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1.2.2. Al-Shabaab control areas, presence, and influence

Al-Shabaab is Somalia's 'armed Islamist extremist and self-declared al-Qaeda affiliate organisation'.81 As indicated by the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in its October 2024 report, 'Al-Shabaab remains the most significant threat to peace and security in Somalia'.82 The group is characterised by enduring resilience and capacity to absorb attacks.83 During the reporting period, the group has managed to repel repeated Government-backed military offensives, to recapture previously liberated areas, and to carry out complex attacks against the Government, ATMIS, and international targets, as well as civilians and the business community.84 According to the Center for Preventing Action's backgrounder, the group's overall goal remains 'to destroy the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), rid their country of foreign forces, and establish a "Greater Somalia," joining all ethnic Somalis across East Africa under strict Islamic rule.'85

Armed attacks. In the reference period Al-Shabaab has continued to stage high profile attacks in Mogadishu, as well as elsewhere in Somalia, resorting to improvised explosive devices (IEDs), rockets and mortar attacks, while also engaging in military operations in various regions across the country.86 In Mogadishu alone, in the reference period, Al-Shabaab carried out more than 160 attacks against civilians.87 The deadliest of these were: Pearl Beach Hotel attack, on 9 June 2023 (16 casualties);88 SYL Hotel attack, on 15 March 2024 (34 casualties);89 Top Coffee attack,90 on 14 July 2024 (31 casualties);91 Beach View Hotel restaurant attack,92 on 2 August 2024 (287 casualties);93 Tea shops bombing, on 17 August 2024 (28 casualties);94 Gel Doh bar and restaurant attack, on 28 September 2024 (16 casualties);95 café bombing outside a police training school, on 17 October 2024 (13 casualties);96 President convoy attack, on 18 March 2025 (at least 10 fatalities);97 Aden Adde International airport and Halane compound mortar attack, on 19 March 2025.98 Another major attack, this time in Beletweyne, in Hiraan region, took place on 11 March 2025 at the Hotel Cairo (unknown casualties, 6-11 fatalities).99

Moreover, Al-Shabaab in the last part of the reference period reversed most of the gains of the Government-led offensive of 2022 and beginning of 2023.100 In particular, after having deliberately reduced its military operations in the course of 2024,101 in the period February - March 2025, Al-Shabaab engaged in a major offensive against Government controlled areas, locations, and towns, starting from Hiraan and Middle Shabelle regions.102 Within this context

the group made incursions into Ceel Saleebaan, located at about 20 km from Adan Yabal,[103] Biya Cadde, located approximately 40 km east of Jowhar,[104] Jowhar,[105] and Balcad, located 30 kilometres from Mogadishu.[106] On 17-18 March 2025, as a reaction to the offensive, the FGS authorities deployed police and the Somali Custodial Corps to the front-lines in Middle Shabelle.[107] A few days later, 145 police officers disappeared from the local Police Academy in Mogadishu, and had reportedly abandoned their post with some of them suspected to have defected to Al-Shabaab.[108]

Simultaneously, the group launched its offensive in Lower Shabelle,[109] including in Awdheegle,[110] and Afgoye.[111] In mid-March 2025 Al-Shabaab started to encircle Mogadishu,[112] with incursions in Ceelasha Biyaha, a strategic town 15 km from Mogadishu, Xaawo-Cabdi, Lafoole,[113] and others along the Mogadishu-Afgooye road,[114] while establishing checkpoints there,[115] as well as on Mogadishu-Balcad road.[116]

On 4 March 2025, the US embassy in Mogadishu warned of imminent Al-Shabaab attacks in multiple locations in Mogadishu, including the Aden Adde International Airport.[117] On 18 March 2025, Al-Shabaab attempted to assassinate the President, with a major IED attack on his convoy while transiting through Mogadishu.[118]

Control areas. Apart from large swathes of territory in South-Central Somalia, which are firmly controlled by the group – notably in Hiraan, Galgaduud, and Southern Somalia - Al-Shabaab contest and exert its influence over larger portions of the country,[119] and controls key routes across South-Central Somalia.[120] Moreover, the group also maintains its strongholds in the north of the country, in the western Al-Madow mountains, between the Bari and the Sanaag regions.[121] For more information on territorial control across Somalia, see the control maps on the situation **at the beginning** (1 April 2023, **Map 2**) and **at the end** (31 March 2025, **Map 3**) of the reference period of this report. For more information on checkpoints and routes controlled by the group see section 1.7 Checkpoints and road security in Somalia.

