



Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab

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What's new? The Somali government has gained ground in its war with the Islamist insurgency Al-Shabaab, mainly in central Somalia. Most of the progress is due to Mogadishu's leveraging of local discontent with Al-Shabaab to form alliances with clan militias.

Why does it matter? The joint campaign has dislodged militants from a swathe of territory in the centre of the country, reestablishing the government's presence in regions that Al-Shabaab had controlled for a decade or more. Troops are now planning to move into the insurgency's southern bastions.

What should be done? Mogadishu must consolidate its gains in central Somalia as it goes on the offensive elsewhere. It should establish holding forces, work for communal reconciliation and, to the greatest degree possible, meet local expectations around service delivery.

I. Overview

Starting in August 2022, the Somali government launched a fresh offensive against Al-Shabaab, capitalising on mounting discontent with the Islamist insurgency, particularly among the politically dominant Hawiye clan. The operation has yielded the most comprehensive territorial gains since the mid-2010s, as soldiers fighting alongside clan militias dislodge Al-Shabaab militants from significant parts of central Somalia. Emboldened by clan backing and foreign support, Mogadishu now aims to send soldiers into Al-Shabaab's southern strongholds. As it proceeds, it should bear in mind the need to consolidate its hold on places it has recaptured from the insurgency. The government should assign holding forces to provide security in recovered areas, support local reconciliation efforts and step up service delivery, while carefully managing residents' expectations. If it does not take these measures, it may give Al-Shabaab, which has proven resilient, a chance to rebound.

The government's push marks a breakthrough in a war that has raged for more than fifteen years. Historically, overstretched Somali and partner forces have hunkered down in urban locales, while Al-Shabaab secured a firm foothold in rural areas. International forces, in particular the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) – which was rebranded as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)

in 2022 –, have led the fight with Al-Shabaab. In contrast, the new offensive is spearheaded by the Somali military, in conjunction with local clans.

A unique set of circumstances aided the government advance. Al-Shabaab overplayed its hand, antagonising clans in central Somalia. Demands that young male children join their ranks spurred local clans to take up arms alongside the Somali military. The insurgents' taxation of communities under their control hardly helped, as the country suffers impoverishment and food insecurity amid a record drought. Furthermore, terrorist attacks in the capital and along Somalia's borders appear to have prodded Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to take a tougher line against the group.

The government now plans to continue the offensive in southern Somalia, even though it has not fully consolidated its hold in the centre. Southern Somalia presents a different set of challenges – for one thing, clans in the south have not shown the same discontent with the Islamist movement that prevails in the centre. But even as its plans advance to meet a new set of challenges, the government should not lose sight of needs in the centre, as otherwise these areas could slip back into Al-Shabaab's hands. Before it launches major new attacks, it should make sure it has adequate holding forces in recovered areas. It should also conduct reconciliation efforts and improve basic services of which residents have long been deprived. For cash-strapped Mogadishu, that could prove difficult, and international donors will need to step in to provide support.

Even if the government is successful in holding down central Somalia and reclaiming territory in the south, Al-Shabaab will probably survive. The group is playing the long game, exploiting government weaknesses wherever it can. The government should thus keep open the possibility of negotiations as a means of winding down the war for good, as Crisis Group has argued in the past. The government's recent wins on the battlefield will, if sustained, strengthen its position if it indeed decides to engage in talks.

II. From Local Anger to “All-out War”

A. The Birth of an Offensive

The Somali government's move to wrest back control from Al-Shabaab in parts of central Somalia is unusual in that the military has joined forces with clan militias. The offensive derives its strength from mounting local frustration with Al-Shabaab's persistent, onerous demands for money and recruits, as well as the group's violent measures of collective punishment for non-compliance. Several sub-clans in central Somalia have resisted the militants previously, but later cut deals with them to forge a form of coexistence, finding the cost of fighting Al-Shabaab too high.¹ Still, overall, the government has made headway.

The insurgents themselves contributed to these dynamics. In recent years, Al-Shabaab has extended its influence by taking advantage of political infighting in Mogadishu, which diverted the attention of Somali elites from the task of counter-

¹ Crisis Group interviews, community members whose clans have fought Al-Shabaab, 2021-2022.

insurgency.² As politicians in the capital squabbled, sub-clans in central Somalia grew increasingly weary of Al-Shabaab's tactics. The Haber Gedir/Salebaan sub-clan is a case in point. People from this sub-clan, part of the wider Hawiye clan family, of which Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud is a member, live in and around the town of Baxdo, situated in the central region of Galgaduud (Galmudug state).³ They tolerated Al-Shabaab's presence in their area, for the most part, until 2019, when its commanders ordered families to provide young men to be enrolled as fighters. An influential community member told Crisis Group that this directive proved too much to stomach. Baxdo is a town with strong Sufi roots; the community perceived Al-Shabaab's demand as a ploy to inculcate the Salafi-jihadist doctrine in the younger generation.⁴

