The Somali National Army Versus al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment

By Paul D. Williams

An important question for the future of Somalia is if the African Union withdraws the remainder of its forces from the country by December 31, 2024, would the Somali National Army (SNA) or al-Shabaab be stronger militarily? According to a net assessment conducted by the author across seven factors—size, material resources, external support, force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale—the SNA would retain an advantage in terms of size, material resources, and external support but performs poorly on non-material dimensions and would remain dependent upon external finance and security assistance. Overall, however, al-Shabaab would be slightly militarily stronger because of its significant advantages across the non-material dimensions related to force employment, cohesion, and psychological operations, as well as the sustainability of its forces.

Now in its nineteenth year, the war against Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin is, by far, the deadliest African conflict involving Islamist militants.[1] After disintegrating during Somalia's civil war in the late 1980s, the Somali National Army (SNA) was reconstituted in the mid-2000s and has been fighting al-Shabaab ever since.[2] The SNA has waged this war with considerable assistance from international partners, most notably an African Union (A.U.) enforcement operation, the United States, and since 2013, the United Nations (U.N.), which has delivered non-lethal logistical support.[a]

In mid-2022, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) built upon a wave of clan-based resistance to al-Shabaab and launched a major offensive campaign in the Hiraan and Galmudug regions. By April 2023, the campaign succeeded in recovering over 200 settlements.[3] However, the FGS could not consistently implement its stabilization policies and al-Shabaab forces regrouped and counterattacked during 2023.[4] Today, the war is stalemated once again, as it has been for most of the last eight years.[5]

One factor that might shift the battlefield balance is the planned withdrawal of the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) without first securing a peace deal between the FGS and al-Shabaab. Initially deployed in 2007 and reaching a peak of over 22,000 personnel after 2014, the A.U. force has gradually withdrawn its troops since December 2017 as part of the planned transition to Somali forces assuming responsibility for the country's security.[6] As

of April 2024, ATMIS comprises approximately 14,000 troops and 850 police. Another 4,000 A.U. troops should exit by June 30 with the remainder of the force scheduled to leave Somalia by the end of 2024. In addition, the departure of the A.U. force could also mean the end of the United Nations Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS), which currently delivers logistical support to nearly 19,000 SNA soldiers.[7][b]

Considering this exit plan, this article addresses whether the departure of ATMIS would leave the SNA or al-Shabaab stronger militarily. This question is especially pertinent given the specter of an Afghanistan scenario in which the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces rapidly collapsed after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in the summer of 2021.

In Somalia, the ATMIS exit raises legitimate security concerns, but a similarly rapid and complete collapse of the SNA and total victory for al-Shabaab is unlikely. Not only would the SNA retain significant external security assistance from the United States, Turkey, the European Union, UAE, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and other countries, but ATMIS' departure would undermine a key element of al-Shabaab propaganda. Moreover, the SNA already endured the partial withdrawal of a key security partner when the Trump administration removed most of the roughly 700 U.S. troops from Somalia in December 2020. The impact on the SNA was not positive but nor was it catastrophic: The United States retained its logistical, training, and mentorship support packages, and many of the withdrawn troops continued "commuting to work"[8] from the wider region and Europe. In May 2022, the Biden administration redeployed some 450 U.S. soldiers to Somalia.[9] The issue at hand is whether the departure of ATMIS could be more consequential.

To answer this question, this article analyzes the principal sources of strength for both the SNA and al-Shabaab, basing a net assessment on seven factors identified by Jonathan Schroden to

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b   This non-lethal support to the SNA is paid for by voluntary contributions to a U.N. trust fund. See "Somali Security Forces (SSF) Trust Fund," United Nations Office in Somalia, n.d.

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a   The SNA has also received training and equipment from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the UAE, Qatar, Ethiopia, Uganda, Eritrea, and Egypt.

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compare the strength of Afghan forces and the Taliban before and after the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan.[10] These factors are size, material resources (i.e., money and technology), external support, force employment, cohesion (i.e., staying power and battlefield performance), psychological operations, and morale. While the first four address material factors, the latter three emphasize non-material factors, including the will to fight.

