



Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia

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Principal Findings

What's new? Al-Shabaab's lethal insurgency continues with no end in sight. The group consistently stays a step ahead of local and regional military operations. Combined with dysfunction and division among their adversaries, the militants' agility has allowed them to embed themselves in Somali society. It also makes them hard to defeat.

Why does it matter? The protracted war has cost countless lives and derailed Somalia's state building project. There is growing domestic and international consensus that Al-Shabaab cannot be beaten by military means alone. Yet there is little appetite among Somali elites or the country's international partners for exploring alternatives, notably talks with militant leaders.

What should be done? Putting off efforts to engage militants in the hope of gaining the upper hand militarily or forging greater unity among elites will prolong the conflict indefinitely. The government should seek discreet channels to Al-Shabaab leaders to test whether political negotiations and confidence-building steps might be feasible.

Executive Summary

The war with Al-Shabaab's Islamist insurgency has torn apart Somalia for more than fifteen years and shows no sign of abating. Military operations by Somalia's government and its foreign partners have been stymied in part by discord between Mogadishu and the country's regions, known as federal member states. For its part, Al-Shabaab has proven resilient, adjusting to counter-insurgency campaigns and entrenching itself deeper in parts of Somali society. The government that has just come to power, led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, may boost confidence that Somali forces can take the fight to militants. Yet even new leadership is unlikely to prevail over Al-Shabaab by force alone. Mohamud's government should continue military operations and redouble efforts to repair relations among Somali elites. At the same time, it should seek to engage Al-Shabaab's leaders to test whether political talks might be feasible and explore initial confidence-building steps that could reduce violence. The challenges to dialogue with militants are huge, but given that the alternative is incessant war, engagement is worth a shot.

Though military campaigns ousted Al-Shabaab from Somali cities in the early 2010s, counter-insurgency efforts by the government backed by a 19,000-strong African Union (AU) force have floundered of late, and time is running out. Political division underpins the failure. Relations between the federal government and some member states became more rancorous under Mohamud's predecessor, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, or "Farmajo". But elites have long channelled energy – even before Farmajo's tenure – into bickering over power and resources, leaving the struggle against Al-Shabaab a secondary concern. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. A re-hatted AU force, whose mandate was renewed in April, will, in principle, keep Al-Shabaab at bay while Somali security forces build up, allowing AU troops to pull out by the end of 2024. In reality, few believe that Somali forces will be ready by then. The fraught debates of late 2021 over the AU mission's extension illustrate that international patience with the present model of external assistance is waning.

Al-Shabaab, for its part, demonstrates internal coherence and capacity to adapt. It responded to early setbacks when pushed out of the capital, Mogadishu, in 2011 and the port city, Kismayo, a year later by switching to guerrilla warfare. It avoids costly frontal battles with opponents, instead sapping their strength through asymmetric attacks. Its dominance in rural areas, where it provides basic services in localities under its control, helps it recruit and generate revenue through taxation. The group has also sent operatives back into cities, where they run elaborate extortion rackets that at once fill its coffers and undermine government authority. Al-Shabaab is certainly not popular, but aspects of both its service provision and its message do hold some appeal. Moreover, its flexibility makes it difficult to counter militarily and its roots in society give it a degree of staying power.

Both sides thus remain locked in an endless cycle of war. Authorities in Mogadishu may argue that by staying the course, with reforms to strengthen their own hand, a concerted military push and now a president who pledges reconciliation among elites, they can gain the upper hand over Al-Shabaab. Emboldened by the Taliban's success in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab calculates that it, too, can emerge vic-

torious by biding its time, given the federal government's weakness and external partners' impatience. Both parties overestimate their chances. Little suggests that Al-Shabaab will be defeated militarily, but nor are militants likely to prevail in the long run. Powerful neighbours are more likely to step in directly, as they have before, if a militant takeover of large parts of Somalia looks as though it might be on the cards.

If the war is largely stalemated, obstacles to a negotiated settlement are formidable. Previous outreach efforts to militants have fizzled, either because Al-Shabaab leaders rejected them or because Mogadishu overly focused on stimulating defections from the group. Calls for dialogue from civil society and foreign actors, while growing louder, are driven by frustration with the status quo more than the existence of an opening. Al-Shabaab's al-Qaeda ties hardly help. Neighbours Ethiopia and Kenya are hostile, driven partly by understandable fury at Al-Shabaab attacks in the region and partly by fear of Islamists with pan-Somali aspirations holding or sharing power in Mogadishu. Many Somalis also reject the idea of bringing in Al-Shabaab. Its brutality fuels loathing, even if this sentiment does not translate into support for Somali authorities. Clan politics could complicate engagement. Plus, militant leaders reject the government as illegitimate and show little readiness to compromise on their vision of Islamist rule – although in a recent public statement a high-ranking Al-Shabaab leader appeared to leave the door ajar generally to the idea of talks.

Given that the alternative is indefinite violence, Mohamud should test the waters with Al-Shabaab to see what might be feasible. This endeavour could take different forms: empowering an envoy, instituting a committee of individuals able to contact militant leaders or entrusting the UN, with its wealth of peacemaking experience, with reaching out to the group. Emphasis at first should be on discretion, given the task's sensitivity. The immediate goal would be to probe with the group's leadership under what conditions it might be ready to enter more formal talks and perhaps what room there might be for compromise on big issues, notably political and religious pluralism, the role of Islam in public life and demobilisation. If such efforts reveal readiness to engage on the militants' side, both parties could take steps to build confidence – moderating how they speak of each other, for example, or concluding local ceasefires or getting vital assistance to populations living under Al-Shabaab control, especially amid the country's recurring droughts. With time, these measures might prepare the ground for an official process.

Prospects for success are low – indeed, Al-Shabaab may again rebuff Mogadishu's overtures – but the cost of some quiet exploratory outreach would not in itself be high. Most risks, if factored in, are manageable. To mitigate the danger that militants would use dialogue to regroup, the tempo of military operations could continue unabated, perhaps with some adjustment to targeted killings if meetings do take place with leaders. President Mohamud can follow through on his sensible pledges to repair relations between Mogadishu and federal states, even while making contact with Al-Shabaab. Suspicion among elites means that any diplomacy with militants could sow fear that the federal government is using it for other purposes, but that is a challenge to be managed through consultations if engagement with Al-Shabaab goes anywhere, not in its initial stages. Much the same applies to resistance from Somalia's foreign partners, though Mohamud might err on the side of seeking Western backing, which could help bring along regional capitals, fairly early on.

There will never be an ideal time to engage Al-Shabaab, but it makes more sense to try now than to wait. The AU forces' mandate means the departure of foreign troops – one of the insurgency's core demands – can still be leveraged to extract concessions from the group. As for Al-Shabaab's rigid ideological stance, uncompromising political vision, al-Qaeda links and activities outside Somalia's borders, these remain daunting hurdles. But they are issues that should be tackled through negotiation rather than precluding it. No one should expect quick wins. If precedent from other places is anything to go by, getting to political talks is likely to be a lengthy process, with fits and starts, and the road to a settlement an even longer and more arduous one. But getting started requires initial soundings and the new government loses little by taking them. President Mohamud came to power promising reconciliation among Somalis. The question that peace in Somalia likely hinges on is whether that can extend to Al-Shabaab's insurgency.

Mogadishu/Nairobi/Brussels, 21 June 2022

Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia

I. Introduction

Al-Shabaab (which translates as “the youth” in Arabic) began as the enforcement wing of the Islamic Courts Union, a group of clerics who restored relative order to much of south-central Somalia after defeating warlords who had held those areas since the central government collapsed in 1991.¹ Following Ethiopia’s December 2006 invasion, which dislodged the Islamic courts in favour of the internationally backed Transitional Federal Government, Al-Shabaab positioned itself as a vehicle of armed resistance and a governing actor throughout the areas under its sway. In 2007, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) replaced the Ethiopian troops. AMISOM offensives and Al-Shabaab’s own internal divisions soon put the militants on the back foot. Al-Shabaab recovered, however, to regain dominance in rural swathes of south-central Somalia, where it put down the roots of an enduring insurgency. It stages daily attacks on AU forces, Somali troops and officials, including in towns nominally held by the federal government.²

The conclusion of a fraught election cycle and selection of a new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who previously served in the same capacity between 2012-2017 and returns to power promising to reconcile Somalia’s feuding elites, offers a chance to rethink the approach to a war that has dragged on for more than fifteen years, with no end in sight. This report explores available options. In particular, it examines prospects of political engagement with Al-Shabaab. It follows previous Crisis Group publications examining the possibility of dialogue with other jihadists elsewhere.³

The report is based on more than 150 interviews, mostly conducted in 2021 and early 2022. Interviewees included current and former Somali government, defence and intelligence officials, civil society figures, including religious scholars, clan elders, NGO representatives and researchers, businesspeople and diplomats. Crisis Group took special care to contact a variety of actors living and working throughout Somalia, including federal member state representatives and other local authorities, humanitarian workers, defectors from Al-Shabaab and civilians who live or previously lived

¹ See Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°74, *Somalia’s Divided Islamists*, 18 May 2010; and N°99, *Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will be a Long War*, 26 June 2014.

² The AU Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) replaced AMISOM on 1 April 2022. The mission has a 33-month mandate, and it is set to withdraw from Somalia in four phases over that period. Conditions on the ground will dictate the actual pace of withdrawal, and it is uncertain what will happen to the timeline if those conditions do not align with it. Crisis Group interview, technical adviser to AMISOM, January 2022. For background, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°176, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, 15 November 2021.

³ See Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2017; Crisis Group Africa Reports N°276, *Speaking with the “Bad Guys”: Toward Dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists*, 28 May 2019; and N°306, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*, 10 December 2021.

in places under Al-Shabaab administration. Efforts were made to interview women in each of the sectors surveyed, including those who have lived under Al-Shabaab and businesswomen who now operate in Al-Shabaab-held territory. While research involved interviews with individuals associated with Al-Shabaab, it did not include contacts with the group's leadership due to the challenges associated with securing access. Interviews took place in person in Mogadishu, Nairobi and other locations, and by electronic means with respondents based elsewhere in Somalia.

II. A Grinding Stalemate

The war that pits Somali and international forces against Al-Shabaab can be characterised as a stalemate at best. The militants have defied years of counter-insurgency efforts and remain committed to driving foreign troops out of Somalia. They also seek to topple the federal government and establish a state run according to the dictates of their particular interpretation of Islam. The grinding conflict and its attendant costs, coupled with the thinning patience of the government's foreign backers, is prompting more and more conversations in Somalia about the prospect of intra-Somali dialogue, including with Al-Shabaab, as one feature of a pathway toward ending the violence.⁴

A. *Faltering Government Efforts*

Factional politics have persistently hindered Somali government efforts to defeat Al-Shabaab. As discussed in previous Crisis Group reporting, Somali politicians are often consumed by their own squabbles, especially between the federal government and member states.⁵ The unsettled relationship between Mogadishu and its domestic rivals at times descends into armed confrontation, leaving counter-insurgency campaigns to sputter. The result for several years has been a government that faces a coherence deficit, and therefore struggles to counter an adversary in Al-Shabaab that has demonstrated a greater unity of purpose. The internal tensions also divert resources from the battle with the militants, which often appears to be a secondary priority.

In the course of Farmajo's term, friction between the federal government and member states worsened.⁶ Al-Shabaab directly expanded its reach as a result, including in parts of south-central Somalia that have witnessed the sharpest quarrels between Mogadishu and federal member state leadership.⁷ Even when the government at-

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, Mogadishu, August 2021. For further examples, see Abdurahman Baadiyow, "How to deal with Al-Shabaab? Thinking outside of the box," *Wardheer News*, 8 November 2017; and Joanne Crouch, "Counter-terrorism and the Logic of Violence in Somalia's Civil War: Time for a New Approach", *Saferworld*, November 2018.

⁵ "We put a lot of energy into politics rather than security". Crisis Group interview, federal member state minister, Mogadishu, August 2021. See also Rashid Abdi, "Somalia's South West State: A New President Installed, a Crisis Inflamed", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 24 December 2018; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°260, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, 5 June 2018.

⁶ These frictions predate Farmajo's administration (2017-2022) but grew under his tenure as he sought to centralise power to a greater degree than his immediate predecessors. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, 14 July 2020.

⁷ For instance, Al-Shabaab expanded its presence amid a confrontation in the Gedo region in 2020. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, op. cit. A similar situation transpired in the central state of Galmudug in 2020-2021 following the election of pro-Mogadishu candidate Ahmed Kariye "Qoor Qoor" as state president. The insurgents capitalised on election-related fighting between government forces and the anti-Al-Shabaab Islamist militia Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) to make significant advances. "Al-Shabaab never collected taxes in ASWJ's area before, but now that has all been lost because of politics". Crisis Group interview, former Somali defence official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

tempted major offensives against Al-Shabaab, these fell short.⁸ Gains of military campaigns were rarely sustained, as centre-periphery and related political tensions undermined the efforts, redirecting attention and limited resources elsewhere.⁹ Although a more unified approach among the political class would by no means be guaranteed to vanquish Al-Shabaab in the long run, the converse is undeniably true: political dysfunction, especially during the protracted 2021-2022 electoral cycle, has aided the Islamist group.¹⁰

Some in Mogadishu argue that with the conclusion of the electoral cycle in May 2022 and formation of a new government, Somalia will be able to focus anew on

⁸ The Somali Transition Plan, crafted in 2018 and updated in 2021, outlines a series of government objectives including AMISOM's handover to local forces of responsibility for protecting locations in Mogadishu and major supply routes linking the capital to the key towns of Baidoa, Beledweyne and Barawe. Since 2018, Somali forces have taken control of Mogadishu National Stadium and Jaalle Siyaad Military Academy, in addition to Warsheikh and Afgooye forward operating bases. But other towns targeted for recovery are still in Al-Shabaab's hands, while priority supply routes remain insecure. The plan called for AMISOM, now replaced by ATMIS, to shift toward a transition mission. Crisis Group interviews, Somali government officials and foreign security partners, July-October 2021.