The Salebaan's refusal to comply with this de facto draft triggered a spiral of retaliation, starting with insurgents confiscating livestock and abducting elders. It culminated in Al-Shabaab assaulting Baxdo on 17 June 2022, which proved to be a tactical misstep: a militia from the sub-clan inflicted heavy casualties among the invading militants, killing an estimated 70 of them.⁵ Still, even after its defeat, Al-Shabaab carried out raids on smaller and less protected villages nearby in revenge.⁶

Around the same time, in the eastern part of Hiraan region (Hirshabelle state) west of Galgaduud, the Hawiye/Hawadle sub-clan's historically uneasy relationship with Al-Shabaab became outright hostile. The roots of the Hawadle's aggravation can be traced to 2021, when the militants took control of the road connecting Hiraan's capital Beledweyne to the Galgaduud region.⁷ Al-Shabaab had already blocked a southern route linking Beledweyne to Mogadishu, impeding the flow of vital supplies to a part of Somalia that has suffered severe drought for years.⁸ Now its checkpoint on the road headed east choked off the area, in effect. Local anger rose, becoming even more pronounced in May 2022, when the militants killed a Hawadle elder in Beledweyne, reportedly for having participated in government elections.⁹

The community in Hiraan mobilised to push back against the group, emboldened at a crucial moment by Ethiopian military support. Al-Shabaab has long viewed Ethiopia, which invaded Somalia in 2006 to overthrow its precursor group, the Islamic Courts Union, as a major adversary; the insurgents have attempted to infiltrate the country in the past, mostly to no avail. In July 2022, however, the group launched an unprecedented incursion into Ethiopia's Somali region. Alarmed, Addis Ababa beefed up the deployment in the buffer zone it maintains between its border with Somalia

² Crisis Group Africa Report N°309, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 21 June 2022.

³ Hawiye refers to the clan family, Haber Gedir to the clan and Salebaan to the sub-clan.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Baxdo official, Dhusamareb, November 2022.

⁵ Abdi Sheikh, "Somalia security forces, residents kill 70 militants in attack, says official", Reuters, 17 June 2022. Al-Shabaab fighters also attacked Baxdo in January 2022, but they were repelled.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Galmudug officials, Dhusamareb, November 2022.

⁷ In 2021, Al-Shabaab took control of villages along the route and set up a new checkpoint, which hampered the delivery of supplies. Crisis Group interviews, Hawadle community members and MP active on front lines, October-December 2022.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, member of a peacebuilding organisation active in Hiraan, September 2022.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hawadle community member, November 2022.

and areas where Al-Shabaab is active.¹⁰ Ethiopia struck Al-Shabaab positions in Somalia from the air in late July and early August, while the head of the Ethiopian Army's Somali Command Post, General Tesfaye Ayalew, visited Beledweyne.¹¹ Interlocutors on both sides of the Ethiopia-Somalia border confirmed to Crisis Group that Addis Ababa gave military supplies to local Hawadle at this time, coordinating with regional officials.¹²

Al-Shabaab responded to the mobilisation by unleashing a wave of repression upon the sub-clan, which generated still more resentment. In early August, Al-Shabaab torched Hawadle villages in Hiraan's Mahas district, destroying wells. Weeks later, on 2 September, militants ambushed a convoy bringing food to the area, killing numerous civilians, including women and children.¹³ More clan members joined the militias as a result.¹⁴

Another Al-Shabaab attack, this time in Mogadishu, provoked a strong reaction from the national government. On 20 August 2022, Al-Shabaab stormed the well-known Hayat Hotel in the Somali capital – a common meeting place for government officials – putting the premises under siege for 30 hours before security forces could dislodge them. The operation – which led to the death of more than twenty people – may have been an attempt to intimidate President Mohamud, who had been elected to a second non-consecutive term that May, out of taking an aggressive posture toward the group.

If so, Al-Shabaab's leadership miscalculated. While Mohamud had struck a somewhat conciliatory tone when he first returned to office – repeatedly talking about the need for “different security strategies and tough negotiations” with Al-Shabaab – his stance changed dramatically after critics accused him of mounting a confused, ineffective response to the siege.¹⁵ He proceeded to declare an “all-out war” on Al-Shabaab that combines military pressure with efforts to rein in the group's extortion rackets in and around Mogadishu.¹⁶ He also committed to undercutting the group's Salafi-

¹⁰ Mohamed Dhaysane, “Ethiopian authorities to create buffer zone inside Somalia”, *Voice of America*, 29 July 2022.

¹¹ “Ethiopia defense forces, Somali state special forces senior delegation in Beledweyne, central Somalia”, *Addis Standard*, 2 August 2022.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, senior Somali and Ethiopian officials, Hawadle community members, September-November 2022.

¹³ “Al-Shabaab sets 7 villages on fire, blows up wells in Hiran region”, *Goobjoog*, 8 August 2022.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, *macawisley* members in Hiraan, November 2022.

