

Ending Chaos: Seizing the Opportunity and Revitalizing Somalia's Offensive Against Al Shabaab?¹

Mohamed Husein Gaas

Raad Peace Research Institute (RAPRI), Mogadishu

Summary²

Al Shabaab has been a persistent threat to Somalia and neighbouring countries for almost two decades, despite consistent counter-terrorism operations waged by the Somali Forces, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), now African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) forces, and International Allies. In response to this threat and to seize the opportunity presented by the uprising of the Macawisley militia combined with the previously agreed end of the current ATMIS, the Somali government declared 'a total war' to liberate the country from Al Shabaab in August 2022. However, the offensive faces significant challenges, including a lack of shared vision, coordination issues, inadequate civilian protection, insufficient resource allocation, and the absence of long-term planning and effective international support. As ATMIS forces prepare to depart, an urgent action that prioritize enhancing international collaboration, improving coordination among stakeholders, and bolstering civilian protection measures is needed. Additionally, long-term strategies such as Security Sector Reform, deepening federalism, and community engagement are crucial for Somalia to finally overcome the multifaceted threat posed by Al Shabaab. Failure to implement these measures

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not only jeopardizes immediate security but also perpetuates instability, hampering long-term stabilisation and state building efforts.

Background

Since its public emergence in 2007, Al Shabaab has exerted considerable influence across central and southern Somalia. Al Shabaab has managed to infiltrate both government institutions and the security apparatus. Operatives frequently bribe their way into the highly securitized centre of Mogadishu to conduct attacks, albeit a recent government security reform concerning the National Intelligence Agency (NISA) and checkpoints in and around Mogadishu, has decreased Al Shabaab's room of maneuver in the Somali capital from mid-2022 onward. In central and southern Somalia, Al Shabaab has effectively manipulated clan dynamics and inter or intra-clan conflicts to gain or keep a foothold. Further, the group also recruits individuals from marginalized communities, often by exploiting grievances or offering upward social mobility. It is adept at twisting the economic problems and desperation in which many Somalis find themselves by offering a salary to fighters and some social security to their families. Further, it collects 'taxes' in the capital, forcing big businesses to pay them in order to avoid reprisals. These tactics - alongside Somali government weakness, corruption, lack of professionalism, and in-fighting - underpin Al Shabaab's resilience in the face of massive national and international counter-terrorism operations for almost 20 years. Nevertheless, since 2022, the militant group capacities have been significantly weakened by the bolstered capacity of the Somali forces, as well as the opposition of the populace against its

brutality, and the ongoing offensive against it.

Government Offensive and Its Strategy

After assuming the presidency in May 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mahamoud capitalized on the opportunity of uprising of a clan militia known as a Macawisley in Hiiraan region and launched an offensive against Al Shabaab in central Somalia in August 2022. Besides this, the government's decision was underpinned by the planned withdrawal of the AU troops in Somalia, (ATMIS). The decision marked a decisive shift in the government's approach towards countering Al Shabaab. Mogadishu now, by 2022 took the lead, whereas counterterrorism beyond the capital had previously been led by external actors. Until early 2023, the government forces and allied clan militias captured many areas from Al Shabaab, and it appeared that the offensive was progressing quickly. It was considered to be the first leg of an offensive that, once central Somalia was freed from Al Shabaab, was supposed to extend into southern Somalia, particularly in Jubaland and the Southwest States. Unfortunately, while this early phase offensive in 2022 has weakened Al Shabaab, the militant organization remained in control of considerable areas in Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Southwest and Jubaland

states of the country.

In early 2023, the government-led offensive came to a halt. There were several reasons behind this outcome. First, the Somali army was over-stretched creating a logistical challenge to continue an effective operation over many months along a frontline encompassing several regions (from Lower Shabelle, Middle Shabelle, Hiiraan to Galmudug to southern Mudug). Second, the government was constantly facing a more robust internal opposition in Mogadishu, and it was thus hard to focus on the offensive undeterred. Third, AU forces remained in their positions in the south, and US and Turkish drone support at times arrived late and was paused to be effective.

