

Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Taking Stock of Obstacles

By Daisy Muibu

A year and five months after the Somali government launched its offensive against al-Shabaab, the initial optimism that characterized its first few months have diminished as the counterinsurgency's momentum has stalled in the central regions of the country. Certainly, clan mobilization against al-Shabaab remains a significant development, while the initial recapture of significant swathes of territory in central Somalia by forces led by the national army and Somali partners demonstrates political will from the federal government to fight al-Shabaab. However, with only a year left until African Union forces are mandated to fully draw down, significant obstacles remain that cast doubts over the government's ambitious goals to defeat al-Shabaab and assume full responsibility for securing the country by December 31, 2024.

Launched in August 2022, the federal government of Somalia's offensive against al-Shabaab was initially followed by much optimism. Unlike previous offensives, which were often foreign-led, the Somali National Army (SNA) was taking a leading role in fighting al-Shabaab.¹ Meanwhile, clan militia (known as Ma'awisley), who had prior to August 2022 organically mobilized against al-Shabaab's predation in central regions of the county, were now supporting the government's offensive.² Moreover, U.S. and Turkish drone strikes were inflicting higher costs on the operations of al-Shabaab's command and control bodies.³ In light of these positive developments, analysts expressed cautious optimism about the opportunity the federal government had to enduringly weaken al-Shabaab.³ What was perhaps one of the most promising sources of optimism in the early months of the offensive was the significant swathes of territory that the government, with support from the Ma'awisley, initially recovered from al-Shabaab in the central regions of the country, particularly in Hirshabelle and Galmudug river and in Galgaduud located in the federal member states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug, respectively.⁴ In fact, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported in April 2023 that government forces in the first phase of the offensive had managed to recapture over 215 locations, mostly in Hirshabelle and Galmudug.⁵

a U.S. drone strikes impact the functions of the group's Shura Council and *tanfid* (equivalent of a cabinet). See Stig Jarle Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 16:1 (2023); Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Harun Maruf, Senior Editor, Voice of America Somali," *CTC Sentinel* 15:11 (2022): p. 13.

On August 17, 2023, the president of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, announced the government's plans to liberate the country from al-Shabaab or diminish its influence to only small pockets of the country within five months.^b However, in the spring and summer of 2023, the momentum of the government's offensive took a turn, facing significant setbacks that have cast a cloud over the government's ambitious goals for defeating al-Shabaab. By January 2024—the five-month mark proclaimed by President Mohamud—al-Shabaab remained active and still capable of exerting influence, especially in its southern strongholds. Today, the government is steadfast in its rhetoric about plans to extend its offensive beyond central territories in Hirshabelle and Galmudug and to defeat al-Shabaab in its southern Somalia strongholds by the end of December 2024. But at the moment, the government's counterinsurgency operations have stalled in the central regions of the country.

In light of these developments, there is a need to take stock of the Somali government's offensive and the obstacles that are undermining efforts to not only consolidate its gains, but that are also threatening its efforts to liberate the country from al-Shabaab and stabilize recovered territories. This article is organized in two parts: The first briefly outlines the current status of the government's offensive as of early 2024. This is followed by a discussion on the obstacles to consolidating the government's gains in the central regions of Somalia, as well as broader challenges for stabilization.

Part One: The Stalling Offensive Against al-Shabaab

Launched following a set of clan uprisings against al-Shabaab in 2022, the first phase of the government's offensive against al-Shabaab in Hirshabelle and Galmudug meaningfully degraded the group's territorial control in the region within its initial months.

b This proclamation was even more ambitious than a previous remark made in January 2023 where the government declared its plans to defeat the militant group by the end of the summer of 2024. See Harun Maruf, "Plan is to remove al-Shabaab within 5 months . . .," X, August 17, 2023.

