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Faltering Lion: Analyzing Progress and Setbacks in Somalia's War against al-Shabaab

BY JAMES BARNETT
RESEARCH FELLOW, HUDSON INSTITUTE

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Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
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Cover: A vehicle with Somali National Army soldiers on patrol on October 17, 2022, near Doolow in the Gedo region of South West, Somalia. Photo by Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Barnett is a research fellow at Hudson Institute, where he studies conflict, terrorism, and geopolitics in Africa. He has extensive fieldwork experience, including in conflict environments across Nigeria and in Somalia, South Sudan, and Ukraine.

Mr. Barnett is also a research fellow with the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) in Abuja, Nigeria, and in 2021 he was a Fulbright research fellow at the University of Lagos for nine months. Additionally, in 2023, he served as a long-term analyst on the International Republican Institute-National Democratic Institute international election observation mission to Nigeria. Prior to joining Hudson, he held research or analyst positions with the United States Institute of Peace, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project. He was also a 2016–17 Boren Scholar in Tanzania.

His writing has appeared in publications such as *Foreign Policy, New Lines Magazine, War on the Rocks, African Arguments,* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books* as well as research journals such as West Point's CTC Sentinel. Along with Hudson fellows Eric Brown, Hillel Fradkin, and Husain Haqqani, he is an editor of Hudson Institute's journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology.* He has also been interviewed by Agence France-Presse, *Al Jazeera, Asharq,* BBC News, *Le Monde, Premium Times,* and Voice of America, and he has testified before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Mr. Barnett holds a BA with highest honors in history and Plan II from the University of Texas at Austin and an MA with distinction in war studies from King's College London. He speaks Swahili, Arabic, and Spanish.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Analysts have long understood the war against al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's East African affiliate, as "unwinnable" and "[with] no end in sight."[1] Most have considered the group one of the largest and most sophisticated jihadist insurgencies on the planet while viewing Somalia, the state in which it was born and primarily operates, as a quintessential "failed state."[2] Yet in mid-2022, many analysts began to change their tune.[3] Al-Shabaab began to suffer its most significant setbacks in a decade at the hands of a clan uprising in Somalia's central states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug. The uprising quickly received military support from the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and some United States officials believe it constitutes Somalia's Anbar Awakening.[4] Meanwhile, Somali officials speak of this offensive, which they've now dubbed Operation Black Lion, as the long-awaited death blow against the group.

Unfortunately, the pendulum started to swing back after al-Shabaab began regrouping and counterattacking in early 2023. As of September 2023, the Somali government is struggling to complete the offensive that began last year in central Somalia. All the while, the government promises to achieve ever more ambitious goals for defeating the group in its south-

Photo: Somali security forces near the front lines in Jubbaland, southern Somalia. (James Barnett)

ern Somalian strongholds by the end of 2024. The question, then, is whether Somalia is really turning a page in the war against al-Shabaab, with the group's defeat or meaningful degradation in sight for the first time in years, or if the FGS's battlefield progress in 2022 was merely a short-lived setback for the terrorist group.

In this report, I argue that the ongoing, if faltering, offensive against al-Shabaab reveals the dilemma of counterterrorism in the Horn of Africa: On the one hand, al-Shabaab is not invincible, and the group's center of gravity—its ability to gain a modicum of acceptance or legitimacy from vulnerable Somali communities—has been exposed as fragile. On the other hand, Somalia's perennial and myriad political disputes, as well as other issues like a lack of state capacity and rampant corruption,[5] are preventing its federal and state governments from capitalizing on the opportunities available to them. Instead, Mogadishu, aware of its limited military capacity, is looking to the militaries of neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia to bear the brunt of its anticipated offensive into southern Somalia, even though these countries' controversial interventions in Somalia over the years have catalyzed al-Shabaab's formation and expansion. In any case, there appears to be little appetite from either country to engage in another offensive. Al-Shabaab, for its part, is counterattacking against government forces in central Somalia and looking to expand its operations in neighboring countries—in part to hinder those regional militaries' potential participation in any forthcoming offensive.

Consequently, the situation looks less promising than it did at the end of 2022, and al-Shabaab is unlikely to face a meaningful defeat in the coming months. Instead, the best-case scenario would see this military offensive degrade al-Shabaab over the coming months to the point that the terrorist organization partially fractures and loses some of its popular support, possibly opening up room for the FGS to negotiate with factions of the group. A more likely scenario, however, would see the conflict remain a stalemate, with the government's current offensive bringing only temporary or superficial gains that do not meaningfully degrade al-Shabaab's capacity.

I have drawn this report from insights I gained during a four-week trip to Kenya and Somalia in June 2023. Within Somalia, I traveled around the federal capital, Mogadishu, as well as the capitals of the states of Jubbaland, Galmudug, and Puntland, in the south, center, and north of the country respectively. I also traveled to the frontline town of Bar Sanguuni, near al-Shabaab–controlled territory in Jubbaland, and separately to Las Anod, a disputed city that both Somaliland and local clans have claimed and that is at the heart of a new regional conflict. Given the sensitivity of discussing security matters in Somalia, I have anonymized the details of interview subjects in almost all references.

THE FALTERING LION

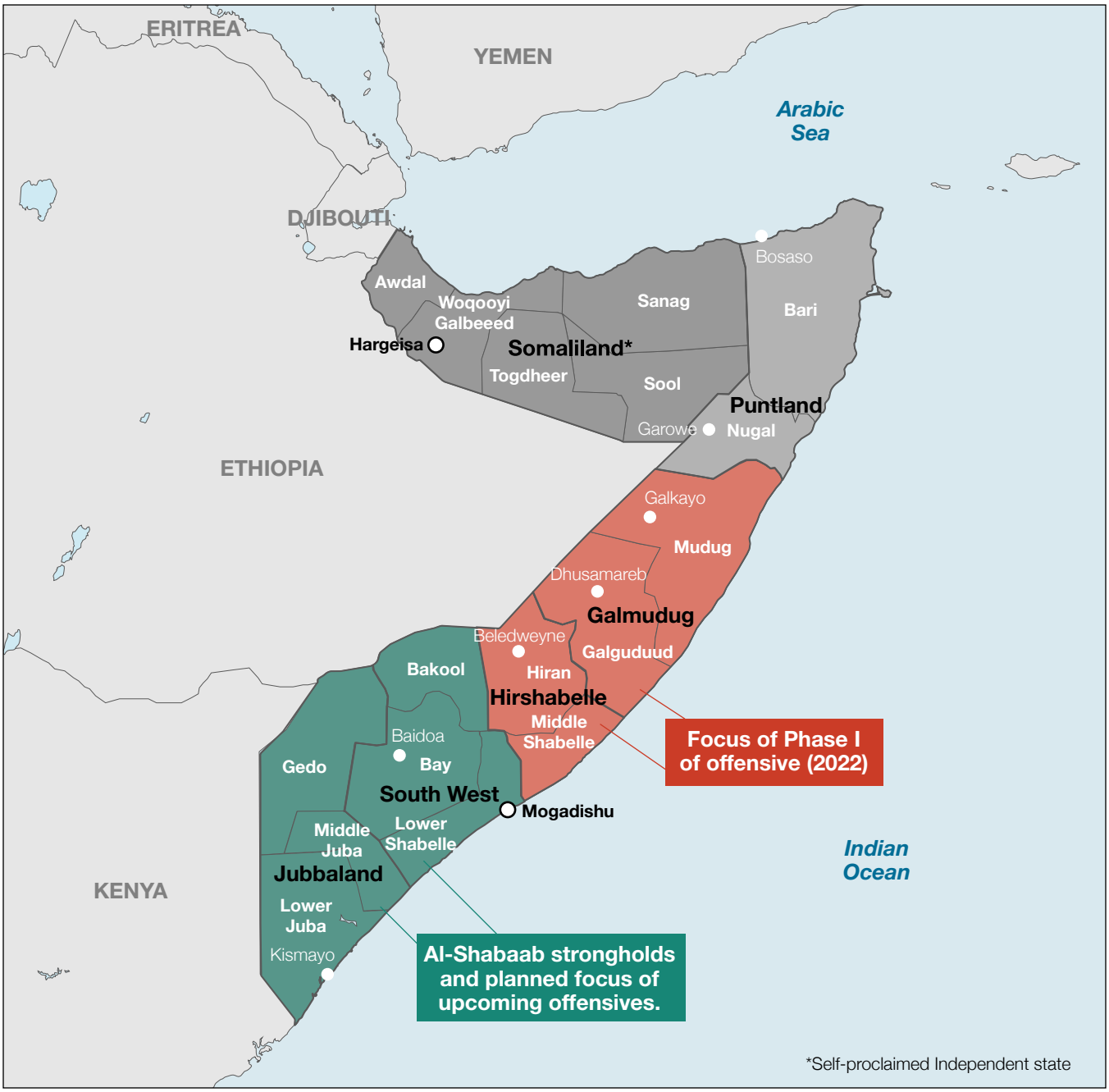
Introduction: A Promising Offensive Takes Hold but Falls Short

"Those people have always guarded their freedom," one Somali analyst remarked to me about the clans in central Somalia that rose up against the jihadist group al-Shabaab in mid-2022.[6] Central Somalia had seen clan uprisings before—against the Italian colonizers, the Cold War–era dictatorship of Mohamed Siad Barre, and even al-Shabaab in the 2010s. But the 2022 uprisings, driven by militias that dubbed themselves Ma'awisley after the sarongs many of them wear, were notable because they allowed the Mogadishu-based FGS to do something it has rarely done before: successfully weaken al-Shabaab.

