



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Enduring and Future Terrorism Threats

BRUCE HOFFMAN AND JACOB WARE

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Harun Maruf

SENIOR EDITOR,
VOICE OF AMERICA SOMALI

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FROM THE EDITOR

In December 2007, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point launched a new monthly publication with the aim of drawing on the “Center’s network of scholars and practitioners dedicated to the study of terrorism and counter-terrorism to provide the most well-informed forum” for the analysis of the most pressing security challenges facing the United States and its allies. This issue marks the 15th anniversary of *CTC Sentinel*. It has been my great privilege to serve as editor in chief for exactly half that period. We hope the publication has helped contribute to greater understanding of the complex and continuously evolving counterterrorism problem set. My predecessor, Erich Marquardt, deserves special credit for the years he spent building *CTC Sentinel* into a powerhouse of scholarly research. I’d like to also acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of our managing editor, Kristina Hummel, and the wise counsel of our editorial board members: Colonel Suzanne Nielsen, Brian Dodwell, Don Rassler, and Colonel Sean Morrow. The huge time and energy invested in *CTC Sentinel* by our leadership and faculty over the past 15 years has helped drive us forward in our mission of relentless improvement. Our choice of cover for this anniversary issue reflects our immense gratitude to our many contributors over the years whose insights and scholarship have been essential to the counterterrorism mission.

In this month’s feature article, Bruce Hoffman (whose insights were featured in the inaugural issue of *CTC Sentinel*) and Jacob Ware examine the terrorist trends and threats to watch out for in 2023 and beyond. Our interview is with Harun Maruf, the longest-serving editor of VOA Somali, the Somali-language service of the U.S. government-funded broadcast service Voice of America. Samira Gaid argues that “recent military breakthroughs against al-Shabaab have provided Somalis with an historic opportunity to now do what is necessary to bring lasting security to the country” but that making enduring gains will require learning lessons from previous failures. Wassim Nasr outlines how the Wagner Group is aggravating the jihadi threat in Mali, creating the risk of further destabilization in the Sahel region.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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Cover: The names of all contributors who have made CTC Sentinel possible over the past 15 years (Impel Creative)

The Terrorist Threats and Trends to Watch Out for in 2023 and Beyond

By Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware

The terrorist threat today is growing increasingly diverse, and although counterterrorism no longer sits atop the United States' national security hierarchy, it remains an omnipresent challenge, manifesting primarily through terrorist networks like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Although questions remain over the leadership and strategy of these groups, they are nonetheless still intent on undermining the West and spreading jihadi doctrine throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Threats endure from state-sponsored terrorism as well as from domestic extremists, too, with the latter presenting a rising potential for violence during the upcoming presidential election season. The danger, now, is that in its prioritization of other national security issues, the United States becomes complacent in its counterterrorism fight. Our longstanding extremist adversaries stand prepared to strike, and eternal vigilance is essential.

Among the memorable aphorisms of Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld was his answer to a reporter's question at a Pentagon briefing just a few months after America's war on terror commenced. When asked about Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein's alleged ties to al-Qa`ida, Rumsfeld famously explained that:

There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.¹

It is an apt summation of the global and domestic landscape of terrorism today. There are some known knowns, such as the fact that counterterrorism is no longer the overriding national security priority for the United States that it was for nearly two decades. In addition, we have known unknowns, such as the abiding threat posed by longstanding terrorist adversaries like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State including who will succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri as al-Qa`ida's emir and how successful the Biden administration's "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism strategy will prove in the long-term, as well as the resurrection of an old threat made new: state-sponsored terrorism. And, finally, there are unknown unknowns, foremost of which is the trajectory of domestic terrorism as political divisions in the United States deepen in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election.

This overview provides a snapshot of continuing and emergent

terrorist threats and counterterrorism challenges organized around Secretary Rumsfeld's three categories of threat analysis. Rumsfeld's guiding paradigm is not intended to be a systematic or perfect overview of the range of terrorist threats and adversaries nor does this article explore all types of terrorist threat for each of Rumsfeld's categories. Instead, it provides a potentially useful prism through which to assess the uncertainty of currently unfolding and future potential salient extremist and terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland and its allies abroad.

The Known Knowns: Counterterrorism is no longer the preeminent U.S. national security concern, despite terrorism remaining an enduring threat.

For nearly two decades, counterterrorism was America's foremost defense and national security priority. That changed in 2018 with the release of the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy. As Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis explained, "We are facing increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory. Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."²

The long promised but unfulfilled "pivot to Asia," advanced during President Obama's first term in office,³ was the driving force behind this rebalancing of U.S. defense and national security priorities implemented by President Trump. President Biden, who had been vice president when Obama commenced this shift, has continued along this same path. "War in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multi-generational undertaking. We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in ... Afghanistan. And it's time to end the forever war,"⁴ Biden declared within months of assuming office. He made good on the pledge with the completion

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of the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, when he reiterated that, “there’s nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan.”⁵

Regardless of the merits of this decision (against which these authors argued⁶), the withdrawal itself was shambolic. U.S. forces, for instance, abandoned the mammoth Bagram airfield and facility without notice, thus allowing some 5,000 imprisoned al-Qa`ida, Islamic State, and Taliban terrorists to escape from both that prison and the Afghan National Detention Facility at Pul-e-Charkhi⁷—including, according to U.S. government sources, some three-dozen senior al-Qa`ida operatives.⁸

In mid-August 2021, as the Taliban advanced on Kabul and the Afghan government started to collapse, President Biden promised that the United States possessed an “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism capability that “will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed.”⁹ The effectiveness of this strategy was almost immediately called into question when tragedy struck on August 26, 2021, at Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport. Concealed within the crowds seeking places on the final departing flights was an Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISK) terrorist who detonated a bomb that killed over 180 people—including 13 U.S. military personnel—and injured more than 150 others.¹⁰ This prompted one unnamed U.S. intelligence official to dismiss the administration’s claims as more “over-the-rainbow” than “over-the-horizon.”¹¹ Additional proof of the challenges of this much-touted counterterrorism strategy was also tragically provided three days later when a U.S. drone strike meant to disrupt a suspected follow-on ISK attack unintentionally killed Afghan civilians—among whom were seven children.¹²

The successful targeted killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri by a CIA drone on July 31, 2022, arguably provided needed proof of the viability of America’s “over-the-horizon” strategy. The al-Qa`ida leader was killed as he appeared on the balcony of a villa in Kabul’s tony Shirpur neighborhood—where he reportedly lived as a guest of long-time terrorist and Taliban Minister of the Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹³ The fact that al-Zawahiri was living more or less openly in a house linked to Haqqani clearly revealed the falsity of Taliban assurances to the United States during the Doha negotiations that they would not allow Afghanistan again to become a terrorist safe haven.¹⁴ It also raised new questions about whether the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, rather than ending “the forever war,” in Biden’s words, may in fact extend it if indeed al-Qa`ida has re-established, and continues to consolidate, its presence.

Finally, far from validating the “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism approach, the al-Zawahiri strike perhaps underscored its challenges. Al-Zawahiri, after all, was hiding in plain sight. U.S. intelligence had reportedly tracked al-Zawahiri’s wife, daughter, and grandchildren to Kabul and eventually confirmed that the al-Qa`ida leader was living with them. In fact, al-Zawahiri felt so safe and secure that he frequently emerged onto his balcony, thus enabling confirmation.¹⁵ As some observers have noted, the success of any counterterrorist operation is predicated on on-the-ground human intelligence, which was likely relatively easily obtained in this instance. But, in less permissive, rural environments and more typically security-conscious terrorist hiding places, the United States has likely largely deprived itself of such essentials by leaving Afghanistan.¹⁶

Indeed, the other high-profile counterterrorism success of the Biden administration, the assassination of Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi in northern Syria in February 2022, was not actually a triumph of “over-the-horizon” capabilities, but a clear sign of the importance of forward basing. The raiding party had flown from a U.S. special operations forces base in Syria.¹⁷

The Known Unknowns: al-Qa`ida, the question of who will lead al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and Iranian state-sponsored terrorism

As we enter the third decade of the post-9/11 war on terrorism, several facts are assured: Both salafi-jihadi and state-sponsored adversaries will maintain their intentions to attack both the U.S. homeland as well as American interests and allies abroad. But the primary form and leadership of those threats remains unclear.

The Jihadi Terror Threat

Although al-Zawahiri’s elimination will likely hinder al-Qa`ida’s core operations for the time being, its affiliates remain resilient and strong. In July, in the latest of its invaluable and industry-leading biannual reports, the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team shed new light on al-Qa`ida’s current strength. Beyond Afghanistan, the movement is thought to include 7,000 to 12,000 fighters in its al-Shabaab affiliate in Somalia; a few thousand with its Syrian wing, Hurras al-Din; a few thousand more with al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula; 180-400 with al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); and still more fighters with its expanding Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali and the Sahel.¹⁸ Although these numbers remain relatively consistent, at least since our last assessment in this publication in 2021, they indicate the global movement’s enduring relevance and continued recruitment.¹⁹ Indeed, JNIM’s gains and its opportunity to now trumpet the notion that it achieved withdrawal of French military forces from Mali is an ominous sign of the al-Qa`ida movement’s resiliency and strength.²⁰

The threats posed by each of these affiliates are more local or cross-border than regional, much less global. But some harbor ambitions to strike internationally. Since 2016, for instance, al-Shabaab—doubtless al-Qa`ida’s least technologically proficient franchise—has sought to replicate the movement’s spectacular 9/11 attacks by training pilots and operatives to hijack commercial aircraft and crash them into buildings. In the last few years, two al-Shabaab terrorists have been arrested in the Philippines and Africa taking flying lessons.²¹ In May 2022, accordingly, President Biden reversed his predecessor’s decision to withdraw even the modest number of U.S. military personnel supporting the Somali government’s campaign against al-Shabaab, a key exception to the “over-the-horizon” approach taken elsewhere that underscored the rising terrorist threat in that country and its potential spread both regionally and even internationally.²² Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also retains an external operations capability, and helped coordinate the 2019 Pensacola shooting, the only successful foreign-originated plot on U.S. soil since 9/11.²³ As for Afghanistan, it admittedly remains unclear if al-Qa`ida currently plans to expand its external operations, with the U.N. Monitoring Team commenting that the group “does not currently wish to cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment.”²⁴ This is also the view of the U.S. intelligence community, which assesses that “neither the few remaining al-Qa`ida core members nor its



Storm clouds pass over the dome of the U.S. Capitol building on January 23, 2018. (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call via AP Images)

regional affiliate are plotting to attack the Homeland, and we have no indications that these individuals are involved in external attack plotting.”²⁵

Like al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State’s demise has often been foretold only to prove premature. Much like the killing of Usama bin Ladin in 2011 did not lead to the demise of the movement he founded—and nor will that of al-Zawahiri—the targeted killings of the Islamic State’s founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019 and his successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, this February have not precipitated that movement’s collapse either. Some 40 days (the traditional Muslim period of mourning) after al-Qurashi’s death, the Islamic State announced the appointment of a new emir—Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. This leadership transition was remarkably smooth. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, National Counterterrorism Center Director Christine Abizaid commented that “ISIS members readily accepted the new leader” and that the U.S. intelligence community saw “no signs of fissures or splintering by the branches and networks despite limitations the group faces in Iraq and Syria.”²⁶ However, this latest emir was also relatively quickly killed, detonating a suicide vest during a Free Syrian Army (FSA) operation in Jasem in Deraa governorate in October.²⁷ The Islamic State announced that the new emir was Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi. This latest leadership transition, and the world’s whack-a-mole approach to Islamic State leaders, lends greater credence to the warning given by General Kenneth F. McKenzie, commander of U.S. Central Command, in 2020: “This threat is not going away. There’s never going to be a time I believe when either ISIS or whatever follows ISIS is going

to be completely absent from the global stage.”²⁸ The prior emir’s presence in Deraa province, a government area in Syria’s southwest, may, however, indicate a shifting frontline away from Kurdish-held land in the northeast and toward other, more lucrative targets, from the terrorism threat perspective, of Israel and Jordan.

General McKenzie’s dispiriting assessment had likely been influenced by the Islamic State’s stubborn persistence in Syria and Iraq—where, until its final defeat in 2019, the group ruled eight million people in captured territory comprising 41,000 square miles (a third of Syria and about 40 percent of Iraq).²⁹ Some 6,000 to 10,000 Islamic State fighters there prosecute an ongoing insurgency against a variety of state and non-state adversaries. They are complemented by 200 to 400 fighters with Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a in Mozambique; 500 fighters with Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt; fewer than 100 in Libya; 200 to 280 in Somalia; 200 with Islamic State East Asia in the southern Philippines; a fierce and violent Khorasan Province faction in Afghanistan; and additional fighters with the Allied Democratic Forces in Uganda, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in the Sahel, the Islamic State West Africa Province, and its Yemeni branch.³⁰ The various affiliates’ pledges of allegiance despite the network’s frequent leadership transitions indicate it remains cohesive as a global movement, and retains the ability to inspire support and loyalty among affiliates around the region.

As a case study, the movement’s gains in Mozambique illustrate its continued traction. As the self-proclaimed caliphate was contracting under the weight of the large global coalition mobilized against the Islamic State, the movement was fruitfully expanding elsewhere. Starting in 2017, the Islamic State operations

in Mozambique have claimed the lives of over 3,000 persons and created an internally displaced population of nearly a million.³¹ It has also threatened Mozambique's liquefied natural gas resources, the third largest reserves in Africa, which have assumed new importance as a result of the disruption to Ukraine's natural gas exports caused by Russia's invasion.³²

Indeed, despite the enduring challenges posed by the Levant, Africa continues to emerge as the world's leading terrorism hotspot. The Global Terrorism Index's 2022 report found that the preceding year had seen "serious deteriorations in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), especially the Sahel. Forty-eight per cent, or 3,461, of all terrorism deaths globally occurred in SSA with four of the ten countries with the largest increases in deaths from terrorism residing in SSA: Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and Niger. Three of these countries are in the Sahel." These numbers were actually an improvement on the previous year's figures, largely due to counterinsurgency successes against Boko Haram in Nigeria, which has perhaps displayed the vulnerability of this network in the face of effective countermeasures.³³ Terrorist groups in the region, however, continue to benefit from poor governance exacerbated by political turmoil, such as the recent *coups d'état* in Burkina Faso.³⁴ Not every Islamic State branch around the world is thriving, but in Afghanistan, the Islamic State affiliate there spread throughout the entire country and carried out 334 attacks in 2021—a 140 percent increase over the previous year.³⁵

Like al-Qa`ida, therefore, the threat posed by the Islamic State remains mostly local and regional—and not international. However, the movement continues its longstanding efforts to inspire violent attacks in the West, through small cells and individuals radicalized online and inspired to attack their home countries.³⁶ Meanwhile, the United States and its allies continue to struggle to resolve the legal quagmire regarding the many Islamic State fighters taken prisoner during the group's final stands in 2019 and their families. An estimated 120,000 prisoners and dependents now reside in several camps around northeastern Syria, including 30,000 children under the age of 12. The Islamic State continues to deliberately target these minors for radicalization.³⁷

Given the protean nature of all the above, there are several possibilities—especially pertaining to terrorist *modus operandi*—that could emerge. Will salafi-jihadi terrorist groups, for instance, take advantage of their newfound freedom and choose to return to the 9/11 model, featuring central coordination and directed attacks, or will they mostly continue the model of inspiring sympathetic lone actors in Western countries that proved so tactically successful during the Islamic State years? And secondly, will they use their safe havens to resume attacks against their historic "far enemy," the United States and its allies, or will they predominantly take advantage of their geographic diversity to escalate local jihads that seek to overthrow local regimes and build caliphate micro-states?³⁸ Of course, jihadi groups have perfected blending strategies and making adjustments based on the conditions they face. A key question, then, is just how well will the United States manage

“Despite the enduring challenges posed by the Levant, Africa continues to emerge as the world's leading terrorism hotspot.”

these threats, given a commitment to a still untested, sustained “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism strategy while its attention is increasingly reassigned to other national security priorities?