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Much of the early gains the federal government experienced occurred between August and December 2022. During this period, the SNA, supported by clan militia (i.e., Ma'awisley) and Turkish and U.S. drones,⁶ recaptured much of al-Shabaab's territory in Hiraan east of the Shabelle River in Hirshabelle state, as well as strategic territory such as Adan Yabaal, al-Shabaab's regional center of operations in Middle Shabelle.^c Support from the Ma'awisley and local power brokers was particularly consequential for the government's initial successes due to their ability to provide operational information and legitimize the government's efforts.⁷

At the beginning of 2023, the offensive still had some momentum, recapturing key territory, such as the strategic towns of Ceel Dheere and Xarardheere in Galgaduud (region in Galmudug state).⁸ However, over the same period the government faced losses. For instance, in January 2023 and for the first half of the year (January to June 2023), the offensive experienced significant setbacks, including a string of al-Shabaab attacks in Hirshabelle and Galmudug that slowed the pace of the offensive and resulted in some territory that had been recently recovered in Hirshabelle being recaptured by al-Shabaab.⁹ Despite plans for a second phase of the offensive (Operation Black Lion) in collaboration with the leaders of Somalia's five federal member states as well as neighboring countries Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti, the federal government's ambitious plans to extend its offensive south to al-Shabaab's strongholds in Jubaland and South West State have faced significant delays.¹⁰ Rather than launching this planned second phase in June 2023 as a lightning advance against al-Shabaab, the government was forced to push back plans for Operation Black Lion in order to focus on central Somalia.¹¹

The period since July 2023 has been characterized by even more setbacks amidst the federal government's efforts to revitalize the offensive. In early August 2023, President Mohamud temporarily relocated from Mogadishu to Dhusamareb, the capital of Galmudug state, to revive support for the offensive from the frontlines and oversee preparations for a new phase of military operations against al-Shabaab in Mudug and Galgaduud.^d On August 6, the federal government announced the launch of the second phase of its offensive, mainly focused on Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle.^e Despite capturing key al-Shabaab-controlled towns, Wahbo and El Buur, in Galgaduud in late August,¹² at the end of the same month government forces faced a significant misfortune. Al-Shabaab launched a deadly attack on a recently captured base in the village

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of Cowsweyne in Galgaduud.¹³ The attack inflicted heavy losses on SNA brigades in the area, causing them to retreat from frontline towns and villages they had captured in preceding months.¹⁴

Since August 2023, the government's campaign has remained centered in Galmudug state, mainly in Mudug and Galgaduud regions, but between mid-October and November, there appears to have been a halt in the offensive in the region.¹⁵ Although the government has managed to maintain some of its gains in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle (Hirshabelle State), and parts of Mudug (Galmudug), in Galgaduud the offensive is stalled.¹⁶ In fact, the attack in Cowsweyne in August 2023 and the resulting collapse of the government's frontline in southern Galmudug, revealed shortcomings that remain obstacles to the government's efforts to consolidate its early gains in central Somalia. Moreover, these shortcomings further undermine the government's prospects for a broader offensive against al-Shabaab in its southern territories and overall stabilization once the African Union (A.U.) peacekeeping forces known as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) draw down. These obstacles are discussed in the following section of the article.

Part Two: Obstacles to Further Progress Against al-Shabaab

The recent setbacks faced by the government's offensive in central Somalia underscore a set of obstacles that have and continue to impact the prospects for successfully countering al-Shabaab and stabilizing recovered territories. These include overly ambitious timelines for the offensive; donor fatigue and lukewarm regional support; logistical and holding challenges; political infighting and clan divisions; and al-Shabaab's ability to stall progress.

Overly Ambitious Timelines

Speaking at a town hall meeting in Dhusamareb on August 17, 2023, President Mohamud declared his administration's intention to “eliminate al Shabaab from the country in the coming five months,” or diminish the group to only a few pockets where it will be harmless.¹⁷ The declaration came only a week after the second phase of the government's counterinsurgency operations was announced and less than two weeks before the deadly attack on two military brigades in Cowsweyne¹⁸ that set back the offensive. These and other events underscore concerns among analysts about the government's overly ambitious timeline for operations. As of mid-February 2024, al-Shabaab remains entrenched in its strongholds of southern Somalia and still poses a countrywide threat. Meanwhile, the government aims to build up a full national army and federal security sector by the end of 2024.¹⁹ This timeline corresponds with the withdrawal deadlines negotiated by the former president, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, for ATMIS troops to leave Somalia. Much skepticism surrounds both deadlines: skepticism about whether Somalia's federal forces will be prepared to take over once

c Adan Yabaal was recaptured in December 2022. “Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab,” *Crisis Group Africa Briefing* 187 (2023); Ahmed Mohamed, “Somali Army Dislodges Al-Shabab From Key Stronghold,” *Voice of America*, December 6, 2022.

