Blunting Al-Shabaab's Impact on Somalia's Elections

What's new? The Al-Shabaab insurgency has threatened to disrupt Somalia's high-stakes elections due by the end of February. The Islamic State's local branch may also stage its own assaults. A larger number of polling stations than in previous elections means that militants will have a wider range of targets to choose from.

Why does it matter? Militant attacks and intimidation of delegates and candidates could reduce participation in the polls and undermine their legitimacy. A disrupted electoral contest would sharpen political discord in Somalia, which Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State can exploit, while undermining longer-term efforts at reconciliation.

What should be done? Authorities should step up efforts to secure voting locations and their surroundings and keep security forces in place for some time after the polls. They should also stand up an impartial election dispute mechanism to ensure that most Somalis perceive the elections as fair.

I. Overview

As Somalia heads into fraught parliamentary and presidential elections, due to take place in January and February 2021, jihadist groups are on the lookout for ways to wreak havoc. The Al-Shabaab insurgency has said it will disrupt the vote and warned citizens against taking part. Both Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State's local branch, a newer and weaker but still deadly player in Somalia, appear emboldened by the late 2020 drawdown of Ethiopian and U.S. forces from the country, which leaves a partial security vacuum. Jihadist violence and intimidation could undermine participation rates and thus the legitimacy of results. Militants will also be primed to exploit any aggravated political tensions that may arise from a contested vote. The federal and member state governments need to pull together to curb the jihadists' chances of playing spoiler. Authorities should rapidly beef up security at and around polling stations, and keep these measures in place after the vote, while instituting an agreed-upon mechanism for adjudicating disputes over the results.

Securing the vote will be a major challenge. Events, including a conflict in northern Ethiopia that prompted Addis Ababa to pull out thousands of troops stationed near Al-Shabaab's stronghold in south-central Somalia and President Donald Trump's order to reposition U.S. troops from the country, mean that Somali authorities must shoulder more security responsibilities. Given limited capacities, federal and state authorities

will struggle to stem militant attacks on candidates and voting delegates, who will be spread over an increased number of voting areas. That said, authorities, working with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), should continue to strengthen security arrangements, relying on the Somali police to protect designated voting centres while using the Somali National Army where needed to defend the areas around these hubs. Federal and state authorities tasked with election security should draw down the mobilised forces only gradually, in order to shield participants from harm.

Meanwhile, Somalia's federal and state leadership should urgently resume dialogue with the political opposition to address the latter's concerns about election management and avoid a contested vote that will likely trigger protests – and serve as a gift to the militants. They should also stand up the impartial electoral dispute resolution mechanism they agreed upon in September, in order to ensure that grievances do not linger unresolved. The more Somalis see the election as fair, the fewer frustrations militants will have to exploit. By contrast, a botched election could set off violence of which militants can take advantage.

II.   **Voting in Somalia: A Matter of Life and Death**

Somalia's parliamentary and presidential elections will unfold amid bitter wrangling among the country's political elites. The vote, now scheduled to take place on a staggered schedule over January and February, will see President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmajo) seek to buck recent trends by becoming the first incumbent re-elected in many years. Farmajo's opponents, backed by the leadership of the Jubaland and Puntland regions, accuse the president of reneging on the terms of a September agreement to organise the vote consensually. They claim that he has stacked the committees charged with conducting the indirect election with loyalists. Despite diplomatic pressure for all sides to work together and suggestions – including from Crisis Group – for a short postponement to create conditions for credible elections, Mogadishu on 23 December announced that the vote would go ahead beginning on the first week of January. The opposition rejected this unilateral decision and at the time of writing was mulling conducting a parallel process instead.[1]

One threat that hangs over the high-stakes elections is that the disagreements between the government and opposition could spiral into violence among their respective supporters. A confrontation could break down along clan lines, as segments of the politically dominant Hawiye clan, an important constituency in the capital, are strongly opposed to the Farmajo government. Outside Mogadishu, in places like Gedo, where voting is scheduled to occur, government security deployments have displaced local forces, offering another potential flashpoint.[2]

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[1] See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°163, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, 10 November 2020. See also "Somalia electoral commission announces election dates", Anadolu Agency, 23 December 2020; "Go'aannada shirka wadatashiga murashaxiinta madaxtinnimada dowladda federaalka soomaaliya", statement, Union of Presidential Candidates, 26 November 2020; Crisis Group interview, member of opposition candidate's team, December 2020.

