

Ending 'Forever War' in Somalia: Negotiating with Al-Shabaab

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Summary

The election of a new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud in Somalia, coupled with a recent statement from one of the Harakat Al-Shabaab's leaders, Mahad Warsame Qalley Karate have again put negotiations with Al-Shabaab on the agenda. The war against Al-Shabaab has developed into a 'forever war', where the biggest losers are Somali's civilian population. Negotiating is one of the few alternatives that offers a potential for an end to the more than three decades of war, violence, and instability in the country. Yet, negotiations require Al-Shabaab's willingness to participate, a clear negotiating strategy, including sufficient deterrence against exiting the process, and positive incentives to ensure the will to stay in negotiations. This policy brief highlights the barriers that exist to negotiations and suggest ways to overcome them. It also outlines factors that could result in the failure of negotiations and suggests potential ways to manage possible difficulties that will be encountered during the talks process.¹

Background

In June 2022, the British Channel 4 broadcasted a television interview with Al-Shabaab Commander, Sheikh Mahad Warsame Qalley “Mahad Karate”, commenting on the possibility of Al-Shabaab, which is the largest and strongest Al-Qaeda-affiliated violent extremist group in Africa, engaging in negotiations with the Somali Government.² With a smile, Mahad Karate stated that, “in general, anyone Sharia forbids us from, we won’t negotiate with, and anyone whom Sharia allows us, we will negotiate with, when the time is right.” Mahad Karate’s statement came after a change of government in Mogadishu. Somalia’s new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said that his government would, “in the right time,” negotiate with Al-Shabaab.³ We have also seen interest in such negotiations from Qatar, which already has attempted to facilitate dialogue with the group in the past and has deployed veteran diplomat, Dr. Mutlaq Bin Majed Al-Qahtani, the special envoy in charge of the Doha rounds of negotiations with Taliban to the task. For outside actors negotiations open up possibilities. The recent American strategy towards the sub-Saharan Africa stressed Delivery of Democratic and Security Dividends, and the current strategies to facilitate security have resulted in an unending ‘forever war’ against terror, with many civilian deaths.⁴

Are such negotiations feasible? Some observers suggest that Al-Shabaab has, over the last few years, become economically successful and thus see that the organisation as becoming to immersed in profitable war related business activity to engage in dialogue, as the current status quo is simply very beneficial to them. Others see the organisation as too ideologically

entrenched to enter negotiations. Seemingly, the latter view was reinforced when Al-Shabaab spokesperson Ali Dheere commenting on the appointment of Al-Shabaab defector Muqtar Robow to the of minister of Minister of Endowment and Religion position, rejected negotiations with infidels and terming the government as a ‘Ridda’, an apostate government.⁵ However, both of these two positions avoid addressing what factors could incentivise Al-Shabaab to negotiate, neglecting the mixed signals indicated by “Mahad Karate’s statement. The question might not be ‘if Shabaab will negotiate’, but rather under which circumstances Shabaab will negotiate. Entering negotiations with Al-Shabaab is all about the balance of perceived benefits and losses, and whether these can be changed by policies that could, in some cases aggressively, pressure Al-Shabaab to begin talks, in other cases offer rewards for such engagement, and two specific factors, the clear announcement by the new president Hassan Sheikh of increasing the fight against Al-Shabaab, and the appointment of a defector that opposed Al-Shabaab’s previous leader as a federal minister, might have contributed to Ali Dheere’s comments.

The often-repeated claims that Al-Shabaab is unwilling to enter negotiations are misleading. Indeed, the group has in the past frequently engaged in negotiations at a local level. Local clan leaders, NGOs, and humanitarian actors have all negotiated with Al-Shabaab over mundane issues, such as ‘tax’ exceptions, personnel hiring processes and other local policies. These negotiations have not always been between equals as Al-Shabaab has often been the strongest party, but negotiations have achieved tangible results. As such, under the right circumstances, Al-Shabaab

can and will negotiate.