d President Mohamud remained in Dhusamareb until late October. His presence in the region demonstrated his commitment to the offensive as well as his efforts to build political support and was met with a lot of praise. See “President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud embarks on a crucial mission to Dhusamareb,” *RadioDalsan*, August 5, 2023; Alan Boswell, Omar Mahmood, and Sarah Harrison, “Somalia's Stalling Fight Against Al-Shabaab and America's Wobbly Strategy,” November 6, 2023, in “The Horn,” *International Crisis Group* podcast; James Barnett, “Faltering Lion: Analyzing Progress and Setbacks in Somalia's War against al-Shabaab,” *Hudson Institute*, September 28, 2023; and “Situation Update September 2023.”

e Initially, the second phase was intended to push al-Shabaab from its strongholds in southern Somalia, but the government has focused its efforts in central Somalia for its second phase. “Situation Update September 2023;” Barnett.



Somalia (Brandon Mohr)

ATMIS leaves; skepticism about whether the government forces have enough capacity and local support to meaningfully defeat al-Shabaab in its strongholds by end of 2024; and skepticism around the federal and member states' preparedness to establish governance in liberated territories.²⁰

Although the Somali army has assumed a larger role in securing the nation today than it has done in the past,²¹ it is far from a strong defense force capable of taking on full responsibility for securing the country in only a year. As the journalist Harun Maruf explains, "Somalia, despite all its attempts, is still on a journey to recruit and train and have a viable army," and "it seems it's going to be a very long journey."²² Much of the challenges surround the lack of funding to train the army and pay salaries, as well as political difficulties in convincing federal member states to integrate their regional forces into the national army.²³ In December 2023, the national security adviser to the president, Hussein Sheikh-Ali, reported that a security sector development plan was endorsed in a meeting in New York that includes plans to generate up to 30,000 land forces, 40,000 police at the federal and regional levels, and 8,500 members of the prison system custodial corps.²⁴ Although these plans are a positive development, the types of reforms and political negotiations with federal member states that the federal government would need to undertake to thoroughly implement these decisions, and ultimately have professional forces capable of stabilizing and providing adequate governance to liberated territories, will require consistent, sustained effort over a prolonged period of time, not just a few

months.²⁵ A previously agreed upon national security architecture provided for coordination and cooperation between the forces of the federal government and federal member states.²⁶ However, since the agreement was reached in 2017, progress toward meeting the benchmarks set forth in it have yet to be reached due to funding challenges and tense relations between the federal government and regional states.²⁷

Similar skepticism exists around the possibility of defeating al-Shabaab in its southern strongholds by the end of 2024. As the analyst James Barnett has noted, "at present, the FGS [Federal Government of Somalia] has not generated sufficient federal security forces to carry out the Black Lion offensive without significant support from either local militias or regional militaries."²⁸ The spontaneous and organic uprising of clan militia (i.e., Ma'awisley) against al-Shabaab that has occurred in the central regions is unlikely to manifest across the southern member states due to the complex and combustible nature of clan dynamics in the south, while regional support for the offensive among Somalia's neighbors has been lukewarm (further discussed below).²⁹ Accordingly, without support from clan militia and regional forces in the south, it is far from clear that Somali forces will be able to combat and defeat al-Shabaab by December 2024. Mobilizing the local support needed to fight al-Shabaab in these southern territories would first require negotiating a meaningful political settlement and resolution of the longstanding grievances and disputes among local populations and politicians, which will take time (further discussed below).³⁰ Without such a settlement, there is a risk of further fragmentation into clan rivalries that benefit al-Shabaab.

More recently, delays in the ATMIS troop drawdown have brought to the fore questions about Somali forces' preparedness to take over after December 2024 and what this implies for overall plans for regional and/or international assistance once ATMIS leaves. The first phase of the drawdown concluded in June 2023 when 2,000 troops withdrew from Somalia.³¹ However, in September 2023, the government requested a three-month pause in the planned second phase of withdrawals due to the significant military setbacks its forces faced in the central regions.³² In December 2023, ATMIS resumed handing over security responsibilities to Somali forces after the three-month pause elapsed, with the aim to withdraw 3,000 soldiers by December 31, 2023, and the ultimate goal of a full withdrawal in December 2024.^f Over the month of December 2023, ATMIS handed over control of three forward operation bases (FOBs)—State House, Parliament, and the Qorillow FOBs—and the process of the second phase of the drawdown was completed over January 2024, with a total number of seven FOBs handed over