[2] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, op. cit.

But such discord is not the only danger attending the impending vote. Al-Shabaab has threatened retribution for anyone participating in the vote, whether as electors, delegates or candidates for office, calling the exercise an "apostate" activity.[3] Its warnings have aimed both to advertise the group's position and to provide justification for attacks. At a March forum, the group defined any form of electoral participation as unbelief, in line with its perspective that democracy is a type of "infidelity" that elevates the rule of human beings above that of God.[4] On 1 April, spokesman Ali Dheere stressed that the group will view all those who participate as legitimate targets for reprisal.[5] Another press release in July responding to consultations among Somalia's political leadership about electoral preparations reiterated these points and again warned Somalis not to take part.[6] History shows that these threats are not empty. Following the 2016-2017 elections, Al-Shabaab assassinated dozens of elders and electoral delegates in Mogadishu and elsewhere.[7]

Recent changes to the electoral process designed to make the vote more inclusive could inadvertently offer Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State's local branch a wider range of targets this time. Just as in 2016-2017, Somalia's elections will be based on an indirect model in which clan elders representing constituents pick delegates, who in turn select the parliamentarians who then choose the president. By the terms of a deal authorities hammered out in Mogadishu on 17 September, the delegate base will be twice as large as that in 2016-2017, alongside a corresponding increase in the number of voting hubs, all of which are in towns.[8] These changes will place additional demands on authorities who will need to secure the additional locations. Apart from trying to disrupt the vote itself, militants will also look to exploit grievances stemming from contested results by, for example, stepping up recruitment among communities who perceive the vote as unfair.

Al-Shabaab has also issued private warnings to potential electoral participants. One elder told Crisis Group that militants summoned him and others to a meeting in 2019, granting them amnesties for having participated in the 2016-2017 elections but telling them not to expect forgiveness if they took part in the forthcoming polls.[9]

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[3] "Communiqué from the consultative forum regarding the jihad in East Africa", Al-Shabaab, 18 March 2020.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Third-party security assessment on file with Crisis Group.

[6] "Dhusamareb meeting: illegitimate caucus of apostate Somali leaders", Al-Kataib, 22 July 2020.

[7] Crisis Group tracking of assassinations; Crisis Group interview, Somali elder, August 2020; "A former electoral delegate among 3 killed in Mogadishu", Garowe Online, 9 July 2018. In a two-week span in June 2017, at least twelve delegates were killed. Tweet by Harun Maruf, prominent Somali journalist, @HarunMaruf, 12:11am, 12 June 2017.

[8] In 2016-2017, voting took place in the state capitals of Kismayo, Baidoa, Jowhar, Adado and Garowe, in addition to Mogadishu. In 2021, voting is also planned for Dhusamareb (as a replacement for Adado), Bosasso, Galkacyo, Beledweyne, Barawe and Garbaharey. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, op. cit.

[9] Crisis Group interview, Somali elder, August 2020. In 2017, Al-Shabaab granted forgiveness to electoral delegates who presented themselves at its courts (primarily in Toro Toro, a town about 100km from Mogadishu), in return for paying a small fine and agreeing not to participate in government activities, including elections, in the future. In 2019, the group went further by demanding that elders who participated in the previous elections repent at gatherings in areas under its control. One participant estimated that attendance at these events was in the low hundreds, although Al-Shabaab claimed a much higher number. Crisis Group interview, Somali elder, August 2020. See also "Aar kamid ah