When clans in Hirshabelle and Galmudug rose up against al-Shabaab after years of heavy-handed extortion and forced recruitment by the jihadists, the FGS provided weapons to the clans and sent in troops from the Somali National Army (SNA) to support the uprisings. The results were promising, with al-Shabaab losing control of dozens of villages in central Somalia by the end of 2022. This constituted its largest territorial setback since at least 2014. At the time, clans elsewhere in Somalia that had been under the jihadists' thumb for years watched the Ma'awisley with interest to see if they could sustain their

Photo: A member of the Puntland security forces walks through an abandoned military camp in northern Somalia. (James Barnett)

Figure 1. Somalia's States and Regions



Note: Map shows Somalia's five federal member states, along with the self-declared independent territory of Somaliland and the administrative region surrounding the capital of Mogadishu. Phase I of the offensive against al-Shabaab resulted in the loss of much, but not all, of its territory in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, but the group's stronghold remains in Jubbaland and South West states.

Source: Stratfor, 2021.

opposition to the seemingly dominant jihadists. For a time, even analysts who had long been skeptical of the Somali government's capacity to defeat al-Shabaab expressed optimism.

But by the start of 2023, operations in central Somalia began to lose momentum just as Somalia's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, began promising to continue the offensive and achieve the total elimination of al-Shabaab within a year. The FGS was no longer limiting the goal of the offensive to central Somalia, always al-Shabaab's secondary theater of operations; the offensive would soon turn to the south, where al-Shabaab maintains its de facto capital in Jilib, Jubbaland (see figure 1). Furthermore, the offensive would not rely solely on SNA support for the clans (which, some skeptics noted, are less friendly to President Hassan Sheikh's government in the south than in central Somalia). The offensive, named Operation Black Lion, would instead involve multiple brigades comprising as many as 30,000 troops from neighboring "frontline states" that would help the Somalis decisively defeat al-Shabaab, an intractable insurgency with roots nearly two decades old. The FGS now appeared to be "overpromising, with a risk of underdelivering," according to one former Somali minister I interviewed in June.[7]

This report details some of the challenges that Black Lion has faced to date and will likely face as the FGS seeks to expand the offensive into new theaters. The goal of this report is to help policymakers consider what outcomes might be realistic in the context of this current offensive—not, I argue, a total defeat of al-Shabaab as the FGS promises but ideally a degradation of the group sufficient to see it fracture. It also seeks to help policymakers and analysts understand how important Somalia's fractious politics are to the challenges of counterinsurgency and stabilization in the country.

The subsequent sections of this report examine Black Lion's progress in central Somalia in 2022; how al-Shabaab responded to these setbacks, including its (to date) successful efforts to foil the next phase of the offensive; the successes and challenges to date of stabilization efforts in recently liberated areas of central Somalia; and how al-Shabaab has worked to successfully preempt and deter a broader regional military offensive by escalating its operations in neighboring East African states.

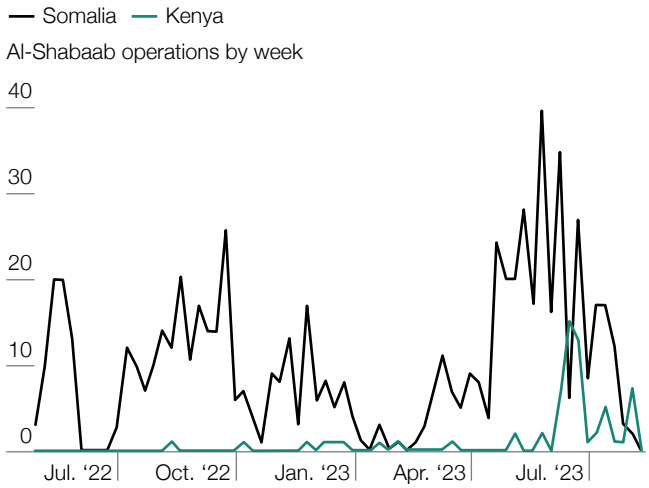
Results of Phase I of the Offensive in Central Somalia

The 2022 clan uprisings in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, which the SNA eventually backed and retroactively dubbed "Phase I" of the government's offensive against al-Shabaab, meaningfully degraded the group and hampered its operations for several months but did not result in the complete eradication of its enclaves in the states.

The first phase of the offensive in 2022 brought notable operational gains. With backing from US and Turkish drone strikes, SNA forces and their Ma'awisley partners killed hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters and liberated likely upward of one hundred villages in this first phase of the offensive.[8] Last year's offensive appears to have significantly, if temporarily, disrupted the pace of al-Shabaab's attacks (see figure 2). Al-Shabaab has frequently attacked Mogadishu for over a decade, but attacks on the capital city declined for several months in the last quarter of 2022 and first of 2023. The decline may have been attributable to military pressure on the group's transit corridors and improvised explosive device (IED) manufacturing hubs in central Somalia during the offensive, along with improved temporary security measures within Mogadishu.[9] Moreover, the political ramifications of the 2022 offensive were profound. Sources in Somalia reported that al-Shabaab genuinely feared for a time that the clan uprising would spread south and that al-Shabaab was losing its once-iron grip on the majority of the Somali population.[10]

However, on the strategic level, the 2022 offensive has not significantly impacted al-Shabaab's ability to wage a multi-

Figure 2. Al-Shabaab Operations by Week



Note: The figure shows Al-Shabaab operations by week (self-reported) in Somalia and Kenya since May 1, 2022. Note the overall decrease in operations beginning in October 2022 and lasting until May 2023, which was especially pronounced in January and February 2023.

Source: ExTrac.