^f In December 2023, ATMIS handed over the Presidential Palace and Parliament Forward Operating bases to the Somali National Army in compliance with the transition plan. ATMIS is estimated to have had 22,000 troops in Somalia ahead of the drawdown process. See "Somalia: AU Forces hand over security of State House and parliament to Govt troops," Garowe Online, December 17, 2023; Harun Maruf, "AU Mission in Somalia Resumes Drawdown After 3-Month Pause," Voice of America, December 17, 2023; and "ATMIS, FGS and UNSOS Announce Resumption of Second Phase Troop Drawdown," ATMIS, December 2, 2023.



Somalia's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, is pictured at a demonstration at Banadir stadium in Mogadishu, Somalia, on January 12, 2023. (Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP Photo)

and 3,000 troops withdrawn by the end of the month.⁸

But there is a growing sentiment that an end to the ATMIS mission in Somalia in December 2024 does not mean the end of regional support in some capacity.³³ The federal government of Somalia proposed that the African Union lead a successor to ATMIS during a December 2023 conference.³⁴ Furthermore, recent reports suggest that A.U. support to Somalia may continue into January 2025, with the establishment of “a new mission with a new mandate.”³⁵ Speaking to the Voice of America-Somalia, the A.U. envoy to Somalia and the head of ATMIS, Mohamed El-Amine Souef, explained that the new mission would support the SNA in terms of building capacity, protecting the public in populated areas, and safeguarding strategic infrastructure in Mogadishu and other capitals of federal member states.³⁶ Questions remain about the funding for such a mission, however, and the number of troops that

could possibly be deployed. What is clear is that it is unlikely that, on its own, Somali federal and regional forces will be prepared to fully take on responsibility for securing the state and stabilizing recovered territories come December 2024, without some type of external support.

Donor Fatigue and Lukewarm Regional Support

Closely linked to concerns around the timelines for the offensive and ATMIS' withdrawal is the perennial issue of funding and external support. In its plans to defeat al-Shabaab and stabilize the country, the federal government has been counting on its external partners for financial aid and support. Notably, plans for the Black Lion operation intended to counter al-Shabaab in its southern strongholds depended on the contributions of 20,000-30,000^h regional forces from neighboring countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti).³⁷ Moreover, in planning for its stabilization efforts, a government official speaking to the International Crisis Group in February 2023 explained that without international support the mission would not succeed.³⁸ On both fronts, questions around funding and external actor support will remain obstacles for the Somali government's efforts.

Notably, plans for “frontline states” Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti to contribute their forces as part of Operation Black Lion have not materialized and appear to be, at best, on pause

^g Prior to the three-month technical pause in September 2023, two FOBs—Bio Cadale and Raga Ceel—had already been handed over. In addition to these two FOBs, State House, Parliament, Qorillow, Burahache, and Kismayo Old Airport FOBs have also been handed over during the resumed second phase of the ATMIS withdrawal. Additionally, two FOBs were closed down, Sarille and Kismayo Old Airport. See “Somalia: AU troops hand over strategic base to Somali forces ahead of exit,” Garowe Online, December 12, 2023; Maruf, “AU Mission in Somalia Resumes Drawdown After 3-Month Pause;” and “ATMIS hands over Qorilow military base to Somali Security Forces,” Reliefweb, December 20, 2023. See also ATMIS, “Today, 20 December 2023, #ATMIS, handed over Qorillow . . .,” X, December 20, 2023; “Atmis hands over 9 military bases to Somalia in troop withdrawal,” East African, January 30, 2024; and ATMIS, “On Monday, #ATMIS successfully concluded Phase Two Drawdown by signing the official handover . . .,” X, January 31, 2024.

^h Initial plans for Operation Black Lion to counter al-Shabaab in its strongholds depended on neighboring countries contributing non-ATMIS forces to support the offensive.