Some officials believe that militants make such explicit threats in order to influence the election outcome by intimidating participants into selecting Al-Shabaab sympathisers instead of others, although no candidate would openly declare support for the group. There is little evidence that Al-Shabaab thinks this way: such an attempt to manipulate the vote would indicate that the movement wishes to turn the political system to its advantage. In fact, the militants seem to take an unambiguous position, arguing that participation in elections is a crime against Islam.[10] According to the elder interviewed by Crisis Group, the militants did not ask him to do Al-Shabaab's electoral bidding but simply to swear that he would boycott future polls.[11] Other elders and delegates contacted by Al-Shabaab said they understood the group's aim in the 2021 polls to be similar to that in 2016-2017, namely to disrupt participation and thus discredit the vote.[12] Some opposition figures think that when officials charge Al-Shabaab with infiltrating the elections they wish merely to disqualify certain delegates or candidates.[13]

Al-Shabaab's threats have worked, at least to some degree. The elder interviewed by Crisis Group explained that without government protection or means of fleeing the country, he had little choice but to agree to Al-Shabaab's terms. He said he would not participate in the 2021 elections. Other delegates who have seen their colleagues killed for participating in previous elections and who have promised Al-Shabaab not to take part in future contests echoed that view.[14] The prospective drop in participation in indirect elections that are already quite restricted raises questions about whether polls can generate a representative government.[15]

Ergadii Xildhibaannada soo xulay oo ka hadlay wixii ay kala kulmeen Al Shabaab", Somalimemo, 2 September 2019.

[10] The illegitimacy of elections stems, in Al-Shabaab's telling, from the fact that they empower governments applying manmade laws rather than sharia, or Islamic law, as Al-Shabaab interprets it. Al-Shabaab also complains that the current federal government has allowed foreign troops to operate on Somali soil. "Communiqué from the consultative forum regarding the jihad in East Africa", op. cit.

[11] Crisis Group interview, Somali elder, August 2020.

[12] Crisis Group interviews, Somali delegates and elders who participated in 2016-2017 elections but subsequently received amnesty from Al-Shabaab, August and November 2020.

[13] Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, November 2020. Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency has reportedly demanded the authority to vet any elder participating in the election. Crisis Group interviews, Somali elders, November 2020. It is notable, finally, that Al-Shabaab did not take the approach of backing sympathetic candidates in 2016-2017. Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, November 2020.

[14] Crisis Group interviews, delegates who requested amnesty from Al-Shabaab, November 2020. As one former delegate explained, "I now have freedom of movement and do not want that to be limited again". Crisis Group interview, former delegate, November 2020. Another reason for reticence about participating is financial. In 2016, elders told Crisis Group, they got a windfall from selling their votes, making participation worth the risk of provoking Al-Shabaab's ire. They said the small pool of participants in that year's vote afforded them more influence in the electoral process and hence larger payments. They do not see vote buying as corruption, arguing that the money is way of extracting benefit for them and their constituents from politicians who will otherwise do little for them once in office. The elders said the financial rewards for selling their votes will be smaller this time around. The doubling of the delegate pool means that elders and delegates soliciting bribes will have more competition. They noted that the money on offer would likely not be worth the increased risk to their lives. Crisis Group interviews, Somali elders who participated in 2016-2017 elections, August 2020. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, op. cit.

[15] Crisis Group interviewed a handful of Somalis living in Nairobi who noted that the threats to participants in Somalia are giving them an opportunity to travel home and serve as replacement delegates.