Finally, the government forces did not have the capacity to cement their authority in the freed territories and Macawisley forces at times engaged in abusing civilians that they were supposed to protect as holding forces. This was especially the case when some of the liberated areas faced local conflicts between clans and clan lineages - incited directly or indirectly by Al Shabaab. Governance and control over clan territories was also complicated by attempts of local sub clans and lineages to attain the lion's share of their respective liberated local districts' incoming administrations. Further, Al Shabaab had also shown the

capacity to attack and overwhelm an army camp as the case of Cawsweyne. Al Shabab initiated revenge by imposing punishment on the local communities and individuals seen by them as collaborating with the government and the SNA. Consequently, this affected the reputation of the government, its legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and their loyalties. This undermined further the offensive especially in the light of Al-Shabaab's claim of victories and the defeat of the SNA. These factors occasionally compelled the army to withdraw, leaving areas susceptible to retaliatory attacks and re-infiltration by Al Shabaab.

Despite these challenges, the offensive was re-launched in mid-2023. The SNA faced major setbacks in August 2023, when Al Shabaab overran several positions, killing considerable troops and seizing military equipment. One of the surprising reasons behind the slowdown of SNA's momentum and retreating from several areas was that previously allied clan militias of Hawadle, Waesle, Murusade, and Saleban of Habar Gidir in Hiran and Galgadud regions had been 'turned around' by Al Shabaab, by promises or coercion, in the first half of 2023. This meant that government forces could not fully rely on their previous partners. Despite these setbacks, the government was able to regain some of its lost territory by late 2023. This period of fighting was particularly bloody. In August 2023, Al Shabaab sources claimed that the militant group had killed roughly 2,500 government soldiers and allied clan militia over the

previous 12 months in central Somalia. However, Somalia's Federal Government did not provide any figures on this, and the figures provided by local communities in the offensive areas are not systematic to be reliable enough.

By October 2023, according to government sources, some 1,700 Al Shabaab militants had been killed in the offensive's first phase. However, in our estimates that number is modest given the offensive's momentum initially, the number of battles, the intensity of the drone attacks that killed at times large number of Al-Shabaab members. Meanwhile, several senior commanders defected to the government. These defectors proven to be a resource to Somali state authorities as they are able to be a constructive tool for the federal government.

The government-led operation up to early 2023 demonstrated unprecedented success on the battlefield, largely due to the determination of the government leadership and the implementation of innovative military, financial, and ideological strategy designed to fight Al-Shabaab. These will be outlined in the following section.

Military Operations

The Federal Government of Somalia has employed first of its kind major military operations against Al Shabaab in August 2022 to reclaiming territories controlled by Al Shabaab and dismantling the militant group's operational capabilities. Through targeted military and financial operations and ideological

campaigns, the Somali government have successfully disrupted Al Shabaab's command structure, dismantled key logistical networks, and liberated territories previously under the group's control. These coordinated efforts have eliminated several high-profile Al Shabaab leaders, undermining the group's ability to plan and execute large-scale attacks. Furthermore, this strategy and the approach that underpinned has further diminished the group's influence. Reforms to the National Intelligence and Security Agency and the checkpoints in Mogadishu in early 2022 have further helped limit the number of Al Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu. These efforts and strategies put together and the mobilisation of local communities to support operations and secure their areas, but also to provide local knowledge and intelligence to the SNA forces has culminated the government's military offensive succeeding in liberating more than 800 to 1000 square kilometers of land previously held by Al Shabaab. By early 2023 as operations advanced only a few districts and small pockets remain in the hands of Al Shabaab in Galmudug and Hirshabelle. However, since late 2023 there has been reversals indicating Al Shabaab's recapture of many areas that the initial government offensive succeeded liberating it. While at the offensive against Al Shabaab seems to have slowed down if it does not have completely stopped, it has played a crucial role in creating a more secure environment in Somalia, as well as limiting Al Shabaab's operational reach and effectiveness. Further, an eventual completion of phase I should set the stage

for the planned June/July 2024 operations that has been repeatedly delayed but is intended to liberate areas in Jubaland and Southwest State that Al Shabaab controls.

