to find employment offering higher wages so that they might send remittances to family and friends still in Somalia or a country of asylum. This may also result in some Somalis moving to another city or state if they consider the economic opportunities to be beneficial.

Clan Systems and Minority Groups

Clan affiliations are the main identity providing factor within Somalia and are important across all parts of society, from social standing and economic status, through to the structure of the government.⁵¹ They offer both protection and care. Clans are patrilineal and a person's ancestor will determine which clan they belong to.⁵²

The four major noble clan families, which are comprised of nomadic pastoralists, are the Darod (in turn comprised of the Ogaden, Marehan and Harti), the Hawiye, the Dir, and the Isaaq. People belonging to minority groups, which are not clans (although may be called so by

people belonging to nomadic clans) include 'outcaste' groups, people of Bantu descent, people of Arabic descent, the Bravanese, Rerhamar, Bajuni, Eeyle, Jaaji, Barawani, Galgala, Tumaal, Yibir/Yibro, and the Migdan/Gaboye.⁵¹

Many minorities, such as Bantus, are in many places local majorities. However, they still face discrimination or oppression from militarily stronger nomadic clans.⁵¹

Gender-Based Violence

According to a report published by UNFPA, girls and women in Somalia are subject to high levels of deprivation, suffering and serious violations to their right to live their lives free from discrimination, violence and torture.⁵³ Intimate partner violence, sexual violence or sexual exploitation and abuse, emotional and psychological violence, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and negative coping mechanisms — including social isolation, victim blaming and restriction of movement — are all issues of concern.⁵³

Same-Sex Relations

Same-sex relations are illegal in Somalia, and intercourse with a partner of the same sex is punishable by law: people may be imprisoned for it. In some regions of the country in the south, certain Islamic courts have imposed a death penalty for same-sex intercourse.⁵⁴ Practitioners may wish to remind resettled refugees what the local laws regarding same-sex relations are and help LGBTQIA+ individuals to access local communities of support if they so wish.

Physical and Mental Health

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the health conditions which should

be considered a priority when caring for and assisting refugees from Somalia are as follows: anemia; diabetes; female genital mutilation; lead toxicity; parasitic diseases, Schistosomiasis and strongyloidiasis; and hepatitis B and C.⁵⁵ Moreover, one in three Somalis is estimated to be affected by some type of mental illness,⁵⁶ and many individuals have suffered because of torture, rape, beating, or other trauma. Mental health is highly stigmatized in Somalia and patients may suffer abuse because of this; as a consequence, people may feel less inclined to reach out for help.⁵⁶ Practitioners may wish to take additional time during the initial assessment, in order to better understand their situation and make appropriate referrals.

Documentation

Practitioners should be aware that, according to a report published in 2017,⁵⁷ there is no recognised competent civil authority which issues civil documentation in Somalia. Most personal records were destroyed during the civil war, and the few records which do still exist are in the hands of private individuals, or are otherwise not retrievable. Many Somali refugees are assigned a birth date of the 1st of January (and the year they were born), when they register with UNHCR in the country of asylum.

Casework and Interpretation

Practitioners from the U.S. have noted that communication practices in Somalia tend to be very direct. Practitioners have also noted that asking interpreters to conduct sight translations of documents for beneficiaries who are not literate may be necessary.

Resources

Practitioners should ensure that interpreters are properly trained. EURITA has developed a number of resources to support you in this training, including a *Trainer's Manual* and *Participant Workbook* which you can find at <https://www.ritaresources.org/resources/library/interpretation-language-access>.

To support U.S. practitioners in working with those affected by conflict, IRC developed the *IRC Mental Health and Wellness: U.S. Programs*. You can also access this through the RITA website at <https://www.ritaresources.org/resources/library/case-management-strategies>.

NOTE:

This backgrounder contains historical, political, and cultural information, as well as resettlement considerations, intended to support practitioners in facilitating the resettlement of refugees from Somalia in Europe. While generalisations regarding the populations may be reported by practitioners, it is important to remember that every individual is unique and should be treated as such.



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