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without a clear path forward.³⁹ The delay is not only the result of operations stalling in the central regions of the country, but also due to waning enthusiasm from Somalia’s neighbors due to financial considerations. There has been a lack of clarity on where funding to support the operation would come from.⁴⁰ Initially, it seemed as though the operation would be funded by the regional actors themselves, but this became a tough proposition, especially due to the economic circumstances within the region.⁴¹ There was some hope that Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, would step in to fund the operation, but that never materialized.⁴² Furthermore, internal developments in both Kenyaⁱ and Ethiopia^j have also distracted the regional actors’ attention away from Somalia. While the federal government in Somalia initially envisioned that Kenyan and Ethiopian forces would play a central role in directly fighting al-Shabaab, these regional actors appear to be more keen on preventing a spillover of al-Shabaab violence across their borders than engaging in a major offensive in southern Somalia.⁴³ Moreover, the recently signed memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland (announced on January 1, 2024) that would grant the former access to the Red Sea and the latter official recognition as an independent country has provoked significant outrage from Mogadishu, which views the move as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁴ The public protests in Mogadishu over the decision and the federal government of Somalia’s strong rejection of the memorandum of understanding cast further doubts on the feasibility of Ethiopian support in offensive operations.⁴⁵

There is also a general sense of donor fatigue among longtime external partners such as the European Union, United Kingdom, and the United States, which have provided humanitarian and security assistance for decades.⁴⁶ On the part of the United States, the Biden administration continues to maintain a few hundred forces (no more than 450 troops) in Somalia to support the national army, with the special unit known as Danab being the priority.⁴⁷ The United States has also bolstered the Somali government’s campaign against al-Shabaab by donating military assistance (including weapons, ammunition, etc.) and carrying out airstrikes that assist Danab forces in recapturing territory from al-Shabaab.⁴⁸

i Kenya is gearing up to possibly lead a multinational security force in Haiti, while the tough economic policies the government has taken at home have raised concerns among locals. See Nyaboga Kiage, “Haiti mission: Police deployment on course despite court injunction,” *Nation*, December 11, 2023, and “Schools in Kenya close over cost-of-living demonstrations,” “Focus on Africa” podcast, July 19, 2023.

j Ethiopia’s federal government has been battling rebellions in the country. See “Ethiopia’s Ominous New War in Amhara,” *International Crisis Group Briefing* 194, November 16, 2023.

In February 2024, the United States signed a memorandum of understanding with Somalia for the construction of five military bases for Somalia’s National Army’s Danab Brigade.⁴⁹ As the Somali offensive continues, U.S. policy toward Somalia seems likely to continue to be focused on containing the threat posed by al-Shabaab through military assistance.⁵⁰ This military support has played an important role in helping Somalia’s federal forces counter al-Shabaab.

Funding for ATMIS in the last year of its mission, in particular, remains a key challenge to a successful transition in December 2024.⁵¹ By the end of 2022, the mission was already facing an overall funding shortfall of EUR 25.8 million, which only increased over 2023.⁵² In a communique issued by the African Union Peace and Security Council that was publicized in April 2023, the Council expressed “deep concern over the inadequate, unsustainable and unpredictable financing for ATMIS, including the significant funding shortfalls, which continues to persist.”⁵³ As mentioned, the A.U. mission is scheduled to draw down in phases, with the full drawdown in December 2024, but technical pauses have financially strained the mission. By April 2023, the mission was unable to meet the cost of the delayed drawdown, further raising ATMIS’ financial deficit.⁵⁴ The financial strain was further exacerbated by the most recent request in September 2023 for another technical pause.⁵⁵ The European Union remains the biggest financial contributor to ATMIS^k but has substantially reduced its contribution in support of ATMIS’ military component from Euro 140 million for 2022 to 85 million for 2023.⁵⁶ The federal government of Somalia and the African Union have considered non-traditional donors such as Turkey and the Gulf States to support ATMIS, but thus far, no other external actors, including longtime external partners, have stepped up to fill the gap.⁵⁷

Logistical and Holding Challenges

The August 2023 attack in Cowsweyne laid bare another set of obstacles to the government’s counterinsurgency efforts, namely logistical and holding challenges. The ambitious timelines set by the government have meant that its military strategy has been hurried, resulting in vulnerabilities. Rather than prioritize the consolidation of early territorial gains by securing surrounding roads and highways and cordoning them off to al-Shabaab’s retaliatory attacks, the government has instead focused on quickly recapturing many large towns over a short period of time.⁵⁸ As a consequence, federal forces have faced difficulties in *holding* recently recovered territories. For instance, al-Shabaab managed to recapture some of the territory it had lost in the early months of the offensive in Hirshabelle once the government expanded its offensive to Galmudug state.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, in August 2023 in Cowsweyne, the national army’s hastily erected garrisons were overrun by al-Shabaab militants only days after the insurgents withdrew from the area.⁶⁰