III.   **The Militants' Growing Threat**

Al-Shabaab is in attack mode. The group has increased the tempo of suicide attacks in Mogadishu, after a decline in early 2020, while continuing to assassinate government officials.[16] Its violent campaigns in state capitals are also on the upswing. Indeed, high-profile attacks between September and November in Kismayo, the capital of Jubaland region and a city previously considered safe, targeted the city's chamber of commerce head, an Amal bank representative and the state's deputy speaker of parliament.[17] Al-Shabaab's encroachments near Dhusamareb, capital of Galmudug, as well as a series of attacks on the airport, are other worrying signs of deteriorating security.[18]

New voting locations further add to the security challenge. Bosasso and Galkacyo, two major cities that are listed as new electoral centres, suffer from recurrent Al-Shabaab violence – including an 18 December suicide attack at a stadium in south Galkacyo shortly before Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble was expected to arrive.[19] Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab retains a heavy presence in Lower Shabelle around Barawe, the new location where conditions may be shakiest.[20]

While the Somali army has moved to retake territory from Al-Shabaab ahead of the elections, it has not taken enough. Operations targeting strategic locations like Janay Abdalle in Lower Juba and Basra in Middle Shabelle in September and October

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Since they live outside the country, they felt comfortable taking this risk. Crisis Group interviews, potential delegates, November 2020.

[16] In the second half of 2020, Al-Shabaab has targeted Mogadishu with at least ten suicide attacks, more than double the number in the first half of the year. These attacks include the 16 August siege of Elite Hotel – the first complex attack in Somalia's capital in 2020. Nonetheless, while Al-Shabaab violence in Mogadishu remains a regular occurrence, the overall frequency of complex attacks on hotels, restaurants and government buildings in 2020 has been lower than in previous years.

[17] The deputy speaker of Jubaland's parliament survived a grenade attack claimed by Al-Shabaab on 9 November. "Guddoomiye ku xigeenka Baarlamaanka maamulka 'Jubbaland' oo isku day dil ka badbaaday", Somalimemo, 10 November 2020.

[18] A standoff in Galmudug in February pitted the Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama militia, which has enjoyed great success in fending off Al-Shabaab, against federal forces. After federal forces defeated the militia, its leaders fled abroad, while its lower ranks disarmed or integrated into state security units. The newly elected regional President Ahmed Abdi Karie "Qoor Qoor" then moved to consolidate his administration, initiating reforms centred around disarming clan militias and training new forces. Yet, in the following months, Al-Shabaab militants advanced toward Dhusamareb from their strongholds in the districts of El Bur, El Dheere, Galhareeri and Haradheere, even as the group launched several attacks on the airport south of the city. Mortars on 2 November targeted Qoor Qoor's plane as it departed – no major damage was recorded, but the incident led authorities to suspend airport traffic. Crisis Group interview, Galmudug resident, November 2020. "Airlines suspend flights to Dhusamareb following recent attack", *Somali Guardian*, 24 November 2020.

[19] The attack killed at least seventeen, including three senior military officers. Declan Walsh, "Suicide bomber in Somalia hits prime minister's rally", *The New York Times,* 18 December 2020.

[20] Barawe is an isolated city surrounded by Al-Shabaab forces, forcing irregular resupply of soldiers and police based there via armoured convoy or air transport. Crisis Group interview, Somali military officer, November 2020. Al-Shabaab attacked the newly inaugurated Barawe airport with two suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices on 24 April. Tweet by AMISOM, @amisomsomalia, 6:45pm, 24 April 2020.

dislodged the militants only temporarily, despite the deployment of elite U.S.-trained forces (known as Danab) and U.S. assistance.[21]

The withdrawal of Ethiopian and U.S. forces also leaves something of a security vacuum that Al-Shabaab can exploit, even if these forces were not expected to play a direct role in election security.[22] In the first week of November, Addis Ababa recalled troops it had deployed in Gedo, Bay, Bakool and Hiraan regions as it turned its attention to the conflict in Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray.[23] The withdrawal comes at a particularly sensitive moment in areas where these forces had been deployed. Even before their departure, Al-Shabaab had already stepped up its attacks in Gedo and on Ethiopian troops occupying the main road to Baidoa.[24] Following the Ethiopian drawdown, the Trump administration ordered U.S. troops in Somalia – thought to number 700 and involved in the provision of training and operational support to elements of the Somali National Army – to leave for neighbouring Kenya and Djibouti.[25]