Financial Strategy

The federal government has simultaneously focused on dismantling the financial structure of Al Shabaab. Mogadishu has sought to freeze the assets of the terrorist group and shutter its businesses by closing its bank accounts, EVC accounts, and networks, and has also passed legislation that criminalizes dealing with Al Shabaab. The government, however, is unable to target Al Shabaab's financial activities outside of Somalia. In tandem with these financial restrictions, the government has implemented robust legislative frameworks to criminalize any association with Al Shabaab, thereby discouraging support from sympathizers and potential collaborators. This legal approach serves as a deterrent, dissuading individuals and entities from engaging in any form of transaction or support that could bolster the group's operational capabilities.

Furthermore, the government's increased allocation of financial resources to military operations has played a crucial role in fortifying the offensive against Al Shabaab. This allocation has ensured the availability of essential supplies and sustained support for the troops, reinforcing the government's commitment to eradicating the threat posed by Al Shabaab. Essentially, support has also been given to rebuilding liberated communities, refurbishing

schools, recruiting new teachers, changing the syllabus of Al Shabaab-controlled schools, building new hospitals, and nominating new district authorities. It should be mentioned here that diaspora and private sector, especially businessmen hailing from liberated areas has contributed to these efforts. For instance, Adale Districts, Aden Yabal District and some villages diaspora and businesses hailing from there built schools, hospitals, markets, and rehabilitated government buildings like police station, in some area they were able to build an airport /landing strip.

Ideological strategy

The emphasis on the ideological dimension of the offensive reflects a proactive approach aimed at dismantling the extremist narrative perpetuated by Al Shabaab. By actively engaging in efforts to promote alternative narrative centred on principles of peace, tolerance, and cooperation, the government has sought to reshape the collective mindset of affected communities. Part of this strategy involves organizing meetings of well-known religious scholars from across Somalia to issue IFTA regarding what Islam believes about Al Shabaab. The position of those scholars was that Al Shabaab are 'Khawarij,' meaning 'out of Islam' and opposing the real teachings of Islam. Such meetings were held in Mogadishu and Dhusamareb during the latter half of 2022 and early 2023 respectively. Other engagement of religious leaders and clan elders but also the prime minister, president and other officials were broadcasted across different media channels (social media

included) in various occasions including the Friday's prayers topic(khudba)

All these efforts have not only helped undermine Al-Shabaab's extremist ideology but has also fostered a sense of unity and shared values within the affected communities. Indeed, despite its shortcoming, the government's multi-pronged strategy has proven effective, resulting in the liberation of significant from Al Shabaab control in 2022 and early 2023. However, inherent within this strategy lies potential vulnerabilities and gaps that warrant scrutiny and further attention.

Identified Gaps and Challenges

Despite the successes achieved thus far, the offensive strategy is not without its potential pitfalls and shortcomings. First is the ongoing struggle to establish government's authority in areas freed from Al Shabaab. Second, is the continued shortage of needed force, most important being the lack of holding forces that can perform the role of police as well. However, the SNA's lack of harmonization i. e. its various military trainings, doctrines that consequently, its lack of a sufficiently developed sense of camaraderie as members of a single national army serving in a single national purpose could be a factor as well. Third, the federal government faces significant challenges from tackling the Somaliland-Ethiopia MoU, and opposition with some actors seeking to undermine what

President Hassan Sheikh's administration is trying to achieve. Fourth, Somalia's external partners have not given sufficient support in the fight against Al Shabaab. This is perhaps epitomized by the African Union forces not engaging offensive in central and southern Somalia. Finally, clan militia protecting communities from retaliation and re-infiltration from Al Shabaab remains a challenge.

Lack of Shared Vision and coordination

Different communities hold diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives on ongoing operations. Moreover, distinct government institutions exhibit varying understandings of the operation's goals and the probability of its success. The emphasis on Galmudug and Hirshabele, both linked to the president has elicited some criticisms. The rationale behind focus on these states was largely because of the ongoing uprising against Al-Shabaab was raging in there and the fact these states are largely populated by a single clan family. It should be noted that there is clan dimension to politics in the country as Somali population is a divided and not fully healed from the civil war and its perils. Then president's focus on these areas he hails from, gives him leverage and boosts his possibilities to be effective. Nevertheless, a unifying vision is crucial, as the absence of a shared understanding and vision among authorities and population regarding the offensive's approach undermines it. SNA forces need the creation of unified command and structure that connect them to enhance

the effectiveness of their operations including the offensive. These issues and the exclusive focus of the government on central regions in Somalia has also partially allowed Al Shabaab to stage a resurgence in even liberated areas and slowing down of the offensive in late 2023. In moving the offensive forward its crucial to better coordinate operations, with an awareness that any integrated strategy should be promoting synergy among different agencies and stakeholders and better funding which, in turn, maximizes the impact of the government's efforts, ensuring a more robust offensive and enhanced possibility of its success.