At least so far as al-Qa`ida is concerned, much will depend on who succeeds al-Zawahiri as that movement's emir. A variety of sources suggest it will be long-time al-Qa`ida operative and bin Ladin loyalist Saif al-`Adl.³⁹ Whether and when al-`Adl becomes al-Qa`ida's new emir remains unclear. However, if he does, he will bring credibility to the leadership role given his long and variegated experiences in the movement stretching back decades. As an architect of the 2005 “Master Plan” or seven-stage strategy to victory that bin Ladin adopted,⁴⁰ al-`Adl is well placed to carry on the struggle. Instead of the 852-page, didactic treatise al-Zawahiri produced,⁴¹ al-`Adl, as his entire history with al-Qa`ida suggests, would likely embrace a more practical, building-block approach to the continued prosecution of its local, regional, and international terrorism campaigns. His excellent and often deeply personal relations with many of the movement's franchises, including in Syria, East Africa, and Afghanistan, will smooth his presumed transition into the top leadership post. It is the authors' assessment that should this in fact materialize, al-`Adl is likely to eschew spectacular operations such as the 9/11 attacks and instead refocus al-Qa`ida on targeting embassies and consulates, tourist destinations, and commercial aviation.⁴²

State-Sponsored Terror

In addition to these ongoing threats from the established terrorist movements of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State and their respective branches, there are the challenges posed by state-sponsors of terrorism. As Seth Jones, who directs the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has warned, “While conventional warfare—clashes between large military forces—defined twentieth-century power, irregular warfare will increasingly define international politics in the coming decades.”⁴³

Foremost among those states employing irregular warfare, covert operations, and surrogate terrorism is the Islamic Republic of Iran. From the time of the 1979 revolution that deposed the Shah and brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, international terrorism has been a prominent feature of Iran's foreign policy.⁴⁴ In recent years, Iran's use of terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy has intensified.⁴⁵ The Iranian regime, for instance, maintains an active proxy warfare program in the Middle East and beyond, dispatching its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the elite Quds Force around the region to support partner militias involved in wars and quagmires.⁴⁶ Its greatest accomplishment is arguably the life support that Iran has provided to the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. A range of Iran-backed militias—including Lebanon's Hezbollah—have intervened on the regime's behalf. Tehran's involvement in Syria has also presented a direct and active

a Recent reporting suggests human rights abuses were committed by the Nigerian government in its war against Boko Haram. Paul Carsten, Reade Levinson, David Lewis, and Libby George, “The Abortion Assault,” Reuters, December 7, 2022.

“The greatest threat to the United States now comes from within its own borders. And the uncertainty of when and where the next serious act of politically motivated domestic violence will occur and against whom and what its continued trajectory will bring is the preeminent ‘unknown unknown.’”

threat to U.S. military forces in the region, most notably through repeated missile attacks from groups such as Kataib Hezbollah—the longstanding anti-American and U.S. State Department terrorist-designated Iraqi Shi`a militia.⁴⁷ Iran’s most recent effort to supply kamikaze drones and other weaponry to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is further evidence of its willingness to destabilize other regions in pursuance of its foreign policy priorities.⁴⁸

More concerning from an American perspective, however, is the intensification of Iranian-sponsored terrorism in the United States itself. Iran has a long history of covertly operating in the United States to eliminate dissidents and other enemies. In 1980, for instance, Ali Akbar Tabatabai, a former press attaché at the Iranian Embassy before the revolution and outspoken opponent of the Khomeini regime, was murdered in suburban Washington, D.C.⁴⁹ And, in 2011, an Iranian-orchestrated plot was disrupted to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States at an upscale Washington, D.C., restaurant.⁵⁰ An Iranian-American living in Texas, whose cousin was serving in the Quds Force, had been enlisted to orchestrate the attack. The would-be assassin had responded “no big deal” to a suggestion the attack might kill scores of others, including prominent elected officials who frequented the restaurant.⁵¹ He is currently serving a 25-year sentence in a U.S. federal penitentiary.⁵²

More recently, there has been an upsurge in such Iranian-backed or -inspired terrorist plotting in the United States. After President Trump began questioning the results of the 2020 presidential election, Iran uploaded a “hit list” of prominent government officials refuting his claims—thus explicitly encouraging violence on U.S. soil in direct contravention of American sovereignty.⁵³ Then, in August 2022, an American citizen attacked author Salman Rushdie, stabbing and seriously wounding him onstage at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini had issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie in 1989 for alleged blasphemy in his novel *The Satanic Verses*.⁵⁴ Additionally, in one of many recently revealed Iranian plots to silence dissidents, a Brooklyn, New York-based *Wall Street Journal* reporter, human rights activist, and prominent critic of the Iranian regime was the target of a 2021 kidnap plot and then of an assassination attempt a year later.⁵⁵ And, earlier this year, a member of the IRGC was charged by the Department of Justice for orchestrating a “murder-for-hire” plot against former National Security Advisor John Bolton as well as a “second target,” seemingly in retaliation for the January 2020 killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani.⁵⁶ Iranian assassination plots have also targeted dissidents and journalists in Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and elsewhere.⁵⁷

Finally, Russia has conducted a range of influence and information operations against its Western adversaries, including its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (and again in the 2022 midterms).⁵⁸ In the years since, Russia has continued its open flirtation with violent elements of the American far-right. Perhaps the most egregious example is the case of Rinaldo Nazzaro (aka Norman Spear), the St. Petersburg, Russia-based leader of the American neo-Nazi terrorist group The Base.⁵⁹ In 2020, the U.S. State Department designated a Russian violent, far-right group, the Russian Imperial Movement, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.⁶⁰ As its global influence wanes in the wake of its Ukraine invasion, Russia may seek to resurrect its irregular campaigns in the United States.

The Unknown Unknowns: Political violence in the United States in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election—and after

Unfortunately, in the assessment of these authors, the greatest threat to the United States now comes from within its own borders. And the uncertainty of when and where the next serious act of politically motivated domestic violence will occur and against whom and what its continued trajectory will bring is the preeminent “unknown unknown.”

The most significant terrorist threat to the homeland today comes from domestic terrorism connected to the violent far-right, broadly defined here to include both white supremacist and white nationalist networks as well as anti-government extremists. The most recent annual report of the Anti-Defamation League found that almost 90 percent of extremist killings in 2021 had been perpetrated by “right-wing extremists”—continuing a trend over the past decade, with 75 percent of the almost 450 extremist-related murders in the United States since 2012 having been perpetrated by the far-right.⁶¹ The ADL data does not account for the most serious terrorist incident in 2022, a mass shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo in May that claimed 10 lives.⁶² The ADL’s data, which uses deaths as its primary unit of analysis, also fails to account for the true magnitude of 2021’s most consequential terrorism incident—the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Like many salafi-jihadi networks, the violent far-right poses a double-pronged threat. In general, the movement adheres to the “leaderless resistance” instruction given by the notorious American white-supremacist Louis Beam in 1992.⁶³ This strategy, which encourages small cell and lone actor violence, has allowed many of the movement’s most violent acolytes to evade counterterrorism detection. But other factions of the movement still seek to organize as collective entities—among whom are the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, Patriot Front, and boogaloo bois, to cite only the most prominent.⁶⁴ They are sustained largely by conspiracy theories demonizing a range of enemies. A variety of recent attacks, including Buffalo but also even more lethal incidents in Pittsburgh, El Paso, Norway, and New Zealand, were inspired by the so-called “great replacement” theory, which holds that a deliberate replacement of the white population in Western states is underway, funded and organized by Jews and other elites.⁶⁵ Great replacement theory, also sometimes dubbed “white genocide” theory, allows white supremacist terrorists to portray themselves as reluctant, altruistic defenders of a white homeland—an intoxicating lie that has caused violence to erupt in places of worship across the United States and beyond.⁶⁶ Other conspiracy theories similarly denigrate

“cabals” of elites—including QAnon, which holds that former President Donald Trump was somehow divinely elected to expose Satan-worshipping, child sex-trafficking pedophiles.⁶⁷

Yet more conspiracy theories have targeted elections—articulating the widely held view that the 2020 election was stolen by the Democrats and that Trump is still the rightful president. In the lead-up to the 2022 midterms, various law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, provided warnings of the threat to poll workers. In 2021, the Department of Justice established a task force to fight threats against election workers.⁶⁸ There is also an escalating terrorist threat against public officials. In fact, in the six years since President Trump’s election year, threats against members of Congress have risen tenfold⁶⁹—with some members of Congress now spending more than ever on their own security.⁷⁰ The 2022 midterms, accordingly, were nervously watched for signs of violence, and although more serious and widespread violence was fortunately avoided, an attempted kidnapping targeting the Speaker of the House that seriously wounded her husband and threats against Jewish communities in New Jersey and New York provided an important reminder of the elevated terrorism threat that now always accompanies U.S. elections⁷¹—and will likely impact the 2024 presidential election, too.⁷²

The violent far-right threat is likely to remain elevated as long as conspiracy theories targeting pandemics, elections, and the Democratic Party remain so widespread. We live in a febrile political climate, where new events and sociocultural developments have the potential to inspire new terrorist plots in near real-time—as displayed when a gunman attempted to enter an FBI office in Cincinnati after the Bureau raided Trump’s residence at Mar-a-Lago.⁷³ Indeed, the violent far-right today is fractured, with multiple unique ideological streams producing their own calls to violence and justifications for more militant action.⁷⁴ Notably, these streams often converge with one another, blurring traditionally conceptualized boundaries between extremist ideologies.

It is in the threats to politicians that one is reminded of an enduring, albeit mostly dormant, threat from the violent far-left. In June, a would-be assassin aborted an attempt on conservative Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s life while near the justice’s home.⁷⁵ And in 2017, a far-left extremist opened fire at a Republican team practice for the annual Congressional Baseball Game, seriously wounding House majority whip Steve Scalise before being fatally shot.⁷⁶ Conservative media and politicians have focused much of their animus against antifa—an amorphous anarchist network that predominantly engages in wanton vandalism and criminal rioting—but the most dangerous violent far-left terrorists are frequently inspired by single-issue causes, from abortion rights to climate change to police killings of unarmed Black men.

The Biden administration has actively addressed these domestic terrorism threats through both new policy and legislative initiatives as well as through aggressive prosecutions. In response to the spread of domestic political violence, the White House released in June 2021 the first-ever National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism. More recently, it convened a special summit titled “United We Stand” that was focused on developing effective responses to the rise of domestic terrorism.⁷⁷ Proposed bipartisan legislation has sought to curb gun violence in the United States and is also expected to address electoral certification rules, the latter designed to prevent another January 6.⁷⁸

More than three decades ago, the Department of Justice suffered

“Perhaps the most consequential development over the last 15 years has been the relegation of terrorism and counterterrorism from the predominant concern of U.S. national security and defense planners to a mere frustration distracting from more pressing concerns including China and Russia, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and pandemics.”

a crippling blow in its efforts to fight the violent far-right when its attempt to prosecute 14 prominent white supremacist and anti-government extremists on seditious conspiracy charges failed at Fort Smith, Arkansas.⁷⁹ Although it is among one of the most difficult federal charges to prove (prior to 2022, the last person convicted in a U.S. court of seditious conspiracy was the ‘blind sheikh,’ Omar Abdel Rahman, in 1995),^b prosecutors nonetheless have brought seditious conspiracy charges against several extremist leaders over their roles in January 6. The 16 defendants include leaders and members of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. On March 2, Joshua James, a leader of the Oath Keepers’ Alabama chapter, pleaded guilty—marking a transformative moment in the government’s efforts to combat violent far-right terrorism that has since been followed by additional guilty pleas, including among Proud Boys.⁸⁰ On November 29, two of the defendants in the first of several seditious conspiracy trials related to January 6, including Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes, were found guilty of seditious conspiracy—a legal and political watershed providing incontrovertible proof that January 6, as well as the longstanding anti-government activism that inspired it, were in fact organized and deliberate efforts to overthrow the United States government.⁸¹

Conclusion

The preceding analysis is not a comprehensive or complete assessment of every tactical terrorist threat. Nor is it a perfect elucidation of the predictability of each category. Instead, it provides a strategic assessment of the preeminent dangers ahead and the questions that remain unanswerable for counterterrorism scholars and practitioners alike.

As noted, perhaps the most consequential development over the last 15 years has been the relegation of terrorism and

b Rahman was convicted for his roles in the 1993 bombing of New York City’s World Trade Center and a follow-on plot to stage a series of bombings against a variety of targets, including tunnels, bridges, the United Nations headquarters building, and the federal office building in lower Manhattan housing the FBI field office. See Carlton Larson, “Seditious Conspiracy Was the Right Charge for the January 6 Organizers,” *Atlantic*, January 15, 2022, and Alanna Durkin Richer and Lindsay Whitehurst, “EXPLAINER: Rare seditious charge at center of Jan. 6 trial,” Associated Press, September 28, 2022.

counterterrorism from the predominant concern of U.S. national security and defense planners to a mere frustration distracting from more pressing concerns including China and Russia, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and pandemics. Indeed, terrorism was ranked as the seventh sub-bullet in a list of “global priorities” in the Biden administration’s national security strategy released in October 2022.⁸² And yet, terrorism threats have stubbornly refused to subside. In fact, as the preceding analysis indicates, terrorism threats have actually proliferated—growing both more diverse and diffuse. Counterterrorism practitioners, then, are left with what we have termed a “counterterrorism dilemma”—an impossible situation in which threats accelerate while resources dwindle.⁸³ As Edmund Fitton-Brown, the former United Nations Coordinator for the ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, observed in an interview published in *CTC Sentinel* in August 2022: “If you think about geostrategic priorities, if you think about climate change, if you think about public health, then this is a world in which counterterrorism has to fight for resources, and it will get a diminishing share of the pie ... So counterterrorism is a diminishing share of a diminishing pie, and if you add complacency into that mix, you are on a short route back to a major threat.”⁸⁴

But terrorist threats are intersectional, weaving through other national security concerns including near-peer competition and a broader assault on Western democracy from within, as displayed by state adversaries like Russia and Iran exploiting turmoil in the U.S. political system to their own benefit. Terrorists also thrive in times of complacency, and while a drawdown of kinetic operations is perhaps a welcome development after more than two decades of

expeditionary warfare and global counterterrorism deployments, the current U.S. policy of relying on local and regional partners is likely to prolong the “forever war” it is meant to end. In its latest report, for instance, the U.N. Monitoring Team warned that ongoing conflicts provide particularly fruitful conditions for these terrorist networks. “The threat from ISIL and Al-Qaida remains relatively low in non-conflict zones, but is much higher in areas directly affected by conflict or neighbouring it,” the U.N. report declared. “Unless some of these conflicts are brought to a successful resolution, the Monitoring Team anticipates that one or more of them will incubate an external operational capability for ISIL, Al-Qaida or a related terrorist group. In this regard, the areas of most concern are Africa, Central and South Asia and the Levant, all of which include the active presence of both ISIL and Al-Qaida.”⁸⁵ It is thus crucial that the United States and its allies remain engaged militarily, diplomatically, and in a humanitarian capacity to manage conflicts, ease suffering, and ensure terrorist organization remain on the defensive.