Nevertheless, for Al-Shabaab there are three key issues that have repeatedly stymied negotiations with the central government in Mogadishu. First, is the **legitimacy** of their negotiating partners. For Al-Shabaab such legitimacy has an *ideological component*, namely that negotiating partners at a national level have an ‘acceptable’ [to Al-Shabaab] and demonstrable Islamic belief via compliance with the Al-Shabaabs perception of Sharia. Indeed, Al-Shabaab has in the past, and in the recent speech by Ahmed Umar, often claimed that the Somali government is “apostate”, and “controlled” by the West⁶ Yet, today, Sharia is an important component of Somali government legislation, which opens up possibilities for common ground, and the government now also has a minister of religion, Mukhtar Robow, that was a former Al-Shabaab leader and shares many of the organisation’s religious beliefs, despite also in a way humiliating the organization.

Second, is the **capacity to deliver**. Al-Shabaab is hesitant to negotiate with a partner that is unable to exercise territorial control and is therefore unable to deliver on its promises. A major obstacle to negotiations between Al-Shabaab and the government of former President Mohamed Abdulaahi Farmajo (2017-2022), was Farmajo’s failure to cooperate with regional governments, making it hard for Al-Shabaab to know how results of negotiations could be implemented.

Third, Al-Shabaab has a focus on **self-preservation**. A crucial demand for negotiations during the proceeding period has been the suspension of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) operations, and the withdrawal of the African Union Peace Operation in Somalia that has recently been renamed as the

African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The dilemma posed by these demands to Somali government and its international partners prior to starting the dialogue is that it removes a potential factor that can be leveraged during the negotiations. For example, if UAV attacks are ended too early, this will put less pressure on Al-Shabaab to negotiate.

Fourth, while Al-Shabaab has failed in its efforts to conquer new areas in Somalia and is in a military stalemate with the forces of local militias, regional states, the Somali National Army, and ATMIS. Yet the group remains financially successful and resilient.⁷ Changing the status quo would also risk lucrative illegal sources of income for Al-Shabaab, especially its ability to tax, and gain protection money from Somalis living in areas under its control. This gives Al-Shabaab a **strong economic incentive** to maintain the status quo. However, Al-Shabaab's wealth does not translate into security for its leadership, who remain the target for UAV attacks, assassinations, and other sanctions and restrictions. The illegal status of the Al-Shabaab and its leaders in Somalia also hinders reinvestment possibilities and constraints their potential spending of its surplus, moreover negotiations might also include potential economic incentives in the form of state positions makes the argument of Al-Shabaab's economic motives might also be overstated.⁸

There are no easy answers for parties trying to persuade Al-Shabaab to the negotiating table; however, the issues listed above would need to be addressed in order for the group to respond positively to any overtures from the Somali government. As such, an irony of the current situation is that the best way to get Al-Shabaab to the

negotiating table may require that more, not less pressure, is put on the group and its leadership.

Actors and issues

Somalia has a new government and possibilities to initiate negotiations, although, as stated by its president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, such negotiations need time before they can manifest themselves. The acknowledgement of the federal structure by the new government means that a Somali led negotiation process, with a deeper anchorage in Somali politics, is more feasible. Indeed, such an anchorage is needed due to legitimacy issues, and the coordination between the Federal Government and its regional states is essential to ensure this. Thus, a process needs to be anchored both with the federal state and with the regional governments.

External actors such as United States, the Gulf states and the European Union are crucial in that process. For the United States and the European Union, the disassociation of the Al-Shabaab from Al-Qaeda will be highly important. Although Al-Shabaab is a member of the Al-Qaeda network, perhaps the numerically largest member organisation today, it however, lacks a tradition for attacking outside the Horn of Africa. In the two incidents that Al-Shabab had been involved in the west, the planned Holdsworth Barracks attack in Australia in 2009, Al-Shabaab actually discouraged Australian members from implementing the attack, and the Cholo Abdi Abdullah plot to fly an aircraft into a building in United States in 2019.⁹ While Al-Shabaab rhetorically talks about global jihad, and has threatened western countries, such as the United States and Denmark, it has perhaps only once, acted on these threats as its focus

in strategy and action has in large been local and regional. Further, while Al-Shabaab was at one stage in the past led by a number of veterans with links to Afghanistan, this is no longer the case. Its leaders today are from Somalia, with their military experience from the country. We have also seen that other Al-Qaeda affiliates have left the Al-Qaeda umbrella in the past. For instance, the previous largest Al-Qaeda affiliate, the Jabat Al Nusra (that later became, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and today is a part of Hayat Tarir Al Sham), for example left it.