During the reference period the group has maintained, gained, or regained control, in full or in part – at times temporarily – of the following locations in South-Central Somalia:

- Bacaadweyne, Caad, Camaara, Xiinlabi, in Mudug;[122]
- Budbud, Galcad, Cowsweyne, Ceel Buur, in Galgaduud;[123]
- Booco, Nuur Fanax, Beero Yabal, Cell Qooxle, Garasyaani, Aborey, in Hiraan;[124]
- Ciidciidka,[125] and Cali Fooldheere, Ceel Baraf, Ruun Nirgood, Ceel Cali Axmed, Caadley, Miir Tuugo, Al-Kowthar, Daaru Nicma, Xalfooley, Nuur Dugle;[126] Shabeellow, Mansuur, Caadleey, Huriwaa, Oobaale, Qurac Madoobe, Miirtaqwo, Biya Cadde,[127] Bursha Sheekh, Ceel Xarar, Xaruur, and Laba Garas,[128] Guulane and Xagarey,[129] Masjid Cali Gaduud,[130] in Middle Shabelle;
- Afgooye-Mogadishu road,[131] Awdheegle town,[132] strategic bridges in the area - Awdheegle, Bariire, and Sabiib and Caanole[133] - Bariire town,[134] in Lower Shabelle.

Unlike previous offensives where the group typically seized new territory and then withdrew, Al-Shabab appears to be consolidating its positions and gains.[135] Moreover, the situation in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle remains particularly uncertain at the end of the reference period, in light of Shabaab's ability 'to mount such a large fighting force over a large area'.[136] The group may

count on a significant fighting force in the region, ‘possibly numbering in the hundreds of fighters’.137

During the reference period, the only exception to this overall trend is represented by the success of government-led operations in Jubbaland:

- in summer 2024, where federal and regional forces repelled Al-Shabaab attacks and reportedly cleared about 100 km on the route linking Kismayo to Afmadow;138
- at the end of March 2025, when following massive bombing and air striking of Jilib - Al-Shabaab stronghold in Middle Juba - many militants fled the town, whose key facilities were also severely impacted.139

Al-Shabaab forces. Relatively recent estimates indicate that Al-Shabaab had between 7 000 and 12 000 fighters at the end of 2023.140 However, Al-Shabaab’s 'true strength remains unknown’. The militants recursively replenish their losses through forcible recruitment and by cutting deals with clans.141 During the reference period, Al-Shabaab has launched massive recruitment campaigns, including: on occasion of the signing of the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, on 1 January 2024, when the militant group called for the Somalis ‘to join in defending their land from Ethiopia and other foreigners’;142 during the first half of 2024, when the group was reported to make renewed efforts to recruit fighters to counter the offensives by the FGS, and to look for ‘individuals with engineering expertise to assist with drone modifications, as well as clerics for propaganda dissemination’.143 At the beginning of March 2025, in the course of Al-Shabaab offensive in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle, the group released a ‘video purportedly showing hundreds of newly trained militants’.144 This happened again at the end of March 2025.145

Within this context, the UN Secretary General, in the latest report on Children and Armed Conflict, indicated that more than 900 children were recruited and 663 were abducted by Al-Shabaab in the course of 2022,146 mostly in Bay, Bakool, Hiraan, Middle Juba, and Lower Shabelle.147 According to the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, there are no indications that patterns in the recruitment and abduction of children at the hands of Al-Shabaab have changed ever since and in the period September 2023 – August 2024.148

For further information on Al-Shabaab as a military and political organisation, including insights into the group’s outreach, see the EASO COI report Somalia: Actors (July 2021).149 For additional details about conflict layers and dynamics at federal and regional level see section 1.3 as well as the regional chapters of this report. For information on Al-Shabaab financial capacity and source of revenue see section on 1.10 Individuals who have to pay taxes to Al-Shabaab in the EUAA COI Report Somalia: Country Focus (May 2025).150

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