In the 15 years since its first issue, *CTC Sentinel* has covered al-Qa`ida’s stubborn resiliency—despite the killing of bin Ladin and almost the entirety of its original senior leadership—the meteoric rise of the Islamic State and the way in which it revolutionized terrorist radicalization and recruitment via social media, continued Iranian-sponsored violence in the Middle East and elsewhere, as well as white supremacist attacks from Oslo to Christchurch and Texas to New York. The lesson, then, is that as much as we might wish that the terrorist threat to the homeland has subsided, it has not. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Harun Maruf, Senior Editor, Voice of America Somali

By Paul Cruickshank

Harun Maruf is the longest-serving editor of VOA Somali, the Somali-language service of the U.S. government-funded broadcast service Voice of America, which he joined in December 2007. He has reported on Somalia for more than 30 years and was one of the founders of independent Somali media in the early 1990s. He previously worked for Associated Press and BBC as a reporter in Somalia. In addition to his responsibilities as a senior editor at VOA Somali, he introduced hard-hitting programs at VOA Somali including investigative reports and series programs. In 2018, he launched The Investigative Dossier, a bi-weekly, groundbreaking investigative program and the first of its kind by Somali media. He is the co-author of the critically acclaimed 2018 book Inside Al-Shabaab, the Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally. Twitter: @HarunMaruf

The views expressed by Harun Maruf in this interview are solely his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Voice of America or the United States Government.

CTC: To learn about what is going on in Somalia, many of us covering counterterrorism issues have for years turned to your extraordinarily insightful reporting. Tell me about your journey into journalism.

Maruf: Early on, I wanted to become a footballer. But when I went into high school, obviously my priorities changed. I very much enjoyed writing and following media. I used to carry my own transistor radio, which my father bought for me, and I would listen to the BBC and write down the names of all the world leaders, all the capitals in the world, every major story in the world.

My parents are from the Somali Region in Ethiopia, but because my larger family were involved with efforts, by Somalia, to take back this Somali Region, my family could not live in that region for security reasons. So when I was very young, we moved to Somalia. I have been to most Somali regions, but Mogadishu is where I spent most of my life. That's where I studied, got my first job, where I got married, where my first child was born.

When the state collapsed in 1991, I was trying to go to university to study journalism. But that opportunity never came because of the state collapse. Nonetheless, I continued my interest in journalism, and I was one of the first journalists to establish the free press that emerged in the country after [President Mohamed] Siad Barre was gone. This was a very interesting period for journalism. We were exercising the freedom to write, to criticize for the first time. It was very exciting, but also a very dangerous time because at that time the country went into civil war. And it very quickly became very dangerous, really, to write critically about what was happening in the country. My first job in journalism was as a columnist. I was writing columns four days a week for our newspaper in Mogadishu.

My columns were very critical, and I was threatened because of my take on things. My questions at press conferences to warlords and other politicians were always very pointed so I never had easy relations with politicians and warlords.

It goes without saying that there were a lot of security challenges working in Mogadishu as a young journalist. On one day, history was made in Somalia, and it would change the rest of my life. On December 9, 1992, President George H.W. Bush sent troops to Somalia to deliver aid to people who were impacted by the famine the country was then suffering, and I went to the airport—that's where the United States troops landed; that's one of the first areas they took over—and I went there just to cover it as a young journalist. I had my own notebook and a pen, and I met an American journalist who was working for the Associated Press. He was talking to a group of Somalis, and they could not communicate. I was able to speak at that time basic English—not very good, but basic English—and he saw me taking notes and he said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a journalist," and he said, "Can you help me talk to these guys?" And so I translated for him, and then when we finished-up, he said, "Can you come with me? I'll introduce you to my boss." We went to the Sahafi hotel (the journalists' hotel) in Mogadishu where hundreds of Western journalists were staying, and he introduced me to his boss and the rest is history. Associated Press made me their stringer in Somalia. That's how I hit it off. That's how in 1995, I got a job with BBC Somali service; that was my dream job. I always was listening to BBC as a young media fan. It was a dream job come true.

I worked for BBC and Associated Press all the way until 1999; when I went to the United Kingdom to study. I got my master's in international journalism at City University of London, and then I worked briefly for the BBC World Service Trust,^a as a consultant for a project that helped train many Somali journalists. Then I worked as a Human Rights Watch researcher for Somalia, and we covered the new conflict from the early period of the Ethiopia military intervention in Mogadishu from December 2006 into 2007 when the brutal counterinsurgency fighting broke out in the capital. In late 2007, while I was in the Dadaab refugee camps in northeastern Kenya interviewing Somali refugees who fled Ethiopian military operations in the Somali Region—my parents' home region—I was called by a gentleman who was the head of the Voice of America's [VOA] Somali Service, Fred Cooper, and he offered me a U.S.-based job. At that time, it was very dangerous in Somalia because

a Editor's Note: The BBC World Service Trust was founded in 1999 by the BBC as its international development charity. In 2011, it was renamed BBC Media Action.

of the fighting between Ethiopia and the Islamic Courts^b and later on al-Shabaab, and my work was becoming known to the local and foreign human rights violators who were not happy to have their human rights violations in Somalia investigated. It became increasingly dangerous for me, and I was briefly detained because of the investigations in Somalia. So I decided to take the job offer and to go back to journalism, and that's how I ended up working for VOA.

CTC: When did you first start reporting on Islamist militancy in Somalia?

Maruf: In 1992, I witnessed as a journalist one of the first Islamic courts that emerged in Somalia. Many people don't know that Mogadishu had an Islamic court in 1992. At the time, there was civil war in Mogadishu, and one of the community leaders, who later became a warlord, called upon the scholars and said, "I don't want to see any looting, any disturbances in my neighborhood, and I want you to set up an Islamic court." So an Islamic court was set up in an area called Medina near the airport in Mogadishu. After that, a group of Islamic scholars tried to set up more courts in Mogadishu, but they were immediately disbanded by one of the most powerful warlords at the time, General [Mohamed Farah] Aideed.

In 1994, the Islamic courts properly emerged in Mogadishu. Mogadishu was divided into two parts at the time: north and south. The south was controlled by General Aideed who was a sworn enemy of militant Islamist organizations. But the north was controlled by another warlord called Ali Mahdi, and Islamic courts emerged in his area. And they succeeded in restoring relative stability, and they were carrying out adjudications—chopping [off] hands of thieves and lashing criminals. So I also covered that, and I witnessed myself Islamic courts levying punishments on criminals. But it's important to note these were not militant courts, and the motivation behind it was to fight criminals and keep peace. But these Islamic courts were, after maybe two years, immediately subdued and destroyed by the warlord because they were getting too powerful. But the Islamic courts reemerged in 1998, 1999, in the south this time, and they were supported by the business community who only wanted security in their area—businessmen and elders—and I witnessed that, too, as a journalist. So I had a very long history of covering Islamist organizations and Islamic courts, which have a very deep-rooted history in Somalia.

I co-authored probably one of the first papers¹ about the emergence of Islamic Courts and the little-known jihadist unit, al-Shabaab, that was embedded within the Islamic Courts Union. It was a much-circulated paper. That's how, early on, I developed my



Harun Maruf

interest in writing about the Islamist militancy in Somalia.

CTC: In the past 15 years or so, for Voice of America, you've been mainly based in the United States, correct?

Maruf: Correct. Security-wise, because of the nature of my work, I not only cover Islamist organizations and military organizations, but I also do some investigative reporting of corruption, mismanagement, bad governance, and that has created a lot of animosity for me on the ground.

CTC: Take us inside the reporting enterprise for VOA Somalia. How do you collect information on the challenge posed by al-Shabaab and other jihadi groups?

Maruf: Voice of America's Somali service was initially launched in 1992 when U.S. forces were sent to Somalia by President Bush, but it did not last long. After a year or so, that program ceased to exist. VOA Somali was relaunched in 2007, so it's a relatively new service. Within that very short period, we have succeeded really to compete with media organizations that have been covering Somalia for decades like the BBC Somali Service. We have a vast network of reporters and a very rich network of contacts throughout the country and in the region including government sources and independent sources on the ground. News is breaking every minute, so you have to have the capabilities to cover it.

When it comes to covering al-Shabaab, given it is a group that seeks to push out propaganda, VOA has strong editorial standards in place.

We used to interview al-Shabaab leaders when they were in Mogadishu in 2009, 2010, but since they left Mogadishu, they have largely stopped speaking and giving interviews to *most* media. They still give interviews to *some* of the media, but they are very selective

^b Editor's Note: "The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) originated as a loose association of Islamic courts in Somalia, which provided security and managed crime after the fall of Siad Barre's authoritarian regime in 1991. Around 2000, the courts first united to form what would be called the ICU. It later evolved from a judicial system to a governing apparatus, eventually providing social services and implementing Shariah law in the territories under its control. The ICU maintained a powerful militia, which included the group that would later become known as Al Shabaab, and conquered Mogadishu and much of Somalia in June 2006. After ruling for several months, the ICU was defeated in December 2006 by troops from Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopia, and the group was disbanded." "Islamic Courts Union," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, last modified February 2019.

on which media outlets they speak to. On occasions in which there are major developments involving al-Shabaab, we have made efforts to make contact to try to interview members of the group for legitimate news reasons to get their point of view, but it has not been successful so far. The last al-Shabaab figure we interviewed was the American jihadist Omar Hammami, just days before he was killed by the group.²

In covering al-Shabaab, we monitor their media platforms and websites. We also monitor their official radio station, Andalus, and another radio station called al-Furqaan, which portrays itself as a more independent radio station but nonetheless is located in al-Shabaab territory and defends and takes the line of the group, and so is essentially an al-Shabaab radio station. These two radio stations propagate and air al-Shabaab stories and speeches of their leaders.

And we also monitor al-Shabaab social media activity. A few years ago, Twitter tried to shut down al-Shabaab accounts,³ but there are still accounts that are very much affiliated with al-Shabaab because they very quickly and immediately post their statements and speeches. It appears those who run these accounts have access to the group immediately after an explosion; within a matter of minutes, sometimes even seconds, they publish al-Shabaab claims. So it's an open secret that they are al-Shabaab accounts, so we also monitor those. We also talk to people who have contacts within al-Shabaab and people who defect from al-Shabaab who know the group.

CTC: More than a decade-and-a-half since al-Shabaab emerged in Somalia, the terrorist group has grown to become “Al Qaeda’s largest, wealthiest and most deadly affiliate.”⁴ It still has a significant presence in the rural areas of southern and central Somalia and still has the capacity to carry out large-scale attacks in almost any part of the country such as a twin car-bombing in Mogadishu in October that killed over 120.⁵ What has been the source of the group’s resilience?

Maruf: There are a combination of factors. The main factor is the environment. The Somali state collapsed in 1991, and civil war engulfed the country. Institutions collapsed. Warlords emerged and fought for power and territory. People were desperate. They were looking for some sense of normalcy, stability. They were looking for alternatives. So the environment in Somalia was very conducive for an organization like al-Shabaab to not only emerge, but also to organize itself, to equip itself, and to advance its agenda. All the ingredients were there. Somalia was referred to for a long time as a failed state. And although it was all the way back in 2000 that a transitional government for Somalia was established in Arta in Djibouti,⁶ today’s government still only has weak reach into many parts of Somalia. This means that al-Shabaab still has the space to mobilize, to organize itself, to train itself, and to carry out attacks. Somali borders are open, and al-Shabaab is still importing weapons from Yemen. This has been documented by the both the U.N.⁷ and the United States. In October, the U.S. Treasury designated al-Shabaab members who have been accused importing weapons for al-Shabaab from Yemen and facilitating al-Shabaab acquiring weapons in the region.⁸

So the environment has helped al-Shabaab emerge and rise as a very strong militant organization. The group was part of the Islamic Courts that emerged because of the popular backlash against

“Al-Shabaab are very much a part of the society in Somalia. Although they merged with al-Qa`ida in 2012 and are very much still part of the al-Qa`ida system, very proud of being with al-Qa`ida and have carried out attacks in Kenya, in Djibouti, very nearly in Ethiopia, in Uganda, they still portray themselves as a locally grown militant organization/resistance group.”

warlordism, lawlessness, and anarchy. It was after the December 2006 Ethiopian intervention that al-Shabaab grew significantly as a force and recruited many members. Many Somalis, inside and outside the country, opposed the presence of Ethiopian forces. Ethiopia and Somalia had a long history of troublesome conflict, fighting over territory and borders because of the colonial history. So many people who were not necessarily supportive of al-Shabaab opposed the presence of Ethiopia. Al-Shabaab took advantage of that, and they became an organization very deeply rooted in society and to this day that continues to be the case.

You mentioned the word resiliency. Resilience may be an overused word, but not in the case of al-Shabaab. They have survived time and again. Although they lost Mogadishu and all the major cities in Somalia, they control large parts of the countryside and some smaller towns. The weakness of the central government and al-Shabaab’s roots in the local communities means they have been able to impose themselves in these areas. This has also allowed them to build up significant influence even in areas they do not control. They’re collecting taxation from Mogadishu and other major cities. When the ISIS branch in Somalia tried to collect taxation from businesses in Mogadishu and other towns, al-Shabaab posed as the defenders of the business community and tracked down and killed ISIS members in Mogadishu, including the deputy leader of ISIS in Somalia, Mahad Moalim, back in 2018.⁹ It was a very interesting development at the time.

So al-Shabaab are very much a part of the society in Somalia. Although they merged with al-Qa`ida in 2012 and are very much still part of the al-Qa`ida system, very proud of being with al-Qa`ida and have carried out attacks in Kenya, in Djibouti, very nearly in Ethiopia, in Uganda, they still portray themselves as a locally grown militant organization/resistance group that’s fighting ‘crusaders’ as they call it—non-Muslim countries who are in Somalia and are supporting the Somali government: Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, etc. This is how they portray themselves, and that’s why they might still appeal to some people in the countryside and can still extort some people in the urban areas.