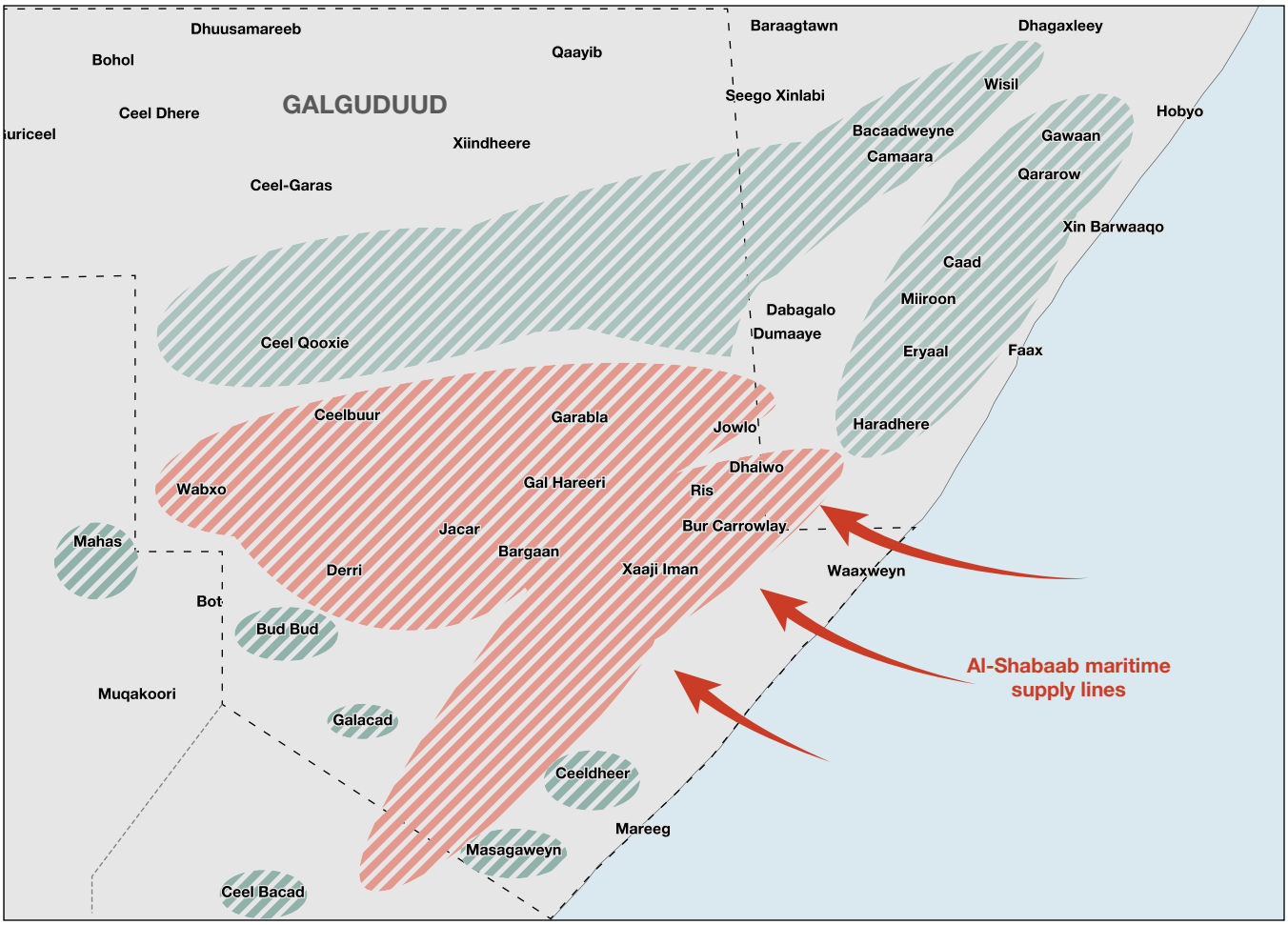
faceted and multipronged insurgency across East Africa. Al-Shabaab's stronghold remains in southern Somalia, particularly in the Jubba River valley, rather than in central Somalia. It also has a strong presence along the Kenyan border (including a camp in Boni Forest in Kenya's Lamu County). Analysts estimate that the group generates around $100 million in annual revenue through a combination of taxation in areas it controls, extortion of major businesses, and various illicit activities.[11] While the loss of some of the major population centers (and therefore taxation hubs) in central Somalia in 2022 no doubt puts a dent in its finances, the group has diverse revenue streams and saves some of the money it gains from periods of territorial expansion for periods of territorial contraction.[12] Thus, while the offensive has doubtless contributed to some financial and military attrition in al-Shabaab—perhaps especially so because some of the clans that rose up in mid-2022 were ones from which al-Shabaab historically conscripted fighters—the offensive has not struck at the group's center of gravity.

Similarly, while the progress within central Somalia in 2022 was meaningful, the campaign in that theater is far from over. When the offensive began running out of steam in early 2023, al-Shabaab retained a territorial sanctuary in Galmudug in a pocket between the major towns of El Buur and Gal Hareeri. Both of these towns are important areas for fundraising and the construction of vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs), according to sources I interviewed.[13] Al-Shabaab has been able to resupply its forces in these areas because of the SNA's lack of sufficient holding forces.[14] In particular, one source noted that there are no SNA forces along the 125-kilometer coast between El Dhere and Harardhere. As such, al-Shabaab can resupply its enclave in central Galmudug by boat from Middle Shabelle.[15]

The SNA's lack of sufficient holding forces, the reasons for which I detail in a subsequent section, has also limited FGS gains in central Somalia, as al-Shabaab continues to enjoy freedom of movement around many ostensibly liberated areas. One politician I interviewed in Dhusamareb stated, "My relative's community [in Galmudug] was liberated, but the people in the village don't know it. They still see al-Shabaab moving freely on the roads outside the village, so they assume al-Shabaab must still be in control."[16] One report I heard in June 2023 suggested that al-Shabaab could still move dozens of technicals (pickup trucks with mounted machine guns, the most ubiquitous combat vehicle in both the insurgents' and government's arsenals) within a few kilometers of the last SNA checkpoint on the highway outside El Dhere.[17] The FGS reportedly does not know how much territory the SNA has liberated in central Somalia since mid-2022,[18] which speaks to the laxness of government "control" over the more rural liberated communities.[19]

In the first few months of 2023, President Hassan Sheikh began coordinating with the presidents of Somalia's five federal member states (FMSs) as well as with leaders of neighboring Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti to prepare for the second phase of the offensive, which would, in its initial formulation, involve

Figure 3. Al-Shabaab in Southern Somalia



Note: Areas left under al-Shabaab's control in Galmudug state (red) after the completion of the first phase of the offensive, which led to the creation of new SNA garrisons (green). Accurate as of June 2023.

Source: Author.

clearing the remaining al-Shabaab forces from central Somalia while attacking the group's stronghold in the south. Operation Black Lion, a much-hyped offensive originally set for June, soon suffered delays, forcing military planners to scale back the next phase to focus on central Somalia (and to be carried out by SNA and clan forces rather than neighboring East African militaries), leaving the southern states for a later date.

Finally, at the beginning of August 2023, President Hassan Sheikh traveled to Dhusamareb, the capital of Galmudug, to oversee the final preparations for the newest phase of the offensive.[20] His presence in Dhusamareb was symbolically significant as it showed his commitment to the offensive and marked a sharp contrast from his predecessor (under whom relations between the federal and state government were fraught), signaling

his efforts to build political consensus in order to achieve his ambitious goals.

The new offensive took off on August 14, and within two weeks, SNA forces had captured one of their two principal objectives, El Buur. Then, even more quickly, things began to go south.

Stalemate and Setbacks: Al-Shabaab Responds in Central Somalia

The initial clan uprising had caught al-Shabaab unprepared in mid-2022, but by the start of 2023, the jihadist group had pivoted to trying to reclaim some of its lost territory in central Somalia. Al-Shabaab has plenty of experience recovering from territorial losses in its more than 15 years of existence. In fact, it has not fought a major battle on urban terrain since it withdrew from Mogadishu in 2011. Facing an impending offensive, al-Shabaab instead withdraws from towns it has occupied and shifts to a guerrilla warfare approach, attempting to isolate the towns after their liberation by FGS or African Union (AU) forces. It conducts IED and hit-and-run attacks on the surrounding highways while also periodically attacking the town's garrisons to signal resolve. The goal of such an approach is to attrit and fix opposing forces in these towns so that they cannot meaningfully conduct clearance operations in the surrounding areas, allowing al-Shabaab to maintain its camps, freedom of movement, and influence in rural communities. It can employ this approach for years as it waits for fractious and poorly resourced government forces to withdraw.

Al-Shabaab reverted to this historical pattern of attempting to isolate garrison towns in early 2023. The group has maintained a tempo of guerrilla attacks in Hiraan and Galmudug's hinterlands since the start of the year while also conducting massed attacks combining infantry and VBIEDs on SNA holding forces in several instances. Notably, al-Shabaab temporarily overran the government's bases in Budbud, Ali Yabaal, and Masagaway towns in April and May 2023 before the second phase of the offensive in Galmudug began.[21]

On the political front, al-Shabaab has initiated its own countermobilization of Galmudug clans since December 2022. While none of the clans that it has rallied to its side are particularly powerful or well-armed, this countermobilization serves two purposes: it provides al-Shabaab with propaganda that signals openness to partnership with other clans around Somalia, and it creates the conditions for increased clan conflict within Galmudug, thereby undermining the political consensus that the government needs to fully liberate and stabilize the state.[22]

All of this poses a challenge for the FGS as it begins its second phase of the offensive in central Somalia, which al-Shabaab has now had ample time to prepare for. The SNA's initial operations in Galmudug in August yielded immediate results: al-Shabaab withdrew without much of a fight from the Galmudug town of Oswein on August 22 and then from El Buur, one of the two principal targets of this present offensive, on August 25, prompting triumphalist rhetoric from Mogadishu. But the group then retaliated days later by attacking the hastily erected FGS garrisons at Oswein on August 26, overrunning the base, killing scores of fighters, and destroying several armored vehicles before withdrawing with a number of prisoners.[23] The insurgents reportedly surrounded Oswein immediately after SNA forces captured it, thereby cutting off any SNA efforts to supply its troops in the new outpost.[24]

The attack not only halted the SNA's advances to Gal Hareeri, which were set to begin from Oswein once troops had stabilized their positions in the town. It also led the SNA to withdraw, at least temporarily, from several other strategic towns in the region, such as El Dhere, Masagaway, Gal'ad, and Budbud, which al-Shabaab subsequently occupied.[25] The SNA's decision to withdraw from those positions underscores its ongoing vulnerability owing to Mogadishu's hurried military strategy, which prioritized securing a number of large towns quickly over consolidating those gains by establishing defensive cordons and securing the interlinking highways.