The above facts indicate that a disassociation between the Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda is possible. Yet, such disassociation might be false as in the case of Taliban in Afghanistan, and indeed we have seen similar claims about Hayat Tarir Al Sham. However, possible, and eventual disassociations on the behalf of Al-Shabaab in that regard need to be monitored. Furthermore, the United States is crucial to any negotiated settlement because it has the capabilities to force Al-Shabaab into negotiations, namely the use of drone-strikes against Al-Shabaab. In this sense the United States remains essential to the negotiations process.

Qatar has played a role in attempts to negotiate with Al Shabaab in the past, however, because of its support for the previous president Farmajo, it is now seen as controversial in Somali politics. Qatar's old rival, the United Arab Emirates is becoming closer to the current government, yet it has much less experience than Qatar in dealing with Al-Shabaab. It thus becomes important for any negotiations attempts to try to secure Qatari competence and lessons learned from its previous attempts to negotiate with jihadists, both inside and outside Somalia. Yet this would need to be done while

taking current Somali political alliances into consideration.

Possible Obstacles

When the parties negotiate, obstacles are still many. In an early phase, 'false channels' to the Al-Shabaab can create confusion. Indeed, there have been instances in the past where businessmen and eager NGO's offer to act as middlemen without having the right connections with the top levels of the organization. At times, the promise of payment for such services makes it attractive to claim that 'channels' are better connected to Al-Shabaab than they are and overestimate their own ability to interact with the organization. The use of false channels that at times take pride in their connections with the Al-Shabaab can be costly and misleading resulting more bottlenecks and not less, and miscalculation of the possibilities for the success of such processes.¹⁰ Yet, there are many individuals with good Al-Shabaab connections in Somalia, such as clan elders hailing from the same clan as Al-Shabaab leaders, and businessmen operating in areas controlled by the organisation, as well as defectors that still maintain connections with it. Nevertheless, negotiation channels should initially be established with a proof of identity mechanism, proving through video-messaging with notable Al-Shabab commanders, and/or messages in the organisation's outlets that prove (in code if needed) that contact has been established.

Strategic use of negotiations to create battlefield advantages as illustrated by the events in Afghanistan, can lead to a situation where the Somali government might lose the current war, or even become more weakened than its now, and at worst collapse all together. The post-Afghan situation,

preceded by the Doha negotiations, illustrates this point.¹¹ In fact, as late as five years ago, any negotiations that included AMISOM withdrawal without disarming Al-Shabaab would probably have led to organisation's outright takeover of Southern Somalia. Today the situation is a bit more unclear, as Al-Shabaab maybe wealthier, but the Somali Army and federal states are also in a better shape militarily. Yet, the Somali Army might still be overestimated. This might be one of the reasons of why Somalia's President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud recently stressed that Somalia was not ready for negotiations yet.¹² Despite this, some of the federal states, such as the Jubaland and Puntland have a proven record of withstanding against Al-Shabaab's repeated attempts to overrun in these respective states. Negotiations need both a continuous assessment of the Somali National Army and the regional states forces military capabilities. A tit for tat approach where military disarmament on one side is followed up by military concessions by the other side of equal battlefield value is also needed. The irony is thus perhaps that negotiations would demand a stronger Somali Army, as well as a more robust federal states. It is essential to understand that such strength has to go beyond just material strength, it has to include doctrine development, a buy-in of the various elements of Somalia's security architecture, including the federal member states' security forces and local ownership of these security institutions.

The Federal Government in Somalia can also use negotiations to encourage individual defections, which has been utilised by its predecessors. While this tactic seems to be tempting, it will taint the negotiation process and such strategies are not worth the price.

A potential obstacle is also the

lack of shared visions for Somalia political system. Al-Shabaab is ruled by an Amir, and a Shura council that has advisory functions, it is in theory a centralized and undemocratic structure, although in practice it has shown itself to be more decentralized than argued by its leaders. As argued by Mahad Karate, Al-Shabaab is anti-democratic, seeing the system as a western imposed and 'un-Islamic one.' This is easy to contrast with the current Somali system, which strives to be both democratic and decentralized. Although such a system is influenced by corruption, and includes clan component, yet so far it has provided checks and balances on political power and the possible emergence of autocratic regime that has resulted in oppositional candidates winning over the last four successive selection/election processes in Somalia. Quite a different trajectory from neighbouring countries, such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Uganda where more totalitarian leaders often govern for life.