The other factor that has allowed al-Shabaab to remain strong in Somalia is, as I mentioned, the weakness of the Somali state institutions. Yes, there have been a lot of positive developments in Somalia, and since 2000, there have been peaceful transfers of power, but nonetheless, there have been political squabbles every few years. Whenever there is an election coming up, the Somali



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political atmosphere really goes from bad to worse, and Somalis take their eyes off stabilizing the country, they take their eye off the main prize, which is to stabilize and deliver services to the population. At that moment, al-Shabaab portrayed itself as a viable alternative group. Whenever these political developments happen and it becomes very volatile and poisonous, al-Shabaab creates doubts in state issues in the eyes of the public, so this also contributes to their resilience and presence in the country.

CTC: Why have the Somali government, African Union forces, regional powers, and the United States been unable to significantly diminish the threat of al-Shabaab?

Maruf: The African Union forces' initial mandate was to protect the government and government institutions. They succeeded in doing that. Then their mandate slightly changed, and they helped the government drive al-Shabaab out of the major towns. But Somalia is a big country, and African Union forces number about 22,000 troops, [though] that figure has gone down with the ongoing drawdown. Somali forces number between maybe 12,000 to 18,000. And for a long time, there were serious challenges for Somalia to expand the number of soldiers, to train a capable force that can not only take over responsibility from African Union forces, but also recover more territory from al-Shabaab. And because of the same political challenges and pitfalls we have just discussed, Somalia, despite all its attempts, is still on a journey to recruit and train and have a viable army. It seems it's going to be a very long journey.

There have been serious challenges in getting funds to train its army, in paying salaries to the army, and in convincing the regions to become part of the national army and integrate their forces into the federal army. There was the so-called national security architecture that was reached in 2017 between the Somali government and Somali regional leaders, and this security architecture stated that Somalia should have about 22,000 forces—4,000 Special forces, 18,000 regular forces—and about 32,000 police forces.¹⁰ But all these benchmarks have not been reached, five years later, precisely because of lack of funding, because of the political shortcomings of Somali leaders.

This meant that from 2015 up until the new offensives against the militant group since the summer of 2022,¹¹ al-Shabaab was not put under pressure. From the point al-Shabaab was driven out of Mogadishu in 2011, up until 2014, the government made gains against al-Shabaab, taking back territories and cities from al-Shabaab. But from 2015 onward, the operations against al-Shabaab were not consistent. Observers thought there was not a strategy and that there was no sustained effort to recover more territories from al-Shabaab. I'm sure administrations during this period will have different takes, but that approach did not work to diminish the al-Shabaab threat. This is partially why the Somali government and African Union, earlier this year, signed a new agreement, changing the name of African Union forces from AMISOM to ATMIS,⁶ and this agreement, if it succeeds, will shift the priorities of African Union forces from defending bases to becoming more of a mobile force to help Somali forces go out and dislodge al-Shabaab from more territories, recover more territories. That's what we have seen partially achieved lately by Somali forces, but without a significant contribution from African Union forces.

CTC: Let's talk about the new offensive against al-Shabaab. After Somalia's new President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud took office in May, he declared that defeating al-Shabaab was a top priority.¹² After the militant group killed over 20 people in a brazen attack at the Hayat hotel in Mogadishu,¹³ he declared a "total war against al-Shabaab."¹⁴ According to the government, an uprising against al-Shabaab by Ma'awisley tribal farmers-turned-militia-fighters backed by Somali government forces and strengthened at times by heavy artillery provided by the African Union has dislodged al-Shabaab from large swaths of central Somalia including in the Hiran region.¹⁵ What is your assessment of this renewed counterinsurgency effort and strategy and its potential to result in enduring security gains? How has al-Shabaab responded?

Maruf: First of all, based on our reporting so far, this uprising—the local mobilization of local forces—and Somali government forces have been able to seize large areas in central Somalia—Hiran and Middle Shabelle (both in Hirshabelle State), and in Galmudug State, primarily. They have taken back large areas from al-Shabaab.

A former prominent al-Shabaab theological leader once said, 'Somali militants are like a fish, and people are the water. Fish cannot survive without water.' And what he was referring to is that

c Editor's Note: In April 2022, the African Union replaced the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) with ATMIS—the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia.

this group really cannot survive without the community. They are very much entrenched in society. This is how they raise their funds. This is how they recruit. This is how they get information. They're part of society. They cannot maintain their organizational structure and survivability without support and without being among the society.

In the decade or so that preceded the current uprising, Somali clans tried to launch uprisings against al-Shabaab, but they did not succeed because every time they tried to resist the militants' demands in terms of extortion or donating livestock or recruiting their boys, al-Shabaab crushed this resistance because there was no capable central government really at the time to help them and support this local resistance. This happened in the west of Kismayo in 2012; it happened in Bay region, in Lower Shabelle region in 2013 and in 2015. In 2018, it happened in the Middle Shabelle region just to the north of Mogadishu.

This appears to have changed in the case of the ongoing uprising since June 2022 by the clans in central Somalia. Shortly after the new Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud came to power in May, he announced a strategy to confront al-Shabaab militarily, economically, and ideologically.

What helped spark the uprising was that al-Shabaab attacked some communities in late May. It started just spontaneously in central Somalia, in the Hiran region, and elders and clans dusted off their weapons, took up their guns, and drove al-Shabaab from several villages. Things escalated when al-Shabaab destroyed some water wells in early August.¹⁶

It's very important to understand that while the new government was calling for an offensive against al-Shabaab, it was not ready to initiate it when the uprising in central Somalia started. The prime minister was only appointed on June 16 and only formed his government on August 2. It then took them a few days to take their offices. By that time, the fighting was taking place already in the Hiran region, so they were not ready for this, apart from the president's call for a multi-front war. They did not have a very well-thought-out strategy to fight al-Shabaab based on discussions with security experts. Of course the government disputed this and insisted it had a plan from the beginning. But because of this organic rising that started in central Somalia—those are the words of the president, “organic rise up”¹⁷—the government publicly backed the uprising and sent the army to help the local forces fight al-Shabaab. This is how this resistance, this uprising, has developed into a very serious effort against al-Shabaab.

The new offensive will have serious challenges. It *has* serious challenges, as we speak. As I just mentioned, it did not come about as a result of a very carefully planned strategy. The timing did not suit the Somali army. Somalia has been training about 5,000 soldiers in Eritrea who have not yet returned. I'm sure the government would have liked to have them return for the start of any offensive.

Another problem is that there has been mistrust among some of the Somali clans. At times, we have seen clans drive al-Shabaab from an area, then al-Shabaab goes into the territory of a different clan, and they hesitate to chase them into that territory because if they do that, fighting may break out between the clans. This is one of the challenges that is facing the current operation. Also al-Shabaab since 2011 has not been fighting to *hold* territory. What al-Shabaab does is when they see a powerful threat that's coming, they withdraw very deep into al-Shabaab areas. They save their

“Clans in other regions are watching what happens in Galmudug and Hirshabelle states. If the current uprising and offensive succeeds, the people we speak to locally believe that more clans will try to replicate this in their territories, in their areas, and they will be more encouraged to fight al-Shabaab. But if the efforts do not succeed, the uprisings will die down.”

men for another fight. This is one of the tenets of guerrilla war. When troops move into a town, al-Shabaab gives them a few days, few weeks, and then they carry out a counteroffensive using very powerful explosives that cause havoc and chaos in the military camps. They have been carrying out this strategy for many years now, to deadly effect.

In response to the current operations against them, al-Shabaab has already launched one counteroffensive. In recent months, government forces have been very cautious not to go too deep into al-Shabaab areas, and in cases where they went too deep, they have retreated from at least one town. And this is part of the challenge.

So the Somali government needs to have a very thorough strategy so that when troops go to an area, they don't retreat. Because al-Shabaab has been controlling the countryside for a long time, one of the factors that has been working against Somali government forces is they go to a territory and then they stay for a few weeks and they retreat. Same for African Union forces in recent years: They go to a territory, they stay for a few weeks, and then they come back. Most locals have wanted the government to reach their area, wanted services and education and an end to al-Shabaab rule, but what happens to the locals when they support government and African Union forces coming into their areas but these forces then abandon them? What happens is very serious repercussions for the locals. The president recently visited some of the frontlines, and I am told that he is very well aware of this. He will want probably to refine the strategy.

Notwithstanding these challenges, what we are seeing is a very serious offensive that really targeted the biggest vulnerability of al-Shabaab. What's the Achilles heel of al-Shabaab? It's their dependence on the support or obedience of the local population. And if the government really succeeds in bringing people onboard, they could go very far. Also, if this first phase of the offensive fails to completely drive al-Shabaab from Galmudug and Hirshabelle States, and move them from there into the deep south and southwest, the effectiveness of the strategy will be seriously questioned.

But very importantly, another challenge is that the current military effort by the government and the clans is only taking place in two states. South-central Somalia is four states, so this operation, this uprising has not expanded or spread to the whole of south-central Somalia or the southern regions. The government has said plans are underway to open a second front in the south. It is going to be more difficult in the south. Geographically, it's very difficult.

It has forests; it has valleys. Central Somalia is more of a plain area, not a lot of forests, so it is easier there for forces to spot al-Shabaab and dislodge them from territories. But as the fighting moves into the southern regions, it is going to be more challenging.

Even more importantly, other clans in other regions are watching what happens in Galmudug and Hirshabelle states. If the current uprising and offensive succeeds, the people we speak to locally believe that more clans will try to replicate this in their territories, in their areas, and they will be more encouraged to fight al-Shabaab. But if the efforts do not succeed, the uprisings will die down.

CTC: Somalia currently faces the threat of one of the worst famines in its history, according to the United Nations.¹⁸ The drought in Somalia appears to have motivated the Ma'awisley militia-farmers to take up arms against al-Shabaab in central Somalia out of anger caused by the group's taxes and the expropriation of their food.¹⁹ But there is concern that severe food shortages can also create fertile ground for al-Shabaab recruitment. How do you see this issue?

Maruf: It's a very serious situation. Drought is impacting millions. There is a shortage of food and a lack of water. There was not enough rain for several seasons, and this is deteriorating the situation. And the clans and locals are reporting that al-Shabaab has been destroying water wells in areas where they see clans supporting the government, in particular in the states of Galmudug and Hirshabelle. We have seen videos and pictures of water wells destroyed in these two states. In Adan Yabaal, which government forces captured December 5, al-Shabaab was accused of removing pumps from the water wells. Based on reports from ground, this has further deteriorated the already severe humanitarian conditions on the ground because water is very scarce now in Somalia. Al-Shabaab's attacks on water wells is one of the factors that drove locals in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states to rise up against al-Shabaab. In Galmudug state, al-Shabaab was accused of destroying a local communication center,²⁰ creating anger and suffering among the local population. These communication centers are a lifeline to the locals. Why? Somalia has not had the ability over the years to print and distribute paper money, so people rely on mobile money, so if the mobile network goes down, then they can't get support from their relatives outside the country or their relatives inside the country.

Another incident that contributed towards the uprising was an attack in September by al-Shabaab on a convoy transferring food supplies from one town to another in Hirshabelle that killed about 20 people.²¹ It's one of the factors that drove a lot of people into the local resistance and the local forces fighting against al-Shabaab.

During food shortages—like, for example, the 2017 famine—a lot of people tend to flee al-Shabaab areas because aid agencies, whether local or international, cannot reach them. They cannot deliver food because al-Shabaab early on in the conflict kicked out international NGOs from its territory, accusing them of things like spreading Christianity. This challenge for al-Shabaab is they don't want everybody in their territory to flee and go to the government area. They *need* the population for recruitment and to extract funds and supplies. So what they do is they set up camps in their area, and they set up a drought committee. And then they take to the airwaves, the radio stations, and they raise funds and even sometimes contact local NGOs. They don't allow them to go inside

and distribute food. But they say, "OK, if you really want to bring food, give it to us, and we will redistribute." So they slightly ease up on aid deliveries in order to keep the population in the area; that's the goal. We've been getting some reporting recently that they are easing up in the south of the country, for example, by turning a blind eye to donkey carts coming in carrying food.

CTC: It's a fine line for al-Shabaab because famine conditions can create anger against them, but it can also, in the areas that they control, create even more dependence on them because they're the only power on the ground that can provide the food that the people so desperately need.

Maruf: The drought committee they set up has been distributing food in remote areas in the countryside and has been posting videos and pictures of their committee distributing food.

In response to the offensive by the tribal militias and the government, al-Shabaab held a conference, entitled Nuqaba Council of Wilayat, for clan elders supportive of decisions and fatwas issued by al-Shabaab's clerics. They did this because they know clan elders have been instrumental in this latest uprising. So they said, 'You have to issue a statement,' and these particular elders issued a statement denouncing the offensive by the government, saying their respective clans are not part of it. They even went as far as showing pictures of elders and locals they said were clan fighters who wanted to oppose this local mobilization, in a move apparently intended to offset the local fighters supporting the government offensive. So they can be adaptable also in these situations.

CTC: What insights can you share about their current capacity and structure of al-Shabaab inside Somalia?

Maruf: Based on my reporting, al-Shabaab structurally has two councils. They have the Executive Council, which they call the Tanfid and the Shura Council, or the Consultative Council. The Executive Council pretty much is the cabinet. They run all the operations. It's led by Ahmed Diriye, the emir of the group who is also known as Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah,²² and he has a deputy, Abukar Ali Aden, who used to be the head of the defense department of the group for a long time. There is a third commander in the top three leaders of the group, Mahad Karate,²³ who is a very experienced and controversial figure who has lately been commenting on al-Shabaab media about the group's operations.

Al-Shabaab's main power lies within three organizations: the Jabhat, their military wing; the Amniyat, which is their security and intelligence wing; and their explosives wing, the Sanaaca (explosives manufacturing department), staffed by experts and technicians who make and understand explosives. So these three departments are really very powerful. Their explosives department is led by Abdullahi Osman Mohamed, believed to be a former cameraman turned militant who is also known as "Engineer Ismail."²⁴ His deputy within the explosives wing is an American, Jihad Mostafa (also known as Ahmed Gurey). They are both part of the top leadership. The FBI recently described Jihad Mostafa as the most high-ranking American jihadist globally,²⁵ and he's very highly regarded in al-Shabaab. And then you have the head of the military wing, Yasir Jiis.²⁶ You have the head of the Amniyat, Yusuf Ahmed Hajji Nurow (aka Geesa Ade).²⁷ They have departments covering finance, politics and regions, *da'wa* and education, judicial, and

others. After that, they have regional departments, governors; they have Hisba (police) department, the local taxation offices, and checkpoint controls. So it's a very tightly run organization.

