



**Hiraal Institute**  
Addressing Horn of Africa's Security Challenges

# **LOCKED AND LOADED**

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# **THE DANGERS OF PREMATURELY LIFTING THE SOMALI ARMS EMBARGO**

**HIRAAL BRIEFING**  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an in-depth examination of the potential consequences of lifting the arms embargo in Somalia. With a focus on both national and international implications, our findings suggest caution and a nuanced approach towards this crucial policy decision.

Somalia's complex societal structure, characterized by deep-seated clan loyalties, presents a significant challenge. The Somali National Army (SNA), which consists mainly of clan militias, raises concerns that lifting the embargo could fuel inter-clan conflicts, especially as the government has promoted clan militias since August 2022. Such an action could potentially ignite a volatile arms race among the clans, escalating violence and instability.

The fact that the Somali government does not fully control all its ports of entry further complicates the situation. Without comprehensive oversight of these crucial trade nodes, the risk of arms being diverted to non-state actors, criminal syndicates, or potential adversaries is heightened. This underlines the need for effective management of borders before any changes in the arms embargo policy.

Open arms markets in Somalia pose another significant risk. The existence of these markets and their ease of access could potentially be exacerbated by the lifting of the arms embargo, leading to a rise in violence and instability. Furthermore, it raises concerns about the effective control and tracing of arms flow within the country.

A worrying trend of weapons meant for the SNA appearing in open markets underscores the challenges of control and accountability. Without robust mechanisms to secure and monitor weapons, the premature lifting of the arms embargo could lead to increased arms proliferation.

Furthermore, the potential implications of unchecked arms flows are not confined to Somalia. Lessons from history show how they can fuel conflicts,

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destabilize regions, and pose significant threats to international security. This global perspective must be factored into any decision regarding the future of the arms embargo.

Our analysis emphasizes the need for a nuanced and cautious approach towards the arms embargo issue. Strengthening Somalia's capacity in arms control, securing ports of entry, and promoting effective governance must be prioritized before any significant changes to the current policy.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In this comprehensive analysis, we delve into the potential implications of lifting the arms embargo in Somalia, a critical issue that carries far-reaching consequences not only for the nation but for regional and global security. This exploration is set against the backdrop of Somalia's complex clan-based power dynamics and the fragile control over its ports of entry.

Against this intricate socio-political landscape, we argue that lifting the embargo prematurely could escalate clan conflicts, fuel illicit arms flows, and potentially destabilize the broader region. We further scrutinize the alarming presence of open arms markets in the capital, Mogadishu, and the concerning instances of state-sanctioned weaponry ending up on the open market.

These realities present a compelling argument against the lifting of the arms embargo, calling for caution and a comprehensive understanding of the ground realities before any changes to the current policy are made. The implications of such a decision extend beyond Somalia's borders, underlining the need for careful consideration of the potential consequences at the global scale

## 2. CLAN-BASED POWER STRUGGLES: A DEEP-ROOTED CHALLENGE

Understanding the complexities of Somalia's societal structure is key to any discourse related to the potential lifting of the arms embargo. At the heart of the country's unique landscape is the deep-seated clan system. Clan loyalties often override national allegiances and territorial control is contested along these lines. This dynamic, rooted in historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts, significantly influences the country's security landscape.

Clan-based conflicts are a recurring feature of the Somali landscape, often marked by violent confrontations involving the use of small arms. Clan wars are not merely internal disputes; they have broader implications for Somalia's security situation and the stability of the region. The unrestricted flow of arms that could result from lifting the embargo could exacerbate these inter-clan disputes and escalate local conflicts, with detrimental effects on human security and development.

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The diffusion of arms among different clans could tip the precarious balance of power, leading to an intensified cycle of violence as clans vie for territorial control and political influence. Given the high likelihood of these weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors, the risks associated with lifting the embargo outweigh the potential benefits. More weapons in an environment already characterized by conflict might not lead to a balance of power but rather stimulate a volatile arms race, further destabilizing the region.

Moreover, this potential surge in weapons could complicate ongoing efforts to establish effective governance and rule of law in Somalia. It would present an additional obstacle to conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives, as arms could be used to undermine political processes and disrupt societal peace.