Al-Shabaab's assault on Oswein indicates that it retains significant resources in Galmudug with which it can conduct massed attacks. In the coming weeks, Somali forces may succeed in reoccupying the garrisons they abandoned and continue their march into Gal Hareeri, which Somali security sources note would mark a significant operational blow to al-Shabaab's operations in central Somalia by depriving it of an IED production facility. (Notably, al-Shabaab's attack on Oswein involved the use of multiple VBIEDs.) But if al-Shabaab succeeds in maintaining supply lines and freedom of movement from the south to Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, the group will be able to at least partially offset the loss of Gal Hareeri and El Buur. This would allow the group to isolate the government-held towns through guerrilla warfare as it has done in the past. In fact, the Somali government–aligned Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) previously captured El Buur in 2014, but the insurgents maintained a heavy presence around the town, effectively besieging it for three years until they managed to recapture it in 2017 after ENDF forces repositioned.[26]

Successfully holding any liberated towns in central Somalia will therefore require not only suitable holding forces in the major towns themselves (see the subsequent section) but also operations from Somali and partner forces to interdict any routes that al-Shabaab uses to resupply its forces in central Somalia.

Stabilization Challenges and the Primacy of Politics

The recent FGS setbacks in Galmudug state following al-Shabaab's massed attack on Oswein throw into the spotlight one of the central challenges that the Somali government faces in its offensive: holding and stabilizing the territory it liberates. The Western experts who advise the Somali government tend to speak of "stabilization," (i.e., the consolidation of military gains through the establishment of holding forces and governance in liberated territories) in technocratic and apolitical terms. On some level, stabilization is indeed a problem of resources and capacity—specifically, security forces' ability to effectively protect liberated communities from further insurgent attack and the government's ability to provide basic services that earn the trust of the population and prevent it from turning to the insurgents for such services.[27] But at a broader level, the matter is fundamentally political.

Somalia's challenge has never been a lack of militias or military forces capable of fighting al-Shabaab. The problem has been that these forces typically spend more time fighting or preparing to fight one another than they do fighting al-Shabaab. As one former government minister said, "Our problem has been twofold: it's been political, and a lack of resources. If we get the politics right, we can sort out the rest and defeat al-Shabaab. But we've spent how many years trying to get the politics right? And without success."[28]

At present, the FGS has not generated sufficient federal security forces to carry out the Black Lion offensive without significant support from either local militias or regional militaries. President Hassan Sheikh has set ambitious targets to build up a full national army and federal security sector by the end of 2024, but few analysts in Mogadishu believe this is possible. Instead, the government has relied heavily during its recent operations on foreign-trained Somali "special forces" units, particularly the US-trained Danab brigade and the Turkey-trained Gorgor brigade. While these forces receive better training, equipment, and pay than typical SNA units,[29] they are best suited for special operations raids rather than clearance operations. Given the shortage of FGS security forces, however, the government has relied on these units as holding forces, with sometimes catastrophic results, as seen in al-Shabaab's recent attack on the Gorgor base in Oswein.[30] Additionally, Danab and Gorgor units, despite their superior training and higher levels of pay, are not immune to the Achilles' heel of the federal security sector: the fracturing of units or defection of fighters along clan lines.[31] Furthermore, Somalis widely perceive FGS security forces not as constituting a national institution but instead as serving the interests of the president's clan, which limits where these forces can effectively operate.[32]

Given the inadequate number of trained SNA forces, other forces have also carried out the government's holding and stabilization efforts to date: Hirshabelle and Galmudug state forces that have received the colloquial name Darwish ("Dervishes"), and the Ma'awisley militias. The latter can often be a suitable partner in stabilization efforts. The communities that the FGS has recently liberated have not experienced anything resembling control by a central government since the late 1980s. Instead, these communities have survived day-to-day primarily through a system of traditional clan rule, even as al-Shabaab forces have forced clan leaders to collaborate with them or tolerate their occupation in recent years.[33] While there is a need to eventually build up state institutions and security forces in these communities, traditional forms of authority can serve as a bridge between the onset of liberation and the development of a meaningful state presence, which will take time. Clans often deliver their own forms of justice that will meet some basic requirements for popular legitimacy.[34] For better or worse, the Ma'awisley are the de facto holding forces—or at least partners to the SNA—in many parts of central Somalia until the government builds up state-level Darwish and federal police. Some of the Hawiye subclans in particular are well armed and defend their communities without any formal status, pending their eventual integration into either the SNA or state-level Darwish.[35]

But for a clan-based stabilization approach to be effective, the clans must align with the FGS and also feel that they are part of the political arrangement in their respective states. The situation in Hirshabelle, in particular, is concerning in that regard. Hirshabelle president Ali Guudlaawe fired the governor of the Hiraan region, Ali Jeyte Osman, in June 2023 for political reasons despite Ali Jeyte's leadership of the successful government offensive in Hiraan. Ali Jeyte, who has a strong base of local support, has since declared that Hiraan will break from Hirshabelle.[36] The situation in Galmudug is also precarious. The clans that the FGS recently liberated from al-Shabaab were not part of the October 2021 political agreement that ended Galmudug's yearslong internal conflicts because those clans were under al-Shabaab control at the time. The newly liberated clans are now agitating for their inclusion in the Galmudug political process, requiring a renegotiation of the composition of state and federal ministerial posts and state security forces.[37] Some Galmudug clans reportedly rebuffed President Hassan Sheikh's overtures in September 2023 to join in the next wave of the offensive. Furthermore, in contrast to the more autonomous and economically dynamic FMSs, like Puntland and even Jubbaland, Galmudug and Hirshabelle both remain heavily dependent on federal funding and security forces, as their governments have not mobilized and trained local Darwish to the same extent. A modicum of political consensus between the FGS, the FMS, and the local clans is ultimately the sine qua non of effective stabilization in central Somalia, as the state and federal governments can address essential funding and capacity issues only in the proper political climate.

Finally, the drawdown of AU forces known as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), presently set to end by December 2024, will likely impact stabilization efforts in central Somalia over the coming year. ATMIS is present in only a few cities in central Somalia, as government forces or clan militias hold most areas. Al-Shabaab retains control near some of the cities that ATMIS occupies mostly in Middle Shabelle region in Hirshabelle, where Burundian forces are drawing down quickly. In order to avoid seeing al-Shabaab reoccupy those cities, SNA or Darwish forces will need to backfill ATMIS forces, which will limit available units for further offensive operations given the slow pace at which the Somali government is presently generating new forces. That the Somali government requested a 90-day pause to the ATMIS drawdown in September (which the AU has not granted, as of late September) shows that Mogadishu is concerned about the added complications of backfilling ATMIS positions amid its own stalled operations in central Somalia.

I do not mean to downplay some of the tactical and operational challenges that the SNA and partner Somali forces face as a result of resource constraints. Better-trained and better-equipped

forces are necessary to hold liberated territory in the face of a battle-hardened and determined enemy. The photos al-Shabaab released of its August 26 attack on Oswein show a vulnerable camp in the desert brush with minimal defensive positions or barricades, indicating that a lack of resources, poor training, or the SNA general staff's hasty planning (or perhaps all three) contributed to the overrun of the base.[38] Likewise, on the governance front, corruption and a lack of resources hamper both the federal and state governments' efforts to build up the institutions, such as courts and schools, that in the long run will provide a bulwark against jihadist influence. But while these challenges are real, they are secondary to and indeed downstream from the nationwide political crisis that has precluded Somalia's clans from building the necessary consensus to defeat al-Shabaab.

Challenges in Southern Somalia

Given the ongoing challenges in Galmudug state, it may seem premature to begin considering the operational conditions in southern Somalia, which is the ultimate but presently distant objective of the government offensive. But al-Shabaab has already begun preparing for this potential phase of the offensive through a two-pronged approach: doubling down on its ties with powerful clans locally while seeking to expand its presence regionally. It therefore bears considering some of the challenges that the FGS and its partners will face in the south in order

Figure 4. Photo of Al-Shabaab Conference

Note: Al-Shabaab holds a conference for clan elders in Jubbaland in May 2023 in an effort to shore up support from them ahead of a government offensive.

Source: Al-Shabaab propaganda channels monitored on ExTrac.

to better create the necessary political conditions for such an eventual offensive.

Al-Shabaab Braces for an Offensive in the South

There is no element of surprise when it comes to where the FGS and its partners will next focus their military efforts. Southern Somalia, particularly the Jubba River valley northeast of the Kenyan border, has been al-Shabaab's stronghold since AU forces pushed the group out of Mogadishu in 2011. Al-Shabaab is laying the groundwork to resist this phase of the offensive by shoring up its support among clans in the south, which have historically been more sympathetic to al-Shabaab than those in Hirshabelle and Galmudug. Al-Shabaab held a clan conference to this effect in Jilib in May (see figure 4).