CTC: Let's turn to drones and how they're shaping the conflict in Somalia. It is well-documented in open-source reporting that the United States has long used drones in Somalia.²⁸ In September 2022, Somalia's interior minister, Ahmed Malim Fiqi, revealed in a television interview that Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 attack drone was being used to carry out strikes and reconnaissance in counterinsurgent operations, with the operators of the Turkish drones being provided target coordinates by Somali commanders.²⁹ This represents the first time the Turks have actively become involved in the fight against al-Shabaab in Somalia.³⁰ How significant is this Turkish drone campaign against al-Shabaab? Could this be a game changer? What does your reporting indicate?

Maruf: The role of Turkish drones in bombing al-Shabaab was confirmed by multiple security sources.³¹ It may be a little bit early to say it's a game changer, but it's a very significant development because in the recent operations in central Somalia, whenever Somali government forces and local forces came across a very strong resistance from al-Shabaab, they called for an air support and the Turkish drones were on hand to lend a hand. That has given them some reinforcement breakthrough, based on our sources locally. It should be pointed out there were also a number of U.S. airstrikes during these operations.³²

More importantly, our sources on the ground are telling us that U.S. strikes are in the areas where U.S.-trained Somali forces are operating. The most significant job that the U.S. government has been doing in Somalia over the years is the training of a Somali military force called Danab (Lightning), which is the most capable Somali force. There is also a Turkish-trained Somali force called Gor Gor (Eagle). These American- and Turkish-trained forces have been giving support to the regular forces and the local forces. Whenever there is local resistance, they've been given support. So the drone strikes by Turkey have been a very significant part of the current operations, and Somali officials have really praised that. They feel it's making a significant difference. That being said, there have long been drone strikes against al-Shabaab, but what was missing was the kind of ground offensive you are now starting to see. Without ground operations, you can't significantly weaken or defeat a group like al-Shabaab.

CTC: There has been some concern about drones being used by al-Shabaab itself. It would be great if you could talk a little bit about that and the concern that they could move toward using attack drones.

Maruf: Al-Shabaab released purported aerial drone footage of the

Manda Bay attack.³³ e They have also filmed their fighters training with drones in the air. They use very widely available drones. When it comes to the techniques that help them acquire these drones, they can buy from Somali markets, they can also buy from China, they can buy from the Middle East. And they can use people who are affiliated with their businesses, who are affiliated with them to import these drones. And they can acquire drones that way. They also have 'fanboys' in various parts of the world who not only buy them technologies—computers, cameras—but also who can buy them these drones that they then use to shoot very sophisticated films that they can use for propaganda in order to recruit and also to propagandize their attacks.

Sources familiar with al-Shabaab tactics have raised fears the group could use suicide drones. Security sources reported fear that it was possible that al-Shabaab could attach a very small portion of explosives to these drones. And they said that because al-Shabaab always tries to change tactics to outfox its enemies, it was possible they would start deploying attack drones. When, for instance, it was difficult for them to bring in vehicles carrying bombs into the capital, what they did is they dismantled the bombs and they brought them in small pieces. Experts with knowledge of al-Shabaab believe if it gets to the point where al-Shabaab cannot bring operatives into the cities or the identity of their people in the cities becomes known to the security forces, then they would likely resort to other tactics, such as using attack drones, maybe by just attaching an explosive the same size as a hand grenade to their drones to detonate on a specific target or a moving vehicle, or a sports event or maybe a political event. The same concern about al-Shabaab using attack drones in the future was also raised by United Nations monitors in 2021.³⁴ But we have not seen very concrete evidence that al-Shabaab has further developed this drone technology, that they are in a position to attach maybe machine guns or even to use attack drones to hit a plane. But the possibility is always there.

CTC: As you just mentioned, in July 2021, a U.N. report on the global terror threat stated that "Al-Shabaab has significantly increased its use of drones to conduct reconnaissance flyovers and record the activities of security forces. Member States expressed concern about the threat from weaponized unmanned aerial vehicles and the group's intent and capacity to launch attacks on aircraft and civil aviation infrastructure. That concern was aroused by Al-Shabaab plans to target low-flying aircraft within Somali airspace and along the border between Kenya and Somalia, which is an important corridor for humanitarian flights and the main route for commercial aircraft landing in Somalia."³⁵ Are you able to speak a little more about what you have learned in the course of your reporting about how accessible drones are to al-Shabaab and how the group sources drone technology?

Maruf: In October 2021, the Somali government seized several drones at Mogadishu's international airport being imported by a

d While neither Turkey nor the Somali defense ministry has officially confirmed or denied the Turkish drone deployment, in late November Maruf reported, citing Somali security officials, that "Turkish drones were involved in airstrikes in Lower and Middle Shabelle regions in recent weeks." Harun Maruf, "Somalia Military Rebuilding Shows Signs of Improvement," Voice of America, November 30, 2022.

e Editor's Note: In January 2020, al-Shabaab attacked the Manda Bay air base in Kenya, killing three Americans and destroying six American aircraft and one Kenyan aircraft. C. Todd Lopez, "At Manda Bay, Investigation Finds No Single Point of Failure, But Many Recommendations for Improvement," U.S. Department of Defense, March 10, 2022.

former member of parliament who claimed they were for use for agricultural company purposes.³⁶ The incident raised all kinds of suspicions. The drones in question were slightly bigger than the DJI drone that al-Shabaab uses for its filming.

It is important to stress that the drones that al-Shabaab uses are freely commercially available, and so they can source them from anywhere that sells them, including Southeast Asia or from individuals in Somalia who originally bought them for legitimate purposes. It is also important to note that al-Shabaab is very much interested in technology; they have even thought about manufacturing a rocket.

CTC: And of course, al-Shabaab has significant financial resources to devote to such enterprises, with the United Nations noting recently that according to ledgers, the group has around “\$24 million available annually for spending on weapons and explosives.”³⁷ Let’s pivot now to the international terrorism threat al-Shabaab poses. Over the years, the group has launched attacks across East Africa. In 2016, al-Shabaab detonated a laptop bomb on a plane traveling from Mogadishu to Djibouti, but failed to bring down the aircraft.³⁸ In December 2020, the U.S. Justice Department unsealed an indictment against a Kenyan al-Shabaab operative who allegedly plotted to hijack an aircraft and crash it into a building in the United States in a 9/11-style attack. According to authorities, the plot was directed by senior al-Shabaab leaders, including the mastermind of the 2019 Nairobi Dusit hotel attack and the operative obtained flight training in the Philippines between 2017 and his July 2019 arrest in the country.³⁹ It has been reported another al-Shabaab operative getting flying lessons was subsequently arrested in an African country.⁴⁰ What is your assessment of the regional and international terror threat the group poses and specifically the threat it poses to aviation?

Maruf: We have seen their ambitions. They attacked Kenya’s Westgate mall in 2013. They have attacked almost every country that sent troops to Somalia in order to send their message. Based on previous reporting, they have even expressed an interest in targeting shopping malls in the United States, Canada, and Europe.⁴¹ Based on our conversations with security officials in Somalia, al-Shabaab is very opportunistic, very ambitious, and also explores its options. What they lack is the capacity to carry out multiple attacks in places far away from the region, but the ambition is there. And we have seen examples of that, including the Philippines case just mentioned.

There has been a lot of work done on securing the airport in Mogadishu, but one concern Somali security forces have is that there are other less well-secured airports in Somalia where al-Shabaab could hijack an aircraft or get explosives onto a plane. A key task for the Somali government is to secure smaller regional airports. I have no intention to alarm the public, but it would not be wise to dismiss the possibility.

When it comes to the regional terror threat, beyond the attacks we’ve seen the group launch in cities such as Nairobi in East Africa, one significant concern is al-Shabaab’s presence in the Boni Forest on the Kenya-Somalia border; al-Shabaab still moves across the border between Kenya and Somalia, and they have tried to do the same in Ethiopia.⁴²

“Somalia is trying to restore stability inside the country, and they need all the support they can get. The presence of U.S. troops in Somalia has been very, very important ... probably the most significant contribution the U.S. made to Somalia was to train Danab forces, the most capable Somalia forces to date.”

CTC: The United States has been waging a long war against al-Shabaab and continues to target al-Shabaab leaders and fighters with airstrikes.⁴³ In May 2022, the Biden administration redeployed hundreds of U.S. personnel into the country, reversing a withdrawal of ground forces ordered in the waning days of the Trump administration.⁴⁴ Based on all your reporting, how effective have these strikes been in weakening al-Shabaab, and how important is the U.S. military presence inside Somalia to maintaining pressure on the group?

Maruf: Somalia is trying to restore stability inside the country, and they need all the support they can get. The presence of U.S. troops in Somalia has been very, very important. As I mentioned earlier, probably the most significant contribution the U.S. has made to Somalia was to train Danab forces, the most capable Somalia forces to date. They go into areas deep in al-Shabaab territory and then regular forces follow them and try to hold it. The Danab forces are not large in number; they are maybe close to 2,000 now, including a new battalion being trained. The initial idea was to train up to 4,000 special forces. The United States has been supporting this capable force not only through training, but also by mentoring, advising and assisting them.

The U.S. has also been carrying out targeted airstrikes against al-Shabaab leaders. During the Trump administration, U.S. airstrikes targeted the foot soldiers of al-Shabaab, and this created fear in the group. Their movement in large numbers became reduced; reportedly, their top officials also minimized using vehicles from one town to the other. There were not large gatherings of their fighters in one area in order, for example, to carry out large raids on Somali military camps, on African Union forces. It created a lot of fear. And you could tell that this was the case because the leader of al-Shabaab addressed this,⁴⁵ and this is one of the reasons that he sent fighters in September 2019 to attack Baledogle air base, where U.S. soldiers were training Somali forces.⁴⁶ So you could tell that these drone strikes were having an impact.

Based on the reporting on the ground, the Biden administration^f have continued in certain circumstances to carry out airstrikes against al-Shabaab foot soldiers^g as well as leaders such as Abdullahi Yare (also known as Abdullahi Nadir) who was killed in a U.S. drone strike on October 1.⁴⁷ Although the intensity and the frequency of U.S. airstrikes have decreased compared to the Trump era,⁴⁸ you now have Turkey deploying attack drones as well. This means that there are multiple drones spending a lot of time over al-Shabaab territory. It's going to discourage al-Shabaab from moving their weapons, their logistics, their assets, and their officials from one region to another. It's going to further complicate that, and that is very significant. But the Somali government is going to need a more expansive ground operation across southern and central Somalia in order for this air support to succeed.

CTC: What do you think should be the lessons learned from more than 15 years of counterinsurgency efforts against al-Shabaab so that the Somali government can build on the current momentum against the group?

Maruf: The most important lesson is that really no country can survive or can defend itself against a militant organization without having it is own military, without having its own security force. A long time ago, there were even suggestions that Somalia does not need a military. I don't think this notion was coming from Somalis. Somalia really needs a viable army, a strong army. The last few months have provided a sense of what Somali forces can be capable of. We've seen Somali forces with the support of local people taking and seizing territory from al-Shabaab without the presence of African Union forces. There has been progress made by Somali forces against al-Shabaab before, but the question always was 'can they hold territory without the support of African Union forces?' We have seen now that they can take territory and hold it without the support of African Union troops on the ground. So the key lesson is that Somalia really needs to boost and massively invest in its own army and build a strong army.

^f Editor's Note: In May 2022, *The New York Times* reported that President Biden had "approved a Pentagon request for standing authority to target about a dozen suspected leaders of Al Shabab" and that U.S. airstrikes in Somalia carried out during the Biden administration had up until that point "largely been limited to those meant to defend partner forces facing an immediate threat." The newspaper reported that "on its first day in office, the Biden administration suspended a permissive set of targeting rules put in place by the Trump administration, instead requiring requests for strikes — except in self-defense — to be routed through the White House. (Africa Command also invoked that exception for strikes undertaken in the 'collective' self-defense of Somali partner forces.)" Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Biden Approves Plan to Redeploy Several Hundred Ground Forces Into Somalia," *New York Times*, May 16, 2022.

^g Editor's Note: For example, "at the request of the Federal Government of Somalia, U.S. Africa Command conducted an airstrike against al-Shabaab terrorists who were attacking Somali National Army forces near Buulobarde, Somalia, on Sept. 18, 2022. The command's initial assessment [was] that the strike killed 27 al-Shabaab terrorists and that no civilians were injured. U.S. forces are authorized to conduct strikes in defense of designated partner forces. The defensive strikes allowed the Somali National Army and African Union Transition Mission in Somalia forces to regain the initiative and continue the operation to disrupt al-Shabaab in the Hiraan region of central Somalia." "Federal Government of Somalia engages terrorists with support from U.S. forces," U.S. Africa Command, September 21, 2022.

“No country can survive or can defend itself against a militant organization without having it is own military, without having its own security force ... The last few months have provided a sense of what Somali forces can be capable of.”

The Somali government has also learned a second lesson the hard way: They really need the support of the local population. It's going to be very hard for any government to even secure the capital without the support of the locals. If the locals do not support you, they will not give you tips, they will not tell you where the people committing attacks are hiding, and then you are going to struggle in restoring security. So they need to get the public on their side. And al-Shabaab understood that very early on, and that's why they massively entrenched themselves among the society. And so the Somali government needs to give the public confidence that government forces are going to come, education is going to come, water is going to come, services are going to come, that they are able to build local administration, police is going to go there. That's a second lesson.

A third lesson is that Mogadishu needs a long-term strategy to defeat al-Shabaab. Of course, the zeal and courage we've seen from the government forces and the clan militias in recent weeks is important, but you really need to have a strategy, you need to have planning. You need to be able to manage expectations. You need to assess how you are going to sustain operations from a financial point of view and anticipate the cost of the war in terms of destruction and lives lost. You also have to minimize the risk to your forces and also make sure you don't lose the public going forward. That's very important.

A fourth lesson is that it is crucial that counterinsurgency efforts contain both airstrikes and ground offensives. All these are based on conversations with experts and locals on the ground.

A fifth lesson is the need for good operational security. One of the secrets of al-Shabaab in succeeding for such a long time is that they keep their secrets to themselves. They don't allow their fighters to carry gadgets and mobile phones. They execute suspected spies within their own ranks. And they control the movement of their fighters. This is why Somali intelligence, despite getting tips that attacks are in the works, has been struggling to predict what government buildings and installations al-Shabaab is going to attack, even in the capital.

The Somali government needs to learn to better keep its secrets. You see Somali officials going to the airwaves, talking on their personal account, saying 'We're going to attack this place' or 'there's going to be an operation very soon.' Or you see government soldiers on the frontlines with smartphones taking pictures on farms in the countryside, providing al-Shabaab with opportunities to geolocate them and target them. The government really needs to instill discipline within the army so that their secrets are not on TikTok and Facebook.

CTC: Al-Shabaab's control of large swaths of territory has for many years provided it with the ability to raise significant funds. According to a U.N. report published in July 2022, al-Shabaab earns between \$50 million and \$100 million annually, with significant funds raised from its "taxation of all aspects of the Somali economy."⁴⁹ What do you think it will take to diminish this terrorist financing? Will it only dry up when al-Shabaab is removed from the remaining large areas of rural southern and central Somalia that it controls?