Inadequate Resource Allocation

The constraints imposed by limited resources significantly undermine operational performance of the offensive at large. The insufficient availability of resources has posed a considerable challenge and jeopardised the entire operation and exacerbated by poor prioritization. It is imperative to emphasize that the optimal utilization of limited resources for any military campaign. Beside this, the question that looms large is whether international allies have been generous enough to support the government with the adequate resources it needs to overcome the current resource constraints it faces. Therefore, the current allocation of financial resources to the operation requires to guarantee optimal resource availability, their distribution and utilization. The mismanagement or misallocation of the already limited resources could severely impede military

operations, potentially compromising its sustainability. In the light of these proceeding issues, a careful and strategic evaluation is essential to identify, acquire sufficient resourcing, and identify areas where resources may be better reallocated for maximum impact, thus enhancing the overall effectiveness of the military offensive.

Civilian protection

While the government acknowledges the critical importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of civilians, the current operations display a significant deficiency in prioritizing civilian protection with a profound consequences for the overall success of the offensive against Al Shabaab. Civilians in affected areas have unwittingly become entangled in the conflict, disrupting their lives, and jeopardising their safety, which undermines the intended objectives of government operations.

It should be noted that, the success of any military operation hinges on an unwavering commitment to shielding against Civilian casualties during combat. In combat operations such issues are an operational challenge that can/should be addressed in improved prior planning and the capacity to better execute them. But then the other aspect civilian protection in liberated areas falls under the responsibility of the administration and security of liberated areas, which appears to be an afterthought in the current military offensive. Neglecting the imperative of

protecting civilians has resulted in considerable collateral damage, causing harm to innocent lives, and eroding public support for the government. This does not only hamper the legitimacy of the operations but also creates an environment ripe for extremist propaganda. It is imperative to recognize that civilian well-being is intrinsically linked to the overall success of the offensive operations and future stability of the country. Thus, robustly prioritizing civilian protection establishes a foundation of trust and support from the local. This, along with improve standard of living, establishing local community-based authority and reconciliation, in turn, acts as a bulwark against extremist ideologies, fostering an environment conducive to long-term stability and the achievement of the initiative's overarching goals. Hence, safeguarding civilians is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity that must be at the forefront of operational planning and execution.

Lack of Long-Term Stability Initiatives

A notable absence of long-term stability initiatives marks the current offensive campaign's management. Instances of the Al Shabaab reclaiming previously liberated areas, coupled with targeted attacks on individuals suspected of supporting the government, have created an atmosphere of fear and distrust within the local communities towards government-led operations.

The repeated reversals of territorial gains by Al Shabaab have not only jeopardized the safety of the residents but have also profoundly undermined their confidence in the efficacy of government initiatives. Consequently, a growing disassociation between the public and the government has emerged as a direct consequence of such experiences. Furthermore, the initiation of the operation without adequate preparation and planning of long term has exacerbated the situation, manifesting in a glaring absence of stabilizing programs. Although current donors' allocations for the stabilization is around 50 million USD, there are competing actors such as the UN, NGOs, CBOs, and government. Thus, the lack of long-term planning, competitions, and lack of coordination has created situations where stabilization initiative are absent in certain areas. In many cases this forced the diaspora and the private sector to fund their respective villages and districts and issues that stabilization initiative should have been dealing. After all, stabilization programs were not and continue to be not unified and are limited or absent in remote areas where it is needed most. Establishing local institutions and the restoration of basic services are essential for promoting a sense of security and normalcy within the affected regions. The overlook of these fundamental aspects has created a void, hindering the potential for sustained success and hence stability of liberated areas.