¹⁵ “Somalia's president wants help to fight Africa's terrorist groups”, *The Economist*, 19 July 2022. Mohamud previously served as Somalia's president from 2012 to 2017.

¹⁶ Al-Shabaab makes significant amounts of money by shaking down businesses in Mogadishu and other cities. The government's actions have focused on stopping the group from moving its ill-gotten gains through the financial system. Crisis Group interview, government minister, Mogadishu, November 2022. The government has closed 250 suspicious bank accounts and 70 telephone lines. “Somali government closes 250 bank accounts, 70 mobile money accounts”, SONNA, 14 January 2023. On 28 January, Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Dheere criticised the government's efforts as part of a Western plot to rob Somalis of their wealth and urged the public not to trust the banking system. “Al-Shabaab warned of the attempted looting of Somali assets and sent a warning to companies and banks”, *Somalimemo*, 28 January 2023 (Somali).

jihadist ideology.¹⁷ Previous attempts to combat Al-Shabaab had failed, he claimed, because they tried to contain rather than eradicate the group.¹⁸

The government deployed armed forces to Hiraan that worked in concert with Hawadle forces to flush militants out of villages and towns in August. The initial focus was on securing the main road from Mogadishu to Beledweyne and a triangular patch of territory between Beledweyne, Mahas and Bulo Burte. By October, the army and militias had freed much of Hiraan east of the Shabelle River from Al-Shabaab's physical control.

B. *Expansion in Central Somalia*

The government was eager to replicate the success in eastern Hiraan, based on the template the Somali army and clan militias had used there. It encouraged other clans in central Somalia to mobilise volunteer fighters, or *macawisley* ("those who wear the *macawis*", a Somali sarong), relying on prominent personalities to rally their clansmen. Somali soldiers, particularly special forces units, still lead the fight with Al-Shabaab, but Mogadishu has provided the clan militias with logistical support such as ammunition, food and medical evacuations.¹⁹ The *macawisley* participate in joint operations, giving government forces backup from fighters who know the terrain better. They also provide a crucial link to the local population, sparing the government from going it alone or trying to mobilise community support after the fact. The clan participation also reinforces the narrative that sections of Somali society are turning against Al-Shabaab.

Foreign partners have also bolstered the campaign against Al-Shabaab. U.S. airstrikes are helping the Danab, a special unit of the Somali National Army trained by the U.S. as a quick strike force, recapture territory from the insurgents in the regions of Hiraan, Middle Shabelle, Galgaduud and Mudug.²⁰ The U.S. has also donated military assistance, with its ambassador for Somalia praising the war effort as "historic".²¹ Türkiye has carried out drone strikes in Lower and Middle Shabelle, further

¹⁷ Government rhetoric followed suit – increasingly referring to the militants as *khawarij* ("those who deviated from Islam"). Mohamed Sheikh Nor, "Somalia president's declaration on security draws mixed reactions", Voice of America, 3 January 2023. In late January, the government organised a conference of religious scholars in Mogadishu, which culminated in a statement condemning Al-Shabaab as "extremist". "Communiqué from the Somali Ulema and Scholars Conference", Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, 26 January 2023.

¹⁸ "Strengthening Somalia's security: A conversation with H.E. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 September 2022.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Somali government officials, August–November 2022; Somali minister and security official, Mogadishu, November 2022. Officials stress that they do not provide weapons to the clans, who are already armed.

²⁰ The U.S. has been training the Danab since 2013. The goal is to train 3,000 personnel in total, with units then spreading out across Somalia's member states. At present, the elite force's strength is at about half the target. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, November 2022.

²¹ "Somali government receives military support from the United States", SONNA, 28 February 2023. The U.S. announced in May 2022 that it was returning troops to Somalia, reversing President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw them. The first U.S. airstrike under President Joe Biden occurred in July 2021, reaching a total of seven in the ensuing year. The tempo of U.S. airstrikes have increased since, in time with the Somali government's campaign. The U.S. military says it carried

boosting the government's firepower.²² Meanwhile, ATMIS has stayed out of direct combat thus far, but has provided artillery support in Hiraan, medevacs via helicopter and other logistical aid.²³

The combined efforts of the Somali army, clan militias and international partners have led Al-Shabaab's footprint in central Somalia to contract. The government seized the insurgency's regional centre of operations at Adan Yabaal in Middle Shabelle in December 2022. The next month, it captured the strategic towns of Ceel Dheere and Xarardheere in Galgaduud – although militants remain on the outskirts. The military is likely planning to uproot Al-Shabaab from its remaining strongholds in the southern Galgaduud districts of Ceel Buur and Galhareeri. If successful, its campaign would essentially dislodge the militants from a swathe of territory east of the Shabelle River.