Maruf: You have to go back to the state collapse. If you want to stop al-Shabaab financing, you have to go back to how this organization came to be. They came to be because there was a power vacuum. State government and its functions were not operating. So al-Shabaab found an opportunity to equip, to train, to advance their agenda. If you really want to disconnect al-Shabaab from its financing, you need to have a very strong government that can have an oversight on private banks, that can give security to businesses across the country, because the reason that the businesses and the wealthy Somalis are giving money to al-Shabaab is not out of love. It's because they're scared; that is what they tell us. It's because al-Shabaab can send truck bombs to their businesses and blow them up. So, the government has to be able to provide security not only for the wealthy people, but also for all citizens.

Through its threats, for example by sending threats over text message, al-Shabaab is able to exercise significant influence in areas

they do not practically control, so the government needs to impose itself and provide security, offer strong oversight on financial services. But you can't stem the flow of funds to al-Shabaab by just cutting off transfers through the banking system. Based on what we hear, people are physically going to al-Shabaab areas to pay fees so that they can have security, and the government needs to address this. The president has made clear he's going to prioritize cutting al-Shabaab's funds, and there have been a lot of meetings to this effect in Mogadishu on reforming the banking system and also raising the necessary awareness.⁵⁰

One thing I want to go back to is the communities in regions where there currently are no uprisings or local mobilization against al-Shabaab. They are watching what happens in the Hiran, Middle Shabelle, and Galgudud regions and to see if it succeeds. If this succeeds, they will also start mobilizing themselves. If a group of wealthy individuals, businesses in Somalia say, 'We're not going to pay al-Shabaab; we're going to protect our buildings. We're going to take the risk,' that's all it needs for a snowball effect to build up against the group. It's then very likely that other businesspersons in the country, other wealthy individuals in the country would also do the same. It just needs somebody to start; again, this is based on conversations with locals and experts. But who's going to take the risk and start the ball rolling? This is an organization that can exact revenge on their businesses and on their lives, and also their loved ones. **CTC**

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How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel

By Wassim Nasr

Over the past year, mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a private military company with very close ties to the Kremlin, deployed to Mali—first to Bamako, the capital, then to the central part of the country, then in the east all the way to Gao and Ménaka and in the north to Timbuktu. The arrival of Russian mercenaries hastened the departure of French and European forces. However, the Russian private military company did not deploy capable, disciplined, and well-equipped troops to fill the gap, and its brutal and indiscriminate counterinsurgency efforts are serving as a recruiting tool for the jihadis. A year after the arrival of the Russian mercenaries to Mali, the security situation has worsened. Despite ongoing fighting between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State's branches in the Sahel, the two terrorist groups are consolidating their sanctuaries and gaining an unprecedented range of action. With concern that Wagner may seek out Burkina Faso as its next client, the Russian mercenaries' aggravation of the jihadi threat has very concerning implications for the stability and security of the region.

The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company with very close Kremlin ties, currently counts several African governments as clients for what it professes to be a range of security services, including counterterrorism, in a bargain that has seen the group provide military and security services in exchange for mining concessions and political access. But as Christopher Faulkner noted in the June 2022 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, the Wagner Group “has little interest in genuine capacity building and instead seeks to capitalize and profit on insecurity,” with its “nefarious practices, including opaque and manipulative contracts, disinformation campaigns, election meddling, and severe human rights abuses” posing “a severe threat to the security and stability of African states.”¹ However, when seen from the Kremlin's perspective, the Wagner Group has been a very useful proxy. At low diplomatic and military cost, it has helped advance Moscow's agenda and created the perception that Russia has greater capacities than it actually

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does.

This article examines the impact the Wagner Group has had on the jihadi threat environment in the Sahel region, with a significant focus on Mali. The article proceeds in four parts. It first provides some context on the counterterrorism environment in the region, then outlines how the Wagner Group has worked to ingratiate itself with governments in the Sahel. It then examines the Wagner Group's impact on the jihadi threat picture in Mali and potential future impact in Burkina Faso before providing some brief conclusions. The bottom line is that the Wagner Group has not helped bring security to the region and is in fact aggravating the jihadi threat.

The Counterterrorism Environment

After al-Qa`ida-allied jihadis took over much of northern Mali in 2012 and seemed poised to threaten the capital Bamako, France initiated—at the behest of the Malian government—a military campaign called Operation Serval that within months succeeded in restoring the government's nominal control over Mali's territory. The operation did not, however, defeat the jihadi threat,² with various terrorist groups waging an insurgent campaign in Mali that continues to this day. In 2014, France replaced Operation Serval with a broader regional counterterrorism effort entitled Operation Barkhane, with most of the deployed French forces remaining in Mali.³

In May 2021—in a second coup in the country in nine months—Mali's current leader, an anti-French military officer named Colonel Assimi Goïta, seized power. In the months that followed, relations between Bamako and Paris went into a downward spiral, with Goïta refusing, and angered by, French demands to hold elections within a reasonable timeframe.⁴

In February 2022, France announced it was withdrawing militarily from Mali after a breakdown in relations between Paris and the military junta.⁵ By the summer, Operation Barkhane and a separate French-led European military mission in Mali (Task Force Takuba) had ceased operations.⁶ France relocated its main counterinsurgency hub to Niger.⁷

Despite some high-profile successes in removing jihadi leaders from the battlefield—among them, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud;⁸ Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, the founder of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia;⁹ and the Islamic State's first regional leader in the Sahel, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui—Paris had failed to get successive governments in Bamako to make the sort of governance improvements that might have eroded the jihadis' ability to recruit. Civilian casualties¹⁰ produced by French operations, including at a wedding celebration on January 3, 2021, in the Malian village of Bounty,¹¹ had also created anger in the country, which was compounded by the fact that the then Malian government backed¹² an initial French version

of events that was later discredited by U.N. investigators.^{13 a}

In a March 2022 assessment, the Center for Security and International Studies (CSIS) stated that French failures to initiate deep governance reforms had “helped fuel the expansion of jihadist violence from the north of Mali to the central region, as well as to Niger, Burkina Faso, and the northern borders of Benin and Côte d’Ivoire.”¹⁴ Notwithstanding the continuous targeting of high-value targets by French forces and the ongoing war between al-Qa`ida and Islamic State militants in Mali, in this author’s assessment the French military focus in recent years on the immediate threat of the Islamic State in the tri-border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso provided the al-Qa`ida jihadi umbrella group Jama`at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) with time and space to expand farther in Mali, Burkina Faso, and all the way to Benin and Togo.¹⁵

The jihadis still posed a significant threat to Mali when the last French troops left the country in August 2022,¹⁶ with militants belonging to JNIM^b enjoying a stronghold in Mali’s northeast and central regions, as well as arrayed to the north, south, and east of Bamako.¹⁷ In the Sahel as a whole, by the summer of 2022, JNIM was “increasing its control and expanding towards the neighboring coastal countries, with support from [some] local communities,” according to a report published in July by the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi threat.¹⁸ The report stated that JNIM is “the major source of insecurity” in Mali.¹⁹ JNIM represents a political threat to the junta in Mali as well, as the group can provide an alternative governance model. This is not the case yet for the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP),^c which represents a more violent threat but with no viable political governance project so far.

At the time French forces pulled out of Mali, ISSP had been contained by the French military effort and pushed outwards toward the tri-border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso by its more powerful rival JNIM. In May 2022, some Islamic State units signed a ceasefire with some JNIM units in the Gourma region of Mali, but as with other local ceasefires between the warring jihadi groups²⁰ in the region, it did not last long. The overall trajectory is one of steadily growing animosity between the two groups as evidenced by a November 12 clash in the Mali-Burkina Faso border area in which the Islamic State claimed to have killed 80 JNIM fighters.²¹ Broadly speaking, while JNIM has placed more emphasis on building community support and has thus been able to strengthen

“Moscow sees the Wagner Group’s deployment to Mali as a low-cost bridgehead for spreading Russia’s influence across West Africa.”

its presence across the region, ISSP has had a track record of “indiscriminate and constant violence.”²² Since early March, the group’s brutality against the local population has alienated Tuaregs in the eastern Ménaka region of Mali, pushing some toward a de facto alliance with JNIM militants, allowing the al-Qa`ida affiliate to assert itself in areas such as Azarghazen and Inekar. JNIM was involved in the defending Telatai²³ against Islamic State militants in early September and an effort to push back ISSP in Azarghazen²⁴ in late October.²⁵

The Entrance of Wagner

The Wagner Group deployed to Mali in December 2021 at the invitation of the new ruling junta led by Colonel Goïta,²⁶ though it should be noted that the junta still refuses to acknowledge the Russian military company’s presence in the country. The regime’s falling-out with France and other Western countries because of their criticism of the coup meant that it needed to seek other patrons to provide security for the regime and to counter the jihadi threat.²⁷ In the Wagner Group, the new rulers in Bamako saw a company with no qualms about human rights or democracy and that had built up a track record elsewhere in Africa—Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique—for promising security to regimes in exchange for cash and concessions to natural resources.²⁸

For a \$10.8 million monthly fee and concessions to mining rights, the Wagner Group has provided security to the junta, delivered training, and militarily engaged jihadi forces.²⁹ Around the time the last French troops left Mali, around 800 to 1,000 Wagner mercenaries had deployed to the country.³⁰

Moscow sees the Wagner Group’s deployment to Mali as a low-cost bridgehead for spreading Russia’s influence across West Africa. The logic is that in a zero-sum great power game, if it is Russian mercenary forces providing protection and counterterrorism services to governments rather than the French or American militaries, then Moscow’s clout and economic opportunities³¹ in the region will grow. With Western countries attempting to isolate Russia because of its war on Ukraine, fostering friendly relations with African governments is important to Moscow.

For the time being, what is constraining the Wagner Group from an even more expansive role in Africa is the fact that it needs to prioritize deploying Wagner mercenaries to Ukraine.³² In July, then commander of U.S. Africa Command General Stephen Townsend stated: “We’ve seen Wagner draw down a little bit on the African continent in the call to send fighters to Ukraine,” adding that most of the Wagner Group’s drawdown had come from Libya and that there had not been redeployments from Mali.³³ Nevertheless, the Wagner Group’s prioritization of the Ukraine war seems to have had some effect on its mission in Mali. According to a very well-connected Malian source, Wagner mercenaries in Mali have not benefited from any notable logistical support from outside the country since

a Between January 2018 and August 2022, there were only two other documented instances of French operations in Mali causing civilian casualties. On September 1, 2020, French forces fired warning shots at a public transport bus between Intahaka and Gao; one passage was killed and two wounded. On June 8, 2021, French forces opened fire on a vehicle 20 kilometers east of Lerneb; three Tuareg civilians were killed and their vehicle burned. Jules Duhamel, “Overview of Operation Barkhane in central Sahel | 1 January 2018 - 29 January 2021,” Jules Duhamel website, n.d.

b “JNIM is composed of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb’s Sahara Emirate, Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and a majority of the Burkinabe militant group Ansar ul-Islam.” Jason Warner, Ryan O’Farrell, Hèni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, “Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:11 (2020).

c In March 2022, Islamic State fighters in the Sahel were granted the status of a standalone Islamic State province. Previously, the group had operated as the Greater Sahara branch of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP-GS). See Wassim Nasr, “#Mali l’#El revendique l’attaque de la base #Tessit avec importantes prises de guerre ...,” Twitter, March 23, 2022.



Mali (Brandon Mohr)

the late August/early September period and resupply shipments prior to then did not amount to more than guns, ammunition, and rations.³⁴

The Wagner Impact on the Jihadi Threat in Mali

The first Wagner elements arrived in Bamako in the period between December 2021 and January 2022. Within weeks, they were deployed toward the Mopti region of central Mali. The first recorded encounter between Wagner mercenaries and JNIM militants (and the first of Wagner's casualties in the country) occurred on January 3, 2022, on the road between Bankass and Bandiaguara.³⁵ Multiple encounters with al-Qa`ida militants in central Mali followed, including four in September 2022, two in October, and two in November,³⁶ according to JNIM.³⁷

Up to now, the Wagner Group is only known to have had one significant encounter with the Islamic State when Wagner operatives, along with Mali's military, were attacked by ISSP in Ansongo on September 1. The Islamic State—without providing visual proof—claimed that it killed “15 Wagner mercenaries” in the encounter.³⁸ The presence of the Wagner Group in the area did not prevent the Islamic State's Sahel branch from attacking military barracks and facilities in Tessit³⁹ on August 7, resulting in the deaths of at least 42 Malian soldiers.⁴⁰ The towns of Tessit, Gao,⁴¹ and Ménaka⁴² are still under direct Islamic State threat, despite Wagner's presence in both towns.⁴³ According to local Tuareg militants sources,⁴⁴ and to President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger,⁴⁵ the situation could deteriorate very quickly.

A Lack of Capacity

The deployment of the Wagner Group⁴⁶ and the departure of French forces severely depleted the counterterrorism capacity of the Malian government. The Russian mercenaries have little experience operating in Mali and have far less capacity than the French to ‘find, fix, and finish’ terrorist targets. Furthermore, the Wagner Group never operates alone in Mali and is logistically completely dependent on their hosts.⁴⁷

In one notable example of Bamako's current military inadequacies despite its hiring of the Wagner Group, on June 5 pro-junta Touareg forces, including a commander wearing Russian military fatigues,⁴⁸ initiated a failed assault on the ISSP-controlled town of Anderamboukane⁴⁹ in the Ménaka region in the east of Mali with support from the junta in Bamako but without any aerial support or support from Wagner.⁵⁰ The attacking force underestimated the maneuver capacity of ISSP, which succeeded in luring the attacking forces into a trap 40 kilometers away.⁵¹ The town had been under Islamic State control since March. Local sources confirmed that a few days after the failed operation, and following the French departure from the town on June 13, 2022, “poorly equipped” Wagner operatives arrived in Ménaka town.⁵² According to these sources, they rarely left their barracks and did not venture farther than 10 kilometers away until early November 9-10 when, according to a local Touareg leader,⁵³ Wagner mercenaries carried out “a single offensive patrol” 50 kilometers south of the town of Ménaka.