Overall, this net assessment suggests that in the event of an ATMIS exit by December 31, 2024, the SNA would retain only a *conventional* military advantage over al-Shabaab, but this would be insufficient to defeat the militants and would not reduce their ability to wage an effective campaign of destabilization. In fact, the ATMIS exit would likely strengthen al-Shabaab's morale, boost its psychological operations, increase its fighters' freedom of movement and action across larger parts of south-central Somalia, enable it to more frequently target the SNA, and could remove some important counter-IED capabilities that the SNA is lacking.

This article now examines each of the seven factors for both sides, then conducts a net assessment of those factors, before providing an answer to the central question and summarizing the major policy implications.

The Seven Factors

Size

SNA
Although the SNA has suffered a huge toll of casualties in its war against al-Shabaab, it has continued to regenerate and grow the size of its trained forces over time. On paper, the SNA has increased from less than 7,000 troops in 2009 to around 32,000 personnel, though unofficial government estimates suggest the deployable force is closer to 19,000.[11][c] In January 2023, Somalia's National Security Advisor said his government would have an additional 24,000 troops trained and fully equipped by 2024, mainly funded by the UAE and Qatar.[12] There are some risks involved in recruiting and attempting to train such large numbers of troops so quickly. And

there is already considerable variation in the quality of SNA units, with some derived from earlier clan-based formations. The most elite units are the roughly 2,000-strong Danab brigade, trained and equipped by the United States, and the roughly 6,000-strong Turkish-trained and equipped Gorgor battalions.[d] The United Nations has accused the SNA of recruiting 121 children between 2019 and 2022.[13]

Al-Shabaab
Considerable uncertainty pervades estimates of al-Shabaab's strength. In 2008, the African Union estimated al-Shabaab's operational force at around 2,000; by 2011, the figure was 9,500; and by 2022, it was between 4,000-7,000 fighters, concentrated in central and southern Somalia.[14] The FGS claims it has inflicted hundreds of casualties on al-Shabaab during the offensive campaign since mid-2022. And yet, the most recent UN Monitoring Group report published in January 2024 put the number of al-Shabaab fighters at between 7,000 and 12,000.[15] This reflects al-Shabaab's ability to withstand significant casualties and recruit new fighters, including children. Al-Shabaab has often forced clan elders and parents to provide children or face reprisal. The United Nations put the number at about 900 with an additional 663 abducted during 2022 alone.[16] Most recently, al-Shabaab "launched a massive recruitment campaign" drawing on Somali anger at the memorandum of understanding (MOU) concluded between Ethiopia and Somaliland on January 1, 2024.[17] This MOU reportedly included Ethiopia's willingness to recognize Somaliland's independence in exchange for a 50-year lease of 20 kilometers of Somaliland's coastline. Al-Shabaab publicly rejected the agreement and called on Somalis to join them to stop Ethiopian interference.

Material Resources

SNA
Since 2017, Somalia's domestic revenue collection has increased considerably, albeit from a low baseline. This has enabled the payment of salaries for government and federal security service personnel. Since 2021, the SNA's budget has increased significantly (see Table 1). In 2024, defense spending represented nearly 25 percent of the overall federal budget of U.S. $1.1 billion.[18] However, since two-thirds of this budget continues to come from external donors, there is a major question-mark over the SNA's financial sustainability. For context, the FGS' annual budget has remained heavily reliant on external donors for at least the last five years. In the 2020 annual budget, 50 percent came from external donors; the figure was 61 percent in 2021, 73 percent in 2022, and 70 percent in 2023.[19] In addition to major security assistance programs from the United States, Turkey, UAE, and the European Union, the SNA also receives non-lethal logistical support via a U.N.-administered voluntary trust fund. This has mainly been funded by the United Kingdom, but as of January 2024, it contained only U.S. $6.3 million, sufficient to support SNA operations for just four months.[20] In April, the United Kingdom deposited an additional £2.75 million, bringing its contributions to the trust fund to over

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c   Officially, the SNA is supported by 40,000 federal police and several thousand intelligence personnel in the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Somali Dialogue Platform, *The Shaping of the Somali National Security Architecture* (Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2024), p.11.

d   By late 2022, Turkey had also trained around 300 officers and 400 NCOs. Harun Maruf, "Somalia Military Rebuilding Shows Signs of Improvement," Voice of America, November 30, 2022.