The playbook from eastern Hiraan has not worked smoothly everywhere, however. While clans in that region rose up spontaneously against Al-Shabaab, in other areas the government had to coax clans to join forces. Military efforts in Middle Shabelle struggled to get off the ground and were side-tracked by clashes between two sub-clans in the Adale district in November.²⁴ In western Galgaduud, overly enthusiastic pro-government forces marched on the town of Wabxo in early November, only to pull out days later in the face of stiff resistance from Al-Shabaab. They could not hold the area without support from Somali special forces.²⁵

Other advances have also stalled. The army had to stop south of Qaayib, in Galgaduud, amid Al-Shabaab outreach to sub-clans to counter government mobilisation.²⁶ Government efforts to rally clans in Xarardheere, in the Mudug region, floundered because of sub-clan frictions and perceptions that the government had previously failed to support them in fighting the insurgents. The military ultimately moved to capture Xarardheere with limited clan militia participation.²⁷

Moreover, a string of recent incidents shows that Al-Shabaab can still inflict severe damage in areas it has lost, even if it is not reoccupying them. In January alone, the insurgents deployed at least twelve suicide car bombs in central Somalia towns, in some cases causing heavy casualties. A 20 January attack in Galcad (Galmudug state) was particularly damaging, with Danab forces taking significant losses, including of a deputy commander.²⁸ That incident spurred an internal reconsideration of strategy, with the offensive in central Somalia slowing in the ensuing weeks.²⁹ Additionally, Al-Shabaab militants continue to cross from west of the Shabelle River to

out seventeen airstrikes in Somalia between August 2022 and February 2023 – with all but one occurring in central areas where offensive operations were under way.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials, October-November 2022.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, security officials and ATMIS official, September 2022-March 2023. The absence of ATMIS forces from direct combat has irked some international partners. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, January 2023.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Somali official from Middle Shabelle, November 2022.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, and Murosade MP and community members active in the fight, October-November 2022.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security and government officials, Dhusamareb, November 2022.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials and parliament members, January 2023. Xarardheere lies near the coast, explaining the military rationale for seizing it.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Somali security official and U.S. official, Mogadishu, March 2023.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Somali security official, Mogadishu, March 2023.

attack *macawisley* positions in smaller settlements in Hiraan. The infiltration raises concerns about the government's ability to hold the territory it recaptures, especially as it takes over more areas. It also demonstrates the peril of measuring success in fighting Al-Shabaab solely with the yardstick of territorial control.

Still, the government has advantages in its current offensive, when compared to previous campaigns.³⁰ For one thing, the military's collaboration with clan militias is strengthening ties with local communities, while allowing for greater government penetration of rural areas. Previous offensives typically focused on securing cities, inadvertently deepening the rural-urban divide that has played to Al-Shabaab's strengths as a mobile organisation reliant on local communities for recruitment and financing. Secondly, today's campaign is Somali-led, unlike those from 2011 to 2015, when the government's forces played a secondary role to what is now ATMIS. This time around, ATMIS has stayed in the background, essentially serving as the holding force for urban locales while Somali soldiers venture into less densely populated areas.

There is also evidence that both the federal government and the clans are committed to sustaining their momentum. The current government in Mogadishu has arguably staked its reputation on defeating Al-Shabaab.³¹ Moreover, several of the operations to date have involved cross-clan collaboration, demonstrating an unusually high degree of consensus among those fighting the insurgents in central Somalia.³²

Progress, however, should not be chalked up exclusively to Mogadishu or local mobilisation, but rather to the combination of the two. The campaign has been most successful where community resistance to Al-Shabaab is strongest, and the government can be a force multiplier, as in eastern Hiraan. In cases where local engagement is less apparent, the government has struggled to advance.³³ In this sense, the offensive might be characterised as a series of wars between clans and Al-Shabaab, with the government backing the former.

C. *Al-Shabaab Adjusts to the Pressure*

Al-Shabaab has suffered important losses in central Somalia, but it continues to put up significant resistance, showing the value it places on the region. An intelligence source told Crisis Group that the insurgency is likely to reinforce its fighters in central Somalia with personnel now stationed in the south, likely sending the wounded

³⁰ Previous campaigns include the Somali government-led Operation Badbaado in 2019-2020 and AMISOM offensives.

³¹ The government has repeatedly described Al-Shabaab's eradication as a policy priority. "Hamza announced that he is doing three things this year", Caasmiada Online, 11 January 2023 (Somali). Some officials say the overwhelming focus on the war is distracting the government from other important tasks. Crisis Group interviews, Somali government officials and observers, October 2022-January 2023.

³² In certain cases, *macawisley* members have ventured out of their home areas to support neighbouring sub-clans. Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials, politicians and *macawisley* members, November 2022-February 2023. This collaboration is premised on the idea that no territory is safe from Al-Shabaab if the group is present nearby. Every community essentially seeks its own buffer zone. Crisis Group interviews, clan members active in offensive, October-November 2022.