⁹ Operation Badbaado I offers one such tale. It was launched in 2019 with the goal of providing a security buffer in Mogadishu by recovering five "bridge towns" used by Al-Shabaab to manufacture and smuggle explosives. Security forces took control of all the towns within a year. Authorities have held them since, despite Al-Shabaab attacks. Yet further progress in transferring control to holding security forces, expanding into the surrounding countryside and undertaking stabilisation programs has been limited. Close observers note that former Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire oversaw the operation. When he turned his attention elsewhere, such as to pursuing reconciliation in Galmudug, momentum stalled, and the government's focus waned even further following his July 2020 ouster. By 2020, the Farmajo administration had also become distracted by the struggle with the Jubaland member state leadership for dominance in Gedo, after which it came to see Operation Badbaado as a lesser priority. Crisis Group interviews, Western defence attaché, diplomat, humanitarian worker, Somali general and colonel, March 2020-November 2021. Hodan Hassan, "Lower Shabelle Stabilization: Lessons from Operation Badbaado 1", Somali Ministry of Interior, Foreign Affairs and Reconciliation, 24 September 2020.

¹⁰ Politics likewise hampered operations to combat Al-Shabaab in Middle Shabelle (May-June 2021) and Galmudug (July-August 2021). Some in the political opposition claim the Middle Shabelle campaign was designed to occupy federal forces that had flooded into Mogadishu in April 2021 to oppose a two-year extension of the government's term, rather than to roll back Al-Shabaab gains. On 18 June, an Al-Shabaab suicide attack in Biyo-Adde injured a colonel who supported the anti-extension forces, raising opposition suspicions that government forces had purposely looked the other way as the bomber passed through checkpoints. Whether or not these doubts are justified, they show the depth of the fracture in the security forces. Crisis Group interview, former Somalia army official, Mogadishu, August 2021. The military was unable to sustain initial gains in Galmudug, either, and locals complained that the government did little to support them in their own fight to defeat Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, Galmudug resident, August 2021. See also "Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council on Somalia", 6 October 2021. In contrast, Mogadishu later sent major reinforcements to Galmudug to combat ASWJ in September 2021, as the group presented a strong political challenge to the Mogadishu-aligned state leadership. Heavy fighting over five days in late October resulted in more than 120 dead in one of the largest non-Al-Shabaab clashes in Somalia in recent years. Crisis Group interview, former Galmudug minister, October 2021.

fighting Al-Shabaab, yielding different results.¹¹ The new national security adviser is one who maintains that Al-Shabaab can be defeated under the right conditions.¹² Indeed, the new leadership team under President Mohamud might reinvigorate the military struggle, in turn increasing the pressure on Al-Shabaab. Yet Somalia's security forces remain a work in progress, sometimes fracturing along political lines, and it is uncertain when they will be up to the task. The 2017 National Security Architecture agreement between the federal government and member states, which called for establishing a national army and police service including troops seconded from member states, is still just a piece of paper. Recent government efforts to build up the security forces have unfolded with little input from member states.¹³ Even if all the proposed reforms take place, it is unlikely the Somali security forces will be in a position to row back the militants for good any time soon.¹⁴

Without deeper engagement between Mogadishu and member states to resolve persistent political differences that hinder efforts to combat Al-Shabaab – combined with reconciliation within member states, whose internecine disputes Al-Shabaab exploits – the change in government itself is unlikely to shift dynamics significantly in Mogadishu's favour. Moreover, even if federal and state political leaders make progress in tamping down their feuds, Al-Shabaab will remain a potent threat due to its persistent adaptability, as described below. In this sense, continuing largely with the same approach, but just “done better”, may lead to short-term improvements but probably not to the militants' conclusive defeat. Mogadishu is certainly in a stronger position than it was a decade ago, despite the reversals of the past few years. But little suggests that the new government will be able to beat Al-Shabaab by military means alone.

B. *Al-Shabaab's Adaptability*

Al-Shabaab survives, if not thrives, because it enjoys greater internal coherence than its adversaries. It holds together due to adherence to a unifying Salafi-jihadist ideology and strong checks on dissent. Not every member believes equally in each and every tenet, but the common beliefs provide the basis for an organisational logic that

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Somali politicians, civil society members, Mogadishu, August 2021. Mohamud defeated Farmajo by 214 to 110 votes in the third round of the presidential vote on 15 May 2022. Harun Maruf, “Somali parliament re-elects former president to top job”, VOA, 15 May 2022. For additional analysis, see Omar Mahmood, “A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia”, Crisis Group Commentary, 31 May 2022.

¹² He contends that Al-Shabaab lacks popular support in Somalia and would crumble if the government were to mount a sustained, nationwide offensive. Crisis Group interview, Hussein Sheikh-Ali, Somali national security adviser, Mogadishu, June 2022.

¹³ “Somalia: Transforming Hope into Stability”, Crisis Group Commentary, 30 April 2017.

¹⁴ As part of discussions around the transition from AMISOM to ATMIS, the federal government has committed to train up 22,825 troops by the end of 2024, when ATMIS is scheduled to complete its drawdown. This goal is ambitious and the government has provided no additional detail as to how it will be achieved (a conference discussing force generation has been indefinitely postponed). Over the years, Somalia and its external partners have trained thousands of troops, but it has been a major challenge both to sustain them financially and to mould them into a coherent unit. “Somali Dispatch: Somali government's insistence on taking over security is just lip service”, video, YouTube, 28 March 2022.

neither the federal government nor any member state can match.¹⁵ Al-Shabaab is also much more connected via family and other ties to Somali society – and to the government – than outsiders often assume.¹⁶

The broad contours of Al-Shabaab’s strategy are to preserve itself by avoiding direct military combat, to maintain dominance in rural south-central Somalia and, increasingly, to penetrate cities and towns nominally under government control.¹⁷ The group rarely engages in large battles but dictates the conflict’s pace by undertaking smaller ambushes at locations of its own choosing.¹⁸ AMISOM, now re-hatted as the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), meanwhile, has for years adopted a more defensive posture and rarely launches major offensives.

Combined with a Somali security sector that is still developing in the midst of war, these factors have put Al-Shabaab in a comfortable position.¹⁹ With overstretched Somali and partner forces hunkered down in urban locales, Al-Shabaab has secured a firm foothold in the rural areas in which it operates.²⁰ By contrast, the government struggles to connect the towns it holds, as evidenced by Al-Shabaab’s imposition of blockades that restrict the movement of goods into government-held centres and its harassment of convoys along supply routes.²¹

To buttress its rural dominance, Al-Shabaab maintains limited but effective administrative control over local populations.²² Some of the basic services it provides rival or outstrip those offered in government-held areas. The government’s own efforts at service provision are limited and Somalis often perceive Al-Shabaab to be less corrupt in comparison. The group’s resolution of disputes through a Sharia-based justice system is an oft-cited example.²³ Crisis Group interviews with people who have

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Al-Shabaab defectors, civil society actors and government officials, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, government official, March 2022.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will be a Long War*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Al-Shabaab’s emphasis on asymmetric warfare is reflected in its choice of weapons. Its use of improvised explosive devices has spiked in recent years, especially since 2017, when improved technical know-how allowed it to manufacture them locally. “Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council on Somalia”, UN Security Council, 1 November 2019. Mortars launched from spots up to 5km from the target have proven less deadly, but still give Al-Shabaab the ability to harass opponents from a distance. In 2021, Al-Shabaab mortar attacks occurred as far south as Kuday in Jubaland and as far north as Af Urur in Puntland. Crisis Group tracking of Al-Shabaab attacks. Al-Shabaab has been producing more and more mortars locally since at least 2019. Crisis Group interview, Somali security official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, op. cit.

²⁰ Al-Shabaab’s strategic retreat from formal control of urban centres resulted from bitter experience. Its 2010 offensive on Mogadishu proved disastrous, as it suffered significant losses in battles with AMISOM troops, leading to internal tensions over strategy. Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia* (London, 2013), pp. 100-102.

²¹ Major towns in Bay and Bakool, such as Wajid, Huddur, Qansadheere and Dinsor, are subject to an Al-Shabaab blockade, making resupply by land limited. Crisis Group interview, Southwest minister, Mogadishu, August 2021.

²² “We have two governments. ... They control more and generate more funds than us”. Crisis Group interview, Hirshabelle minister, Mogadishu, August 2021.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, August 2020. See also Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°145, *Women and Al-Shabaab’s Insurgency*, 27 June 2019; and “Pathways and Institutions for Resolving Land Disputes in Mogadishu”, The Expanding Access to Justice Program in Somalia, January 2020.

lived under Al-Shabaab administration reveal other perceived benefits, such as greater public safety and less harassment, including of women, by security personnel.²⁴ Some women who lived under Al-Shabaab told Crisis Group that the militants asked little of them other than to attend a weekly education program on Sharia from the local *hisbah* (police) and to abide by *zakat* (tax) payments – although Al-Shabaab does often pressure women to marry its fighters.²⁵ Businesswomen interviewed who operate in Al-Shabaab areas noted that they enjoyed advantages over men in some ways, as the group is less suspicious of women.²⁶

Other factors suggest that Al-Shabaab demonstrates greater administrative consistency and more adroit use of local institutions than the government. One advantage cited is Al-Shabaab's centralisation, which stands in contrast to the government's discordant federalised structure. The latter means a proliferation of administrative levels, and thus of government checkpoints, at each of which people transporting goods must pay a fee.²⁷ Al-Shabaab also portrays itself as avoiding discrimination along

Somalia had little law and order following the central government's collapse, which was a factor in the rise of the Islamic Courts Union. Al-Shabaab invested in developing a judicial structure, relying on a Sharia legal code acceptable in much of society to adjudicate disputes. (A caveat is that Al-Shabaab's structure is based on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence prevalent in Saudi Arabia, rather than on the Shafi'i school that historically has had greater relevance in Somalia. While drawing upon the same sources as other schools, the Hanbali school is generally considered to have more rigid interpretations of Islamic law.) Al-Shabaab courts focus on resolving land and contract disputes. The group's reputation for lower levels of corruption, its assurances that litigants have equal standing (the group likes to emphasise that it does not discriminate along clan lines) and, pivotally, its high enforcement capacity (underpinned by the threat of brute force) have all earned it respect. Though Al-Shabaab can dispense rough justice, it still is seen as more effective than government institutions in this domain. Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu businessman, Al-Shabaab defector, academic specialising on Somalia and Somali lawyer, December 2020–November 2021. Al-Shabaab's judicial decisions are not always accepted, however. In December 2021, residents of a village near Jowhar in Middle Shabelle killed two pro-Al-Shabaab elders who had travelled to enforce a court ruling that the villagers disagreed with. Confidential third-party security assessment seen by Crisis Group.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, July–September 2021. "I get more respect on their [Al-Shabaab] side and there is a clear structure. On the [government] side, there is harassment, threats and psychological abuse". Crisis Group telephone interview, midwife working in Al-Shabaab-held and government-controlled areas in Gedo, August 2021.

²⁵ Two female interviewees said they left for government-held areas because their husbands died and they did not want to marry another Al-Shabaab fighter – but that, prior to their husbands' deaths, they had been content. Single women who rejected Al-Shabaab's injunctions to get married, however, faced regular harassment from group members. Crisis Group telephone interviews, women formerly living in Al-Shabaab areas, August 2021.

²⁶ Businesswomen also noted that they must abide by Al-Shabaab's dress code and *khillwa* regulations (meaning they cannot be alone with a man who is not an immediate family member), but do not require a male escort to move around in public. Crisis Group telephone interviews, businesswomen operating in Al-Shabaab areas, August 2021.

²⁷ "Under Al-Shabaab you can travel from Jubaland to Galmudug with one paper as they have a single administration – on the government side it is not the same". Crisis Group telephone interview, security official near Gobweyn, August 2021. The government's weak control of supply routes also permits militias other than Al-Shabaab to set up checkpoints.

clan lines, although it certainly does not always do so.²⁸ When disputes emerge, Al-Shabaab administrators typically allow local elders the first crack at resolving them and intervene only if the process fails or if their view violates Sharia.