The militant group can now move more freely in the countryside, enabling it, in turn, to attack more urban voting centres. While Al-Shabaab prefers to use suicide bombers in cities, it has increasingly fired mortars to target locations from a distance. The threat of attack therefore remains even if security forces surround the polling venue itself.[26] Authorities will need to work hard to secure the vicinity of voting locations before, during and immediately after the polls. The Somali police and AMISOM have lagged in formulating a plan to deal with these myriad issues. They were still drafting it at the time of writing.[27]

In the meantime, the Islamic State's local branch has also emerged as a threat. Once an Al-Shabaab splinter that joined the Islamic State when the global movement was at the peak of its potency in the Levant, for years it struggled just to survive. The group

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[21] "AFRICOM statement on Sept. 7 event in Somalia", AFRICOM, 8 September 2020; third-party security assessments on file with Crisis Group.

[22] Crisis Group interview, high-ranking Jubaland official, November 2020. Al-Shabaab will also no doubt present any withdrawal as a victory in its propaganda.

[23] Addis Ababa withdrew forces it had deployed on the basis of a bilateral arrangement with Mogadishu, while leaving in place the Ethiopian contingent serving in AMISOM. The African Union mission has also been affected by developments in Ethiopia. Shortly after the Tigray conflict broke out, up to 300 Ethiopian troops of Tigrayan origin serving in AMISOM, including a deputy commander of Sector 3, were reportedly detained. "Risks on all fronts", *Africa Confidential*, 19 November 2020; Crisis Group interviews; Somali and foreign security actors, November 2020. Somalia's political opposition viewed the non-AMISOM Ethiopian contingent with suspicion, accusing it of serving Farmajo's interests in previous regional elections. Some in opposition circles thus support these troops' withdrawal ahead of the election, though they acknowledge the opportunities it provides Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, Somali academic based in Mogadishu, November 2020.

[24] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, 14 July 2020.

[25] "Somalia Force Posture Announcement", U.S. Department of Defense, 4 December 2020.

[26] Crisis Group interview, Somali military official, October 2020.

[27] Part of the delay occurred when Mogadishu, the federal member states and the opposition sidelined the National Independent Election Commission in the September agreement and instead authorised the creation of new federal and state electoral committees to manage the election. A security task force had been working with the Commission, but shifting focus to the new committees as they were being set up prolonged the preparations. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and Somali security officials, November 2020.

has, however, managed to maintain its presence around Bossaso.[28] It has also staged attacks in Mogadishu, although less frequently in 2020.[29] Its modus operandi generally involves assassination of security or government figures with gunfire or, occasionally, explosive devices.[30] Mounting an operation during the electoral cycle would certainly raise the group's profile vis-à-vis its competitor, Al-Shabaab.[31]

IV. **Limiting the Jihadist Damage to Elections**

Preventing militant assaults will be crucial to ensuring the legitimacy of the vote. It will be impossible to insulate all participants from attack. With diminished external support, security forces will likely be hard pressed to push militants further back from voting centres, with their resources better channelled to maintaining defensive postures. Election security planners should thus hasten to bolster security around voting centres in order to maximise participation. They should mobilise state police to patrol the voting centres themselves, while relying on the Somali National Army to stop Al-Shabaab units from encroaching too far into their vicinity.[32]

Election security officials should keep security arrangements in place around voting centres immediately after the vote, given Al-Shabaab's past practice of targeting participants soon after elections are over, especially in areas where the vote has occurred. A more gradual drawdown could mitigate immediate retaliation against elders and electoral college delegates, many of whom will likely remain in town after voting concludes, especially those worried about returning to rural locales with little to no protection from Al-Shabaab. Somalia's international partners like the UN, EU, UK and U.S., as well as AMISOM, should assist Somali authorities in securing the vote both during and after election day, channelling technical and logistical support to the election security task force.