Considering the clan-based nature of Somali society, lifting the arms embargo could have far-reaching consequences, not just for Somalia but for the region at large. This facet of the debate is crucial to consider, reinforcing the need for an informed, nuanced approach to the arms embargo issue.

The Somali National Army (SNA), in its current form, is essentially a coalition of clan militias. Clan loyalties remain paramount, often taking precedence over national allegiance. This clan-based composition of the SNA presents a worrying potential for escalation of inter-clan conflicts, especially in light of the government's recent decisions to promote clan militias since August 2023.

As a consequence of the government's move, more firepower has been handed to these militias, particularly those that have stronger connections within the government. The redistribution of weapons among the clans can potentially ignite a dangerous cycle of violence, fueled by existing clan rivalries and competition for resources. This situation could result in an arms race among the clans, each seeking to secure their interests and territories. The specter of such a scenario stands as a grim warning against prematurely lifting the arms embargo.

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### 3. GOVERNMENT CONTROL OVER PORTS OF ENTRY

A significant impediment to lifting the arms embargo on Somalia lies in the fact that the government does not have full control over all of its ports of entry. This gap in governance presents an acute risk that needs to be factored into any discussions on policy changes concerning the arms embargo.

Ports of entry are critical nodes in the management of international trade and transnational movement. In the context of Somalia, they serve as gateways not only for goods and people but also, potentially, for arms. A well-regulated port system is a crucial line of defence against illicit arms flow. However, without full control and effective management of these ports, there is a heightened risk that arms could be diverted into the hands of non-state actors, including militias, insurgent groups, and organized criminal networks.

This risk is not hypothetical. Evidence from conflict zones worldwide indicated a strong correlation between weak border controls and increased illicit arms trafficking. Somalia, with its current limited control over its ports, could become a fertile ground for this illicit trade should the arms embargo be lifted prematurely.

Furthermore, it's worth noting that the lack of control over ports of entry jeopardizes not only national security but also regional stability. The arms can easily spill over to neighbouring countries, exacerbating conflicts and undermining peace efforts in the broader Horn of Africa region. Such a scenario could create a vicious cycle of violence that is much harder to contain once it begins.

The task of regaining control over all ports of entry and ensuring their proper management is not an easy one, and it is certainly not one that can be completed overnight. It requires time, resources, and strong political will. Therefore, any decision on the arms embargo must take into account the current realities on the ground and the progress made towards securing and effectively managing all ports of entry.

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## 4. THE OPEN ARMS MARKETS OF SOMALIA

A pivotal element in the discussion of the arms embargo on Somalia revolves around the presence of unregulated arms markets in its capital, Mogadishu. These markets are open, active, and alarmingly accessible, serving as vivid reminders of the precarious security situation in the country.

These arms bazaars do not just serve local militias or organized criminal syndicates; they are available to anyone with sufficient financial means. The weapons sold in these markets range from small arms to anti-aircraft cannons, all of which can significantly contribute to escalating violence and conflicts within and beyond Somalia's borders.

The sheer existence of such markets indicates the urgent need for strengthened regulation and control over the arms trade in Somalia. If the arms embargo is lifted without addressing this core issue, it could potentially fuel these markets with an even greater volume and variety of weapons. The unchecked expansion of these markets may, in turn, facilitate an increase in armed violence, potentially contributing to a state of chronic insecurity and social instability.

Furthermore, the presence of these markets signifies a larger problem: the difficulty of controlling and tracing the flow of arms within the country. This challenge is further underscored by the fact that weapons belonging to the SNA often end up in these markets. It raises questions about the SNA's capacity to secure its own weaponry and its ability to prevent these weapons from falling into the wrong hands.

Before the international community can consider lifting the arms embargo, Somalia must first demonstrate significant progress in addressing these issues. It underscores the need for strengthened national capacities in arms control and regulation as a prerequisite to any significant policy change concerning the embargo.

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## 5. EVIDENCE OF POROUS CONTROL MECHANISMS

A critical consideration in the discussion around the arms embargo in Somalia is the disturbing trend of weapons intended for SNA appearing on the open market. This worrying occurrence highlights existing weaknesses in control mechanisms and underscores the potential risks associated with lifting the embargo prematurely.