Somalia security officers patrol near the SYL Hotel that was attacked by al-Shabaab on March 14, 2024, in Mogadishu, Somalia. (Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP Photo)

£20 million since 2022.[21]

Table 1: Somalia Defense and Security Budget (U.S. $ million)[22]

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total Defense and Security Budget	**163.8**	**171**	**195**	**255.6**
Total disbursed by Ministry of Defense	*95.7*	*99.8*	*117.2*	*178.1*
Armed Forces	93	96.1	110.2	170.5
Total disbursed by Ministry of National Security	*68.1*	*71.15*	*77.4*	*77.5*
Police	44.1	45	46.4	46.7
National Security Force (NISA)	17.5	18.8	23.9	23.7

The SNA is a relatively low-tech army consisting of small battalions of about 400 soldiers with limited vehicles, few armored vehicles, and mainly small arms and light weapons because of a longstanding international arms embargo. There is no functional Somali air force or navy to speak of, although the United Nations and ATMIS provide air support to the SNA, and the United States (since 2011) and Turkey (since late 2022) have conducted drone strikes against al-Shabaab.[23] Lack of its own aviation capabilities has considerable implications for SNA's ability to detect threats but also hinders its ability to project power and pursue retreating enemies effectively.[24]

SNA units are equipped in a highly unequal fashion. FGS officials acknowledge that only part of the SNA is mobile, while some units are largely stationary, only able to operate in very localized areas. It is only the roughly 8,000 Danab and Gorgor forces that constitute the so-called "freedom units/maneuver units"—"those that possess the necessary vehicles to move from point A to point B in order to conduct operations including long-range patrolling and special operation raids."[25] Even the SNA's mobile units lack sufficient armored transport, with most operating soft-skin vehicles, often without explosive ordnance disposal teams. This negatively affects morale and has led to higher numbers of IED-related casualties among the SNA than its A.U. counterparts.[26]

Al-Shabaab
Considerable uncertainty surrounds al-Shabaab's annual revenue, but estimates suggest it is roughly U.S. $100 million.[27] Al-Shabaab extorts revenue from mafia-style illicit taxation in Mogadishu and southern Somalia; *Isbaaro* or illegitimate roadblocks;[28] as well as the illicit trade in charcoal, cows, sugar, and other commodities.[29] It also imposes *zakat*—an Islamic tax on savings to be donated to the Muslim poor and needy—on populations under its control.

Al-Shabaab's arsenal includes AK47, PKM, Dushka, B10, grenades, and RPGs, while its heavy weapons include ZU 23/24

and mortars, particularly 60mm and 81mm and reportedly a limited number of 120mm.[30] Significant arms and ammunition are thought to come from Yemen, especially via the *Mukalla* network of arms smugglers.[31] But al-Shabaab has also captured significant military materiel from A.U. and Somali forces. Overrunning A.U. and Somali forward operating bases has enabled al-Shabaab to restock weapons and ammunition. In May 2023, for example, al-Shabaab fighters looted considerable amounts of military materiel from the ATMIS base at Buulo Mareer, including 107mm rockets. Some of these were destroyed by international forces in airstrikes, but al-Shabaab may have subsequently used some of those 107mm rockets to attack the U.N. camp in Aden Adde International Airport (June 25, 2023) and Villa Somalia (July 4, 2023).[32]

Al-Shabaab's weapon of choice remains IEDs, which it can manufacture domestically. They are, by far, the leading cause of SNA casualties. Al-Shabaab has used vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) to deadly effect against A.U. and Somali forward operating bases, as well as in other large-scale suicide attacks, mainly in Mogadishu.[33] The militants also operate a limited number of commercial drones that thus far have been used for surveillance and propaganda purposes.