³³ In such cases, clans may lack confidence in the government's support, fearing that they will merely place themselves at Al-Shabaab's mercy. Crisis Group interviews, Somali politicians and foreign diplomat, Mogadishu, March 2023.

south to recuperate.³⁴ Somali government officials say militants have defected, but not in significant numbers.³⁵ Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab has sought to increase pressure on the government with large-scale attacks in Mogadishu and other cities, in addition to making regular incursions into areas the government has seized.³⁶

Al-Shabaab's flexibility suggests that the organisation is more likely to adapt to the government campaign than be defeated by it.³⁷ For example, the group already appears to be changing its approach to the population in central Somalia, realising its coercive model for securing obedience has backfired. It has started offering more carrots than sticks, emphasising the need to promulgate the public good (*maslaha*) in its rhetoric, rather than exhorting communities to seek forgiveness (*tauba*) for having antagonised the group. This approach has borne fruit: in late December, in a setback for Mogadishu, a group of Salebaan elders in Galmudug reached a fresh agreement with Al-Shabaab to avoid confrontation, withdrawing support for the government in return for the release of hostages and seized property.³⁸

The federal government's collaboration with the *macawisley* likely prompted Al-Shabaab's shift in tone. In the past, the group has been more willing to offer concessions to clans when it feels weak, only to roll them back later when it is in a stronger position. It remains to be seen if it will renege on its commitments this time, but Al-Shabaab likely realised it needed to change tack in order to maintain community relations.³⁹

Al-Shabaab has a track record of turning to guerrilla warfare when it is on the back foot and it has resorted to these tactics of late.⁴⁰ Thus far, Somali forces have fought few major battles with the insurgents. The group prefers to preserve its strength, withdrawing from towns before the army's advance in favour of conducting hit-and-run attacks on recovered areas afterward. Sustained military pressure could certainly erode the group's capacity to act as a de facto authority in central Somalia. But Al-Shabaab's ability to exploit government weaknesses leads some observers to believe that the military cannot expect to quash the insurgency, even if it maintains a united front with the clan militias.⁴¹

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Somali intelligence official, December 2022.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Somali government officials, December 2022.

³⁶ "Somalia Villa Rays attack: Siege ends leaving eight civilians dead", BBC News, 28 November 2022.

³⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

³⁸ A court subsequently sentenced three Salebaan elders to five years in prison. "Three elders arrested for allegedly collaborating with al-Shabaab", Halbeeg, 25 December 2022.

³⁹ Al-Shabaab continues to single out the Hawadle for attack, including in Mogadishu, while letting up on other sub-clans, including the Salebaan. Some observers suggest that this pattern demonstrates the group, having realised it overreached, is learning. Crisis Group interviews, Salebaan community member and foreign diplomat, Mogadishu, March 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

⁴¹ "No one can say Al-Shabaab will be eliminated in two years, only that it will be weakened". Crisis Group interview, Somali intelligence official with extensive knowledge of the group, November 2022.

III. Challenges Ahead

The government's approach of partnering with clan militias to take on Al-Shabaab poses risks. As the militants are driven out of various areas, local actors will inevitably seek to benefit from the power vacuum. Instances of militia members abusing civilians have already occurred, particularly at ad hoc checkpoints; the government reacted swiftly (if brutally) to discipline offenders in some cases.⁴² Some analysts fear that empowering clans could sow the seeds of inter-clan conflict, calling to mind the bitter fighting of the 1990s that followed the Somali state's collapse.⁴³ While that is a worst-case scenario, a more immediate concern is that if the government fails to take steps to address local grievances, Al-Shabaab could be positioned to undermine its efforts at consolidating control.

Analysts who are concerned about the government's strategy point out that thus far, Mogadishu has not fully explained which forces will hold the ground in recovered areas or what role *macawisley* members will play in providing security in the future. To be fair, these are thorny questions. Entities that have participated in the successful campaign against al-Shabaab are not well-suited to keeping regions under government control. Somali special forces units like the Danab are designed for offensive operations, while regular soldiers lack training in community engagement. State-level Darwish (special police) and local law enforcement agencies are more appropriate in the long run, but their strength and capabilities vary from place to place.⁴⁴ Furthermore, as the government recaptures more territory from Al-Shabaab, it risks stretching its limited financial and human resources, as it did in previous counter-terrorism campaigns. The impending drawdown of ATMIS forces by the end of 2024 adds additional pressure, even as new army units are being trained.⁴⁵

Moreover, operations in Al-Shabaab's heartlands in the southern regions of South West and Jubaland are likely to be more challenging than the government's push in central Somalia. The areas retaken so far were, in essence, the low-hanging fruit, for three reasons. First, there is a stronger history of resistance in central Somalia. Secondly, Al-Shabaab's relations with sub-clans in the region, which hail from the politically dominant Hawiye, had become increasingly strained. Thirdly, the Hawiye sub-clans were already armed, dating back to the anarchic period following state collapse in the 1990s.

There are other considerations as well. Expanding to the southern part of the country, which has more clan diversity and militarily weaker sub-clans, will be more

⁴² "Military court sentences soldier to death for shooting minibus driver at illegal checkpoint", Radio Dalsan, 4 December 2022. The establishment of ad hoc checkpoints by militia members is a source of particular local frustration. Crisis Group interview, Somali analyst, January 2023.