Al-Shabaab does, however, manipulate local institutions as well, appointing replacement elders from its ranks for those who flee once they take over an area or otherwise resist collaborating with them. These appointed elders work on behalf of the group but often struggle to earn local legitimacy.²⁹

That Al-Shabaab's track record is viewed favourably in some ways compared to that of the authorities allows the group to present itself as a legitimate governing actor that in some areas is winning the service delivery competition with its rivals.³⁰ True, the accomplishments of Al-Shabaab administration amid dismal government performance can be overblown, and in fact its dictates also draw local resistance, as outlined below. Still, some Somalis see pragmatic reasons to align with the group because they prefer it to the alternatives.³¹ The consent of at least some of the governed, however partial and skewed by the lack of attractive options, is vital to sustaining the movement. Villagers are the group's primary source of fresh manpower, as the group demands that local clans and families hand over a set number of their young male children, while Al-Shabaab's control of rural areas also allows it to collect taxes that help fill its coffers.³²

Yet Al-Shabaab remains far from popular and often must rely on the threat of force to back up its edicts.³³ Where it occurs, resistance to its rule stems from the onerous

²⁸ An elder from the Jareerweyne clan in Jubaland noted how Al-Shabaab appointed people from his town when they took over, granting them a degree of respect they were not afforded previously. In contrast, when the Jubaland administration prised a nearby town from Al-Shabaab control, they appointed officials who hailed from more dominant clans found outside the town. Crisis Group interview, March 2020. In reality, though, Al-Shabaab often engages in Somali clan politics. A study from 2018 highlighted the Hawiye clan's domination of the movement's top levels, noting that half of the executive council and more than half of its high-ranking intelligence and military leaders hailed from that extended family, which tends to be politically dominant in south-central Somalia. "Taming the Clans: Al-Shabaab's Clan Politics", Hiraal Institute, 31 May 2018.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, elders living in Al-Shabaab areas, July-September 2021.

³⁰ Two advantages the government holds over Al-Shabaab are the provision of health care and education. Crisis Group interviews, civilians who formerly lived under Al-Shabaab administration, August-September 2021. Crisis Group interviewed a defector who said he enjoyed his life under Al-Shabaab and remained ideologically aligned with the movement, but left the area the group controlled because he was in need of medical assistance that he could not get there. Crisis Group interview, Al-Shabaab defector, August 2021.

³¹ One interviewee who left Al-Shabaab's areas for government-controlled territory regretted his decision, noting that if one is in a position to accept the group's demands, then living under their rule is preferable. "Under Al-Shabaab you can have a good life if you give them just one or two boys. At least they will not touch your wife while the government side will harass her". Crisis Group telephone interview, internally displaced person (IDP) who formerly lived under Al-Shabaab in Bay, August 2021.

³² Interlocutors noted that the number of young recruits Al-Shabaab demands varies, but a typical imposition is one of every two to three boys younger than 13 per family. Crisis Group interviews, individuals who lived under Al-Shabaab administration, July-September 2021.

³³ The demand that clans hand over boys signals a decline in Al-Shabaab's popularity, as the group is not attracting enough new recruits on its merits, forcing it to find other means of bolstering its ranks. Crisis Group interview, civil society official based in Southwest state, Mogadishu, August 2021.

demands it makes of civilians – one being the forced recruitment of boys for religious indoctrination and another being excessive taxation.³⁴ Locals tend to resist Al-Shabaab when they see the group as taking more than it provides. Resistance does not imply a deeply held preference for the government, however. As one elder told Crisis Group, “People don’t care [if Al-Shabaab or the government are in charge]. They just want to live a better life”.³⁵

Al-Shabaab also increasingly penetrates urban areas held by the government and its security partners, demonstrating an ability to project its presence into locations not directly under its control. Aided by a robust intelligence wing, which reportedly has infiltrated government and security institutions, and backed up by brute force, Al-Shabaab operatives set up shop in government-held areas, with extortion rackets targeting businesses. Among other demands, these operatives impose taxes on shipping containers arriving at Mogadishu’s port and extract annual payments from local enterprises based on Al-Shabaab’s calculations of the businesses’ profits.³⁶ The array of taxes seems to be ever expanding – Mogadishu residents noted that they cannot even undertake renovations of their properties without expecting to pay a fee to Al-Shabaab. Such practices are reported in other government-held cities as well.³⁷

Although Al-Shabaab’s expanded presence shaping everyday life in urban areas has brought it ample financial reward and made it difficult to counter militarily, the group’s actions have downsides for it, too. Its extortion racket engenders ill-will – a problem for the standing of a movement that harbours ambitions to rule all of Somalia. Anger is especially pronounced among people in nominally government-held areas, which receive fewer services from the group, yet are still subject to its burdens. Most pay to avoid reprisal rather than as a sign of fealty.³⁸ A similar situation transpires in rural areas, although the degree of service provision and control is higher than in government-held areas, affecting calculations about whether to show loyalty to the group or not. Secondly, continued civilian casualties and property damage from the group’s violence in cities like Mogadishu have aggravated anti-Al-Shabaab sen-

³⁴ When collecting *zakat* (tax), Al-Shabaab “doesn’t respect us if we’ve had a problem and they do not properly follow Sharia. They take healthy livestock and leave weak ones with you”. Crisis Group telephone interview, anti-Al-Shabaab militia member based near Bulo Burte, August 2021.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jareerweyne elder, Nairobi, March 2020.

³⁶ Since the end of 2018, Al-Shabaab has imposed a tax on goods coming into Mogadishu port. Importers who spoke with Crisis Group explained that due to its members’ infiltration of the port administration, when Al-Shabaab demands taxes, it already has information about what the business has imported, making resistance futile. Crisis Group interviews, businessmen, Mogadishu, August 2021. For businesses, the group estimates annual revenues based on previous earnings and demands a portion. The taxes go up every year, as Al-Shabaab assumes that profits have increased, even if they have not. “You can debate and negotiate with them, but sometimes they accept and sometimes they don’t”. Crisis Group interviews, Bakaara market businessmen, August 2021.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, civilians living in Mogadishu and other Somali cities, federal member state officials, August 2021-January 2022.

³⁸ This taxation has also generated resentment of the Somali government for its inability to stem Al-Shabaab activity. Businessmen in Mogadishu complain that they are subject to double taxation – by both the government and Al-Shabaab – and that they get few benefits from either. Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu businessmen and Kismayo resident, August 2021-January 2022.

timent. The resentment has reportedly provoked internal debate among the militants, who strive to avoid blowback.³⁹

The group's revenue-generating efforts in urban areas raise other questions, too. One is whether Al-Shabaab's success at accruing funds has shifted its attention away from its primary objective – imposing a strict form of Salafi-jihadism in Somalia.⁴⁰ In reality, despite the growing efficiency of its extortion racket, little to date indicates that Al-Shabaab has forsworn its ideological struggle.⁴¹ It is mounting regular attacks on its adversaries, while its efforts at indoctrination also continue apace.⁴² It has certainly made practical adjustments to earn more money, relaxing certain guidelines in favour of profit generation.⁴³ Yet, thus far, the group's leaders have not abandoned jihad for profiteering. Rather, the taxation and extortion are an exigency of war, as the group needs financing to keep fighting.

Some in Somalia and beyond argue that Al-Shabaab's urban infiltration dramatically increased under the administration of President "Farmajo", alleging a level of collusion.⁴⁴ The group's deepening extortion racket in government-held territories is an oft-cited point in this regard; another is the greater recruitment of ostensible Al-Shabaab defectors to government bodies like the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA).⁴⁵ A spike in killings of government critics in attacks claimed by

³⁹ The group has felt compelled to justify collateral damage in its messaging, while warning civilians in Mogadishu to avoid locations frequented by government and security personnel. One example is a May 2019 message from high-ranking group member Sheikh Mahad Warsame "Karate". "Sheikh Mahad Warsame Abu Abdurahman delivers keynote address on situation of jihad in East Africa", *Somali Memo*, 13 May 2019.

⁴⁰ "Amiirka Al Shabaab oo Jeediyay kalimad ku saabsan arrimaha doorashooyinka DF" [Emir of Al-Shabaab delivers a speech on elections], *Somali Memo*, 20 July 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, former Somali intelligence official who has done extensive research on Al-Shabaab finances, businessmen, sheikhs and government officials, Mogadishu, August 2021. "The aim is jihad, not money. People won't risk their lives like this for money". Crisis Group interview, recent Al-Shabaab defector, Mogadishu, August 2021. Analysts are nonetheless asking what Al-Shabaab is doing with the profits it is generating, as by some estimates they outstrip its expenditures. Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, Mogadishu, August 2021. See also "A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabaab's Financial System", Hiraal Institute, October 2020.

⁴² An example of continued ideological focus is Al-Shabaab's development of a primary and secondary school curriculum. In 2020, Al-Shabaab insisted that schools in government areas teach classes related to Sharia and jihad. After negotiations with school officials, the group agreed that schools can satisfy its demands by occasionally inviting likeminded sheikhs to deliver lectures instead. Crisis Group telephone interviews, school principals in Mogadishu and Baidoa, November 2021.

⁴³ An interviewee noted that Al-Shabaab militants now issue fines to government employees taking public transport through insurgent-held areas without seeking permission in advance. In the past, they would have killed them. Crisis Group interview, civil society actor, Mogadishu, August 2021. A female livestock trader working in both insurgent- and government-held areas noted that Al-Shabaab now charges her a higher tax when she sells to customers in government-controlled areas, rather than restricting the trade. Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2021.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security analyst, former intelligence official, diplomats and civil society representatives, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁴⁵ It is primarily the intelligence services that have been recruiting former Al-Shabaab members but also other security institutions like the police. Recruitment did not start under Farmajo, but regulations loosened under his watch. In 2017, the NISA changed the process by which defectors were screened and reduced the duration of the monitoring. The recruitment accelerated in 2019 under NISA director Fahad Yasin, who has publicly acknowledged being a member of Somali Salafist

Al-Shabaab spurred further allegations that elements of the government and insurgency are working together. One such incident was the 23 March suicide car bombing in the central city of Beledweyne that killed the prominent and outspoken parliamentarian Amina Mohamed Abdi.⁴⁶

A common theory is that Al-Itisaam, a group that built up networks in the Farmajo government, deliberately sabotaged the struggle against Al-Shabaab, as it shares a similar objective of advancing an Islamist governance project in Somalia.⁴⁷ It cannot be ruled out that such elements indeed collaborated with insurgents, as the list of opposition critics attacked by Al-Shabaab grew long. There is no smoking gun proving the case, but the administration did little to rebut the mounting accusations among the opposition, signalling the level of discord among the political elite. Yet historical antagonism between Al-Shabaab and other Salafist groups in Somalia cast some doubt on any theory of coordinated collusion.⁴⁸ Al-Shabaab on a number of occasions

movements, to the point that some defectors were being admitted to NISA or the police in a matter of weeks. Crisis Group interview, NISA officer, May 2021. See also “Qeybtii koowaad ee wareysiga Fahad Yaasiin [The first part of Fahad’s interview]”, Caasimada Online, 9 June 2022. Yasin resigned as NISA director in September 2021 and Farmajo subsequently named him national security adviser. He also ran for a parliamentary seat in Beledweyne in February 2022. He was declared the victor, though the Federal Indirect Electoral Team did not certify the result as it suspended the race for the seat, a directive ignored at the state level.

⁴⁶ The outcry over Amina’s death marked a turning point. She was a vocal campaigner for justice for Ikran Tahlil, a NISA agent who went missing in June 2021. Many suspect, albeit without clear evidence to date, that Ikran was killed by her former employers. For more on that case, see “Somalia’s Politicians Play with Fire – Again”, Crisis Group Statement, 14 September 2021. In the aftermath of the 23 March attack, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble linked Amina’s death with Ikran’s, claiming that the same unnamed network had killed both women. He said he himself had received death threats via text message, a stunning declaration from Somalia’s second highest-ranking public office holder. “Those who killed Ikran were also behind Amina’s murder – PM Roble”, Goobjoog News, 31 March 2022.

⁴⁷ Much of the speculation in Somali political discourse centres on the role of Fahad Yasin. See “Fake fight: The quiet jihadist takeover of Somalia”, The Elephant, 8 November 2021. A credible source indicated to Crisis Group that Yasin likely maintains a relationship with Al-Shabaab members through his work at the pan-Arab satellite television channel Al Jazeera in the early 2000s. During his time as a journalist, Yasin interviewed Al-Shabaab members and reportedly worked with Abdullahi Osman Mohamed (known as Engineer Ismail), who later joined the group. Crisis Group interview, former NISA official, October 2021. See also Declan Walsh, Eric Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes, “A C.I.A. fighter, a Somali bomb maker and a faltering shadow war”, *The New York Times*, 24 October 2021. Engineer Ismail has been sanctioned by the U.S., which describes him as a “special advisor” to Al-Shabaab’s emir. “State Department Designates Two Senior Al-Shabaab Leaders as Terrorists”, U.S. State Department, 17 November 2020.