External Support

SNA

The SNA has a wide range of external security partners, on whom it relies heavily. The SNA has worked in parallel and sometimes conducted joint operations with A.U. forces for over 15 years. ATMIS troops have provided artillery and tank fire, as well as counter-IED operations in support of the recent Somali offensive. ATMIS has also conducted resupply operations and delivered medical support, including casualty evacuations and use of its field hospitals. Nevertheless, problems related to coordination, intelligence-sharing, and command and control persist, with some ATMIS contingents raising concerns about the appropriate security clearances of SNA personnel.[34] As noted above, the United Nations is now authorized to deliver non-lethal logistical support for up to 18,900 SNA personnel engaged in joint or coordinated operations with ATMIS. U.S. security assistance since 2012 has focused on building the Danab brigade but also provided vehicles and materiel, while Turkey has trained and equipped the Gorgor battalions. Unlike Turkey, the United States regularly retrains Danab units and provides field mentoring and advising. Since it was established in 2010, the European Union Training Mission has trained about 7,000 SNA troops.[35] Between 2019 and 2023, Eritrea trained about 5,000 Somali recruits.[36] And in January 2023, Somalia's National Security Advisor claimed his government had sent 12,000 recruits to Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Uganda, funded in part by monies from the UAE.[37] It remains too early to say how these new recruits will perform in battle, but those trained in Eritrea have suffered significant casualties against al-Shabaab with one Somali official estimating desertions as high as 25 percent.[38]

Al-Shabaab

In direct contrast, al-Shabaab has very few external partners but has a sustainable, diversified funding model to support its fighters. Their principal sources of strength are domestic, rooted in attempts to strengthen the movement's nationalist credentials. While historically al-Shabaab benefitted from significant support in the Somali diaspora, this has dwindled in response to its persistent use of terror tactics, which have killed thousands of civilians. Al-Shabaab has benefitted from limited amounts of al-Qa`ida expertise and finance, but it enjoys a large degree of operational autonomy and does not rely on much external support beyond some inflows of arms and ammunition noted above.

Force Employment

SNA

The SNA's force employment is part of the Federal Government's three-front war against al-Shabaab, encompassing military, economic, and ideological dimensions. The SNA's strategy has been to work with A.U. forces to hold the major urban areas, secure the main supply routes, and extend stability through a network of dozens of operating bases, with air support from the United States, African Union, United Nations, and Turkey. This was based on a broader "clear-hold-build" approach inspired by the innovation of U.S. military doctrine in the mid-2000s during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The SNA and its partners made some headway on "clearing"—mainly via the Danab troops operating as the SNA's strike force. They were key in what Stig Hansen called "search and destroy" operations against al-Shabaab.[39] But the SNA has lacked effective holding forces and hence has struggled with the "hold and build" elements.[40] In parallel with offensive operations, during 2023 the SNA took over 14 operating bases as ATMIS troops vacated them. It remains to be seen whether occupying these bases will be a boon or hindrance to the SNA, since it may leave the Somali troops vulnerable to al-Shabaab mass attacks while deriving little strategic benefit.[41]

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab is broadly following a strategy of attrition against the SNA and plans to outlast the foreign interventions propping up the FGS.[e] To do so, it has waged a prolonged war of destabilization, unencumbered by the many pressures of governing a weak and divided state. Nevertheless, for local populations under its control, al-Shabaab plans to provide them with a degree of stable governance and justice. Here, its principal strategy is intimidation—convincing the population to follow its orders or else it will punish any disobedience, and demonstrating that the government is too weak to stop the group.[42]

Al-Shabaab's key strongholds are in central (Hiraan and Galagudud) and southern Somalia (around Jilib, Saakow, and Buale), but its forces are spread across the country, including as far north as the mountains of Galgala, Puntland. They have focused on ensuring freedom of movement and action across large swathes of the countryside, in the lush areas of the Jubba and Shabelle rivers, and along key commercial routes. In these areas, al-Shabaab has put considerable effort into providing extrajudicial mechanisms that exploit gaps in the Somali formal justice system to resolve communal and legal disputes as well as punish crimes. The militants have presided over a harsh order, yet some local populations prefer

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e   Al-Shabaab has also followed this strategy for its operations in Kenya. Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, "Provocation and Attrition Strategies in Transnational Terrorism: The Case of Al-Shabaab," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35:4 (2023): pp. 945-970.

it to the anarchy of warlordism and view it as less corrupt than the official justice system available from the FGS.[43] Outside Somalia, the militants have conducted numerous attacks in Kenya, sporadic attacks elsewhere in east Africa, and even briefly invaded Ethiopia in late July 2022.[44] These actions demonstrate al-Shabaab's belief that it has sufficient resources to execute attacks and campaigns outside of Somalia.