Al-Shabaab is employing narratives that it has used since its earliest days to paint any operation against the group as a foreign ploy of Ethiopian imperialism backed by the "Zionist-Crusader alliance" that is the archnemesis of Muslims according to al-Qaeda ideology. The challenge for the Somali government is that this messaging resonates with many Somalis, especially in the south, given Ethiopia's controversial history of both nineteenth-century imperialism and twenty-first-century military adventurism in the country.[39] And unfortunately, any future offensive in southern Somalia will likely involve a heavy Ethiopian military component if it is to succeed at all given the limited capacity of Somali forces (see "Local and Regional Participation").

More recently, in September 2023, al-Shabaab accused the United States of killing innocent civilians in an airstrike in Galmudug (United States Africa Command denied carrying out an airstrike but said instead that it had provided medical evacuation to Somali soldiers in that vicinity).[40] Al-Shabaab released a video featuring a man who purported to be an elder of the Duduble clan and claimed that children had died in the airstrike.[41] The decision to feature the alleged testimony of a clan elder rather than simply rely on the claims of an al-Shabaab spokesman speaks to how the group is attuned to the centrality of clan allegiances in the ongoing war in Galmudug.

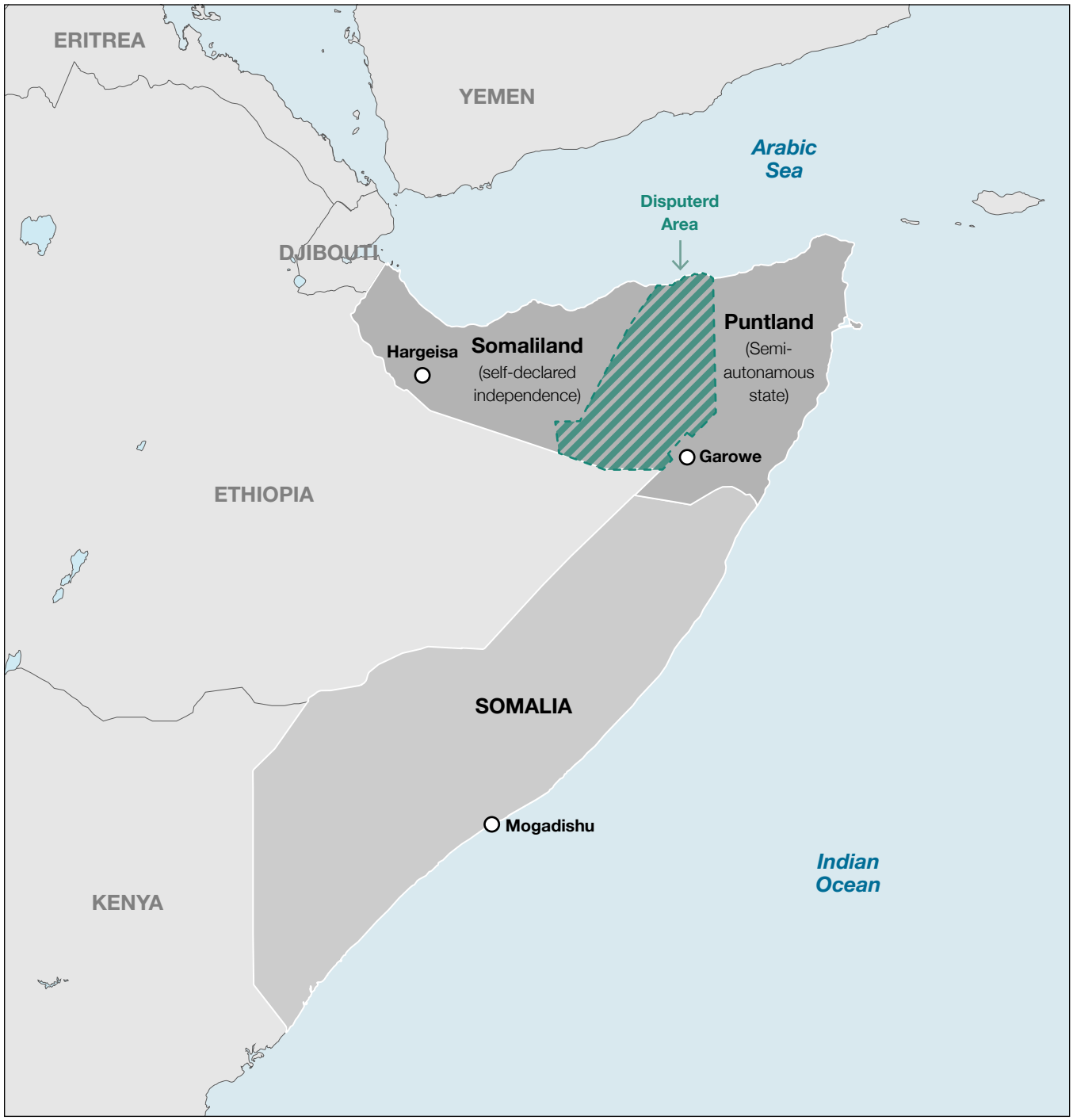
Expanding Regional Presence: A Ring around Somalia?

The most troubling element of al-Shabaab's strategy to counter any future Black Lion offensive, particularly in southern Somalia, rests on a broader regional strategy that it has been laying the foundations for over the past year (see figure 5). Al-Shabaab appears to be attempting to establish a string of bases outside of Somalia that the group could at least partially retreat to if it was pushed out of its strongholds in southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab has not yet established this ring of fallback bases, which would cut from eastern Kenya into eastern Ethiopia and up into Somaliland, but the intention appears to be there.

At its inception, al-Shabaab's international bases were not a response to the clan uprising in central Somalia and indeed predate the uprising. The group's effort began earlier in 2022, when al-Shabaab began repositioning forces in central Somalia to facilitate an incursion into Ethiopia, which it eventually conducted in July 2022. Al-Shabaab's goal at the time seems to have been to take advantage of the then-raging Ethiopian civil war to finally establish a presence in the country, which the effective—if controversial—counterterrorism operations of state-backed ethnic Somali paramilitaries known as the Liyu Police had largely prevented since the late 2010s.

Several sources I interviewed reported that al-Shabaab successfully established a presence in southern Ethiopia during its 2022 incursion. A battalion (roughly five hundred fighters) reached the Bale Mountains around Moyale near the Ethiopia-Kenya border, where al-Shabaab maintains some training camps. Notably, these fighters are predominantly ethnic Oromo—Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, of whom roughly half are Muslim—rather than the ethnic Somalis whom al-Shabaab has traditionally recruited. Al-Shabaab has not claimed any attacks in Ethiopia since mid-2022 in order to maintain operational security.

Figure 5. Horn of Africa



Source: BBC.

Al-Shabaab may have chosen to hold back its forces in Ethiopia in anticipation of the Black Lion offensive, in which case it would activate them to cause mayhem behind Ethiopian lines and therefore distract Ethiopian forces or disrupt their logistical lines. Notably, it has attempted to infiltrate new units into Ethiopia as recently as August 2023, when its forces from Bale attacked Liyu police on the boundary between Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions,[42] reportedly as a diversionary tactic to support a separate al-Shabaab unit that was attempting to cross from Somalia into Ethiopia via El Barde town.[43]

Relatedly, al-Shabaab escalated its attacks in eastern Kenya in June 2023.[44] While it has long conducted attacks across the Kenyan border and from its camps in Lamu County's Boni Forest,[45] this recent spike in operations may have been connected to the group's concerns over an impending offensive into southern Somalia. Specifically, al-Shabaab likely aims to deter Kenyan forces from participating in the Black Lion offensive by shifting their focus to securing the porous Kenya-Somalia border since most Kenyan politicians and analysts prioritize securing their border over capturing al-Shabaab's strongholds in southern Somalia.[46]

Finally, there is also a question of al-Shabaab's presence in northern Somalia and Somaliland, about which much uncertainty remains.[47] According to Somali security sources, in February 2023, when conflict broke out in the disputed city of Las Anod between the Somaliland government and militias belonging to the local Harti clan family,[48] al-Shabaab dispatched a group of approximately fifty fighters via Ethiopia to the area to establish a bridgehead behind Somaliland lines.[49] The al-Shabaab fighters did not align with either of the belligerents of the larger conflict but sought instead to exploit the instability to establish a presence in Somaliland.[50] This small al-Shabaab unit clashed with Somaliland forces and suffered defeat in March 2023.[51] There have been no confirmed reports of further al-Shabaab activity in the area around Las Anod since then despite sensationalist allegations by Somalilanders looking to tar the Harti militias as extremists, although an IED attack on Somaliland forces on the road west of Las Anod in May 2023 suggests that the group may have some lingering presence in the region.[52] Furthermore, as of this writing, an uprising among the Garhajis clan separate from the Las Anod conflict appears to be underway in central Somaliland. This has resulted in some trouble for the Somaliland military as Garhajis units defected.[53] If insecurity in Somaliland persists, or if there is a resumption of the Las Anod conflict (that the Harti militias appear to have effectively won as of this writing) it could provide opportunities for al-Shabaab to establish a more substantial bridgehead in the area.