⁴³ Abdi Ismail Samatar, "Somalia's strategy for the way against al-Shabaab will condemn the country to perpetual hell", *Daily Maverick*, 6 November 2022.

⁴⁴ Relying on state forces is also more in line with the development of a federal security framework, as called for in the 2017 National Security Architecture agreed upon by the government and member states.

⁴⁵ The UN Security Council authorised ATMIS as the successor to AMISOM in March 2022. The mission is overseeing a four-phase transition toward Somali responsibility for security, culminating in withdrawal of all its troops by the end of 2024. For more, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°176, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, 15 November 2021.

complicated – especially since the population in places like Middle Juba has historically mounted less resistance to Al-Shabaab. The government will probably face a stiffer struggle reclaiming territory there. Other issues relate to the prerogatives of the country's federal member states. State leaders in southern Somalia are wary of emboldening a set of sub-clan leaders who could end up threatening their authority. They prefer to rely on the professional soldiers – those serving the state government – they already have.⁴⁶ More broadly, political fissures, both between Mogadishu and federal member states, and within member states, could undermine efforts to deal Al-Shabaab a decisive blow.⁴⁷

Perhaps most challenging for Mogadishu will be ensuring long-term stabilisation in the regions it recovers. Al-Shabaab is losing control of places where people rose up against it, but that does not mean these people have decisively moved to the government's side. Clan militias and government forces are making common cause against a common enemy, and the appeal of jointly fighting Al-Shabaab lies in the prospect of a better future. People's needs are immense, however, and local expectations are high. The government has fed the latter by making a slew of promises. These include pledging to create new districts (referred to locally as *degma barar* or district inflation), each of which would be entitled to services such as health facilities and a local budget.⁴⁸ If the population sees the government as breaking its promises, it will almost surely lose trust in Mogadishu and be more open to other options, including the prospect of Al-Shabaab's return.

The government is counting on bilateral partners to offer significant financial aid for its stabilisation plans.⁴⁹ Though external partners such as the European Union, UK and U.S. are keen in principle to give such assistance, they face constraints, because of both their previous (and costly) security and humanitarian commitments to Somalia and the proliferation of other crises in the Horn that require attention.⁵⁰ There is a distinct risk of an expectations gap in the recovered areas, given the misalignment among local needs, the government's promises and the likely limited international support.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Baidoa and Kismayo, February-March 2023.

⁴⁷ All the member state governments except that in Puntland have extended their administrative terms by a year, pushing back the next round of elections. In trying to sustain the offensive, Mogadishu walks a fine line between appeasing member state leaders and cultivating communities who harbour grievances against state leaders but whose support it also needs. In early February, the federal government supported a reconciliation conference at which the South West state government and the local opposition agreed to a one-year extension for the regional administration. Other states may use the experience in South West as a blueprint for securing support from both Mogadishu and local opponents for extending their terms in exchange for commitments around the conduct of polls later.

⁴⁸ In some cases, the government has gone so far as to pledge to build new airports. "Cali Guudlawe reaches Moqokori district", Muqdisho Online, 11 December 2022 (Somali); tweet by Nasra Bashir Ali, @NasraBashir, state media correspondent for prime minister's office, 5:28pm, 14 December 2022.

⁴⁹ As a government official working on stabilisation put it, "If we do not receive international support, our mission will not succeed". Crisis Group interview, Somali official, Mogadishu, February 2023.

⁵⁰ Some partners, like the U.S., European Union and UK, have made adjustments to direct more funds to stabilisation of newly recovered areas, but little new money has been pledged thus far. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and development professionals, November 2022-March 2023.

⁵¹ Current stabilisation responses are just a "drop in the bucket". Crisis Group interview, stabilisation actor, Mogadishu, February 2023.

IV. Sustaining Progress

Mogadishu, in sum, will have to strike a balance between sustaining momentum with further offensive operations and consolidating its fragile hold on areas recaptured from Al-Shabaab. In order to accomplish the latter goal, it must establish holding forces, engage in community reconciliation and initiate stabilisation efforts.

A. *Planning Further Operations*

Rather than rushing into further operations, which could lead to overreach, the government should take a deliberate approach as the offensive proceeds.⁵² To that end, it should authorise additional military campaigns only after national security officials and local leaders have outlined which forces will be involved, how they will recover the area in question and, crucially, how they will keep hold of it thereafter, within the construct of Mogadishu's wider strategy. It should also ensure that the fresh pushes will not result in reduction of its presence elsewhere. To this end, the government can make greater use of ATMIS, which is committed to undertaking offensive operations prior to the end of its mandate in December 2024.