Al-Shabaab generally avoids direct combat with Somali and A.U. forces, preferring asymmetrical warfare tactics. It favors small-scale raids, ambushes (especially along important transit and supply routes, notably from Mogadishu to Baidoa), assassinations, as well as IEDs, frequently emplaced along roadways. There have also been larger-scale assaults on SNA bases (e.g., at Gerilley following the handover from ATMIS to SNA forces).[45] Al-Shabaab also frequently employs urban area isolation by implementing strict access control measures on roads leading to urban centers. Overall, for the last few years, al-Shabaab has targeted Somali security forces in 42 percent of its attacks, similar to the proportion targeting A.U. forces.[46] The vast majority of these attacks have been in and around the capital Mogadishu, along the major roadways connecting Mogadishu to Baidoa and Beledweyne, as well as north of Kismayo. In Mogadishu, al-Shabaab has favored VBIEDs, suicide commando attacks, and assassinations.

Cohesion

SNA

The SNA is comprised of a very fragmented set of units, some of which remain heavily clan-based and many of which have experienced different training regimes and operate different types of equipment. Since its reconstitution, the SNA has suffered from desertion, defections, soldiers working multiple jobs, and infiltration by al-Shabaab, although these problems have become less acute.[f] Somalia's political leaders have also sometimes tried to politicize the SNA. Under President Farmaajo, for example, SNA units were deployed to coerce domestic political opponents, not just al-Shabaab.[47] And in April 2021, the political impasse over the contested presidential electoral process resulted in fighting between FGS and opposition-aligned forces, which dragged in elements of the SNA.[48] The most cohesive units are the Presidential Guard and the Danab, which have benefitted from consistent payments and good equipment, with the latter also having frontline mentors and advisors, helping their operational performance.[49] During the recent offensive campaign, Danab personnel embedded with other SNA units to help forge a more coherent command and control structure to improve situational awareness.[50]

On the battlefield, the SNA has enjoyed conventional superiority with support from its external partners. The SNA's elite units have conducted many successful strikes against al-Shabaab, but the Somali army has struggled to consistently hold recovered settlements, deliver stabilization programs, and protect populations from al-Shabaab intimidation. It has also often been caught out while defending recovered settlements and some forward operating bases.[g]

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab's cohesion and endurance stems from a mix of its nationalist credentials, coercion, and intimidation. Al-Shabaab maintains legitimacy with populations who see the group's members as Somali nationalists fighting foreign invaders and a corrupt, ineffective FGS that is dependent on those same foreigners. The militants have demonstrated resilience over nearly two decades, despite facing multiple enemies. Nevertheless, al-Shabaab's leadership recognizes its relative weakness in conventional combat. It has therefore forged cohesive units to employ guerrilla tactics and which usually fight only on their preferred terms. This has included a mandatory training program for all al-Shabaab recruits (children and adults) in which they are indoctrinated and assessed for their suitability. There follows three to six months of basic military training, including physical training, obstacle breaching, religious education, tactics, intelligence collection, weapon handling, and IED construction.[51]

On the battlefield, al-Shabaab excels in ambush and overrunning small SNA bases. They have inflicted most SNA casualties using IED attacks and have also launched many deadly small-scale suicide raids. But al-Shabaab has also faced problems. These include suffering large numbers of casualties, including several senior figures, as well as persistent defections, including a mix of rank-and-file and quite senior fighters.[52] The group has also previously suffered from violent struggles over its leadership and direction.[53] However, after the purge of its leadership in late 2013, al-Shabaab has broadly consolidated its approach, now under Ahmed Diriye's leadership. But al-Shabaab's harsh rule has also inspired some local communities to engage in armed resistance, including in Hiraan region in 2022, which catalyzed the subsequent FGS offensive campaign.[54]

Psychological Operations

SNA

The FGS has generally struggled with psychological operations. Its wartime communications tend to emphasize (and often exaggerate) the number of al-Shabaab casualties and the amount of territory its forces have "recovered" or "liberated" as key metrics. This has often been undermined by failure to hold onto numerous "recovered" settlements. The Federal Government has also tended to be reactive, responding to al-Shabaab's narratives and hence prioritizing content moderation, counter-narratives, and even banning certain platforms, including TikTok and Telegram in 2023.[55] Yet al-Shabaab's propaganda persists. More proactively, successive Somali federal administrations have offered amnesty to al-Shabaab fighters who leave and denounce the organization.[56] And in late 2022, the Federal Government tried to undermine al-Shabaab's ideological appeal by instructing media outlets to refer to the group as Khawarij (or deviants from Islam).[57] But this was not consistently implemented and was criticized by some journalists. In early 2023, the FGS received a significant boost when 300 Somali clerics pledged to publicly denounce al-Shabaab's interpretation