⁴⁸ After Somalia’s precursor Salafi-jihadist organisation Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya disbanded in 1997 following its defeat by Ethiopian forces, two broad camps emerged. One sought to continue pursuing jihad under the banner Jabhat al-Islam (Al-Shabaab eventually sprung from this branch), while the other formed Al-Itisaam Bil-Kitab Wal-Sunna (Al-Itisaam), adhering to a Salafist agenda but rejecting violence. Thus, Al-Shabaab and Al-Itisaam share an ideological orientation but differ in method. There is bad blood between the two: Al-Itisaam clerics have criticised Al-Shabaab’s violence, while the insurgency has assassinated Al-Itisaam preachers. This history of animosity, as well as Al-Shabaab’s desire to monopolise the religious space, dampens the prospects of collusion between the two. Crisis Group interviews, Somali sheikhs, August 2021. For more, see Roland Marchal, “The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War”, March 2011. A recent example of Al-Shabaab’s enmity for other Salafists in Somalia is the 22 February assassination of prominent former Al-Itihaad

also undermined agencies like NISA by publicly challenging its narrative of events involving the organisation.⁴⁹

The accusations of collusion between authorities and the militants will remain a source of dissension among political rivals. The wider point, however, is that Al-Shabaab took advantage of the discord to expand its operations, more by exploiting the authorities' distraction with infighting than by collaborating with them actively.⁵⁰ As detailed above, the administration in Mogadishu directed its limited resources primarily toward eliminating domestic political competition and paid less attention to curtailing Al-Shabaab's activities. The key questions are how much damage has been done and how much can be repaired if Mogadishu now refocuses on the task at hand. Yet even such efforts can at best claw back the gains the militants have made, rather than lead to the war's conclusion.

member Sheikh Abdinasir Haji Ahmed in Kismayo. Sheikh Abdinasir had been critical of Al-Shabaab violence and, though the insurgents did not claim his killing, they are widely suspected of being behind it. "Cleric killed in an explosion in Kismayu city", Horseed Media, 22 February 2022.

⁴⁹ In December 2019, after NISA blamed a large bombing in Mogadishu on an unnamed foreign country, Al-Shabaab claimed the attack (given the high civilian toll, Al-Shabaab might have preferred to disavow responsibility, but later decided to embarrass NISA by publicly contradicting the agency's narrative). "Somalia's spy agency links foreign country to Mogadishu's deadly attack", Garowe Online, 30 December 2019. In September 2021, NISA blamed the death of missing agent Ikran Tahlil on Al-Shabaab, a claim the organisation promptly rejected, putting director Yasin in hot water (and costing him his position). The incidents demonstrate at a minimum a degree of distance between NISA and Al-Shabaab. "Why the killing of a spy is shaking the state", *Africa Confidential*, 23 September 2021.

⁵⁰ Similar concerns have surfaced about Al-Shabaab's possible infiltration of the 2021-2022 electoral process. To date, however, there is little concrete evidence of active Al-Shabaab involvement (and any such involvement would be awkward for the movement given its steadfast public opposition to the polls). Indeed, in early 2022, Al-Shabaab stepped up attacks on voting locations and electoral delegates. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°165, *Blunting Al-Shabaab's Impact on Somalia's Elections*, 31 December 2020.

III. Obstacles to Political Engagement

For the reasons described above, neither the government nor Al-Shabaab can be sure it is playing a winning hand. Beset by political dysfunction, the government struggles both to win popular support and to mount an effective campaign against the insurgents. For their part, the insurgents may have won some acquiescence in their rule through service delivery in rural areas, but they also generate resentment among those from whom they demand child recruits and extort money. Under the circumstances, both sides have reason, at least in theory, to seek some form of co-existence that could address their respective vulnerabilities. Such a détente can be reached only through talks. Al-Shabaab may believe that time is on its side with the clock ticking on the AU mission backing up the federal government. Yet there is no guarantee that the government's external partners will withdraw all support or that the militants will overrun all their domestic opponents. A grinding stalemate is a more likely result than an Al-Shabaab victory throughout Somalia.

Yet, aside from one serious initiative in 2009, engagement by senior Somali officials with Al-Shabaab – in particular with its recognised leadership – has been limited.⁵¹ Nor do Al-Shabaab's pronouncements give much indication that it is ready to seek a negotiated end to the war, though credible sources argue that among its leadership there is more willingness to test what engagement might yield than its public statements suggest.

A. *A Troubled Track Record*

Somali administrations have made a handful of outreach efforts toward Al-Shabaab members over the years (and they may have made others that are unknown). For a variety of reasons these efforts have borne little fruit – raising the question of what conditions might prompt a rethink on both Al-Shabaab's part and among domestic authorities and key international partners. As an influential Somali sheikh involved in previous mediation efforts, including those in 2009, said: "It's good to offer talks [again] as this has not been tried when both sides are serious".⁵²

President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed (2009-2012) attempted perhaps the most ambitious program upon assuming power in 2009. Somali sheikhs organised a meeting with Al-Shabaab leaders at the Ramadan Hotel in Mogadishu in 2009 to discuss how to end the conflict.⁵³ President Ahmed, who had headed the Islamic Courts Union, backed the discussions, pledging to do more to enact Sharia in Somalia and support a

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, prominent Somali sheikh, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁵³ Al-Shabaab had rejected an earlier invitation from Somali sheikhs to participate in UN-led discussions with the Islamic Courts Union and Transitional Federal Government in Djibouti. At those talks, in 2008, former Union members led by Sheikh Sharif Ahmed agreed to join the government, while others under the leadership of Hassan Dahir Aweys held out, saying foreign troops should withdraw from Somalia first and calling for the government to commit to Sharia beyond relying on it as a source of guidance for certain matters in Somali courts. The debate split the Islamists into three broad camps – Sheikh Sharif Ahmed's group that joined the government, Hassan Dahir Aweys' followers, who engaged but did not reach agreement, and Al-Shabaab, which sat out. Crisis Group telephone interview, Hassan Dahir Aweys, April 2021.

ceasefire. According to those present, discussions failed for two reasons.⁵⁴ Al-Shabaab viewed anyone who joined the government, including Sheikh Sharif, as an apostate who was dividing Muslims and was therefore an illegitimate interlocutor. It agreed to meet Sheikh Sharif's delegation only under pressure from prominent Islamists.⁵⁵ Relatedly, Al-Shabaab demonstrated no flexibility in its position that the government should be replaced, revealing a lack of willingness to find common ground.⁵⁶ The talks floundered and the war's most devastating stages ensued.

President Mohamud's first administration (2012-2017) took a different approach, targeting individual commanders for arrest or defection.⁵⁷ This initiative had some success, with government forces capturing former Hizbul Islam leader Hassan Dahir Aweys in 2013.⁵⁸ The next year, authorities induced the leader of Al-Shabaab's Puntland operations, Mohamed Said Atom, to defect, along with its high-ranking military intelligence official Zakariya Ahmed Hersi. Mohamud's administration also inaugurated discussions with influential Al-Shabaab member Mukhtar Robow, who eventually defected in 2017.⁵⁹

While some lower-ranking individuals followed, the focus on facilitating individual defection did little to alter the conflict's trajectory. The defecting members had clashed with Al-Shabaab's leadership or were already on their way out of the movement.⁶⁰ Their departure from the group made little difference to its overall firepower, while

⁵⁴ Non-Sufi sheikhs had gathered in Mogadishu to facilitate discussions about how to stop the fighting, the enforcement of Sharia and withdrawal of AMISOM. Crisis Group telephone interviews, sheikhs mediating in the 2009 discussions with Al-Shabaab, April 2021.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, individual present at the 2009 discussions, Mogadishu, August 2021. Al-Shabaab continues to perceive former high-ranking Islamic Courts leaders like Sheikh Sharif Ahmed as beyond the pale to this day. Crisis Group telephone interview, youth activist associated with Al-Shabaab, September 2021. At first, Al-Shabaab rejected overtures to take part, but the stature of the sheikhs who reached out prompted it to reconsider. Many of the sheikhs were well known in Somali society and had not been publicly critical of Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group telephone interviews, sheikhs mediating in the 2009 discussions with Al-Shabaab, April 2021.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Somali sheikh present at discussions, Mogadishu, August 2021. In Al-Shabaab Emir Godane's view, the talks should have revolved around the terms for the government's surrender to the insurgency. Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab sheikh, November 2021. The talks lasted a few days, which was clearly not enough time given that other post-1991 political agreements in Somalia have required months of engagement. Crisis Group interview, Somali lawyer following the 2009 talks, February 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, high-ranking defector, April 2021; government minister, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁵⁸ After rejecting the Djibouti agreement in 2009, Aweys formed Hizbul Islam. His group eventually merged with Al-Shabaab – in what was really an Al-Shabaab takeover – in December 2010. Aweys fell out with Al-Shabaab leader Godane by 2013, leading to his escape and eventual capture by the government. Aweys refused to sign a letter renouncing his beliefs and he has been under a loose form of house arrest in Mogadishu ever since. Crisis Group interview, Somali lawyer involved in the discussions with Aweys, April 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, former senior adviser to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, April 2021. See also "Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council on Somalia", UN Security Council, 12 July 2013.

⁶⁰ Many needed protection, as Al-Shabaab threatened them with harm after they fell out with its leadership. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former senior adviser to President Mohamud and former high-ranking Al-Shabaab member, April 2021.

also likely quieting dissenting voices within the movement that could have been useful for swaying its members' thinking in the future. Nor did the program address the political gulf between Al-Shabaab and the government. Some describe President Mohamud as "reluctant" at the time to open a door for wider talks that would involve government concessions.⁶¹ Others note that there was little support from major international security partners, notably the U.S. and Ethiopia, to go further than the high-level defection approach.⁶²

Under the Farmajo administration (2017-2022), the intelligence agency, NISA, handled the Al-Shabaab engagement file. Credible sources report that former NISA chief Fahad Yasin reached out through contacts to Al-Shabaab on at least two occasions in 2020 and 2021 to explore opportunities for dialogue, but achieved little.⁶³ Part of the challenge was the secretive nature of the outreach, amid perceptions of the agency's increasing politicisation, raising concerns about the discussions' content.⁶⁴ In essence, critics claim that Yasin wanted to use negotiations with Al-Shabaab to seal a deal that would require an extension of Farmajo's time in power to see it through.⁶⁵ Regardless, the intelligence-driven approach raised more questions than answers and it remains to be seen if the contacts generated through that channel could be leveraged as part of a less politicised outreach initiative in the future.

International actors, including organisations working in Somalia and foreign embassies, have sporadically undertaken other attempts to reach out to Al-Shabaab. Their initiatives have also primarily aimed at stimulating individual defections.⁶⁶ There have been some missteps in these efforts. They were not always well coordinated with the Somali government. Some officials involved in outreach described instances where they thought they were talking to Al-Shabaab but wound up in contact either with people outside the movement or with little clout inside it.⁶⁷ Others noted that powerful countries did not support outreach, causing attempts to flounder as those involved sought to avoid blowback.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN official involved in previous attempts to engage Al-Shabaab, Mogadishu, August 2021. Crisis Group interviewed Mohamud while he was running to regain the presidency. He noted that negotiations with Al-Shabaab to end the war will eventually be necessary. Crisis Group interview, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group telephone interviews, former senior adviser to President Mohamud, April 2021; Somali intelligence official, August 2021.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Somali intelligence official and UN official, October-November 2021. While NISA may have wanted to explore a power-sharing option with Al-Shabaab, the militants rejected discussions as they were concerned the group would lose credibility by talking to a government perceived as weak and unpopular. Additionally, following the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab was emboldened to continue its struggle as it believes that foreign troops will eventually leave Somalia. Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab sheikh, November 2021.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Somali government minister, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Somali intelligence official, lawyer and researcher, October-November 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, diplomats, researchers and Somali civil society representatives, July-November 2021.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN official, senior AMISOM official and former Somali government official, Mogadishu and Nairobi, August and November 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN official involved in previous attempts to engage Al-Shabaab and former Somali government official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

B. Does Al-Shabaab Want to Talk?

The question of whether engagement is possible turns not just on the preferences of the government and its external partners, but also on those of Al-Shabaab itself.⁶⁹ Al-Shabaab is an ideologically driven movement, but one that clearly is also motivated by the prospect of attaining power in Somalia. Yet the group rarely comments on its willingness to consider talks with the government as a means of furthering its quest for power.⁷⁰ It has on occasion rejected the idea of dialogue publicly, characterising entreaties to engage as an attempt to divide the movement – which, indeed, most previous overtures have been.⁷¹

Yet credible and well-informed sources assert that individuals in the group, including some senior leaders, give indications that they might consider talks with the Somali government, privately leaving the door further ajar than public posturing suggests.⁷² In a significant departure from past public statements, high-ranking Al-Shabaab member Sheikh Mahad Warsame “Karate” in June 2022 responded to a question on the prospect of dialogue by stressing the illegitimacy of the Somali government, but also stated “anyone whom the Sharia allows us, we will negotiate with, when the time is right”. This was the most emphatic statement on openness to talks on the group’s part, despite the customary caveat that it rejected the government’s legitimacy as an interlocutor and the Al-Shabaab figure’s insistence that the group’s goal remains seizing power in the whole of Somalia.⁷³

A key obstacle is Al-Shabaab’s assertion that the Somali authorities lack legitimacy. Al-Shabaab messaging regularly lambasts the government’s electoral process and its enactment of a constitution that places manmade laws over God’s.⁷⁴ Its adherence to Salafism and, more importantly, its embrace of the principle *al-wala wal-bara* (loyalty and disavowal) – which demands the disassociation of believers from those perceived to be non-Muslims or apostates – throws up another barrier.⁷⁵ Al-Shabaab casts the government as made up of apostates and thus considers it *haram* (forbid-

⁶⁹ Many influential Islamist figures say there will be dialogue eventually, but that Al-Shabaab’s leadership has yet to accept that negotiation is a viable way to end the war. Crisis Group interview, prominent Somali sheikh, April 2021.