This photograph handed out by French military shows Russian mercenaries in Sévaré in central Mali in February 2022. A white skull, a feature of the Wagner Group's insignia, appears to be visible on a vest. (French Army via AP Images)

Targeting of Civilians

The lack of military capacity and ability to target jihadis from the air has seen the Wagner Group defaulting to the sort of heavy-handed tactics that it has used in other conflict zones.⁵⁴ Not only does the Wagner Group have no regard for civilian casualties, but it appears to have repeatedly and deliberately targeted civilians in jihadi strongholds to deter the jihadis from launching attacks and to coerce the local population to turn against the jihadis living within their midst.⁵⁵

One example of an apparent Wagner atrocity was noted by Christopher Faulkner in the June 2022 issue of this publication. While the Malian Armed Forces claimed that it killed over 200 militants between March 23 and April 1, 2022, in the town of Moura, he wrote that conflicting reports suggested “that the military along with Wagner mercenaries held the village under siege for four days and indiscriminately executed civilians, killing at least 300 people with some eyewitnesses estimating the total number to be closer to 600.”⁵⁶

By August 2022, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) had recorded “approximately 500 civilian fatalities resulting from joint operations involving Wagner and Malian state forces.” ACLED noted that the “distinction between civilians and combatants is increasingly blurred during operations between [Mali's military] and Wagner, as evidenced by the multi-

day massacre in Moura and several other events.”⁵⁷

ACLED added that Wagner's deployment in Mali has entailed “mass atrocities, torture, summary executions, looting, the introduction of booby traps as a counter-insurgency tactic, and influence operations in the information environment.”⁵⁸ According to multiple local sources, as well as reports by the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, the Wagner Group has been complicit in multiple cases of indiscriminate violence against civilians. Often, these have been in towns and villages with a Fulani population.⁵⁹ The targeting of these towns amounted to the collective punishment of entire communities. An increasing number of Fulanis have been recruited by al-Qa`ida militants in central Mali and farther south,⁶⁰ as evidenced early on, for example, by an AQIM terrorist attack at a beach resort in Grand Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire, in March 2016 in which two of three attackers were Fulani.⁶¹

Other violence against civilians in Mali the Wagner Group has been complicit in include a massacre at the beginning of March in the village of Danguéré-Wotoro near Dogofri, where at least 35 burned bodies were later exhumed,⁶² and a massacre a few days later of 33 civilians (29 of whom were Mauritanian nationals) in the region of Ségou near the Mauritanian border.⁶³ The Wagner Group was also involved in violence against civilians in Diabali,⁶⁴ Nampala, Sofara,⁶⁵ and Boni.⁶⁶ These towns were known to be JNIM strongholds in Niono,⁶⁷ Djenné, and Douentza circles; or

at least logistical hubs for the group.⁶⁸ According to multiple local sources, JNIM militants use these towns to buy and sell goods, but also to recruit. In early September and late October, Wagner mercenaries were accused of rape, robbery,⁶⁹ and cattle stealing.⁷⁰ JNIM claimed that it managed to retrieve some of the stolen cattle and return it to its owners, gaining a propaganda win.⁷¹ Wagner forces were also reported to be involved in a massacre of over a dozen civilians in the Ségou⁷² and Mopti regions.⁷³

The Jihadi Fightback

Since January 2022, Katiba Macina (KM), a JNIM subgroup active in central Mali, has been the main target of joint military operations conducted by Wagner and Malian armed forces in central Mali. In response to Wagner's joint deployment with the Malian army, the militants adopted a behavior that was very similar to AQIM's behavior in the wake of the January 2013 French intervention: retreating back to safe havens and avoiding getting into armed clashes so that they could assess the capacity of their adversary. There were two movements of militants in the first weeks of 2022. One was westward, with KM/JNIM militants retreating to IDP camps in neighboring Mauritania where some of their commanders had family ties.⁷⁴ The other was southeastward to Burkina Faso.⁷⁵ The strategy was to absorb the energy of the Wagner offensive and then to counter at a time of their choosing.

The KM branch of JNIM launched its counterattack on March 4, 2022, when they killed more than 40 military personnel in an attack on a barracks in Mondoro.⁷⁶ JNIM announced in Fulani and in Bambara that "the attack aimed to avenge the Dogofri massacre perpetrated by Malian and Wagner operatives."⁷⁷ Wagner operatives were active in the same area at the time of the attack, and they were not of any assistance to the attacked Malian forces. On April 24, JNIM intensified its fight back by launching simultaneous attacks on the Sévaré, Niono, and Bapho Malian army camps.⁷⁸

JNIM has continued its efforts to win 'hearts and minds' in Mali in the wake of the French withdrawal, gaining it some support among the local population, mostly among Fulani elements hostile to the Malian armed forces and the Wagner Group, and Tuareg elements that share JNIM's hostility toward the Islamic State.^{79d} The Wagner deployment has created more fertile ground for such outreach efforts. In August 2021, as rumors of a forthcoming Wagner deployment began to spread, the ethnic Tuareg head of JNIM, Iyad Ag Ghali, mentioned Russia for the first time among the enemies of the group. Not only has the Wagner presence in Mali allowed the group to play up Russia as a bogeyman, but the Wagner Group's atrocities against civilians have provided JNIM with a powerful recruitment tool. According to multiple local and regional sources, there was a surge in jihadi recruitment in central Mali between May and July 2022.⁸⁰ There was also an increase in fundraising by jihadi groups in markets and mosques in the period between late September and October 2022.⁸¹

The French withdrawal also made it easier for JNIM to operate in urban areas and have senior leaders operate and meet more openly with less fear of being targeted by airstrikes. On August 6, just days before France completed its military withdrawal, French forces carried out an airstrike⁸² neutralizing JNIM fighters who had

“JNIM has continued its efforts to win ‘hearts and minds’ in Mali in the wake of the French withdrawal, gaining it some support among the local population, mostly among Fulani elements hostile to the Malian armed forces and the Wagner Group, and Tuareg elements that share JNIM’s hostility toward the Islamic State. The Wagner deployment has created more fertile ground for such outreach efforts.”

gathered in the Telatai region near the Niger border.^{83 e}

In the author's assessment, a few years back, JNIM took the political decision to focus on attacking military targets and to avoid indiscriminate mass shootings,^f with one high-profile example being the group's July 20-21 offensive⁸⁴ that culminated with the attack on the Kati barracks.⁸⁵ JNIM's current official policy is to not carry out attacks against 'soft targets,' even though, in the wake of Wagner atrocities, some inside JNIM command are arguing for the return of such "vengeful" attacks.⁸⁶ Unofficially, the group continues to kill and pressure civilians. One of the bloodiest attacks by a JNIM unit in 2022 occurred in Dialassagou⁸⁷ on June 18 when at least 132 civilians were killed for "collaborating with the Malian army." JNIM officially denied responsibility, just as it denied responsibility for the Solhan massacre in Burkina Faso in 2021⁸⁸ as neither attack matched the group's declared policy. In the wake of the fight with the ISSP, JNIM units active in Tamalat, Gao, and Ansongo committed indiscriminate killings of civilian populations they viewed as having accommodated Islamic State militants or collaborated with them.⁸⁹

In addition, JNIM has been carrying out intimidation campaigns, like the Boni siege that lasted from May to September 2022⁹⁰ and assassinations that stay generally unclaimed by the group in its areas of activity.⁹¹

The Rise in Jihadi Violence

Each year between June and September, there is generally a drop in attacks in Mali because of the rainy season. Roads become very

e The Wagner Group made many attempts to paint the departing French forces as a power that massacred Muslims. In April 2022, the French military stated that it had videos of Russian mercenaries burying bodies near an army base in Gossi in northern Mali shortly after French forces had withdrawn from the base in an attempt to frame them. Wassim Nasr, "France says mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group staged 'French atrocity' in Mali," France24, April 22, 2022.

f The last mass shooting attack committed by JNIM was the Aziz Istanbul restaurant attack on August 13, 2017, in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso. The attack remained unclaimed and initiated an internal debate in the ranks of AQIM, al-Qa`ida central, and its branches, and the issue was discussed by the Hattin committee.

d The main recruitment reservoir of ISSP is among Fulani populations across the border in Niger.

Central Mali*

Reported JNIM attacks
Rainy Season (Jun-Sep)

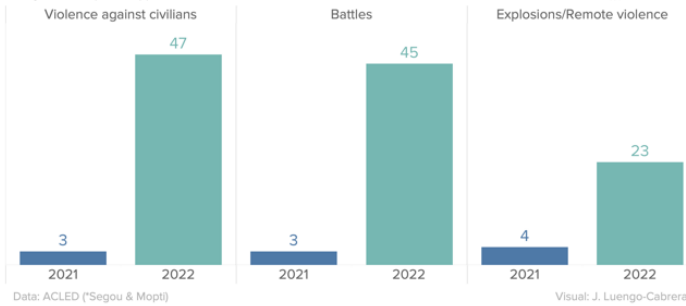


Figure 1: JNIM attacks in central Mali during the rainy seasons of 2021 and 2022. This graphic and the others were made using ACLED data by Jose Luengo-Cabrera, a Crisis Risk and Early Warning Specialist at the UNDP Crisis Bureau.

Mali

Reported JNIM attacks
Rainy Season (Jun-Sep)

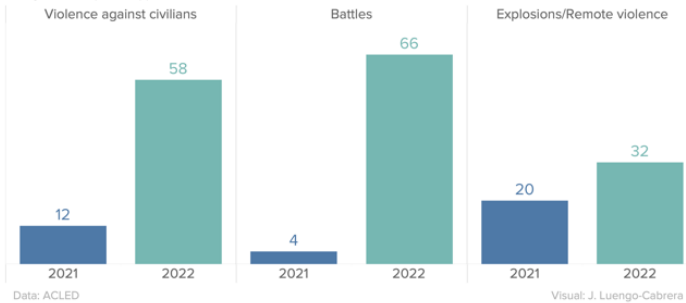


Figure 2: JNIM attacks in all of Mali during the rainy seasons of 2021 and 2022

difficult for both the army and terrorist groups. But 2022 witnessed a record number of JNIM attacks during the rainy season: 47 attacks against civilians; 45 armed clashes with military forces, including MINUSMA;^g and 23 IED and “explosions/remote violence”^h forms of attacks in central Mali. By comparison, in the 2021 rainy season, the corresponding metrics for central Mali were three attacks on civilians, three attacks on military forces, and four cases of explosions/remote violence. (See Figure 1.⁹²)

For Mali as a whole, there was also a significant rise in JNIM attacks across these categories between the 2021 and 2022 rainy seasons. (See Figure 2.)

Overall, when attacks by the Islamic State and other entities are added to the mix, there has been a dramatic increase in political violence in Mali since the Wagner deployment. According to ACLED, “both civilian fatalities and total fatalities from organized

political violence recorded in the first six months of 2022 surpassed the numbers recorded in all of 2021.”⁹³

An October 2022 report by the United Nations painted a bleak picture of the security landscape in Mali following the French pull-out, noting that “while the Malian Defence and Security Forces continued to conduct military operations aimed at stabilizing the center of the country, the overall security situation remained of deep concern.”⁹⁴ The report further noted that Mali had in the previous months suffered a “spike in the activities of extremist elements affiliated with Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara [ISSP], leading to increased threats against civilians and attacks on the Malian Defence and Security Forces and MINUSMA. In addition, insecurity has continued to expand to the west and south of the country, where Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin and unidentified elements carried out attacks.”⁹⁵

The U.N. report also drew attention to JNIM’s persistent targeting of Malian forces in urban centers. It stated that in recent months JNIM had imposed strict social and political norms on the local population in several of its strongholds and that reprisal attacks against communities for their purported cooperation with Malian junta forces had increased.⁹⁶

On October 26, Victoria Nuland, a senior U.S. State Department official, in speaking about Mali, highlighted the U.S. government’s concern over “the constraints that both the government and Wagner forces have put on [MINUSMA’s] ability to operate and fulfill their mandate,” and “the fact that terrorism is going up, not down, and that we are firmly of the view that Wagner works for itself, not for the people of the country that it comes to.”⁹⁷

The removal of French aerial assets and special forces from Mali has also allowed the Islamic State to capitalize with ISSP taking over the town of Telatai on September 6.⁹⁸ By October, the Islamic State was gaining strength in northeast Burkina Faso in the tri-border region between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger,⁹⁹ and had claimed its first attacks in northern Benin¹⁰⁰ while roaming freely¹⁰¹ in the Ménaka and Gourma regions of Mali, taking over the rural Ansongo district near the border with Niger. Hundreds were killed and thousands displaced as the Islamic State militants pushed deeper into Mali from their pre-existing strongholds near the eastern borders.¹⁰² By November, in a sign of ISSP’s increased confidence and a possible pivot away from brutalizing the local population, there were indications that the group had started to try to carry out ‘governance’ functions within its Mali strongholds, including destroying drugs and handing out free medications.¹⁰³

Overall, the trend is for increasing Islamic State activity in Mali. According to ACLED data, there were 34 ISSP attacks in Mali during the June through September rainy season in 2021 and 60 in 2022.¹⁰⁴

As noted earlier, after repeated failures to counter ISSP, JNIM has been expanding its presence in the Ménaka region in order to fight the Islamic State militants. and with the tacit approval of local factions. The AQIM offshoot is successfully capitalizing on both abuses carried out by both ISSP and the Wagner Group to ‘win hearts and minds,’ even though JNIM’s ongoing war against ISSP is exhausting the al-Qa`ida affiliate financially and militarily.¹⁰⁵ This might explain the notably quick, and relatively cheap, resolution of some of the latest JNIM foreign hostages cases in both Mali¹⁰⁶ and Burkina Faso.¹⁰⁷ The abduction of a German national in Bamako,¹⁰⁸ on November 20, was both a function of the reach of JNIM into the

g MINUSMA is the the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.

h “ACLED classifies Explosions/Remote violence events as asymmetric violent events aimed at creating asymmetrical conflict dynamics by preventing the target from responding. A variety of tactics are considered Explosions/Remote violence including bombs, grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), artillery fire or shelling, missile attacks, heavy machine gun fire, air or drone strikes, chemical weapons, and suicide bombings.” See “Explosions/Remote Violence in War,” ACLED, March 22, 2019.