The Issue of Partners: Jubbaland, Kenya, and Ethiopia

Al-Shabaab's present strategy suggests that the group expects an FGS offensive into southern Somalia at some point in the foreseeable future even though the group will doubtless attempt to forestall this as long as possible through its counterattacks in central Somalia.

One reason that the FGS will likely attempt an offensive in the south, however prepared its forces may or may not be, is political: the 2022 offensive became a major source of political capital for President Hassan Sheikh, boosting his credibility both with international donors and among Somali politicians. As several Somali sources observed, so long as the war on al-Shabaab appeared to be progressing smoothly, it became harder for Hassan Sheikh's opponents to attack him.[54] He has, however, spent much of the political capital he earned in 2022 through ambitious yet polarizing efforts like the National Consultative Council (NCC), an effort to overhaul the country's political system in favor of a presidential system legitimated through ambitious (arguably unrealistic) plans for one-person, one-vote elections.[55] Hassan Sheikh may therefore become desperate for a win against al-Shabaab in the coming months, particularly in the lead-up to elections tentatively set for June 2024. There is a risk then that his administration will push for an ambitious and headline-grabbing offensive in the south rather than concen-

trate efforts and resources on the less glamorous and difficult but essential work of continuing counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts in central Somalia.

Jubbaland Forces

There are two principal and intertwined challenges related to conducting an offensive in southern Somalia. The first is that al-Shabaab has historically had stronger ties with clans in South West and Jubbaland states than with those in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, so the chances of an organic and widespread clan uprising akin to the Ma'awisley are slim. As noted above, al-Shabaab has already begun doubling down on its ties with the southern clans in anticipation of any government efforts to recruit them into an anti-terrorist militia effort. Relatedly, the FGS has historically had fraught relations with Jubbaland and South West, particularly under the administration of the previous president, Mohamed Farmaajo (2017–22), who left a legacy of mistrust between the FMS and FGS in the region. The SNA consequently may struggle to find adequate local forces to support any effort in the region.

Jubbaland, al-Shabaab's territorial stronghold where it controls the state's de jure capital of Bu'ale, will be the ultimate target of any Phase II offensive and will pose several political challenges for the Somali government. For starters, the FGS must be on very good terms with the Jubbaland administration for any offensive to move ahead since Jubbaland President Ahmed Madobe arguably benefits from the status quo. His forces have tight control over the lucrative commercial hub of Kismayo, while al-Shabaab controls the state's interior. As one FGS official in Mogadishu remarked, "If there will be an offensive in Jubbaland, it will be on Madobe's terms." President Hassan Sheikh recognizes Madobe's influence—particularly the leverage that he exercises by virtue of his close ties with the Kenyans—and has sought to establish a consensus with him ahead of any offensive, granting a one-year extension to Madobe's term in return for his participation in the NCC process. Hassan Sheikh will need to carefully maintain this delicate relationship in the coming months for any eventual offensive in the south to succeed.

Additionally, rival administrations in Jubbaland need to resolve their political disputes in order for the state to build up sufficient security forces to partner with the SNA in an offensive. For several years, Madobe has faced a rival administration with Ethiopian (and previously Farmaajo government) backing in Jubbaland's Gedo state, which has prevented the establishment of a unified Jubbaland security force. They have made progress in their negotiations since July. But even if they reach a political resolution in the coming weeks, it is likely that the two clans that constitute the Madobe and rival administrations, the Ogaden and Marehan clans, respectively, will continue to view each other with suspicion, which could impede their cooperation in any offensive against al-Shabaab.[56]

Frontline States

Even under the best circumstances, the SNA and the Jubbaland and South West state forces will likely be insufficient to conduct a multifront offensive in the south, meaning the FGS will have to rely on foreign military forces. Notably, the FGS is no longer looking to rely on ATMIS forces, which are set to draw down by the end of 2024. It is instead constructing an ad hoc multilateral framework for Somalia's neighbors, aka the "frontline states" (FLSs), to take part in Black Lion. These forces would comprise Ethiopian and Kenyan forces, with a small Djiboutian military contingent playing a supporting role in unspecific "logistics."[57] The Somalis hope that other nations, such as the US, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (the latter of which reportedly helped bankroll the first phase of the SNA offensive in central Somalia),[58] will provide financial and material assistance and air support,[59] but they expect the Ethiopians and Kenyans to bear the brunt of the fighting. Sources in Mogadishu report that the FGS has asked for around 9,000 Kenyan troops and around 20,000 Ethiopian troops to participate.[60]

This strategy now appears to be on hold, if not completely dead in the water. While the Somali government is prioritizing operations in Galmudug for the foreseeable future (correctly, in my view), the Ethiopian and Kenyan forces that would play a central

role in any southern offensive appear to have quietly distanced themselves from the plan. In Ethiopia, fighting between the military and powerful ethnic Amhara militias, which has been occurring since April and has escalated, risks pushing the country into a renewed civil war.[61] This brewing conflict, coupled with the al-Shabaab presence in southern Ethiopia—which Ethiopian contacts I spoke to were mum about but presumably factoring into their strategic calculations—appears to have curbed Ethiopia's appetite for a major offensive in southern Somalia.

Kenya, meanwhile, never appeared particularly enthusiastic about the offensive. The Kenyan military is well-trained and well-equipped but has not engaged in serious combat in a decade. It has also maintained a casualty-averse posture within Somalia ever since a 2016 al-Shabaab attack on the Kenyan base in El Adde, Somalia, killed over 100 troops. Furthermore, some Kenyan officials fear that al-Shabaab might respond to any offensive in Jubbaland by shifting forces across the border into Kenya's Boni Forest, and they no doubt saw al-Shabaab's escalation of attacks in June 2023 as an ominous sign. Kenya may therefore prefer to maintain the status quo by supporting Madobe's administration in Jubbaland as a buffer zone and beefing up border security while using the Kenyan military for less risky and more lucrative operations, such as regional peacekeeping.

If the ongoing operations in Galmudug yield sufficient gains against al-Shabaab, President Hassan Sheikh may look to resume planning for an offensive in southern Somalia, particularly given the political benefits that such an offensive presents, as noted above. In this scenario, the FGS would need to work carefully to assuage the concerns of both Kenya and Ethiopia in order to gain sufficient military support from its neighbors. Even if it secured such buy-in, the challenge then would be to reconcile the often mutually exclusive interests of Kenya and Ethiopia, which have each backed rival proxies in southern Somalia in the past in order to secure their respective economic, political, and security interests. In short, southern Somalia poses a much more difficult strategic environment for the FGS than even Galmudug (where things are not going according to plan, as of this writing) given both local political factors as well as regional geopolitical rivalries.

CONCLUSION

The FGS and its allies will not meaningfully defeat al-Shabaab in the next year or two, and probably not within the next five years. It is a complex, adaptable insurgent movement—the strongest jihadist group in Africa, for that matter. And it thrives on Somalia's internal conflicts and political dysfunction, intractable problems that the country will not solve overnight. But this is not to say that the group is invincible. While its ultimate defeat is not around the corner, we can hope for its degradation in the coming months, much as the popular uprising and government-backed offensive in 2022 brought meaningful progress against it. But it is important to recognize the limits of these gains, as seen first in the slowdown in operations at the start of 2023 and then in the chaotic start of the El Buur–Gal Hareeri offensive in Galmudug in August of this year. We should set our expectations accordingly.

The Somali government and its international partners are correct to prioritize expanding and consolidating gains in central Somalia, particularly in Galmudug, before turning their attention to southern Somalia. Any offensive in the south is fraught with challenges related to the local and foreign forces that would likely be involved, and the FGS and its partners must

Photo: A soldier walks past a damaged building in the port in Kismayo, the de facto capital of Jubbaland state. The port experienced heavy damage during fighting between 2009 and 2012. (James Barnett)

consequently think carefully about how to proceed with an offensive in the south and work tirelessly to build political consensus among the key militia or military actors before doing so. Unfortunately, given that the south is the group's stronghold, the insurgency will continue to maintain its momentum for some time.