These instances of leakage demonstrate that even the officially sanctioned supply of arms to the SNA faces significant control and accountability challenges. The fact that SNA weapons can be found in the open market raises grave concerns about the army's capacity to secure its armaments and prevent their diversion to non-state actors, criminal networks, or even potential adversaries.

Moreover, this trend suggests that the state's monopoly on the use of force - a cornerstone of sovereign authority - is not fully consolidated in Somalia. As a result, the risk of state-provided arms contributing to internal instability and conflict is real and significant. This reality argues against lifting the arms embargo until effective control mechanisms are firmly established and verifiably operational.

The situation also raises questions about Somalia's current ability to effectively manage a more substantial influx of weapons that would inevitably follow the lifting of the embargo. Without robust systems for monitoring, control, and accountability in place, an increase in the volume of weapons could easily exacerbate the existing problem of weapons proliferation.

The presence of SNA weapons on the open market presents a clear warning against prematurely lifting the arms embargo. It highlights the importance of strengthening Somalia's arms control and accountability mechanisms before any significant change to the arms embargo policy. Therefore, the emphasis should be on capacity building, ensuring effective oversight, and strengthening institutional controls as essential preconditions for any future adjustments to the arms embargo.

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## 6. THE IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

The repercussions of lifting the arms embargo on Somalia would not be confined to the country or even the region alone. Indeed, the potential fallout could pose significant threats to international security, with far-reaching implications that extend beyond the Horn of Africa. It is of paramount importance to assess the possible global consequences of such a policy shift.

Illicit arms flows are an international concern, and their potential to destabilize states and regions has been consistently demonstrated. Increased availability of arms, especially in a country with insufficient control mechanisms like Somalia, can facilitate the activities of transnational criminal and terrorist networks. These groups exploit weak regulations and porous borders, and the increased availability of weapons would provide them with the tools to intensify their operations.

Moreover, the unchecked proliferation of arms in Somalia could potentially escalate conflicts in the wider region, thereby undermining regional stability. These conflicts can breed refugee crises, which not only cause humanitarian disasters but also put strains on neighbouring countries and regions, creating a ripple effect of destabilization.

The potential effects of lifting the arms embargo in Somalia could reverberate far beyond its borders, threatening regional and international security. The unchecked flow of arms could exacerbate piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, disrupting global trade routes and impacting economies worldwide.

Policymakers must factor in these global implications when considering the future of the arms embargo. It underscores the need for a comprehensive, global perspective, one that goes beyond national boundaries and considers the potential cascading effects of policy decisions at a global scale. The focus should not only be on Somalia's immediate needs but also on the broader international ramifications.

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## **7. CONCLUSION AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

As we have demonstrated in this analysis, the potential lifting of the arms embargo in Somalia presents a deeply complex issue. The interplay of domestic dynamics - the clan-based societal structure, limited government control over ports of entry, open arms markets in Mogadishu, and instances of Somali National Army weapons appearing on the open market - all coalesce into a multifaceted challenge. This is further complicated by the potential repercussions on international security, an aspect that has been underscored by historical precedents of unchecked arms flows fueling conflict and destabilization.

The evidence suggests that the premature lifting of the arms embargo could precipitate a range of adverse outcomes, from intensifying clan conflicts and enabling illicit arms flows to posing broader threats to regional and global stability. It is, therefore, crucial that any decisions about the future of the embargo are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of these factors and their potential ramifications.

Our analysis calls for caution and a comprehensive approach that prioritizes capacity building and strengthening Somalia's governance mechanisms. It is essential to ensure that the Somali government can effectively control its borders, regulate its arms markets, and secure its own weaponry. Only once these capabilities are verifiably in place and functioning effectively can the international community consider modifications to the arms embargo policy.

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We advocate for a careful, thoughtful approach that places equal emphasis on supporting Somalia's aspirations for self-governance and sovereignty and maintaining regional and global security. The future of Somalia and the wider international community will be significantly influenced by the decisions made regarding the arms embargo. It is imperative that these decisions are well-informed, balanced, and mindful of the potential consequences.



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