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f   However, recent reports suggest a significant desertion rate has affected the Eritrean-trained SNA troops. "Trained Somali forces desert after PM's support for Hamas," Horn Observer, November 19, 2023.

g   For example, in Galcad. See "Somalia's al Shabaab attacks base in town it had lost, kills seven," Reuters, January 20, 2023.

of Islam.[58]

Al-Shabaab

In contrast, al-Shabaab has cultivated a sophisticated and rather effective PSYOPS infrastructure geared to establishing its version of an Islamic state in Somalia. Its leaders have retained centralized control over its major strategic narratives, disseminated in multiple languages via Al-Kataib Media Foundation, radio stations, online news sources, and social media and messaging apps.[59] Al-Shabaab PSYOPS emphasize their inevitable victory over the "apostate" Federal Government and foreigners (usually portrayed as Christians); their ability to infiltrate government institutions and assassinate officials; and the invincibility of their forces, although it is notable that al-Shabaab frequently lies about their casualty figures and will often bury their dead in mass graves without burial markers.[60] Unsurprisingly, it regularly rejects peace negotiations with the Federal Government, depicting talks as a sign of weakness. Al-Shabaab also portrays itself as transcending clan affiliations but goes to considerable lengths to win support from key clans.[61] A recent assessment concluded that al-Shabaab "understands its adversaries better than its adversaries understand al-Shabaab. It accurately identifies and highlights its enemies' weaknesses, then it effectively communicates those deficits in ways that resonate with Somalis' existing understandings and perceptions."[62]

Morale

SNA

The SNA suffered a long period of very low morale after its reconstitution. This stemmed from a plethora of major challenges, including lack of consistent salary payments and supporting infrastructure, poor equipment, poor leadership, poor management systems, and very high levels of corruption. The SNA was also regularly infiltrated by al-Shabaab operatives, undermining its internal workings and its ability to collaborate with international partners. Although the situation is generally much better than a decade ago, a March 2024 report suggested that during the recent offensive campaign over 1,300 of the Turkish-trained Gorgor troops had deserted their units while several hundred had been killed, including several battalion commanders.[63] It is difficult to judge how the ATMIS withdrawal is affecting morale throughout the SNA: While it undermines a major tenet of al-Shabaab propaganda, it significantly reduces the military capabilities available to support the SNA, and an A.U. withdrawal, similar to the Afghanistan case, could lead to other complementary or cascading impacts.

On the positive side, the long-delayed implementation of biometric ID and electronic payment systems has made it harder to steal soldiers' salaries and has significantly reduced the problem of "ghost soldiers" on the SNA's payroll. The SNA's growing numbers and financial resources have also helped. The growth of the Danab brigade has attracted recruits from across the country and symbolizes the benefits of building an explicitly multiclan national army. The recent deal for the United States to build five new military bases across south-central Somalia should also improve morale.[64] So too has the U.N. Security Council's December 2023 decision to lift the embargo on arms supplies to the FGS.[65] Nevertheless, it is telling that over the last two years, multiple senior political leaders and military officials have felt the need to make more frequent visits to the 'frontlines' partly to boost morale. This includes President

Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who has regularly visited the frontlines since the start of the 2022 offensive campaign.[66]

Al-Shabaab

It is generally believed that al-Shabaab's mid-level and senior members have sustained high morale for years. They generally "believe that they have a better life and security than do [Somali] government officials."[67] One analysis noted the "sense of smugness and self-satisfaction" among al-Shabaab leadership as well as a broad sense of self-righteousness.[68] The militants' resilience in the face of multiple enemies is very important: They are still here, recruiting fighters, financing their war, and achieving regular tactical victories. This is bolstered by a widespread faith that time is on their side and that foreigners will eventually tire and leave Somalia. Such views were strengthened by the 2020 U.S. troop withdrawal and the official adoption of a timetable for ATMIS' exit. When problems have arisen, al-Shabaab turns to da'wa (preaching) officers to raise spirits among its fighters, including by selling the "merits of martyrdom."[69]

On the other hand, several factors have resulted in numerous desertions and defections. The increased tempo of airstrikes targeting rank-and-file al-Shabaab forces during the Trump administration (2017-2020) reportedly spread significant fear and concerns about how it reduced the militants' freedom of movement and ability to muster for large attacks.[70] Al-Shabaab has also lost significant support among the Somali diaspora over the last decade; it is facing a larger and increasingly well-trained and equipped SNA, and it has sustained many hundreds of casualties over the last two years in particular.