Given the improbability of a decisive military victory in the coming months or even years, the previously taboo notion of negotiating with the terrorists has gained traction in certain Somali political circles of late. President Hassan Sheikh has even oscillated between claiming that the objective of the current offensive is al-Shabaab's complete battlefield defeat and claiming that the offensive aims to push the group into negotiations.[62] In principle there is no reason to prefer an endless and fitful counterinsurgency to negotiations, but in practice it would be difficult to secure anything like an acceptable compromise at this stage. Some Somali security sources with knowledge of the group suggested that while al-Shabaab might enter negotiations with international powers, such as the US and Turkey (likely with mediation by Qatar, whose role in Somalia has proven controversial), it has no interest in speaking to the Somali government, which it sees as illegitimate and weak.[63] The US withdrawal from Afghanistan clearly evidenced the problem with pursuing such an approach: the 2020 Doha process allowed the Taliban to completely bypass the weak Afghan government and engage in direct talks with the US, paving the way for the Islamist militants to overpower Kabul once Western forces had drawn down. It is not without reason that many Somalis speak fearfully of an "Afghanistan scenario" in their own country.

It would seem foolish, then, for the FGS to put much hope in negotiations at this stage. Rather, a more attainable goal might be for the FGS and local partners to apply sufficient pressure on al-Shabaab so that they appear strong enough for individual al-Shabaab leaders and their clan allies to see the government as the safest guarantor of their futures. With that in mind, analysts should not measure any military progress against the group only or even primarily in conventional metrics, such as land reclaimed (in the Somali context, any numbers are liable to be superficial) or insurgents killed (al-Shabaab will generate forces so long as it has enough clans under its thumb). But if battlefield progress brings about defections, in terms of both high-level al-Shabaab officials surrendering to the government and formerly sympathetic clans turning on the insurgents, the group may fracture. The government could then coopt some elements and pit them against any irreconcilable jihadist elements.[64]

At present this looks to be the best-case scenario, though unfortunately not the most likely one. But policymakers would do well to consider scenarios that might be acceptable to their interests rather than buy into unrealistic claims about the impending defeat of Africa's most powerful jihadist group.

ENDNOTES

1 Michael Horton, "Sending US Troops Back into Somalia Would Be Folly," *Responsible Statecraft*, July 6, 2021, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/07/06/sending-u-s-troops-back-into-somalia-would-be-folly; International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, Report no. 309, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/309-considering-political-engagement-al-shabaab-somalia.

2 For a few examples, see "Most-Failed State," *The Economist*, September 10, 2016, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/09/10/most-failed-state; Ken Menkhaus, "State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a 'Functional Failed State' in Somalia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656, no. 1 (November 2014): 154–72.

3 See, for example, "Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against al-Shabaab," Briefing no. 187, International Crisis Group, March 21, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b187-sustaining-gains-somalias-offensive-against-al-shabaab.

4 Jack Detsch, "The Somali Underdogs Taking on Terrorists," *Foreign Policy*, August 23, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/23/somalia-al-shabab-al-qaeda-terror-pentagon.

5 Somalia has consistently ranked near last or dead last in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index. While corruption is difficult to quantify and measure objectively, the index is a useful measure for categorizing and understanding different scales of national corruption. To see the latest Corruption Perceptions Index, visit https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022.

6 Interview with Somali analyst, Kismayo, June 2023.

7 Interview with Somali official, Mogadishu, June 2023.

8 See Detsch, "Somali Underdogs," for conflicting estimates.

9 Sources I interviewed in Mogadishu said the deployment of 3,000 Uganda-trained Somali military police in the city in April 2023 had also likely contributed to an improvement in security, although several attacks shattered this period of calm in early June, notably the complex assault on Pearl Beach Hotel on June 9. See Natasha Booty, "Pearl Beach Hotel: Islamists Kill Nine in Somalia Attack," BBC, June 10, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65861346.

10 Interviews with Somali intelligence and security officials, Mogadishu, June 2023.

11 The US Treasury Department has estimated that al-Shabaab generates around $100 million annually. See, for example, "Treasury Designates al-Shabaab Financial Facilitators," US Department of the Treasury, October 17, 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1028.

12 Aisha Ahmad, "The Long Jihad: The Boom-Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa048.

13 Interviews with analysts and officials in Mogadishu and Dhusamareb, June 2023.

14 Interviews with Somali analysts in Mogadishu and Kismayo, June 2023.

15 Interviews with Somali analysts in Mogadishu and Kismayo, June 2023.

16 Author interview, Dhusamareb, June 2023.

17 Discussion with official in Dhusamareb, June 2023.

18 Detsch, "Somali Underdogs."

19 In traveling to Bar Sanguuni in Jubbaland state, I saw firsthand how loose government control over frontline communities is in practice. While both the SNA and Jubbaland security forces maintain checkpoints and outposts along the 50 kilometer highway from Kismayo to Bar Sanguuni, as well as at bases within Bar Sanguuni itself, al-Shabaab moves freely along either side of the road for half of this stretch (particularly between Yontooy and Bar Sanguuni). Additionally, the jihadists have surrounded Bar Sanguuni on three sides and frequently attack the road connecting the town to Kismayo via Yontooy. Notably, unlike the recently liberated territories in Galmudug, these towns have been in government hands for a decade or more, which speaks to the state's inability to extend its presence beyond a few towns in southern Somalia.

20 "Somali Army, Local Militia Launch Large Scale Offensives against Al-Shabaab in Central Regions," *Goobjoog News*, August 16, 2023, https://goobjoog.com/english/somali-army-local-militia-launch-larges-scale-offensives-against-al-shabaab-in-central-regions.

21 "Al-Shabaab Regains Lost Territories in Somalia as Tax Dispute Halts Counter-Insurgency Operation," Armed Conflict Location & Event Database, June 2, 2023, https://acleddata.com/2023/06/02/somalia-situation-update-may-2023-al-shabaab-regains-lost-territories-as-a-dispute-over-tax-halts-counter-insurgency-operation; Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Shabaab Storms Army Base in Central Somalia," *Long War Journal*, June 1, 2023, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/06/shabaab-storms-army-base-in-central-somalia.php. I also heard details of the attacks from officials in Mogadishu and Dhusamareb in June 2023.

22 For more, see "Inside al-Shabaab's Mobilization of Clan Militias in Galmudug," *Somali Digest*, September 1, 2023, https://thesomalidigest.com/analysis-inside-al-shabaabs-mobilization-of-clan-militias-in-galmudug.

23 For photos of the aftermath of the attack, which clearly belie the FGS's claim to have repelled the assault, see Daniele Garofolo, "Al-Shabaab Violently Attacks Three Military and Army Bases and Somali Government Militias," *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring* (blog), Substack, August 27, 2023, https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/al-shabaab-violently-attacks-three.

24 Harun Maruf, "Somalia Shifts Military Tactics in Fight Against Al-Shabab," *Voice of America*, September 6, 2023, https://www.

voanews.com/a/somalia-shifts-military-tactics-in-fight-against-al-shabab/7256956.html.

25 Harun Maruf, "Somalia Military Offensive Suffers Setback as Troops Retreat," *Voice of America*, August 29, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/7245333.html.

26 Harun Maruf (@HarunMaruf), "What you need to know about Elbur/El-Bur/Ceelbuur: It's a historic town in Somalia's Galmudug state, famous for trade, extraction of quarry and producing clay pots . . .," X, August 25, 2023, 10:05 a.m., https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1695075020718866739. See also Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside al-Shabaab: The Inside History of al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

27 The FGS has repeatedly struggled on this front over the years. A decade after the liberation of Mogadishu, not only does al-Shabaab continue to conduct near-daily attacks in the city but it also extorts local businesses to the tune of tens of millions of dollars a year. Many Mogadishu residents, meanwhile, choose to travel to al-Shabaab-controlled territory to settle legal disputes, including property disputes in Mogadishu, in al-Shabaab's courts rather than go through Somalia's notoriously corrupt judicial system. See Bashir Mohamed Caato, "In Somalia, al-Shabab's Courts Win More Converts," *Al Jazeera*, September 14, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/9/14/in-somalia-citizens-eal-shabaabs-justice-system-to-the-state.

28 Interview with former government official, Mogadishu, June 2023.

29 Detsch, "Somali Underdogs."

30 While the FGS and al-Shabaab naturally provide different narratives of these incidents, al-Shabaab often produces photos to back up its claims (even if they tend to exaggerate enemy casualties). The researcher Daniele Garofolo, who specializes in studying jihadist propaganda, counted at least 54 bodies in photos of the Oswein attack released by al-Shabaab. See Garofolo, "Al-Shabaab Violently Attacks Three Military and Army Bases." The FGS also sent some 5,000 Somali soldiers for training in Eritrea under the previous administration of President Mohamed Abdullahi, who is also known as "Farmaajo," which generated significant controversy within Somalia given reports that Eritrea used some of those forces as conscript fighters during the country's intervention in the bloody civil war in neighboring Ethiopia. As of June 2023, approximately half of the Eritrea-trained Somali forces have returned to Somalia, but the remaining soldiers are still unaccounted for. The current government of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud trumpeted the return of those Eritrea-trained fighters, but their performance so far has not inspired much confidence: Eritrea-trained forces manned the base in Masagaway that al-Shabaab overran in May 2023.

