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2.1.2. Middle Juba

(a) Background

Middle Juba region is located in the southern part of Somalia and shares internal borders with Gedo to the north and north-west, Bay to the north-east, Lower Shabelle to the east and Lower Juba to the south. To the south-east, it borders the Indian Ocean. The region is divided into three districts: Bu'aale, Jilib and Saakow. The region's capital is Bu'aale.503

As of September 2024, an IPC document estimated the population of Middle Juba region at 430 129.504 The region's demographic composition is very diverse. The Somali Bantu are the most populous ethnic group in the region. The two strongest clans both in political and military terms are the Aulihan (Darood) and the Mohamed Zubier/Ogaden (Darood) clans.505 For more general background information on Middle Juba region, see section 2.1.2. of the EUAA COI Report Somalia: Security Situation (February 2023). For more detailed information on Middle Juba region's clan composition, see section 2.1.2.1 of the EASO COI Report Somalia: Security Situation (September 2021).

(b) Actors' presence and conflict dynamics

Al-Shabaab control areas, presence and influence, along with other actors

Middle Juba region is an Al-Shabaab stronghold506 and has been described as the group's 'center of gravity' in Somalia.507 Maps published by PolGeoNow show that Al-Shabaab has been in control of virtually the entire region, including the towns of Bu'aale, Jilib, Saakow, and Salagle (**Map 3** Somalia – Approximate Territorial Control as of 31 March 2025508 and **Map 2** Somalia – Approximate Territorial Control as of 1 April

2023509). The town of Jilib serves as the group's main centre of command510 and de facto headquarters.511

Conflict dynamics

The SNA and international forces carried out a number of operations against Al-Shabaab in various parts of Middle Juba, including Jilib, Bu'aale, and Saakow (October 2023)512 and the border area between Middle Juba and Lower Juba (December 2023). 513 In mid-2024, Jubbaland and SNA forces (Danab special forces) launched a ground operation in Jubbaland that also targeted Al-Shabaab strongholds in Jilib district.514

Airstrikes attributed by some sources to US forces reportedly killed or injured senior Al-Shabaab commanders in the Jilib area (in May 2023,515 December 2023516 and notably in a series of strikes in March 2025517) and dozens of fighters of the group in Jilib,518 the Arabow area519 and the border zones between Middle Juba and Lower Juba520 and Lower Shabelle.521 Somali officials claimed that, following the March 2025 airstrikes, several high-ranking Al-Shabaab commanders and their families were abandoning Jilib town and relocating to new places to hide.522 In 2023, Kenyan forces also carried out a series of airstrikes against Al-Shabaab positions,523 including in Saakow, Salagle524 and allegedly Jilib525 and Bu'aale,526 although the impact of these strikes on the group's activities remained unclear.527

Several aerial strikes attributed to international forces, including those of the USA528 and Kenya,529 were alleged to have caused civilian deaths or injuries in Saakow (June 2023),530 Salagle (also June 2023)531 and Jilib (August 2023,532 December 2023,533 and February 2024534).

Over the reference period, Al-Shabaab carried out several public executions, including of two Somali soldiers in Saakow535 and at least 12 individuals on charges of spying for Kenyan, US, FGS and Jubbaland intelligence agencies in Jilib.536

☐ (c) Recent security trends

Security incidents, estimated civilian fatalities and casualties

Between 1 April 2023 and 21 March 2025, ACLED reported 57 security incidents in Middle Juba region, including battles, explosions, or other forms of remote violence and violence against civilians, causing 350 fatalities. **Figure 9** below shows their evolution per type across the reference period. At district level, Jilib recorded the most security

incidents (35 incidents), followed by Saakow (12 incidents) and Bu'aale (10 incidents). 538

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Figure 9. Evolution of ACLED security events coded 'battles', 'explosions/remote violence' and 'violence against civilians' between 1 April 2023 and 21 March 2025 in Middle Juba.539

ACLED recorded 51 incidents involving Al-Shabaab (coded as either 'Actor 1', 'Associated Actor 1', 'Actor 2', or 'Associated Actor 2'). Of these incidents, 14 involved both Al-Shabaab and the Military or Police Forces of Somalia.540

For incidents involving civilian fatalities, please see below an illustrative and non-exhaustive list:

- on 15 August 2023, four civilians were killed in alleged Kenyan airstrikes on a civilian area in the centre of Jilib town. Four other civilians were injuredò;541
- on 15 January 2024, Al-Shabaab publicly executed seven men in Jilib, accusing them of spying for the FGS and the US and Kenyan governments.542

Conflict-related displacement

Between 1 April 2023 and 16 March 2025, 52 217 individuals were newly displaced from Middle Juba due to conflict or insecurity, according to the UNHCR PRMN. Of this group, the majority (32 605 individuals) were displaced within the same administrative region, while 19 612 individuals were displaced to other regions, including Gedo, Lower Juba, and Benadir. During the same period, only 245 individuals arrived from other regions (Gedo, Lower Juba, and Bay). At district level, Saakow was the district most affected by individuals leaving for other regions (9 267) and Jilib was the district most affected by intra-regional IDP departures to other locations within Middle Juba region (12 687).543 For information on conflict-related displacement prior to April 2023, see section 2.1.2. of the EUAA COI Report Somalia: Security Situation (February 2023).

Other impacts on civilian life

UNOCHA recorded no humanitarian access incidents in Middle Juba region between April and December 2023544 and over the year 2024.545 A suspected Kenyan airstrike on Saakow town in June 2023 was reported to have destroyed key telecommunications installations.546 According to an October 2024 report by the UN Panel of Experts, Middle Juba was one of the regions where abductions of children by Al-Shabaab for recruitment and use was most common.547 No further information could be found within the time constraints of this report.

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