⁷⁰ A pessimistic view suggests that “Al-Shabaab will never accept power sharing ... It cannot accept to work with *kuffar* (infidels) or *murtaddun* (apostates) because that would mean what they were fighting for over the last ten years is wrong”. Crisis Group interview, recent Al-Shabaab defector, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁷¹ In 2014, long-time spokesman Ali Dheere rejected the prospect of negotiations when an Al Jazeera journalist posed the question. “Al Jazeera: Somalia’s al-Shabab group vows comeback”, video, YouTube, 24 February 2021. In 2018, he further noted that “negotiations are more dangerous than weapons of mass destruction”. “After Taliban, will Al-Shabab negotiate?”, VOA, 2 March 2020.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, former senior UN official, former intelligence official, diplomat, Somali researchers and current Somali government official, August 2021-February 2022.

⁷³ “Inside Al-Shabaab: The extremist group trying to seize Somalia”, Channel 4 News video, YouTube, 5 June 2022.

⁷⁴ See the third video message in the twelve-part Al-Kataib video messaging series covering the Somali constitution, released in September 2021.

⁷⁵ For a discussion on Al-Shabaab’s adherence to this concept, see an audio message from Al-Shabaab’s emir, Abu Ubeidah: “May God give the darwish a gentle message”, 2 March 2021.

den) to maintain relations or negotiate with it.⁷⁶ Al-Shabaab also views the government as having little popular support and accuses it of serving foreign interests.⁷⁷ It is furthermore an ardent critic of the federal model, characterising it as a conspiracy to divide Somalia and render it weak.⁷⁸

Another reason Al-Shabaab may be less inclined to engage in talks with the government is that it views authorities as having precious little to offer.⁷⁹ Al-Shabaab views itself as the stronger party, especially because it is able to levy taxes and wield influence in cities at low cost.⁸⁰ It also follows the debates in Western capitals about funding that reflect impatience with the AU military mission.⁸¹ The group seemingly believes that time is on its side, that it benefits from the status quo and thus has little to gain from altering it.⁸²

Many observers assert that a cadre of less ideological foot soldiers and mid-level officials in Al-Shabaab is looking for an exit. Some limited data is available to back up this contention.⁸³ A long-running government defection program is designed to provide a way out of the group, and the continued defections suggest that internal quarrels do exist.⁸⁴ This approach will probably not work with everyone, however,

⁷⁶ The concept of *al-wala wal-bara*, popularised by the 14th-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya, has become a staple of modern-day jihadist ideology. Salafi-jihadist movements, including Al-Shabaab, use it to argue that Muslims must separate themselves from non-Muslims to avoid corrupting their struggle. Crisis Group interview, Somali cleric, April 2021.

⁷⁷ Al-Shabaab propaganda frequently describes Somali government officials as “puppets”. For this reason, Al-Shabaab, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, might see negotiations with the government’s foreign backers, like the U.S., as a necessary part of any dialogue effort. Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab sheikh, November 2021.

⁷⁸ For an overview of Al-Shabaab’s critique of the federal system, see the fourth video message in the Al-Kataib series: “False promises and fading hopes”, February 2021.

⁷⁹ “Al-Shabaab’s administration is already equivalent to the government, so why would they come unless you can offer them the same position?” Crisis Group interview, midwife working in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Jubaland, August 2021.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials and residents living under Al-Shabaab rule, August 2021.

⁸¹ “Dowladaha ku midaysan howlgalka AMISOM oo ka shiray qaabkii ay ciidamadooda ugala bixi lahaayeen Soomaaliya” [AMISOM member states discuss troop withdrawal from Somalia], *Somali Memo*, 14 July 2021.

⁸² Some question whether Al-Shabaab wants to govern Mogadishu again, given that it benefits greatly from holding territory in rural areas and levying taxes in many towns and cities. Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials, Mogadishu, August 2021.

⁸³ The numbers of those who might want a way out of the war are difficult to quantify. Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials, government members and Al-Shabaab defectors, Mogadishu, August 2021. A study of seventeen mid-ranking Al-Shabaab officials in 2018 noted that slightly more than half would be willing to pursue negotiations with the government, especially if it met conditions like requesting the withdrawal of foreign forces and offering amnesty for fighters. Anneli Botha and Madhi Abdile, “Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations”, in Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (eds.), *War and Peace in Somalia* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 461-473. Defection centres tend to receive fewer *amniyat* (intelligence) defectors compared to other positions in the group, indicating possible differences of opinion based on status. Crisis Group interview, Somali security official, August 2021.

⁸⁴ The government has not always treated defectors well, undermining trust in the program. The most prominent example was Mogadishu’s placement of high-profile defector Mukhtar Robow under house arrest after he declared his ambition to run for the Southwest state presidency in 2018.

since leaving the group tends to endanger defectors' personal safety.⁸⁵ The program may also discredit the overall notion of outreach from the government, as Al-Shabaab may subsequently perceive any such overture – even one with genuine diplomatic intent – as a hostile act. While there have been some successes to date and the program fills a useful function by supporting those looking for an exit, the track record suggests that defections alone are unlikely to significantly weaken Al-Shabaab.

To the contrary, if there is indeed support for dialogue in the group, it would be difficult for this sentiment to find expression without the top leadership's blessing. Al-Shabaab historically has gone to great lengths to preserve internal unity and suppress dissent. Its record includes a purge of high-ranking officials, including foreigners, amid a power struggle in 2013 and another in 2015 aimed at eliminating those expressing support for the Islamic State.⁸⁶ Both campaigns were brutal, with the likely impact of consolidating Al-Shabaab's core, while serving as a powerful example to its membership of the consequences of not toeing the line.

Thus, while some surmise that – should the government desire to talk – Al-Shabaab may face a split between those willing to engage and hardliners, there is reason for scepticism. Al-Shabaab's internal cohesion may well be greater than others assume, due partly to measures preventing dissent from bubbling to the surface.⁸⁷ Any outreach that bypasses its top leadership, up to the level of Emir Abu Ubeidah, is thus unlikely to succeed. In this sense, while Al-Shabaab is certainly not monolithic, it is indeed centralised.

Despite plenty of cause for doubt that Al-Shabaab would be keen for talks, there are also reasons why it might be in the group's interests. The insurgency's full and sustained conquest of Somalia appears, as described, an uncertain prospect given strong domestic centres of opposition that have impeded its growth in the past. Nor are regional powers like Ethiopia and Kenya likely to stand by should Al-Shabaab

Defections rates dropped thereafter. Crisis Group interviews, screening officer at defector center, former security official and advisor to defection program, July-August 2021.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, recent defectors, August-September 2021. Al-Shabaab eliminates suspected spies by staging public executions. It killed more than two dozen of its own members in June 2021, showing that internal discontent exists but comes with great risks. "10 qof oo ku eedaynaa Basaasnimo oo lagu dilay Jilib iyo Buula Fuulaay [10 spies killed in Jilib and Bula Fulay]", *Somali Memo*, 28 June 2021. Those who defect must fear for their safety as Al-Shabaab targets former members for death. Crisis Group interview, adviser to defector program, October 2021.

⁸⁶ The 2013 purge was related to internal power dynamics and the centralisation of control under Godane. Crisis Group interview, Somali cleric formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, April 2021. For an account of this period, see Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab* (Bloomington, 2018), chapter 12. Al-Shabaab's repression in 2015 stemmed the Islamic State's advance, although a faction under Abdulkadir Mumin broke off and established itself in the mountains outside Bossaso in Puntland. Zakaria Yusuf and Abdul Khalif, "The Islamic State Threat in Somalia's Puntland State", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 November 2016.

⁸⁷ Close observers of the movement repeatedly stress that, while there may be a level of internal tension on the path forward, Al-Shabaab maintains a rigid hierarchy under Emir Abu Ubeidah, reducing the potential for division. Crisis Group interviews, Somali intelligence officials, researchers and government officials, July-December 2021. Al-Shabaab officials, even at the *wilayat* (regional) level, tell humanitarian aid organisations that they cannot entertain proposed engagement until they get a green light from above. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official with regular Al-Shabaab interaction, December 2021.

manage to overcome domestic rivals. In that sense, Al-Shabaab's position is different from that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Moreover, even if the movement feels confident it can outlast the government, the war has reportedly produced considerable fatigue among its rank-and-file. Its leaders have also demonstrated concern for the welfare of family members living in areas controlled by the government by, for example, demanding that elders based in cities ensure that their kin benefit from humanitarian operations.⁸⁸ An eventual dialling down of the war – or even entering in good faith into peace talks – could offer other benefits to Al-Shabaab's leaders, such as a freeze on targeted killings by U.S. drones.⁸⁹

Al-Shabaab might also profit from striking a deal at a moment when it perceives the federal government as weak. Lessons from other conflicts suggest that a crucial failure among belligerents in the stronger position is to reject negotiations when their advantage is greatest, assuming that they are on the path to total victory, a stance that often proves mistaken.⁹⁰ Engaging from a position of strength, by contrast, can secure concessions that would otherwise be unattainable. For example, Somali authorities have yet to finish drafting the constitution, meaning that by engaging at this point Al-Shabaab could have a say in shaping its provisions.

How much these calculations play into militant leaders' calculations is far from clear. Well-informed sources note there has been interest at a high level in the movement to consider alternatives in the past, including active outreach from the group to prospective interlocutors at times.⁹¹ Whether this interest remains current is debatable, but assessing if prospects for political talks with Al-Shabaab are in any way feasible almost certainly requires actually exploring that option with the movement itself.

C. *Al-Shabaab's Foreign Ties and External Operations*

Another hurdle relates to the extent of Al-Shabaab's commitment to pursuing an agenda beyond Somalia's modern borders. If its ambitions are limited to Somalia, envisioning a path to negotiations is still complicated, but less so than if it clings to transnational or regional aspirations. While the group is certainly focused on Somalia in its day-to-day operations, it has done little to suggest it is confined by this frame – causing concern among Somalia's neighbours and security partners.⁹² Yet Al-Shabaab's outlook on this topic remains fluid and a subject of debate.

While the extent of ties have fluctuated, Al-Shabaab formally remains an al-Qaeda affiliate, in that its leaders have maintained their allegiance to the al-Qaeda leader-

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials operating in Al-Shabaab areas and defectors, Mogadishu, August 2021. A settlement of the war could open the door to further international investment and economic relief, which would undoubtedly benefit both Al-Shabaab family members and the wider population it aims to govern.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Somali defence official, August 2021.

⁹⁰ "Did the war in Afghanistan have to happen?", *The New York Times*, 2 September 2021.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, former Somali government official, former senior UN official, diplomat, August 2021-May 2022.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Kenyan and Ethiopian officials, 2020-2021. International and bilateral sanctions from countries like the U.S. against Al-Shabaab and its leaders may also raise a legal challenge with regard to holding talks with the group. Crisis Group interview, mediation expert, February 2022.

ship.⁹³ The relationship endures beyond the personal connections between core al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab's founding members, some of whom trained in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, as a new generation of homegrown Al-Shabaab leaders has also demonstrated its commitment to al-Qaeda.⁹⁴ After Emir Godane died in 2014, the new leader Abu Ubeidah, who has no experience fighting abroad, quickly reaffirmed Al-Shabaab's *bay'a* (oath) to the transnational jihadist group. The ties are apparent in public exchanges of messages between the organisations, which are infrequent but still a powerful reminder.

As to why Al-Shabaab continues to preserve its affiliation with al-Qaeda, it likely sees certain benefits in being part of the global jihadist movement, including the respect this association commands among other militants.⁹⁵ Placing itself under the al-Qaeda umbrella also facilitates relationships with other affiliates, especially al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, with which it has long maintained a direct connection.⁹⁶ Additionally, Al-Shabaab continues to recruit non-Somali foreign fighters in East Africa, an endeavour that is aided by presenting itself as al-Qaeda's regional representative. Indeed, Abu Ubeidah may have had little choice in reaffirming the *bay'a*, given the expectations of other senior Al-Shabaab commanders, who see the oath as an important signal of Al-Shabaab's binding commitment to al-Qaeda.⁹⁷

Beyond that, however, the operational utility of Al-Shabaab's association with al-Qaeda is uncertain. External technical assistance, likely from al-Qaeda, has been relevant in advancing the group's lethal capabilities in the past.⁹⁸ But Al-Shabaab's revenue streams, local recruitment efforts and arms procurements do not involve al-Qaeda. Nor is the global group likely in much of a position to offer material support to Al-Shabaab – instead its value appears to be related mostly to propaganda.⁹⁹ Al-Qaeda promotional material highlights certain Al-Shabaab attacks on regional or Western targets, with Al-Shabaab also actively framing some of its operations under

⁹³ Relations between the two organisations have not always been smooth. Osama bin Laden famously called upon Godane to keep the ties secret, downplaying the need to declare an Islamic emirate in Somalia and prodding him to review planned attacks to avoid harming Muslims. Declassified letter from Osama bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr (Godane), 7 August 2010.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Somali intelligence official, December 2021.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, former Somali intelligence official, November 2021.

⁹⁶ Al-Shabaab maintains an ambassador to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Confidential third-party security assessment document seen by Crisis Group. In May 2021, an Al-Shabaab video featured a brigade of foreign fighters named after that group's late leader Nasir Abdel Karim al-Wuhayshi. Confidential third-party assessment seen by Crisis Group. Yemen is the main source of illicit arms coming into Somalia, making it useful to maintain good networks there. Jay Bahadur, "Following the Money", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 17 September 2020.