31 Clan identity typically remains a stronger form of association than any embryonic esprit de corps within the Somalian security sector. During my time in Las Anod in northern Somalia and Somaliland, multiple officials of the SSC-Khatumo rebel movement (comprised primarily of the Dhulbahante clan) stated that Dhulbahante members of the Danab and Gorgor forces had defected from their units and forsaken their relatively lucrative contracts to travel to Las Anod and fight alongside their clansmen.

32 This was visible in an episode in August 2023 in which FGS police captured a former SNA officer and 24 of his militiamen in Mogadishu after a series of clashes. Some Somali opposition figures expressed sympathy with the former SNA officer and accused the Somali police of harassing perceived enemies of the president's clan under the guise of security operations. See Harun Maruf (@HarunMaruf), "Renegade former army officer and 24 of his militias were captured following an hours-long security operation in Mogadishu, Saturday, police said. According to . . .," X, August 19, 2023, 7:01 a.m., https://twitter.com/harunmaruf/status/1692854245547028839.

33 Interviews with stabilization experts in Dhusamareb, June 2023; for an interesting report on this topic, with a focus on how clan authorities negotiate their relationships with al-Shabaab, see Mohamed Mubarak and Ashley Jackson, "Playing the Long Game: Exploring the Relationship between Al-Shabab and Civilians in Areas beyond State Control," Overseas Development Institute, August 2023, https://odi.org/en/publications/playing-the-long-game-exploring-the-relationship-between-al-shabab-and-civilians-in-areas-beyond-state-control/.

34 More so than the flashy services that al-Shabaab highlights in its propaganda, such as *zakat* distribution or feasts during Eid, the group offers two incentives for local communities to support it (beyond or in addition to its coercive efforts): al-Shabaab is less corrupt and therefore provides a more stable business environment than the federal government, and it provides a more effective and fairer justice system than the government.

35 Interviews with officials and analysts in Dhusamareb, June 2023.

36 "Ex-Hiran Governor Explains Why He Fell Out with Gudlawe," *Garowe Online*, July 23, 2023, https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-ex-hiran-governor-explains-why-he-fell-out-with-gudlawe.

37 Interviews with officials and analysts in Dhusamareb, June 2023.

38 Some Somali analysts have also lamented that the lack of air support from foreign partners and the lack of loitering munitions within the SNA arsenal make their forces vulnerable to massed attacks.

39 For more, see James Barnett, "The Evolution of East African Salafi-jihadism," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 26 (July 2020): 20–48.

40 Omar Faruk, "Residents and Authorities in Somalia Say Airstrike Caused Several Casualties Including Children," *Associated Press*, September 9, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/residents-authorities-somalia-airstrike-caused-casualties-including-children-103055110.

41 Christopher Anzalone (@IbnSiqilli), "Al-Shabaab's media apparatus trotted out a man it claims is a Dudulbe clan elder…" X, September 9, 2023, 3:22 p.m., https://twitter.com/ibnsiqilli/status/1700590557511258572?s=46&t=79h2fQFl3E61l_n9PUVvfw.

42 BOSS (@THE_GEELLE), "Some local reporters from western #Som region are reporting clashes between #AS and liyuu police

militias in #Eemay and #Ceelkari zone . This time, the #AS offensive . . .," X, August 5, 2023, 3:45 a.m., https://twitter.com/THE_GEELLE/status/1688094036765069312.

43 WhatsApp conversations with Kenya- and Ethiopia-based analysts, August 2023.

44 Liam Karr, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Update Special Edition: Al Shabaab Increases Attacks on Somalia's Neighbors," Critical Threats Project, June 29, 2023, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-update-special-edition-al-shabaab-increases-attacks-on-somalias-neighbors.

45 Kenyans have also long constituted the largest contingent of "foreign fighters" (i.e., non-Somali nationals) in al-Shabaab, and these fighters have been instrumental in the group's high-profile terror attacks on international targets in Nairobi. For a very detailed overview of these evolving dynamics, see Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra, "East Africa's Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019): 1–11.

46 Some of the logic for this approach can be seen in the essay by a prominent Kenyan policy advisor: See Peter Kagwanja, "Kenya Needs Strategic Mindset to Engage 'Global Somalia,'" *Nation*, June 4, 2023, https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/kenya-needs-strategic-mindset-to-engage-global-somalia--4257510.

47 Al-Shabaab has long maintained a presence of at least a few hundred fighters in the Golis Mountains of Puntland, but Puntland has primarily been a logistics and fundraising node for the group rather than an area where al-Shabaab attempts to control significant territory or conduct major attacks. The group has historically been less active farther west in the Somali horn in Somaliland, some sporadic attacks over the years notwithstanding, which is why the present speculation about a growing presence in the contested Sool region is particularly concerning. Given the political climate, however, with Somaliland and Somali officials promoting rapidly divergent narratives of the source and nature of the conflict in Las Anod, any claims of an al-Shabaab presence in the region should be examined carefully.

48 For more on this conflict, see my dispatch from the contested city: James Barnett, "Inside the Newest Conflict in Somalia's Long Civil War," *New Lines Magazine*, August 7, 2023, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/inside-the-newest-conflict-in-somalias-long-civil-war. I did not find any evidence to suggest, as Somaliland officials have controversially claimed, that al-Shabaab is formally aligned with the Harti militias and is playing a major role in the conflict.

49 Interview with Somali security officials in Mogadishu and review of Somali intelligence reports, June 2023. According to these reports, the commander of the overall al-Shabaab operation in this part of Somalia/Somaliland was a member of the Isaaq clan, while the two al-Shabaab commanders dispatched to Las Anod area were Hawiye and Rahanweyn, respectively.

50 Interview with Somali security officials in Mogadishu and review of Somali intelligence reports, June 2023.

51 Interview with Somali security officials in Mogadishu and review of Somali intelligence reports, June 2023.

52 Conversation with analysts in Nairobi, June 2023. The question of any potential al-Shabaab role in Las Anod has become highly politicized, with Somaliland officials making repeated but unevidenced accusations that the Harti movement is collaborating with al-Shabaab, accusations that the movement, known as SSC-Khatumo, strongly denies. This narrative war has precluded more nuanced discussions about the risk of jihadists exploiting the conflict.

53 WhatsApp conversations with Somali officials and Western diplomats in the region, August 2023.

54 Interviews with Somali analysts and government officials, Mogadishu, June 2023.

55 Harun Maruf, "Somali Leaders Reach Landmark Political Agreement," *Voice of America,* May 28, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/somali-leaders-reach-landmark-political-agreement/7112409.html.

56 This is particularly notable because the Ogaden forces aligned with Madobe are based in southern Jubbaland around Kismayo and backed by Kenyan forces, while the Marehan forces belonging to the opposition are based in northern Jubbaland and are backed by Ethiopian forces. The al-Shabaab-controlled towns in the Jubba River valley, including Jubbaland's de jure capital, Bu'ale, lie between these two enclaves. As such, there is a risk that in any offensive, the two forces would compete with each other to secure these towns in the Jubba River valley first, particularly ahead of elections.

57 Interview with Black Lion commander, Mogadishu, June 2023.

58 Interviews with Somali researchers and officials, Mogadishu, June 2023.

59 Notably, the UAE also conducted its first drone strike in Somalia in June (interestingly, using a Turkey-made Bayraktar drone), possibly signaling a greater Emirati support role in subsequent offensive operations.

60 Interviews with Somali researchers and officials, Mogadishu, June 2023. See also "Somalia's Neighbours Commit to Send More Than 30,000 Additional Troops to Combat al-Shabaab," *Hiiraan Online*, March 2, 2023, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2023/Mar/190155/somalia_s_neighbours_commit_to_send_30_000_additional_troops_to_combat_al_shabaab.aspx.

61 "At Least 183 Killed in Clashes in Ethiopia's Amhara: UN," *Yahoo! News*, August 29, 2023, https://news.yahoo.com/least-183-killed-clashes-ethiopias-110810931.html; WhatsApp conversations with Ethiopian analysts, August 2023.

62 Andres Schipani, "Somali President Says 'Defeat' of al-Shabaab Militants within Sight," *Financial Times*, April 5, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/8dc5db3f-9f52-486a-b29f-741919e06875.

63 WhatsApp conversations with Somali intelligence official, November 2022; interview with Somali security official, Mogadishu, June 2023.

64 Not to draw an arbitrary distinction between "hardliners" and "moderates" within the group, but information suggests that certain al-Shabaab commanders are indeed more inclined to negotiation than others.

Notes

Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20004
+1.202.974.2400 www.hudson.org