Net Assessment

Considering this discussion of the size, material resources, external support, force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale for both the SNA and al-Shabaab, how should one assess those factors in the projected absence of ATMIS forces?

Size

The SNA is probably over twice the size of al-Shabaab, and if the current recruiting plan succeeds, it would be well over three times as large. However, measuring each side's mobile forces reveals much greater parity. Moreover, while al-Shabaab's true strength remains unknown, the militants have consistently replenished their losses through forcible recruitment and cutting deals with clans. ***Assessment: Significant SNA advantage, but rough parity of mobile forces.***

Material Resources

Al-Shabaab has a much leaner and less technically sophisticated fighting force than the SNA, and as such, it is cheaper to maintain. The militants also maintain diverse revenues streams despite attempts to stop them.[71] The SNA's greater numbers, administrative, and support elements require more funding, currently more than the FGS can afford alone. It is an open question how long Somalia's external partners will continue to pay for security assistance programs for the SNA. The U.N.-delivered logistical support package for up to 18,900 SNA personnel will be particularly important to maintain. ***Assessment: Finance: Significant SNA advantage in absolute terms, but it is dependent on external partners. Significant al-Shabaab advantage in terms of***

sustainability. Technical Capability: SNA slight and growing advantage.

External Support

Even without ATMIS, the SNA will retain considerable security assistance from about 10 external partners. This is a significant advantage, including for training, equipping, and advising. But it can also create unhelpful dependencies, add to incohesion, and generate coordination and capacity challenges for the FGS. Al-Shabaab, in contrast, is primarily a home-grown movement and is not dependent on external partnerships, receiving limited funding and technical expertise from al-Qa`ida. *Assessment: Significant SNA advantage, but unlike the SNA, al-Shabaab has few external dependencies.*

Morale Force Employment

Although al-Shabaab lost considerable territory between 2011 and 2014, since then, neither side has managed to decisively break the strategic stalemate. Outright military victory is highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. Moreover, al-Shabaab benefits from the current configuration of forces: It is cheaper to maintain its *modus operandi* than the SNA; its ability to sustain its war of destabilization is a propaganda victory of sorts; and the SNA are spread over many forward operating bases. The withdrawal of ATMIS would take further pressure off al-Shabaab, enabling them to focus a much higher proportion of their attacks on the SNA. *Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage.*

Cohesion

The SNA remains a fragmented force for two principal reasons. First, Somalia's bickering political leaders have failed to implement a coherent national security architecture that clarifies force structures and the relationship between the FGS and the country's federal member states. Second, it is an army built by multiple security partners who have used different doctrine, techniques, and equipment. In sum, no amount of professionalism by individual SNA soldiers could overcome such top-down political fragmentation. In practice, Danab forces remain the key to ensuring greater cohesion among the wider SNA, but there is consequently a danger of them being overused, including for tasks other than their intended purpose. In comparison, al-Shabaab's fighting force is more cohesive, despite some clan-related tensions. *Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage, but the SNA is improving.*

Psychological Operations

Al-Shabaab continues to disseminate its strategic messages regarding endurance, inevitability, and invincibility via a range of platforms and mediums. Those themes continue to resonate with a variety of local audiences in Somalia. In comparison, the FGS has been reactive and overly fixated on incomplete metrics such as casualty counts and "recovered" territory while struggling to undermine al-Shabaab's legitimacy. *Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage.*

Morale

Overall, al-Shabaab's leadership and much of the rank-and-file appear to have maintained consistently higher levels of confidence than most of the SNA. Al-Shabaab's superior morale stems from the beliefs that the group can withstand SNA offensives and exploit SNA weaknesses more effectively than *vice versa*. In comparison, the SNA's morale has deflated after the initial progress of the 2022 offensive. Moreover, the recent positive news about lifting the U.N. arms embargo, increasing funds, and fresh recruits is largely offset by concerns that its international partners are growing weary. *Assessment: Slight al-Shabaab advantage.*

Table 2 summarizes the comparative discussion of each factor and presents a net assessment of each. As the last row indicates, the net assessment of these factors tilts to the advantage of al-Shabaab.