Compounding the hasty pace of the offensive is the reality that the government is still in the process of building up its national army, with a goal to have a full army and federal security sector by end of 2024. In addition to skepticism about the ability of the

k The European Union supported the ATMIS military component with EUR 85 million in 2023, and a further EUR 33 million to the civilian and police components in 2023 and 2024. See “EU Statement: UN High Level Meeting on ATMIS Financing and Resourcing for the Somali Security Transition,” European External Action Service, March 22, 2023.

“Compounding the hasty pace of the offensive is the reality that the government is still in the process of building up its national army, with a goal to have a full army and federal security sector by end of 2024. In addition to skepticism about the ability of the government to deliver on its force generation plans, the lack of a fully developed army has meant that the government has been over-reliant on its more professional and foreign-trained special units: Danab (lightning) forces trained by U.S. forces and the Gorgor brigade trained by Turkey.”

government to deliver on its force generation plans, the lack of a fully developed army has meant that the government has been over-reliant on its more professional and foreign-trained special units: Danab (lightning) forces trained by U.S. forces and the Gorgor brigade trained by Turkey.⁶¹ Despite being primarily suited to special operations raids, these forces have been used to clear territory and at times function as holding forces.⁶² The challenge with this approach is that it can, as is the case with the Gorgor during the Cowsweyne attack, make these forces “sitting ducks” for an al-Shabaab attack.⁶³

Additionally, the government’s strategy does not fully explain which forces are responsible for holding territory. Without a comprehensive strategy that clearly coordinates federal, state, and clan forces, among other stakeholders, “there is a high risk the current effort will eventually falter” and counterinsurgency operations will be disjointed.⁶⁴ Forces such as the national army, Danab, and Gorgor may be useful for offensive operations but lack the training in community engagement, while state-level security forces are better suited to engage local populations but vary significantly in their capabilities.⁶⁵ Consequently, with a national army that is still in development, and state forces with varying capacity to significantly contribute to the offensive, there is a risk that if and when the government regains more territory from al-Shabaab, it may stretch its human and financial resources as it has done before.⁶⁶ Moreover, rather than being drawn into the offensive simultaneously, the way that different clan militia have mobilized themselves against al-Shabaab has occurred separately, resulting in a “lack of concurrent operations,” which tends to advantage al-Shabaab who is able to counter one community at a time.⁶⁷

In fact, the federal forces’ inability to hold recovered territory and questions about which forces are appropriate to play a holding role are recurring issues. Several key cities, towns, and villages across Somalia have exchanged hands between al-Shabaab and the government’s forces and its allies for years.⁶⁸ For years, Somali and A.U. forces would gain control of territory in the countryside, hold

it for a few weeks, and then retreat and al-Shabaab would return.⁶⁹ This pattern of temporary gains and quick losses impacts broader efforts toward stabilization. For populations living in these often-rural territories, confidence in the government’s ability to deliver security wanes and, as is discussed in the next section, can leave residents hesitant to collaborate with government forces.

Political Infighting and Clan Divisions

Another obstacle to the government’s offensive has been the difficulty the federal government has faced in gaining support for its offensive among some clans. Clan alliances have been integral to the government’s initial success in dislodging al-Shabaab from their strongholds in central Somalia particularly during the first phase of the offensive. While some clans naturally rose up against al-Shabaab, the government has had to work to persuade others to join its offensive in the central regions of the country, facing resistance in some cases.⁷⁰ For instance, some communities in Hirshabelle and Galmudug have been hesitant to collaborate with government forces due to fear of al-Shabaab reprisals in the event the government is unable to hold territory.⁷¹ In areas of Hiraan and Mudug, some sub-clans¹ have signed agreements with al-Shabaab stipulating that they would not participate in the government’s offensive for their safety.⁷² In other cases, such as in the Mudug region, tensions between government and local clans have been the result of local perceptions of the government’s previous failures to assist local communities against al-Shabaab.⁷³