In the long run, however, the best means of tackling Al-Shabaab is reducing the movement's ability to leverage political and clan fissures to advance its goals.[33] The first step is to conduct an election broadly perceived in Somalia as fair, so that few grievances emerge. Mogadishu's unilateral approach to managing the election, including its decision to publish a timetable without consulting the opposition, threatens perceptions of fairness. The Farmajo administration should instead stick as closely as possible to the September electoral agreement, which demanded consultation in

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[28] Crisis Group analyst's interview in a previous capacity, humanitarian agency official, Garowe, August 2019; "S/2019/858", UN Monitoring Panel Report 19-16960, 1 November 2019.

[29] The Islamic State has claimed over 100 attacks on behalf of its Somali affiliate since April 2016, with the vast majority of these occurring in the Bari region of Puntland or in Mogadishu and environs. The last attacks claimed in Mogadishu came in October and December 2020. Crisis Group tracking of attack claims.

[30] Crisis Group tracking of attack claims.

[31] A December 2020 video from the Islamic State in Somalia confirmed that the group still views Al-Shabaab as a major adversary. "ISIS affiliate in Somalia declares war on Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab", Garowe Online, 17 December 2020.

[32] Crisis Group Briefing, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, op. cit.

[33] For a warning on this during the 2016-2017 elections, see Ilya Gridneff, "Al-Shabaab strategy shifts towards clans as presidential election looms", IPI Global Observatory, 27 January 2017.

all decisions surrounding the vote. Even at this late stage, and with tensions running high ahead of the elections, Mogadishu should urgently convene a meeting with federal member state presidents and the political opposition to address their concerns over election management, even if that means further adjustments to the electoral timetable. Failure to do so will jeopardise the elections' perceived integrity and, by extension, Somalia's stability.

It is also essential to offer those unhappy with the election outcome institutional avenues to raise their grievances. Most expect the polls to be hotly contested so it will be vital to stand up a robust, impartial and authoritative dispute resolution mechanism, as Crisis Group has already advocated. This step will be key to finding mutually acceptable resolutions to electoral disputes.[34]

Beyond that, the political class must repair fractures that have stymied institutional development and pivotal security reforms. Upon assuming office, President Farmajo vowed to defeat Al-Shabaab in two years – an objective that he clearly has not met.[35] It was always unlikely – even absent wrangling among Somalia's politicians – that authorities could beat back the resilient insurgency on the timeline Farmajo outlined. But the constant bickering between the centre and the regions has not helped. It stands in the way, for example, of establishing a national army and police force, which Somalia's leaders agreed to do under the terms of a national security plan they endorsed at a London conference in 2017. All the proposals included in that plan for a "new Somalia security architecture" have since languished amid the politicians' quarrels.[36]

Without progress on mitigating tensions between Mogadishu and member states, Somalia will continue to struggle to deal with the militant threat. Bridging this divide will be the key challenge for the next Somali administration. In the meantime, a smooth electoral process will be an important first step that accords the victor a chance to build consensus, which will contribute to curbing the militants' influence.

V.   Conclusion

The threat of attack, whether by Al-Shabaab, Islamic State or both, hangs over the 2021 elections in Somalia. Prospective electors, delegates and candidates face a difficult choice – take part and hazard the militants' wrath, or refrain and further undermine the credibility of a vote that already excludes the bulk of Somali society. Eliminating the militant risk is impossible. Yet adjusting security plans to protect voting centres during the vote and in its immediate aftermath, in addition to instituting the right mechanism for resolving electoral disputes, can help shift the balance in favour of participation and limit the damage militants can do. Elections perceived as fair will help cool Somalia's overheated political climate and create the conditions, under the next government, for security and political reforms that in turn could shrink the space for militants to take advantage of political division.

Mogadishu/Nairobi/Brussels, 31 December 2020

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[34] Crisis Group Briefing, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, academic focused on Somalia, October 2020.

[35] "Somali president promises to defeat Al-Shabaab in two years", *The Star*, 11 May 2017.

[36] "Somalia and its backers sign security pact to beef up army", Reuters, 11 May 2017.