⁹⁷ Abu Ubeidah may also have seen the pledge as useful for closing the ranks around his leadership at the time of his ascent. Crisis Group interviews, security analyst, August 2021; researcher focused on jihadist organisations, April 2022.

⁹⁸ Al-Shabaab's advances in the use of improvised explosive devices are likely partly attributable to foreign technology transfer from trainers with experience drawn from battlefields in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. "Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council on Somalia", UN Security Council, 7 October 2016.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking Islamic Courts Union member, Nairobi, November 2021. Some have even suggested that Al-Shabaab is in a better position to support al-Qaeda or its affiliates than the reverse. Crisis Group interviews, Somali researcher, December 2020.

the banner of al-Qaeda's global campaign, even if its logic in perpetrating those attacks seems guided by its own local objectives rather than al-Qaeda's transnational aspirations.¹⁰⁰

The extent of Al-Shabaab's ambitions in East Africa is a somewhat different piece of the puzzle. Al-Shabaab's activities diminish in intensity with distance from its hub in south-central Somalia. But its reach nevertheless extends beyond both Somalia's borders and the Somali-inhabited areas of the Horn of Africa or what it refers to as Greater Somalia.¹⁰¹

Somalia's neighbours are threatened by Al-Shabaab's blending of irredentist Greater Somalia rhetoric with Islamist ideology, to the point where both Ethiopia and Kenya have invaded Somalia and stationed troops on its soil over the past decade in essence to prevent formal Al-Shabaab control of Somalia's government.¹⁰² Al-Shabaab denounces the present AU, Ethiopian and Kenyan deployments as illegitimate foreign occupations and maintains cells focused on operations in East Africa.¹⁰³ In addition to its own notorious attacks – including the bombing of a venue showing World Cup matches in Kampala, Uganda, in 2010, a bloody 2015 attack on a university in northern Kenya, and sieges in 2013 of the Westgate shopping centre and in 2019 of the Dusit D2 complex, both in Nairobi, Kenya – the group has sought to inspire attacks by others in parts of both Ethiopia and Kenya.¹⁰⁴ After civil war broke out in Ethiopia in November 2020, chatter about Al-Shabaab's intent to hit targets there increased, though the group has not yet managed to do so.¹⁰⁵ In north-eastern Kenya, Al-Shabaab

¹⁰⁰ Al-Shabaab framed its two most recent high-profile attacks in Kenya – a January 2019 attack on the Dusit complex in Nairobi and a January 2020 attack on a U.S. military installation in Manda Bay along the Kenyan coast as part of al-Qaeda's global "Jerusalem shall not be Judaised" campaign. Al-Qaeda in turn praised the operation and used similar messaging. "Al-Quds (Jerusalem) will never be Judaised", Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Muhajideen Press Office, 16 January 2019; "New statement from al-Qa'idah's General Command: Salutations for the brave mujahidin of Somalia on their invaluable role in the series of operations 'Jerusalem shall not be judaised'", Jihadology, 20 January 2020.

¹⁰¹ Al-Shabaab is not alone in showing interest in the Greater Somalia project. Other Somalis have long spoken of uniting the five Somali-inhabited areas of the Horn – Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and north-eastern Kenya – under one administration. Successive post-independence Somali governments have resisted accepting the colonial borders that divide Somali-inhabited regions from one another.

¹⁰² In 1996, Ethiopia bombed camps associated with Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya, an ideological forerunner to Al-Shabaab, to prevent an Islamist group it saw as hostile from seizing power in Somalia. In Ethiopia's view, the Islamic Courts Union presented a similar challenge – hence its 2006 invasion to oust the group.

¹⁰³ The group has circulated maps showing Kenya's north east as a key theatre of operations. "Wererar 3 Askar Kenya ah lagu dilay oo ka dhacay deegaan katirsan gobolka Mandheera' [Three Kenyan soldiers killed in Mandera attack]", *Somali Memo*, 16 December 2021. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°265, *Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, 21 September 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Shabaab's top leadership has issued statements calling for lone-wolf attacks in Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti in recent years, although it is difficult to trace any incidents back to these calls. "Al-Shabaab issues threats ahead of elections in Djibouti", VOA, 28 March 2021. Somaliland is another location of interest to Al-Shabaab.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Shabaab has had its sights set on Ethiopia since the 2006 invasion, and the war there likely offers it a chance to make inroads. Credible sources report Al-Shabaab is training an Ethiopian con-

has been particularly active, claiming small-scale attacks across the border on a near-weekly basis.¹⁰⁶

The group's recruitment outside Somalia is another source of concern in the region. In the past, Al-Shabaab signed up a few dozen Western and Somali diaspora members, but it attracts fewer of them now, focusing instead on East Africa.¹⁰⁷ The organisation has placed a particular emphasis on Swahili speakers. Somali intelligence officials estimate that the biggest source of recruits is Kenya, followed by Tanzania, with some from Uganda and Ethiopia as well.¹⁰⁸ Al-Shabaab also maintains links to a network of East African Salafi-jihadist movements.¹⁰⁹

Al-Shabaab has concentrated its outside operations in AU troop-contributing countries, seemingly pursuing the strategic objective of forcing foreign troops out of Somalia.¹¹⁰ It has stressed that it will continue staging attacks in Kenya, which it portrays as a defensive reaction, as long as that country keeps troops in Somalia.¹¹¹ Whether it would in fact cease attacks abroad if foreign troops withdrew remains untested.

Yet Al-Shabaab's efforts in East Africa appear to have been surpassed of late by a burgeoning Islamic State-affiliated network.¹¹² Some foreign fighters have defected from the insurgency to these groups.¹¹³ At present, Al-Shabaab seems to have narrowed its focus to areas more directly adjacent to Somalia.¹¹⁴

tingent, primarily consisting of Ethiopian Somalis and Oromos. Crisis Group interviews, Al-Shabaab defector, and former and current Somali intelligence officials, August and November-December 2021. When asked about Al-Shabaab's plans regarding Ethiopia, a person associated with the group and residing near the Ethiopian border remarked, "We are not sleeping". Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2021. In April, Ethiopian intelligence agents arrested 34 individuals in Somali and Oromia states whom Addis Ababa claims were Al-Shabaab members at an advanced stage of plotting an attack. "NISS arrests 34 Al-Shabaab members planning attacks in Addis, regional states", ENA, 23 April 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Group Africa Briefing N°114, *Kenya's Somali North East: Devolution and Security*, 17 November 2015. Crisis Group monitoring of Al-Shabaab messaging.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Shabaab's leadership targeted foreign fighters during both the 2013 and 2015 purges, and continues to execute others accused of spying, likely diminishing its appeal among foreigners. "Two Kenyan al Shabaab fighters executed for spying for KDF (Kenya Defence Forces)", Hiiraan, 1 June 2018. Foreign fighters play a number of roles in the group, but do not feature in the top leadership or handle finances. Crisis Group interviews, recent Al-Shabaab defector and former Somali intelligence official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Somali intelligence officials, Mogadishu and Nairobi, August and December 2021. A May 2017 Al-Shabaab video promoting its foreign fighters featured members from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, although the message delivered by Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Dheere focused on Kenya. "Shabaab spokesman calls on Kenyan jihadists to form an army", *Long War Journal*, 22 May 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ The presence of Tanzanians in its ranks suggests that Al-Shabaab's ambitions extend beyond the AU troop-contributing countries. Thus far, it has not claimed any operations in Tanzania, although returnees from Al-Shabaab have been blamed for some attacks there. Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Dino Mahtani, "The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 November 2021.

¹¹³ Foreign fighters have consistently attempted to defect since a branch of the Islamic State emerged in Somalia in 2015. From the second half of 2021, more and more fighters from countries like Kenya and Tanzania have followed this path. Crisis Group interview, former Somali intelligence official, November 2021. East African fighters, in addition to a handful of militants from Middle Eastern or

The extent of Al-Shabaab's external associations and operations – whether its ties with al-Qaeda, its recruitment in East Africa or its rhetorical commitment to the Greater Somalia project – is a potential hindrance to dialogue.¹¹⁵ The group's views on these issues have long been a subject of internal debate and may remain so.¹¹⁶ It remains unknown if Al-Shabaab would be willing to formally confine its ambitions inside Somalia's modern borders. The uncertainty about its positions underlines the fact that even if it stays primarily concerned with Somalia itself, East African powers will continue to view Al-Shabaab as posing a threat and will oppose talks that do not take into account their security concerns. The degree to which Al-Shabaab is willing to commit to ceasing attacks outside Somalia is a subject that would have to be explored through engagement. Given the ill-will accumulated over the years, it will take significant confidence building and assurances to convince countries outside Somalia even to reach this point.

D. *Somali Politics*

If a good part of the challenge lies with Al-Shabaab itself, Somali politics more broadly pose a further obstacle. Two factors are particularly important: first, the distrust that pervades relations among Somali elites; and secondly, the deep animosity among some of Somalia's people toward Al-Shabaab itself.

Factional Somali politics mean that competing Somali elites will see any outreach from the Somali government to Al-Shabaab through the prism of their own disputes over power and resources. The government's opponents, whether in Mogadishu or the regions, will inevitably view such an overture with suspicion – all the more so because it will have to be discreet at first, likely involving no more than a handful of representatives. Witness, for example, the distrust that Farmajo's attempts generated. Moreover, many Somali politicians may oppose talks less for ideological than for self-interested reasons, because they see the militants as possible competitors for key roles in government.¹¹⁷ The fighting has spurred a war economy, which means that

Western countries, have also defected to the government. Crisis Group interview, defection centre worker, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹¹⁴ Emir Abu Ubeidah has called in his speeches for attacks on Somalia's neighbours Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and, less often, countries elsewhere in East Africa. Crisis Group monitoring of Abu Ubeidah's speeches.

¹¹⁵ Little suggests at present that either Ethiopia or Kenya is prepared to endorse Somali government engagement with Al-Shabaab, with Kenya being particularly vocal in its opposition, including at international forums. At the UN Security Council in August 2019, Kenya unsuccessfully pushed for Al-Shabaab to be designated as a terrorist organisation under the UN's al-Qaeda and ISIL sanctions regime (Resolution 1267). Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, August 2019. Kenya is looking to bring this matter up again before its term on the Security Council ends in 2022. It views this designation as a means of blocking potential negotiations with Al-Shabaab until a later point when the federal government is in a stronger position. Crisis Group interviews, Kenyan diplomat and researcher, Western diplomat and Kenyan official, UN official, October 2021-May 2022.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia's Divided Islamists*, op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Members of Somalia's political elite may also have little incentive to engage in a political process with Al-Shabaab that could eventually threaten their status, even if society at large were to support a settlement. A leading presidential candidate noted warily to Crisis Group that if Al-Shabaab were one day to turn into a political party, it would be formidable, as it could unite clans under an umbrella of Islamic identity. Crisis Group interview, Somali presidential candidate, Mogadishu, August 2021.

certain actors benefiting from the status quo might see little value in an approach that could slice smaller their share of the pie or usher in a reduction in external military assistance.¹¹⁸

Furthermore, Al-Shabaab activity has a varied geographic impact, meaning that the political elite and populations in each of Somalia's member states will likely have a different attitude about engagement. Leaders in Puntland, which is less affected by Al-Shabaab, might, for example, be more worried about concessions to the militants. Others whose security Al-Shabaab directly threatens on a daily basis could see more benefit if engagement results in a reduction of violence.¹¹⁹ Somaliland, whose status vis-à-vis Somalia remains unsettled, would also be concerned about any move to reconcile with Al-Shabaab, given the group's support for the irredentist Greater Somalia project, which envisages unifying all Somali-inhabited areas in the Horn.¹²⁰

Some observers even argue that outreach to Al-Shabaab should not take place until the disputes that roil Somali politics – notably those over the division of power and resources between Mogadishu and the federal states – are resolved.¹²¹ Yet the lack of progress over recent years in repairing those relations and the absence of a clear, comprehensive framework for reconciliation mean that it is unclear when such a situation might arise. Rather than viewing outreach as part of a strictly linear process which requires a lengthy waiting period, officials could explore prospects for talks concurrently with other initiatives – such as pursuing intra-government reconciliation – to reduce mistrust in Somali politics.¹²²

Alongside the factiousness among elites, other Somalis are likely to have serious concerns about engaging Al-Shabaab.¹²³ These range from high-profile defectors from Al-Shabaab, or associated movements who still command loyalty or authority, to groups like Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) and Macawisley that have engaged Al-Shabaab in active combat.¹²⁴ All would feel threatened by the prospect of government engagement with the insurgency, especially if it eventually resulted in Al-Shabaab

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, August 2021–February 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, federal member state ministers, August 2021.

¹²⁰ Al-Shabaab's history is intertwined with that of Somaliland. Godane and other key members like Ibrahim Haji Jama Me'ad hailed from Somaliland. While Somaliland has largely insulated itself from Al-Shabaab attacks outside the borderlands contested with Puntland since 2008, it is widely believed that the organisation maintains a presence there. Salafist Somaliland Sheikh Aden Sunne Warsame, who has been repeatedly arrested by the Somaliland government on suspicion of plotting violence, formally joined Al-Shabaab in March after moving with his family from Hargeisa to Jilib in Middle Juba. "Afar arrimood oo uu caan ku ahaa Sheekh Adan Sunne" [Four things that Adan Sunne was famous for], BBC Somali, 22 March 2022. In 2021, Somaliland officials arrested a number of individuals suspected of links to Al-Shabaab, including the wives of group members. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and international organisation representative, October–November 2021.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Somali government officials and diplomats, August 2021–April 2022.