Al-Shabaab has also engaged in its own countermobilization efforts.⁷⁴ According to the International Crisis Group’s reporting, offensive operations into Galgaduud in the fall of 2022 initially stalled south of Qaayib due to al-Shabaab’s mobilization of sub-clans to counter the government’s recruitment efforts.⁷⁵ Since December 2022, al-Shabaab’s efforts to recruit its own clan support have continued, particularly in Galmudug state. As James Barnett has outlined, “none of the clans that it [al-Shabaab] has rallied to its side are particularly powerful or well-armed.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, mobilizing these communities not only signals al-Shabaab’s willingness to partner with other clans, but also increases the possibility of clan conflict within federal member states.⁷⁷ Reports from September 2023 also indicate that al-Shabaab has partnered with clan militias to defend areas in Galmudug state—such as Ceel Buur and Ceel Dheere, among others—from security forces.⁷⁸

The competition for local clan support also has direct implications for stabilization in regions recovered. In areas where militia rose up against al-Shabaab, public support for the counterinsurgency offensive does not automatically mean those people decisively support the government or view it as legitimate. As the International Crisis Group reports “clan militias and government forces are making common cause against a common enemy, and the appeal of jointly fighting Al-Shabaab lies in the prospect of a better future.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, locals living in the hinterland areas that the government’s offensive operations are trying to recover have significant needs and high expectations of a government that has already made ambitious promises.⁸⁰ If the government fails to deliver or is perceived to have broken its

¹ Sub-clans reported to have entered such agreements with al-Shabaab include the Haber Gedir/Salebaan in Xarardheere town in Mudug in December 2022, and the Hawadle Galible Hassan Agoon sub-clan (among other sub-clans) in Bulo Burto district in April 2023. See “Somalia: Counter-Insurgency Operation;” “Sustaining Gains in Somalia’s Offensive against Al-Shabaab.”

promises, it will most certainly lose the local public trust it needs to legitimize its efforts, creating room for a possible al-Shabaab return.

Beyond competing with al-Shabaab for clan support, political infighting and clashes between sub-clans have also undermined the government's efforts to recruit local support and threaten to fragment security responses into clan rivalries. In Hirshabelle state, political turbulence between the Hirshabelle State President Ali Abdullahi Hussein and the Hiiraan Governor Ali Jeyte Osman triggered disorder in the state in June 2023 that soured the federal government's relationship with some sub-clans, particularly the Hawadle.⁸¹ Meanwhile in the southern member states, longstanding tensions between Jubaland's president, Ahmed Madobe, and the regional administration in the Gedo region threaten to fragment efforts to counter al-Shabaab.⁸² In South West State, disputes between clan-based security forces over tax collection resulted in violent clashes in June 2023 involving members of the Somali army mostly from the Hawiye clan clashing with South West police forces hailing from the Rahanweyne clan in Lower Shabelle.⁸³ The federal government has made efforts through a series of National Consultative Councils with member states to address political rivalries and refocus efforts toward countering al-Shabaab.⁸⁴ However, without meaningful settlement of these often-longstanding disputes and grievances, there is a risk that rivalries will impede meaningful cooperation in the fight against al-Shabaab. Furthermore, with the next round of member state-level elections^m due in November 2024, political tensions across most of the member states are mounting over significant delays of the electoral dates and a lack of clarity over the modality of the elections.⁸⁵ If the polls prove not to be fair, transparent, and inclusive, or if the federal government is seen to interfere with state-level elections, then there is a risk these tensions could further fragment member states.⁸⁶

Al-Shabaab Stalling Progress

Lastly, al-Shabaab has proven capable of stalling the government's progress in the offensive. Despite losing key territory in Hirshabelle and Galmudug during the first phase of the offensive, al-Shabaab has since the beginning of 2023 managed to regroup, conduct retaliatory attacks, and attempt to reclaim lost territory. In addition to entering agreements with local clans and countermobilizing its own clan support against government forces,⁸⁷ as discussed earlier, the group has maintained a steady pace of guerrilla attacks in Hiraan and Galmudug's more remote territories.