Appendix A: Map of Voting Locations in Somalia
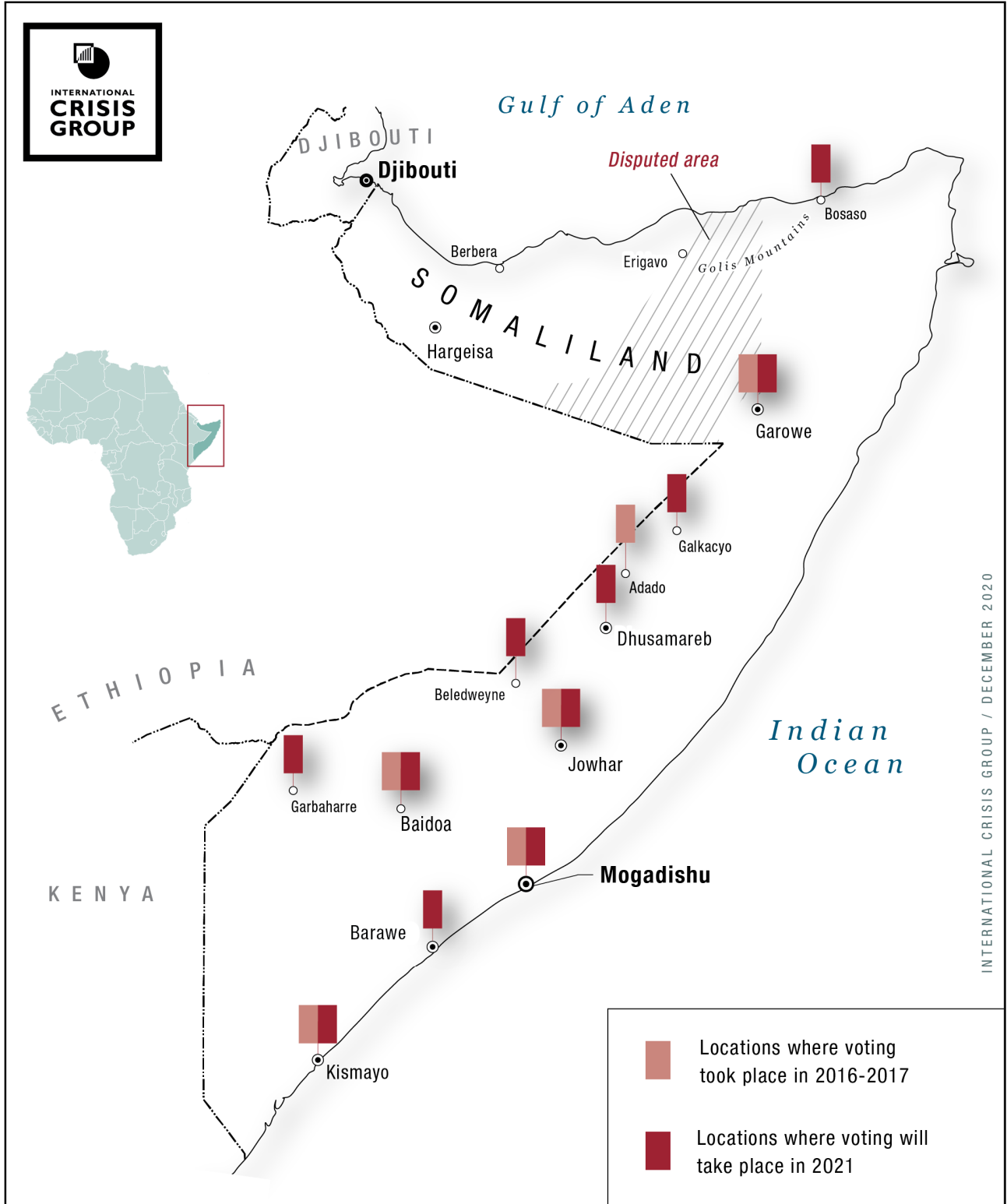
Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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International Crisis Group
Headquarters
Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38
brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office
newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office
washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office
london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation
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