In light of the prevailing shortcoming and circumstances, it is important for

the offensive strategy to not only focus on short-term successes but also to explore the root causes of extremism. Ignoring the underlying socio-economic and political grievances is a precarious overlook that may lead to a resurgence of extremist activities in the future. Therefore, a comprehensive and holistic approach is essential to address the multifaceted challenges, ensuring immediate security and laying the foundation for enduring stability in the country.

Inadequate International Collaboration

Ensuring the success of the offensive demands a more robust collaborative and support of government efforts. However, the current scenario reveals a disconcerting reality of that the backing from international stakeholders are marred by fragmentation, poor coordination, and a lack of focus which poses a considerable challenge to the effectiveness of the overall offensive and its possibility to succeed.

Recognizing and rectifying these shortcomings necessitates a continuous process of strategic analysis and adaptability. The international collaborative framework must evolve to address the existing gaps, thereby fortifying the overall strategy against the multifaceted threat posed by Al Shabaab. This involves addressing immediate concerns and anticipating and preemptively responding to potential challenges that may emerge in the complex landscape of Somalia's security and its ongoing offensive against Al-Shabaab. Only through a concerted and well-

coordinated international effort can we hope Somalia to overcome the threat of Al Shabaab.

Policy Recommendation

To effectively address the complex threat posed by Al Shabaab in Somalia, a comprehensive strategy that addresses the identified gaps and shortcomings is needed, encompassing both short-term and long-term measures.

Short-Term Measures:

1. **Stabilization Initiatives:**

Prioritizing stabilization efforts in regions liberated from Al Shabaab is crucial. This entails financial support for governance capacity-building, conflict resolution programs, and service delivery and development projects targeting underlying factors contributing to instability. By fostering meaningful stabilization initiatives, Somalia can pave the way for enduring stability in liberated areas.

2. **Community Engagement:**

Building trust, cooperation, and resilience against the influence of Al Shabaab require fundamental community engagement. Initiatives aimed at enhancing intelligence gathering and empowering communities to actively participate in their own security are vital. Counter-radicalization and reintegration programs must

provide educational, vocational, and psychological support to offer alternatives to vulnerable individuals.

3. **International Support and Collaboration:**

Strengthening international cooperation and support including humanitarian, developmental and military assistance, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic engagement is indispensable in bolstering Somalia's efforts to combat Al Shabaab.

Engaging diplomatically to garner support for anti-Al Shabaab initiatives and promoting inclusive governance frameworks is essential for long-term stability.

Long Term Measures:

1. **Security Sector Reform (SSR):**

Priority must be given to the training and capacity building of Somali security forces. This includes enhancing skills in intelligence gathering, counterinsurgency tactics, and community policing. Professionalizing security forces with a focus on accountability, corruption reduction, and human rights promotion is imperative. Equipping them with modern equipment and logistics, such as communication tools and surveillance technology, is equally vital. Effective coordination among interagency, Federal, and regional levels is crucial for success, as is avoiding

duplication of efforts. Additionally, legal framework enhancement, including the criminalization of terrorist activities and judicial capacity-building, is essential for ensuring accountability and upholding the rule of law.

2. **Deepening Federalism and Local Governance:**

Empowering local and regional administrations and ensuring equitable resource allocation play pivotal roles in addressing regional grievances and fostering inclusivity and consensus. By decentralizing governance frameworks to the lowest levels, Somalia can mitigate the appeal of extremist ideologies while promoting community resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the intricate challenge posed by Al Shabaab in Somalia requires a comprehensive and well-considered strategy not only in terms of military campaign but also fostering state-society relations. This includes vital elements such as governance and SSR, better government initiatives, active public engagement, and more robust collaboration and coordination rooted in a common vision across federal and regional states. It further needs deepening the governance frameworks and the federal system. Recognizing that security measures alone are insufficient, equal emphasis is placed on community participation, the establishment of robust stabilization initiatives, enhanced

legal frameworks, and global cooperation. By integrating these diverse approaches, a detailed roadmap emerges, offering a more effective means of countering the intricate threat of extremism and terrorism posed by Al Shabaab in Somalia. This comprehensive strategy acknowledges the interconnected nature of the challenges, aiming to establish a sustainable and resilient framework for counterterrorism.