Since early 2023, these attacks have included the frequent deployment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) followed by fighters with small arms and light weapons targeting government holding forces,⁸⁸ a common tactic the group deploys.⁸⁹ For example, in January 2023, the group reportedly deployed 12 vehicle-borne IEDs against Somali forces in towns located in central Somalia.⁹⁰ In one instance, al-Shabaab managed to hit Danab forces in Galcad (Galmudug state), resulting in significant losses that set back the offensive in the region in the following weeks.⁹¹ Since then, the insurgent group has continued to attack towns and villages such as Massagaweyne in Galguduud region (Galmudug state), and has even regained some lost territory in Hirshabelle.⁹² Other notable attacks include the August 2023 Cowsweyne attack that caused

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government forces to retreat from recently captured territory,⁹³ while the following month saw the highest number of suicide bomb attacks (14) conducted by the group since 2006.⁹⁴ Al-Shabaab has also targeted Somali state officials in an effort to discourage them from supporting the federal government's offensive or in retaliation for those who have supported the campaign.⁹⁵ According to ACLED reporting, 76 instances of al-Shabaab perpetrating violence against local Somali state officials occurred between August and October 2023.⁹⁶ Furthermore, in February 2024, al-Shabaab attacked a military base in Mogadishu, killing four Emirati troops and a Bahraini military officer in the country on a training mission.⁹⁷

These attacks should come as no surprise as this is not the first time al-Shabaab has had to recover from territorial losses. In its more than 15 years of existence, the group has proven to be resilient. Al-Shabaab has previously been pushed out of Mogadishu and major cities between 2011 and 2015, experienced significant battlefield losses, and endured internal divisions that have threatened to erode its internal cohesion.⁹⁸ Despite these challenges, the group has adapted, controlling large swathes of rural territory and small towns across southern and central Somalia, embedding itself within local communities as a viable alternative to the state, and managing to build up significant influence in areas beyond its territorial control.⁹⁹

Al-Shabaab has also honed its ability to deploy guerrilla tactics shortly after withdrawing from controlled territory.¹⁰⁰ This often involves initially withdrawing its forces deep into al-Shabaab-controlled territories, then after a few days beginning to isolate the towns and villages liberated by the government and A.U. forces, conducting hit-and-run attacks on surrounding roads and highways, and at times directly attacking garrisons within the liberated territory.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, it is important to remain cautious about equating the number of cities, towns, or villages taken over by the government as proof of success against al-Shabaab.¹⁰² The insurgent group may be pushed out of territory, but it frequently returns as a spoiler, deploying its guerrilla tactics and stalling the government's progress.

Conclusion

The initial optimism that characterized the first few months of the Somali government's offensive against al-Shabaab has over time diminished as the counterinsurgency's momentum has stalled in the central regions of the country. Certainly, clan mobilization

^m All federal member states, aside from the semi-autonomous Puntland, are due to hold concurrent elections in November.

against al-Shabaab remains a significant development, and has arguably been the most consequential for the government's initial gains against al-Shabaab. However, moving forward, significant obstacles need to be overcome before the government can effectively consolidate its gains and fully liberate and stabilize the country.

Importantly, the government needs to align its goals with more realistic timelines. The president's proclamations about defeating al-Shabaab within months and fully building up Somalia's federal security capacity by December 2024 unnecessarily inflate public and partner expectations and risk stretching the national army's limited human and material resources as a result of a hurried military strategy. In the near term, the government's strategy should consider prioritizing the consolidation of its security forces' hold on the territories it has recovered, rather than attempting to expand its operations further southward into al-Shabaab's strongholds. The Somali government needs to demonstrate that it can administer recently recovered areas well before it tries to liberate more. A focus on consolidating gains should be accompanied by efforts to meaningfully settle longstanding political disputes and clan rivalries that impede meaningful cooperation in the fight against

al-Shabaab.

On the part of international and regional partners of the Somali government—such as the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Turkey, UAE, Qatar, and the African Union—efforts should be made to step up support for a stabilization project in the near term and after the ATMIS drawdown date in December 2024. Importantly, there needs to be more explicit discussions and planning on what type of stabilization support would need to follow a potential ATMIS exit and where funding would come from to support such an effort.

Lastly, recent developments, such as Somalia's entry into the East Africa Communityⁿ and the recent lifting of the 31-year U.N. arms embargo,¹⁰³ and how they will impact Somalia's operations against al-Shabaab and prospects for stabilizing the country are yet to be seen but should be closely followed. **CTC**

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