Table 2: A net assessment of the SNA and al-Shabaab's military strength in the projected absence of ATMIS forces

Factor	Advantage	Comments
Size	Significant SNA, but rough parity of mobile forces.	The SNA has twice the numbers of al-Shabaab, but many of its units are not mobile and its newest recruits are not battle-hardened.
Material Resources	Finance: Significant SNA in absolute terms; but significant al-Shabaab advantage in terms of sustainability. Technical Capability: Slightly SNA.	The SNA has access to more funding, but al-Shabaab's fighting force is more financially sustainable. The SNA has access to better military technology than al-Shabaab.
External Support	Significant SNA, but al-Shabaab is less reliant on external partners.	The SNA benefits from a variety of external security partners but remains dependent on them, whereas al-Shabaab is largely self-sufficient.
Force Employment	Slightly al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab has proved resilient in the countryside and its key strongholds, and adept at eroding government control. It plans to outlast Somalia's external partners while waging a war of destabilization and intimidation. SNA partner air superiority and better special forces are mitigating factors.

Cohesion	Significant al-Shabaab, but SNA improving.	Al-Shabaab is a more cohesive organization than the SNA.
PSYOPS	Significant al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab consistently conducts more effective psychological operations.
Morale	Slightly al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab believes foreign forces are tiring of their deployment in Somalia and they are better able to exploit the SNA's weaknesses than *vice versa*.
Net Assessment	Slightly al-Shabaab.	While smaller and less technologically sophisticated, al-Shabaab's fighting forces are more cohesive, financially sustainable, employ sustainable technologies and effective PSYOPS, and have generally higher morale owing to their demonstrated resilience.

Conclusion and Implications

This article has analyzed whether the departure of ATMIS would leave the SNA or al-Shabaab stronger militarily. Having conducted a net assessment across seven factors, the author's conclusion is that al-Shabaab would enjoy a slight military advantage overall.

Although the SNA has significant advantages across the main material dimensions of this assessment (size, finance, technology, and external support), it remains heavily reliant on external support and is weaker across the non-material dimensions. In contrast, al-Shabaab's main advantages stem from the sustainability of its forces and operations, and its performance across the non-material dimensions of this assessment related to force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale. This finding has several implications for how to tilt the military balance in Somalia in the Federal Government's favor.

First, given how important non-material factors were in the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, this assessment should serve as a stark warning that reforms are needed.[72] The FGS should focus on improving the central non-material issues related to force employment, cohesion, PSYOPS and morale.

Second, without ATMIS, the SNA should prepare to face several hundred additional attacks each year. Since A.U. peacekeepers were the targets of nearly half of al-Shabaab attacks over the last few years,[73] the militants will subsequently be able to focus almost entirely on the SNA. Many attacks will use IEDs, and hence, the SNA should prioritize improving its counter-IED capabilities.

Finally, although the SNA's material advantages over al-Shabaab are important, they have depended on external support that is no longer guaranteed. After ATMIS, the SNA will become even more reliant on its other external partners, especially the United States and Turkey. Given the Trump administration's decision to withdraw its troops in 2020, the 2024 U.S. presidential election result could be a key factor in the war against al-Shabaab. The policy challenge for Somalia's remaining external partners is therefore to provide useful assistance to the SNA without creating military dependency of the type witnessed in Afghanistan. For the FGS, three additional imperatives stand out. First, to ensure the financial sustainability of its armed forces. Second, to improve their cohesion. This requires agreement among Somalia's political elites on operationalizing the new national security architecture and not politicizing the security services, as well as creating more cohesion by standardizing equipment and systems across the SNA. Third, the FGS must ensure that the SNA continues to receive the non-lethal logistical support currently delivered by UN Support Office for Somalia and financed via the U.N. trust fund.   CTC

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