The Somali checks and balance system including the decentralisation is an advantage for negotiations with the Al-Shabaab, as it can prevent an Afghan 'style' jihadist takeover, as witnessed in 2021. Indeed, the current system of Somalia makes it possible to 'test' negotiation agreements within the system. For example, there can be a cooperative Al-Shabaab federal state government in one federal state, testing how such a solution works without implementing solutions wide across Somalia. There are signs that AlShabaab can be pragmatic in relations to traditional clan leaders, that at the same time remain important in the election system for Somalia. The emphasize on Sharia compliance in the Somali constitution also creates some common grounds.

However, despite the overlaps between clan elders' interaction and

influence on both Al-Shabaab and the Somali government, the two maintain divergent visions. These incommensurable items are, however, possible to reconcile through negotiation process, and perhaps in a separate, non-binding, advisory fora where Al-Shabaab can interact both with the Somali government and federal states. Such a forum should be allowed to allocate an ample time for discussions and could be a tool to facilitate and create shared understand of country's decentralised and democratic system.

The above issues are just some of the many that might come up in negotiation process and that would necessitate avoiding opting for artificial benchmarks leading to a focus on speed rather than reflection or sufficient planning that demands continuous analyses.

Conclusion

Negotiations with the Shabaab will be a complex process with many fall-traps as sketched out in this policy briefs

proceeding paragraphs. Thus it will, and should be, a long-term process. This being said, such fall traps include: not using the proper channels; failing to creating an adequate incentives for entering into and remaining with negotiations, failing to discuss future visions for Somalia or using such processes for other purposes; not taking the various Somali and international actors into account; lacking local legitimacy and ownership; and, finally, allowing negotiations to be used as pieces in a Somali political power game between the opposition and the government, or even in international rivalries.

Yet, Al-Shabaab is locked in a stalemate, and the Somalia and its people are trapped in a 'forever war.' This means that the negotiation option should be explored imperatively. While Somalia's president says that Somalia cannot enter negotiations with the Al-Shabaab at the current moment which is an understandable position given the current state of Somalia, contacts

should nevertheless be initiated, and secure channels should be created. Negotiations will take time, and we can save such time by starting to explore dialogue between Al-Shabaab and the Somali government and federal states on more mundane humanitarian issues such as the issues relating to the current draught in the country to consolidate dialogue channels. For national negotiations, a proper combination of deterrence and incentives have to be established. To negotiate with the Al-Shabaab also means that the pressure against them has to be kept.

Somalia's new government has several advantages in dealing with the Al-Shabaab, including enjoying more legitimacy than its predecessor, having a former Al-Shabaab leader as a minister, and a better relationship with the important federal states. This is an advantage that can be utilized and because of this, a Somali-led negotiation process with Al-Shabaab is more realistic now.

References

¹ Authors would like to thank Dave Hartwell for edits and comments.

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³ The Somali president underlined that Somalia was not ready to negotiate with the Al-Shabaab at present. See; <https://goobjoog.com/english/somalia-not-right-now-in-a-position-to-negotiate-with-al-shabaab-president-mohamud/>

⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>

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⁸ <https://www.hudson.org/research/17330-into-darkness-scrutinizing-economic-explanations-for-african-jihad>

⁹ <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-holsworthy-barracks-plot-a-case-study-of-an-al-shabab-support-network-in-australia/>; Cholo Abdi Abdullah, it should be noted that the later report mentions another case where Al-Shabaab member was arrested for planning a similar plan in an unknown country in Africa, however no names or sources are mentioned.

¹⁰ Negotiations should initially be established with a proof of identity mechanism, proving through video-messages that includes notable Shabab commanders, and/or messages in Al-Shabaab outlets that prove (in code if needed) that contact has been established.

¹¹ For a reflected analysis of post-Taliban Afghanistan see https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_5_Afghanistan.pdf

¹² The Somali president underlined that Somalia was not ready to negotiate with the Shabaab at present. See; <https://goobjoog.com/english/somalia-not-right-now-in-a-position-to-negotiate-with-al-shabaab-president-mohamud/>

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