The government expects to partner with regional governments to further push into Al-Shabaab strongholds. In early February, the heads of state of countries that border Somalia – Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti – met in Mogadishu. The following month, Somalia's national security adviser commented that he expected additional soldiers from these countries to be deployed to Somalia within eight weeks.⁵³ These troops will be operating outside ATMIS; much remains uncertain about the operation, including vitally how command will be coordinated and where in Somalia the troops will venture. The move would add to the government's firepower but also carries serious risks: in the past, Al-Shabaab has pointed to the presence of foreign troops on Somali soil to incite opposition to the government.⁵⁴ While the momentum is not in Al-Shabaab's favour, given local frustrations with the group, if soldiers from outside the country stay for a long time or commit abuses of civilians, their utility would wane.⁵⁵

In addition to military planning, the government will need to secure support from local communities before making further advances in its offensive. It can continue to work through government officials and other prominent personalities from the areas it plans to recapture prior to deploying soldiers. In order to win over sub-clans that

⁵² Some have criticised the government's approach to date as haphazard, as some recovered areas sit isolated, far away from others. Crisis Group interview, Somali security official, Mogadishu, March 2023.

⁵³ Harun Maruf, "Somalia's neighbors to send additional troops to fight Al-Shabaab", *Voice of America*, 2 March 2023. A high-ranking Somali official expected Ethiopian troops in his region to be deployed before Ramadan begins in late March. Crisis Group interview, Hirshabelle official, March 2023.

⁵⁴ The government's efforts in central Somalia succeeded largely due to connection with local communities. External firepower is likely to be a poor substitute.

⁵⁵ The initial thinking appears to be that regional actors will mount a quick operation to further degrade Al-Shabaab rather than plan for a long-term deployment. Crisis Group interviews, Somali official and foreign diplomat, March 2023.

may be reluctant, government representatives will need to demonstrate that Mogadishu is prepared to fully back up the communities it partners with.

Overall, such deliberate steps are more likely to pay dividends than rapid advances that run out of steam because of too few troops or too little community support. They also will go some way toward ensuring that newly recovered territory does not fall back into Al-Shabaab's hands.

As it formulates its plans, the government must also consider humanitarian needs in areas where it is attempting to uproot Al-Shabaab. The humanitarian crisis, brought on by the historic drought, has not figured in the government's operations to date. Yet humanitarian needs will take centre stage if the offensive shifts to parts of southern Somalia where hundreds of thousands lack sufficient food and water.⁵⁶ Quick operations to recover new areas may improve humanitarian access, but if operations are prolonged or result in significant Al-Shabaab counter-attacks, they may aggravate local hardship. Where military advances are likely to disrupt access to food or water, the government should consider taking the battle elsewhere or pausing until conditions improve, rather than adding to people's suffering. If imminent action is necessary, the government should be prepared to bring in supplies for needy residents rapidly after recapturing the area.

B. *Holding Forces*

Determining which forces should hold the new areas, for how long and how they will be financed should be a central part of planning. While addressing this question will likely require a phased approach, involving greater reliance on the army at first, integrating *macawisley* who wish to be part of state-level Darwish units and provide security in their areas might relieve the pressure over the medium term.⁵⁷ Tapping militia members could not only give the overstretched security forces respite, but also keep local fighters occupied under a government umbrella, reducing their motivation to resort to extortion or make other demands on residents. The government will need to pay and train the militia members, however, which may necessitate external support.⁵⁸

The government will also need to address how the member states that make up the Somali federation will help constitute holding forces and how its plans intersect with the yet-to-be-implemented 2017 National Security Architecture, which provided the basis for Somali security sector development.

Finally, the government will have to put safeguards in place to prevent predatory behaviour. Mogadishu must be vigilant about limiting abuses, whether by regular

⁵⁶ Since 2022, the drought has displaced more than 1.1 million people. In December 2022, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projected that the Baidoa and Burhakaba districts would suffer famine between April and June. "Nearly 8.3 million people across Somalia face crisis (IPA Phase 3) or worse acute food security outcomes", IPC, 13 December 2022.

⁵⁷ Not all *macawisley* will be interested in such opportunities. Some may prefer to return to their previous livelihoods after securing their areas. Crisis Group interviews, *macawisley* members, November 2022.

⁵⁸ Demobilising the clan militias would carry a similar price tag, as would providing them with other support to resume previous livelihoods. These options will nonetheless likely need to be part of plans for the *macawisley*.

forces or militia members with which it cooperates, watching out in particular for fighters targeting people from rival clans. Carefully monitoring the situation on the ground, and appropriately punishing predatory behaviour, will be vital to strengthening government ties with local populations. For purposes of encouraging those ties, the government should also avoid penalising communities that remain under Al-Shabaab's control.⁵⁹

C. *Reconciliation*

The government must also make reconciliation among rival sub-clans a priority. Whenever possible, it should map out reconciliation needs and conduct outreach to relevant power brokers before moving into Al-Shabaab-held areas. Reconciliation must be a continuing effort, however. After all, communities may come together against a common enemy – in this case, Al-Shabaab – only to fight over the spoils of victory thereafter.⁶⁰ This risk is especially high in areas inhabited by several clans with a history of mutual antagonism, such as around Xarardheere, where sub-clan mistrust stalled the government offensive (see Section II.B above). Mogadishu has held this strategic city near the coast, but the intra-clan competition in the area has hindered its forces from moving on to recapture surrounding regions.