¹²² At a minimum, an improvement in the relationship between the federal government and member states would be useful, however.

¹²³ During countrywide consultations about Somalia's National Reconciliation Framework, participants repeatedly noted that this effort at improving communal ties needs to apply to Al-Shabaab as well. Crisis Group interview, Somali NGO employee, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹²⁴ Both ASWJ and Macawisley have fought Al-Shabaab, but the former's track record is more significant. It previously received backing from Ethiopia and the U.S. Crisis Group interview, former Somali defense official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

becoming part of the government and political order. Many clans in Somalia are already armed in part because they trust no one else to protect them – for some, engagement with Al-Shabaab could further erode their confidence in the Somali government's intentions and capacities. Clans would be especially wary if they have little representation of their own in Al-Shabaab or if they have crossed the organisation in the past.

A related stumbling block could be Al-Shabaab's restrictive view of the place of women in society, whether with regard to women's rights in the abstract, or to concrete matters like women's capacity to travel or get an education. True, Al-Shabaab has adopted a pragmatic outlook in some areas, allowing women to work and move around in public without male custodians.¹²⁵ Yet what Al-Shabaab might insist on, with regard to women's rights and social norms more widely, remains uncertain and a valid fear for many Somalis, given the group's interpretation of Sharia. Such concerns are likely to affect the thinking of Somalia's international partners, particularly Western donors, in order to ensure that advances they have invested in, such as expanding women's rights over the past decade and a half, are not reversed.¹²⁶

Yet here, too, much remains unclear and worth testing through dialogue. The degree to which Al-Shabaab can stomach a social order in Somalia that does not rigidly correspond with what it has instituted in its own areas of administration can only be ascertained for sure through talks. This approach has some resonance locally. A prominent female politician who strongly advocates for negotiations explained to Crisis Group that Al-Shabaab's views on women should not be considered an impediment per se, since if the group were to insist on strict measures that in her view have no place in Somali society, talks would not succeed in any case.¹²⁷ Another such female activist noted that politicians who had held conservative views about gender relations moderated their positions once in power, adding that she expected Al-Shabaab to make similar adjustments should it engage in dialogue.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, women who have lived and worked under Al-Shabaab's administration, July-August 2021.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, July 2021.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, female politician, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹²⁸ She pointed out cases of politicians who had once refused to shake the hands of foreign women but now are willing to do so. Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Mogadishu, August 2021.

IV. Toward Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab

After fifteen years of war, it appears doubtful that the Somali government, even with sustained external assistance, can defeat Al-Shabaab militarily. This point is increasingly acknowledged in Somalia. The vast majority of respondents interviewed for this report conveyed their view that there are few alternatives to engaging with the militants as an eventual means of ending the war.

The notion of waiting until conditions to initiate talks are more propitious is alluring but mistaken. Greater political unity among Somali elites would certainly help to roll back the militants' gains. But, on its own, unity is unlikely to be enough to right the ship, given how adaptable Al-Shabaab has been and how embedded the militants have become in Somali society. Nor, frankly, does it appear realistic to pin a military strategy – or, indeed, to condition talks with Al-Shabaab – on sustained reconciliation among Somali elites, however well-intentioned the new government may be. As for Al-Shabaab, it may presently have little interest in engaging the federal government, assuming that time is on its side amid donor fatigue and persistent government dysfunction. Yet a triumph for the militants is also likely to prove elusive given strong resistance from sections of Somali society and regional and international powers who will likely be determined to stop them from taking over in Somalia. With neither side likely to prevail, dialogue should remain an option to spare the country an endless struggle.

Exploring whether there is interest and enough common ground for a negotiated settlement thus makes sense. There are still many unknowns, especially when it comes to how much both Al-Shabaab and the federal government would be willing to compromise on key issues including modes of governance, interpretation of religious law and, on the part of the militants, willingness to curb operations outside Somalia. Success is far from guaranteed. Commencing outreach without answers to these questions may make some in the Somali government and among its international partners uncomfortable. But the reality is that in Somalia, as in many wars, gauging prospects for talks is not possible without undertaking some initial dialogue. Doubts about how much militants are prepared to compromise should not preclude engagement; rather, those questions should be explored through it.

To that end, the new Somali administration under President Mohamud should discreetly explore if there is interest on Al-Shabaab's part to genuinely engage. The new president, who came to power on a platform of reconciliation, is serving a second time in office and can leverage his experience of what worked and what did not last time around. If initial probing finds interest on the militants' side, authorities should take further steps to build confidence and eventually prepare the ground for a more formal process.

A. *Testing the Waters*

Gauging Al-Shabaab's stance on negotiations with the government will be impossible without testing the waters. Timing for the new government matters. Ideally, it would actively explore options while it still has significant external security backing. The departure of foreign forces would be a key Al-Shabaab demand, so the issue could be

part of an intra-Somalia dialogue, including with Al-Shabaab, as Crisis Group has argued previously.¹²⁹ The departure of foreign forces could thus be conditioned on actions that Al-Shabaab itself takes. The choice of interlocutors on the militants' side will be another important factor. Given Al-Shabaab's rigid, disciplined internal leadership structure, future attempts to explore the possibility of talks should focus first and foremost on outreach to the top leadership – Abu Ubeidah himself and those around him.

The incoming Somali administration should thus aim to quietly look into prospects for peace talks with Al-Shabaab. The immediate goal would be to establish lines of communication with the group's leadership to test under what conditions the group might be ready to enter more formal talks and perhaps do some initial probing on what room there is for compromise on some of the big issues. The new government has several options for such outreach, all of which have advantages and disadvantages.

One possibility would be to appoint a high-level envoy, empowered to represent the government. Advantages would be, first, to have someone clearly entrusted by the president to speak on his behalf, and secondly, to keep the initial engagement under wraps – likely imperative in the early stages – and in the hands of a single discreet interlocutor. The challenges include that a lone representative is more likely, if dialogue became public, to play into perceptions that the outreach is politicised and fuel distrust among the government's rivals. Another problem might be that since Al-Shabaab portrays all those working for the federal government as illegitimate, it may reject direct talks with a formal government appointee.

A second option could be to identify a team of trusted intermediaries (or *wasadah*).¹³⁰ Clan elders and sheikhs are also two oft-cited groups with potential access to Al-Shabaab. Typically, Al-Shabaab deals with elders at sub-clan level rather than the larger clan families, while militants' relations with prominent sheikhs are often testy, given bad-tempered theological debates they have engaged in.¹³¹ Yet certain religious scholars may be well placed to press the group's leadership to consider talks.¹³² Businesspeople also maintain relations with Al-Shabaab and might play an intermediary role. In principle, their connections to all sides means they could serve as go-betweens for initial outreach, if they are willing to take the risk.¹³³ Any appointed group would have to be able to guarantee to Al-Shabaab that they have the federal government's blessing and its assurances that it will follow through on any agreed-

¹²⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, op. cit.

¹³⁰ This outreach could incorporate or build off the previous administration's engagement through NISA, if that connection proves useful and enduring. While intelligence officials can play a role in establishing initial connections, it may be better to leave the exploratory discussions to other intermediaries.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Somali sheikh involved in previous attempts to engage Al-Shabaab, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹³² Al-Shabaab is unlikely to react well to sheikhs who have criticised its interpretations of Islam. Crisis Group interview, Somali sheikh, April 2021. A genuine offer of dialogue backed up by a collection of important and respected sheikhs and clan elders will put pressure on Al-Shabaab to respond or risk social opprobrium for ignoring calls to end the war. Crisis Group interviews, Al-Shabaab defectors, July-August 2021.

¹³³ An incentive for them could be the reduction of double taxation, if Al-Shabaab and the government were eventually able to come to terms.

upon steps. It might also be worth considering a group of intermediaries alongside an officially appointed envoy to facilitate initial discussions.

The advantage of such a group could be that it can leverage pre-existing relations with Al-Shabaab and, because it does not directly comprise officials, might find it easier to get in touch with militant leaders to broach the topic of talks. Still, determining the best intermediaries will be tricky, given the distrust any contact is likely to generate among those who believe their interests are not represented within the team. It might also be harder to keep the endeavour quiet.

A third option could be the UN, through its mission in Somalia, UNSOM. The main advantages would be the body's experience facilitating dialogue and ability to provide good offices, while the use of an external third party could help insulate initial contacts from Somali politics. Still, distrust of foreign involvement, even by a nominally neutral body like the UN, would be hard to overcome.¹³⁴ Nor does the current UN leadership appear inclined to such an undertaking, which is not explicitly defined in the mission's mandate from the Security Council (though previous UN representatives do appear to have found space to explore prospects for talks).¹³⁵ In that sense, an initial Somali-led approach might, for now, have better chances of evolving into something viable.

B. *Building Trust*

Testing the waters for talks could yield a variety of benefits, even if the parties cannot take the next step to formal negotiations. Dialogue could explore Al-Shabaab's stance on the thornier issues around Sharia, modes of governance and its external activities, for example, but also focus on ascertaining whether certain, more immediate confidence-building measures that would have benefits for both sides might be feasible. In this sense, while getting to political talks is a key objective, engagement can demonstrate potential benefits beyond this ultimate goal.¹³⁶

In particular, authorities might consider limited confidence-building measures aimed at forging trust, while working through their emissaries to urge Al-Shabaab to reciprocate with its own steps. This tack would allow the movement to soften its own violent public image. Some areas might include:

¹³⁴ It would be important to insulate any outreach from external rivalries, to avoid politicising discussions and having actors view them through a zero-sum lens with regard to how it may affect their influence in Somalia. Qatar, for example, remains strongly interested in pursuing political engagement with Al-Shabaab, but its competitors may view an active role for Doha in pushing this approach negatively. Crisis Group interview, Qatari diplomat, February 2022.

¹³⁵ Adjusting UNSOM's mandate in line with this objective would provide insurance for the mission if it were to go down this track. Crisis Group interviews, former UN officials, May 2022.

¹³⁶ Agreeing to talks would be a risky endeavour for both the government and Al-Shabaab, given how much each has derided the other in public statements. For Al-Shabaab, it may require a degree of socialisation among members after years during which the leadership rejected engagement as an option. Such a process, even if the leadership were behind it, is likely to take some time.

- The government could tone down the rhetoric it uses to describe Al-Shabaab. The concept of a “linguistic ceasefire” has been useful in other places, as a means of reducing tensions and building trust.¹³⁷ Al-Shabaab could reciprocate, for example, by desisting from calling the government a group of apostates.
- Authorities could further take steps to improve personal safety and freedom of movement for Al-Shabaab family members, a concern of the group’s membership but also some of its leaders.¹³⁸ The government can start by committing to Al-Shabaab that it will not harm relatives of militants who already reside in government-held areas – a matter consistent with Somalia’s obligations under international law, but one which the government can still emphasise. It could also open up avenues for these family members to travel between Al-Shabaab and government-held territories without facing recrimination.¹³⁹ Al-Shabaab could reciprocate with its own commitments related to allowing low- and mid-ranking government officials to travel in Al-Shabaab territory to visit family members. Relatedly, Mogadishu could also undertake a basic verbal commitment to treat Al-Shabaab detainees better and avoid abusing or killing them – again, in keeping with international law.
- Somali authorities could offer practical benefits to improve the lives of people living under Al-Shabaab control, leveraging their advantage in areas of service provision, like health care. Creative measures should be considered to boost confidence by offering public goods to populations living under Al-Shabaab control. For example, Al-Shabaab could agree either to allow COVID-19 vaccinations for these people or to let them travel to government-held areas for the purposes of getting inoculated.¹⁴⁰ Authorities would have to refrain from exploiting this access to gather information for planning attacks on the group.¹⁴¹ The drought afflicting Somalia at present further opens up immediate opportunities (and creates an urgent need) to ease tensions by ensuring relief supplies are delivered across territorial lines, which could come under the guise of a humanitarian truce.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ For more on this concept, see Sophie Haspeslagh, “The ‘Linguistic Ceasefire’: Negotiating in an Age of Proscription”, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2021). The government’s part of the “linguistic ceasefire” would be to refrain from using the term *khawarij* (extremists) to describe Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, prominent Somali sheikh, April 2021. After Mohamud referred to Al-Shabaab members as Muslims in one speech early in his first tenure, Al-Shabaab members expressed appreciation. Crisis Group interview, former Somali intelligence official, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian worker in Al-Shabaab areas and elders, August 2021.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, clan elders, August 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Al-Shabaab expressed concern about the coronavirus after the initial outbreak, but in March 2021 rejected the vaccine on offer by state authorities. The group did leave the door open for Muslims to get the jab once a “safe and effective vaccine becomes available”. Statement, Office of Politics and Wilayat, Al-Shabaab, 30 March 2021.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker in Al-Shabaab areas, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹⁴² The rains have failed for successive seasons in Somalia, resulting in acute food insecurity. The UN’s Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs noted in February 2022 that the drought affects 4.3 million Somalis, with 554,000 already displaced. “Somalia: Drought Situation Report no.4”, UN OCHA, 20 February 2022. Al-Shabaab has initiated its own relief operations and expressed interest in securing outside supplies. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, February 2022.

- Eventually, the government should explore whether limited or local ceasefires in relation to specific operational activities or for humanitarian reasons could be possible on both sides. For example, militants could commit to halt their campaign of assassinations of elders and others that took part in elections, or commit to ceasing major attacks in Mogadishu.¹⁴³ In return, the government could likewise commit to ceasing offensive operations in agreed-upon periods. The exchange of prisoners could be another measure to work toward, if sufficient trust can be built up on the two sides.

The Somali government could undertake any combination of these measures, increasing or decreasing in intensity in relation to Al-Shabaab's reciprocation. The end goal would be finding creative means of improving the overall environment so that a basic relationship and level of trust can be established between the group and the government. If the parties can achieve this minimal understanding, they can lay the groundwork for eventual wider negotiations.¹⁴⁴

C. *Managing Risks*

Engaging Al-Shabaab is bound to be a risky endeavour. The dangers range from militant leaders exploiting talks to regroup, to engagement with Al-Shabaab yielding nothing but deepening divides among Somali elites. These are genuine perils that the government will need to factor into any outreach. For the most part, though, there are ways to mitigate the dangers. None of the risks is in itself cause to put on hold efforts to at least test the waters with militant leaders.

A first risk is that, as has happened elsewhere when authorities engaged militants, Al-Shabaab exploits talks to regroup and prepare for another bout of fighting. Were that to happen, it could allow militants to gain greater battlefield advantage than they have at present. Yet establishing lines of communication with the group does not necessarily mean lowering the tempo of military operations or other efforts to weaken Al-Shabaab, such as stopping its flow of financing. Certain operations, such as targeted killings of leaders, may need to be paused to allow time for making contact, but overall military operations would likely continue, even if adapted to reinforce diplomacy.¹⁴⁵ Were initial talks held to yield some form of truce or cessation of hos-

¹⁴³ Although no lasting agreement came about, the government of Burkina Faso reached an accommodation with Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin ahead of the country's November 2020 elections, an example of a ceasefire around a limited, but practical aim. "Burkina Faso's secret peace talks and fragile jihadist ceasefire", *The New Humanitarian*, 11 March 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Authorities or religious leaders could also encourage Al-Shabaab to participate in a virtual debate with religious actors in Somalia as a means of bridging gaps and explaining its positions. Al-Shabaab expressed willingness to engage with Somali religious scholars who hold different opinions in a September 2021 message, but called for them to travel to areas under its control first. Given security concerns, few scholars would be inclined to do so, but a virtual forum can alleviate this concern while putting pressure on Al-Shabaab to honour its offer. "Mu'assasada Al-Kataib Waxay Insha-Allaah Dhowaan Baahin Doontaa Dokumentari ka Kooban 12 Qaybood oo Falanqaynaya Qawaaniinta Kufriiga ee ay Xukuumadda Riddada ah Dalka ku Maamusho" [Al-Kataib Foundation will soon, God willing, publish a twelve-part documentary analysing the apostate government administration of the infidel's rule of law], Al-Shabaab Press Office, 9 September 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Attacks on high-value Al-Shabaab targets can disrupt dialogue if not aligned with those efforts. An example of this interplay was the killing of Al-Shabaab member Abdulkadir Commandos in an

ilities, the danger of militants using that pause for their own ends would have to be accounted for. But that is unlikely to happen for some time.

As for the danger, cited by Western officials, that Al-Shabaab might use talks to engineer foreign forces' exit before seizing the country – as those officials argue the Taliban did in Afghanistan – that, too, seems overblown. First, for the reasons outlined above, Al-Shabaab would likely struggle to capture and hold all of Somalia. Secondly, as long as the AU mission is around, it will be able to condition its withdrawal on concessions from Al-Shabaab. To suggest that Afghan Taliban negotiators misled their U.S. counterparts misreads complex talks that were in large part about the U.S. pulling out in exchange for counter-terrorism guarantees; U.S. dealmaking with the Taliban was motivated more by Washington's intent to withdraw than by peacemaking.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, a flaw in the U.S. and other foreign forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan was arguably that it was insufficiently calibrated to encourage a peace process among Afghans.¹⁴⁷ With impatience among donors in Somalia still evident despite the AU mission mandate's renewal, there is all the more reasons to try establishing contacts rather than wait.

A second risk is that dialogue legitimises the group or that authorities wind up prioritising concessions to an outfit that deploys violence to maintain its power at the expense of more peaceful elements of society. This dilemma is hardly new for peacemakers; sadly, the interests of men with guns have often carried the day due to the imperative of ending violence. First, though, initial discreet contacts are unlikely to much change Somalis' or outside powers' perceptions of the group, particularly if they are kept secret. Over the longer term, the best way to stop militants' views from carrying too much weight in a peace process usually lies in a more inclusive process of dialogue that gives other parts of society a say. It will certainly be an important challenge if peace talks do get under way. It is not, however, a reason to put off trying to establish lines of communication.

A third and particularly acute danger is that engagement becomes intertwined with Somali politics. Outreach by the new government could play into divisions in Mogadishu or widen the rift between federal authorities and some regions. Even if Al-Shabaab defines itself as sitting above clan politics, clan calculations are never far away. As an interlocutor put it, "Once you get to the negotiating table, it becomes a clan discussion".¹⁴⁸ Previous integration of non-clan entities into Somalia's political system has adhered to its organising principle of power-sharing among clans.¹⁴⁹

August 2020 U.S. airstrike. The veteran Islamist leader Hassan Dahir Aweys strongly condemned the killing of his former Hizbul Islam associate, arguing he was in ill health and posed little threat. Whatever the facts, the incident inflamed Aweys, an influential man whose voice could be leveraged to support dialogue. It demonstrates the need to assess the strategic implications of targeted killings, even when they seem to promise tactical benefits. "Xasan Daahir Aweys oo hanjabaad culus soo diray" [Hassan Dahir Aweys sends serious threats], Caasimada, 27 August 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°159, *Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, 2 October 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker who travels across Al-Shabaab-held areas, Mogadishu, August 2021.

¹⁴⁹ The basis for political representation in Somalia since the early 2000s has been the 4.5 clan formula, in which the largest clan families have an equal share, while smaller clans receive half a

If negotiations were to progress, a disconnect could emerge if Al-Shabaab were to seek representation that challenged this prevailing framework, upsetting the country's delicate clan balance.

A poorly thought-out or rushed process could sharpen those risks.

All this means that, if talks happen, it will also be a challenge to balance the need for discretion in order to advance negotiations with the duty to generate buy-in from among Somali society. To this end, future government negotiation efforts should build in consultations that include a wide swathe of political, social and civil society actors prior to engaging in substantive discussions.

A similar risk lies in international politics. The Somali authorities could engage Al-Shabaab, only to encounter severe resistance from outside that endangers nascent efforts. Pushback could, for example, come from neighbours that have been battling Al-Shabaab for years and are deeply hostile to its Islamist and expansionist agenda. This risk would be best dealt with through careful consultation with Somalia's foreign partners, especially those who have invested substantially in counter-terrorism efforts in the country, and reassurances that any future settlement would factor in their interests. Building support in the U.S. for such an approach, which may not be completely out of the question, could help bring other countries on board.¹⁵⁰ U.S. backing and the development of a wider set of countries who support talks might also help manage any geopolitical friction if talks are eventually hosted outside the country for example.

A different danger is that engagement winds up endangering interlocutors among the militants themselves, emboldening hardliners and perhaps even splitting Al-Shabaab. Somali authorities might see a split as positive in terms of weakening the group, but it could leave an aggrieved rump faction that is less inclined to negotiations and more deeply committed to the Somali government's violent destruction. The small Islamic State presence in Somalia, centred in the Bari region of Puntland – itself already a breakaway faction of Al-Shabaab – could wind up presenting itself as an anti-negotiation movement and attract dissidents.¹⁵¹ This development would have two attendant risks – first, emboldening the Islamic State in Somalia, which to date has had minimal reach outside its mountainous Puntland hideout, and secondly, putting rival jihadist groups at each other's throats. How much the Somali government can do to avoid engagement setting off unexpected dynamics within the jihadist movement is unclear, but discretion until militant leaders are prepared to go public would best protect those leaning toward dialogue.

share. When the Islamic Courts Union came into the government in 2009 and Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a temporarily joined the Galmudug administration in 2018, they agreed to divide the seats they were granted on the basis of clan power-sharing in order to maintain equilibrium. Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, May 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, April 2022.

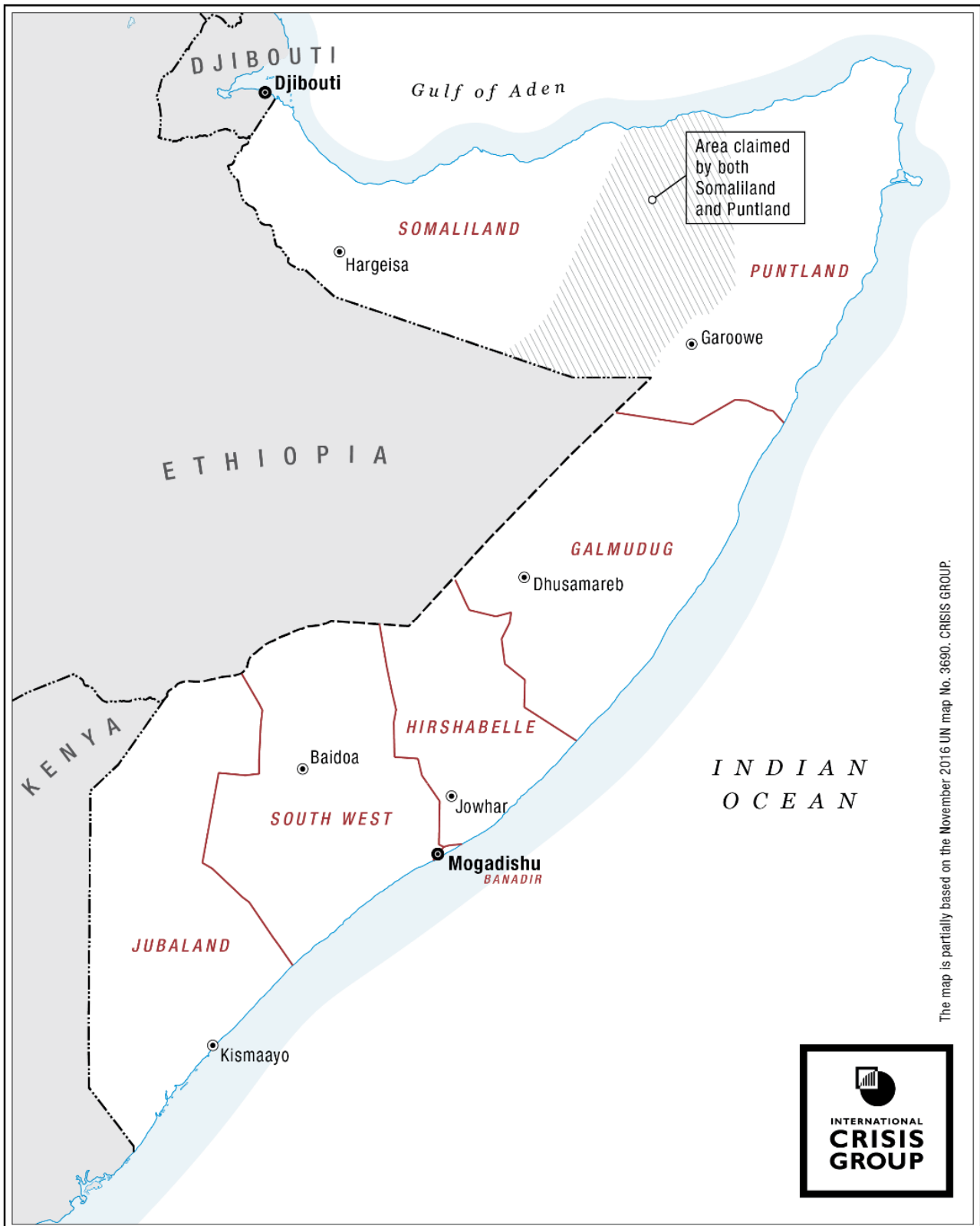
¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Somali security and intelligence officials, August 2021.

V. Conclusion

The war with Al-Shabaab has dragged on for fifteen years. Little suggests that the militants can be defeated militarily. It is time to start exploring whether another approach can help bring peace. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's government should take the bold step of testing whether political engagement with Al-Shabaab can serve as a complement to military operations and other policies that seek to weaken the group. Al-Shabaab has thus far been reluctant to engage and success this time around is far from guaranteed: a pathway toward talks is unlikely to be the answer on its own and there are clearly risks along the way that the government will have to factor in to its approach. On balance, though, it is worth trying. After all, if the government genuinely seeks negotiations and Al-Shabaab rejects its overtures, more Somalis are likely to lay the blame for the war's prolongation at the militants' feet. The cost of continued conflict makes it imperative to at least keep the option of engagement on the table. Rejecting that option out of hand consigns Somalia to an intractable war with no end in sight.

Mogadishu/Nairobi/Brussels, 21 June 2022

Appendix A: Map of Somalia



The map is partially based on the November 2016 UN map No. 3690. CRISIS GROUP.



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.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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June 2022

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