As the government drives out Al-Shabaab, it is in many cases appointing temporary committees for local governance. It ought to reserve seats on these bodies for sub-clans in proportion to their perceived demographic weight, based on local agreement. Federal or state government officials must avoid the common practice of pursuing arrangements that reflect the political objectives of elites from outside the region, or benefit only a portion of the community, at the expense of the higher priority of knitting these communities together. Placing reconciliation front and centre in areas liberated from Al-Shabaab, and weaving it into the developing administrative structures, will help reduce incentives for aggrieved clans to use *macawisley* fighters to advance their interests.

D. *Stabilisation*

Furthermore, the government, with the help of external partners, must urgently restore basic services in recovered areas, some of which have seen no development money for over a decade. The government must be careful not to over-promise, while focusing on measures that can immediately yield dividends. It can, for example, secure quick wins by accelerating repair of damaged infrastructure, including boreholes and other water sources. It can also win local support by scaling up ser-

⁵⁹ For example, members of the Murosade sub-clan complain that the Galmudug government and Somali army are blockading their areas in Galmudug – impeding the flow of goods to civilians – as a means of putting pressure on Al-Shabaab. They draw an unflattering comparison to Al-Shabaab's own tactics in South West state. After Murosade MPs took their concerns public in February, supplies trickled into the area, but it remains unclear if the reprieve is only temporary. Crisis Group interview, Murosade MP, Mogadishu, February 2023.

⁶⁰ Control of checkpoints is already a source of sub-clan competition in Hiraan's recovered areas. Crisis Group interview, stabilisation actor active in Hiraan, February 2023.

vices such as mobile health clinics and education, two areas where research suggests the government holds an advantage over Al-Shabaab.⁶¹

In early December, the government presented a stabilisation program, developed by the Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation, which is a step in the right direction. Intended as a framework, the plan lacks detail, much less a support strategy for each recovered area. The government and member states can do more to plan and coordinate roles and responsibilities internally when it comes to stabilisation.⁶²

To help Somalia build its social services infrastructure, both Western partners – like the U.S., the UK, the European Union and its member states – and regional partners – like Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – should step up support for immediate stabilisation projects while longer-term service delivery mechanisms are worked out. Humanitarian aid agencies can also play a role in getting needed supplies to recovered areas. They are, of course, keen to preserve their neutrality: they want to avoid association with any military and guard against the blurring of lines between stabilisation and humanitarian programming.⁶³ The federal government, along with its member state counterparts, should pursue dialogue with these agencies to reach a common understanding about their concerns and better identify the means of collaboration in recovered areas.⁶⁴

E. *Eventual Engagement*

Finally, even if the offensive achieves considerable further success, military operations are unlikely to conclusively end the war with Al-Shabaab. While government rhetoric suggests it is bent on Al-Shabaab's total defeat, the campaign is more likely to weaken the group instead.⁶⁵ As Crisis Group has argued previously, a political settlement will likely still be needed to bring the hostilities to a close.⁶⁶ The government should therefore also try to establish communication channels with Al-Shabaab. If the government manages to sustain military pressure, it may indeed be able to extract concessions from Al-Shabaab – perhaps even to prod the militant group to come to the table on terms acceptable to Mogadishu. If this path emerges, Somalia's partners should quietly find ways to explore rather than obstruct it.

V. **Conclusion**

The Somali government has made notable progress in pushing Al-Shabaab insurgents out of much of the country's centre. Its offensive, with the help of clan militias, has boosted morale in Somali society, creating a sense of positive momentum.

⁶¹ Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

⁶² There has been friction at times over who has the lead for stabilisation activities on the government side. Crisis Group interviews, stabilisation actors, December 2022-March 2023.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers in Somalia, November 2022-March 2023.

⁶⁴ Some agencies, like the International Organization for Migration, the World Food Programme and the UN Children's Fund, have already initiated responses in newly recovered areas.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Somali observers and foreign diplomats, September 2022-January 2023.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

The gains are fragile, however, and the harder part lies ahead. Expanding the offensive to southern Somalia likely will require a different model than what worked in the centre, given the divergent social dynamics and lower levels of past resistance to Al-Shabaab. Still, consolidating Mogadishu's grip on recovered areas probably represents the biggest challenge. The government urgently needs to work out how to provide basic security and other services in these parts of the country – lest it lose them back to the insurgents. Agile despite its setbacks in central Somalia, Al-Shabaab is likely to play for time, while working to stymie government progress and wear down the locals' resistance. The government should step up its efforts in newly recovered zones, striving to reconcile clan rivals and fulfil its promises of service delivery. Failure in these respects will give Al-Shabaab a chance to reverse the government's recent successes.

Mogadishu/Nairobi/Brussels, 21 March 2023

Appendix A: Map of Somalia



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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March 2023

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