Malian capital and its need of financial resources.¹⁰⁹

The Potential Future Wagner Impact in Burkina Faso

If the Wagner Group becomes active in Burkina Faso, it is possible it will also aggravate the jihadi threat there. In Burkina Faso, JNIM operations have in recent months increased and grown bolder. JNIM's October 24 attack on an army barracks in Djibo, a town the terrorist group has blockaded for months,¹¹⁰ which resulted in the freeing of more than 64 detainees was a significant blow to the new junta in power and a 'PR' coup for JNIM especially as most of the freed detainees were elderly and very young Fulani men.¹¹¹ The army retaliated by bombarding the Holdé area, causing 49 civilian casualties,¹¹² according to a local NGO source,¹¹³ and 42, according to jihadi sources.¹¹⁴

After five years of jihadi insurgency,¹¹⁵ JNIM constitutes the main jihadi threat to Burkina Faso.¹¹⁶ A series of coups in Ouagadougou has destabilized Burkina Faso and distracted its military from countering a severe jihadi threat. In late September 2022, a new junta, led by army captain Ibrahim Traoré, came to power and immediately adopted an aggressive stance toward France and a friendly posture toward Russia.¹¹⁷ The latest effort by the junta to recruit civilian volunteers¹¹⁸ will most probably further aggravate the security situation. In November, Burkina Faso's newly appointed prime minister asked France to help fund and arm¹¹⁹ the "90,000 volunteers."¹²⁰ However, according to a French official,¹²¹ this demand came with many other irrational demands that, unanswered by France, could 'justify' the new military rulers of Burkina Faso turning to Russia. According to the same source, Mali is playing a very active role in the rapprochement between Russia and Burkina Faso. The source added that the new authorities in Ouagadougou seem to be following the 'Malian playbook' by suspending in early December the broadcasting of Radio France International.¹²² It was noteworthy in this regard that in early December, Burkina Faso Prime Minister Kyélem Apollinaire de Tambèla made a trip to Russia via Bamako.¹²³

There is concern the newly installed military junta in Burkina Faso will also hire the Wagner Group.ⁱ There are suspicions (though not proven) that Moscow played a role in instigating the coup,¹²⁴ with demonstrations in support of the junta featuring Russian flags¹²⁵ and the Wagner Group's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, among the first to praise Captain Traoré's takeover.¹²⁶ The jury is still out on whether and to what degree the junta will lean toward Moscow and the Wagner Group. To some degree, Traoré's anti-French stance

"The deployment of the Wagner Group to Mali has strengthened and energized jihadi groups, providing them with not only a recruitment tool, but a much more favorable operating environment in Mali."

seems to have been designed to mobilize popular support in order to guarantee the success of his coup, and it is not clear what his next steps will be.¹²⁷

It is important to note that French Task Force "Sabre" has had a continuous presence in a Ouagadougou suburb since 2009 and remains deployed there.¹²⁸ France is currently evaluating all options, including withdrawing its forces from Burkina Faso.¹²⁹ It is possible that the French presence could be reduced to a very small force by the beginning of 2023.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, if Wagner becomes active in Burkina Faso, it will also likely aggravate the jihadi threat¹³¹ there, as well as potentially allowing the jihadis to increasingly threaten Togo¹³² and Benin,¹³³ where jihadi activity has been increasing in recent months.¹³⁴

Conclusion

The deployment of the Wagner Group to Mali has strengthened and energized jihadi groups, providing them with not only a recruitment tool, but a much more favorable operating environment in Mali. As noted, there was a surge in JNIM attacks across Mali in the 2022 rainy season compared to the previous year's rainy season, and attacks by the Islamic State within Mali also increased across these time periods.

While the junta and the Wagner Group have engaged militarily with jihadi groups in central Mali, they have shown little interest in confronting JNIM activity in Kayes, Koulikouro, Nara, and all the way to Yélimané¹³⁵ west of the capital Bamako, nor al-Qa`ida militants consolidating positions in Sikasso, Koutiala, and on the border area with Côte d'Ivoire. The strengthening jihadi presence in this border region and the proselytization activities of jihadi preachers on both sides of the border has the potential to also destabilize Côte d'Ivoire.¹³⁶

In the wake of the Wagner deployment and the ruling junta's turn toward Moscow and away from democracy, there has been a rush to the exits by international forces from Mali following the French withdrawal. Egypt suspended its participation in MINUSMA¹³⁷ in July; Germany also suspended its own operations in the U.N. force in August and again in September.¹³⁸ Berlin plans to reduce German troop levels in Mali from the summer of 2023 onwards and to pull out all troops by May 2024 at the latest.¹³⁹ The United Kingdom and Côte d'Ivoire announced in November that they would also be pulling their troops from the U.N. peacekeeping force, with Sweden and Benin also having announced exits.¹⁴⁰ The troop withdrawals risk undermining what is a vital peacekeeping mission, further destabilizing Mali. MINUSMA has been providing most of the post-battle medical evacuations of Malian forces as well as much of the civilian and military air transport between Bamako and the north. It has also been protecting important roads where the Malian state is absent or relying entirely on the international

i On December 14, President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana publicly alleged during a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken that "today, Russian mercenaries are on our northern border. Burkina Faso has now entered into an arrangement to go along with Mali in employing the Wagner forces there." He added that, "I believe a mine in southern Burkina has been allocated to them as a form of payment for their services. Prime minister of Burkina Faso in the last 10 days has been in Moscow. And to have them operating on our northern border is particularly distressing for us in Ghana." The allegations by Ghana's president have not been publicly substantiated, and the government of Burkina Faso vehemently denied the allegations. "[Remarks of] Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo Before Their Meeting," U.S. State Department, December 14, 2022; Anthony Osae-Brown, "Ghana Alleges Burkina Faso Paid Russian Mercenaries With Mine," Bloomberg, December 15, 2022; "Les mercenaires Wagner présents au Burkina Faso, affirme le président ghanéen," *Monde*, December 16, 2022.

force. MINUSMA has also played a key role in investigating and documenting human rights abuses committed by militants as well as government forces.¹⁴¹

There is growing concern that the Wagner deployment to Mali has set off a chain of events that could further destabilize the entire region. On November 17, 2022, NCTC Director Christine Abizaid testified that JNIM “is increasingly threatening capital cities in the Sahel ... [and] probably hopes to exploit the departure of French forces from Mali earlier this year to accelerate its growth and entrenchment, including into littoral West African states such as Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Togo.”¹⁴²

ACLED reported that “during the first six months of Wagner’s deployment in Mali, it became apparent that the group’s operations negatively impacted conflict dynamics, particularly civilian safety,” and added “as Wagner gradually expands its footprint, there is a high risk that other regions will see developments similar to those in central Mali and neighboring areas.”¹⁴³

As the one-year mark of the Wagner Group deployment approaches, these trends are even more evident, and there should be concern that any Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso will make the security situation in the Sahel and bordering countries even worse. **CTC**

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The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures

By Samira Gaid

The grassroots uprising against al-Shabaab in central Somalia that has gathered pace since June and the liberation of large areas in this region by Somali government forces in recent months have given Mogadishu a big opportunity to enduringly weaken al-Shabaab. However, the experience of the last 15-plus years of counterinsurgency suggests that the gains may only be fleeting unless Somalia takes full ownership of the fight, focuses on winning hearts and minds, receives and coordinates continued U.S. and partner support, makes significant progress in building up its military, addresses the clan rivalries that al-Shabaab has been adept in exploiting, and implements a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that unifies stakeholders.

The government of Somalia has been waging a major offensive against the militant group al-Shabaab in recent months, the likes of which have not been seen since 2011 when military operations by Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and African Union (A.U.) forces weakened the group, drained it of its revenue sources in Mogadishu, and compelled it to withdraw from the capital and revert to its insurgency roots.¹

The gains made against al-Shabaab in 2011 and in the years that followed proved only fleeting. Despite the repeated successful U.S. decapitation strikes against its senior leadership, the loss of further territory, and infighting and succession wrangles that threatened its existence, the group reemerged stronger, more cohesive, and deadlier² than before while remaining true to its ideological mission. Al-Shabaab adeptly transitioned from a national insurgency to a

transnational violent Islamist organization, embracing its role as al-Qa`ida's East Africa affiliate.³ Throughout this period, al-Shabaab retained a significant presence across rural areas of southern and central Somalia. Despite the fact that the group has been dislodged from parts of central Somalia by government forces and clan militias in recent months, as the end of 2022 approaches, the group still controls or dominates large swathes of territory in rural areas across south-central Somalia, especially in the areas to the south of the current theater of operations.

Eleven years after the short-lived victory by A.U. and TFG forces in August 2011, Somalia today is facing another pivotal moment in its long fight against al-Shabaab. In May 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned for a second stint in power after defeating President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo in the presidential elections. His return upended what was in effect an involuntary truce between the federal government and the jihadi group, brought about by the two-year delay in holding elections and political instability.⁴ Shortly after taking office, President Mohamud stated that defeating al-Shabaab was a top priority.⁵ After the terrorist group killed over 20 people in a brazen attack at the Hayat hotel in Mogadishu in mid-August,⁶ he declared a "total war against al-Shabaab,"⁷ which he made clear the following month would encompass military, ideological, and economic means to combat the terrorist organization.⁸

The renewed political will to counter al-Shabaab coincided with a tribal uprising in central Somalia's Hiran region against the terrorist group. In June 2022, local clan militias dubbed "Ma'awisley" began to revolt against al-Shabaab's harsh rule and arbitrary taxation policies. Many of the fighters were farmers angered at the militant group's extortive practices as drought conditions worsened in the country.⁹ President Mohamud had at the time just named a prime minister, Hamze Barre, who would take another 40 days to constitute his cabinet.¹⁰ The government had begun to lay the groundwork for a new campaign against al-Shabaab when the uprising gained momentum. Nonetheless, the government rushed to aid the local forces before making adequate preparations for a sustained campaign.¹¹

After al-Shabaab carried out a cross-border incursion into Ethiopia from the adjoining Bakool region in late July,¹² the efforts in Hiran against al-Shabaab gained momentum. Joint Somali forces led by the governor of Hiran and armed locals launched coordinated attacks to drive the group out of the rural villages in the Hiran region.¹³ The Ethiopian military provided air support for the local offensive actions, resulting in the recovery of tens of villages.¹⁴ Before withdrawing from localities it had controlled in Hiran, al-Shabaab carried out savage reprisals, including the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the poisoning of wells, and the torching of homes and vehicles transporting humanitarian aid. However, this only served to intensify the backlash against the group.¹⁵

Since June, off-and-on, there have been large-scale offensive

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Somalia (Brandon Mohr)

operations led by the Somali National Army (SNA) in Hiran, Bay, Bakool, Galgaduud, and Middle Shabelle regions.¹⁶ By late September, the Somali government stated that government forces and local clan militias (which are called Community Defense Forces by the government) had liberated much of the Hiran and Galgaduud regions in central Somalia. Somali-led offensives in early December recovered Adan Yabaal town, one of the two major towns held by al-Shabaab in Middle Shabelle that was a key prior stronghold for al-Shabaab.¹⁷ Adan Yabaal had been under the control of al-Shabaab over the past 15 years, though it was briefly taken by AMISOM and government forces in 2016 before reverting back to al-Shabaab. The group has reverted to its previous tactic of withdrawal without confrontation, a tactic they had previously only displayed when confronted by A.U. forces.¹⁸

In stark comparison to the 2011 counterinsurgent campaign against the group, A.U. forces and the United States are playing supporting rather than lead roles.^a Prior to 2017, operations were led by the A.U. mission with Somali forces playing a support role. But over the past five years, the Somali national forces have incrementally taken over greater responsibility, with current

offensives led and executed by Somali forces.¹⁹ The joint operations between the SNA and AMISOM dubbed Operation Badbaado in April 2019 to capture bridge-towns in Lower Shabelle prepared the ground for current Somali-led operations that serve to boost morale and provide Somali ownership.²⁰

Notably, Turkey is also now playing an active military role in support of Somali efforts. In late September, Somali's interior minister revealed in a television interview that Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones were being deployed to carry out strikes and reconnaissance in operations against al-Shabaab, with the operators of the Turkish drones being provided target coordinates by Somali commanders, according to his reported remarks. While neither Turkey nor the Somali Defense ministry has officially confirmed the Turkish drone deployment, in late November Voice of America Somali reported, citing Somali security officials, that Turkish drones were participating in the operations against al-Shabaab by conducting bombings and surveillance and that "Turkish drones were involved in airstrikes in Lower and Middle Shabelle regions in recent weeks."²¹

With the fight against al-Shabaab potentially at a pivotal turning point, this article examines what lessons can be learned from more than a decade and a half of counterinsurgency against the group. This article now makes a series of observations about the counterinsurgency challenges Somalia faces and the key lessons that should be learned from past failures.

The Need for Somalia to Take the Lead

For years, Somalia has been beset with the dual challenge of state-building while battling al-Shabaab. After state collapse in 1991, the country has remained mired in protracted conflict that revolves primarily around clan competition over access to power and resources. This clan competition continues to be aggravated by historical inequities against minorities and other marginalized groups. Clan identity has historically been important in Somalia's six decades-long post-colonial history. Though considered a homogenous nation, Somalis are born into one of six clans with pre-colonial Somalia governed through a highly decentralized political system, based on kinship, customary law, and traditional authorities.²² State collapse and violent polarization led to a resurgence of these clan structures and regrettably clan supremacy over the nation when it came to the loyalties of many Somalis.

The "clannization" of Somalia's conflict was evident in 1988, two years before the onset of the civil war, when adversaries encouraged social mobilization along clan lines and ultimately led to the overthrow of the military regime.²³ As already noted, the aftermath of state collapse witnessed the reemergence of clannism as the dominant political currency, with political value placed on the greater numerical strength and the superior fighting prowess of clans compared to other Somali actors.²⁴ In this new political reality, minorities and the marginalized were automatically disadvantaged given the premium placed on military capabilities that in turn were dependent on a particular group's access to funds and weapons.

It is against this backdrop that the al-Shabaab insurgency exists and thrives. Notwithstanding the recent counterinsurgency offensives in central Somalia, the group remains a potent threat to Somalia and the Horn of Africa, as illustrated by its double-car bomb attack in Mogadishu on October 29 that killed over 100 people,²⁵ the group's cross-border raid into Ethiopia this past summer, and a string of attacks over the years in Kenya, Uganda,

a The African Union has, for example, provided heavy artillery for the effort. The United States has, for example, at the request of the Somali government targeted al-Shabaab fighters in the Hiran region from the air. Yousra Elbagir and Vauldi Carelse, "From farmers to fighters - how a new Somali militia has risen against al Shabaab," Sky News, October 14, 2022; "Federal Government of Somalia engages terrorists with support from U.S. forces," U.S. Africa Command, September 21, 2022.

and Djibouti.²⁶

For more than 15 years, Somalia has been fighting al-Shabaab through an ongoing partnership counterinsurgency (COIN) effort. The actors include the various Somali forces, A.U. forces, the United States, and other regional partners.²⁷ Somalia's decade of COIN experience in the current fight against al-Shabaab provides important lessons and examples, chief among which is the absolute need for local legitimacy by government and allied forces if the efforts are to bear fruit. In Somalia, the partnership approach to COIN, which began in 2007 and to some degree remains ongoing despite the recent Somali-led counterinsurgency offensives, has not been effective in routing the insurgents: Notwithstanding its recent loss of significant territory, al-Shabaab remains present in large areas of south-central Somalia.

What up until recently was a mainly internationally led effort has only successfully *enduringly* driven the group's visible presence out of the government's strongholds and urban areas. Since the group departed Mogadishu in 2011, al-Shabaab has generally avoided large-scale battles to retake cities. The group returned to its insurgency roots, primarily conducting raids and ambushes, cutting off main supply routes, and concentrating its limited forces to create a tactical numerical advantage that has lasted over a decade.²⁸ Despite the United States and African Union playing a smaller role in counterinsurgency than before, the Somali government still lacks a comprehensive, coherent, Somali-centric strategic and operational approach for countering al-Shabaab. Understandably, the government remains fragile and cannot defeat the insurgent groups operating in Somalia without outside assistance. This assistance comes in the form of a multitude of actors who seldom cooperate in pursuit of their security objectives in Somalia. The international nature of Somalia's conflict and the varied interests in the country complicate the feasibility of a coordinated response to the threat of al-Shabaab. With this comes an incoherent approach that maintains only the status quo via a containment strategy. Indeed, Somalia's COIN model has historically been primarily externally driven by A.U. forces, with Somali forces in a supporting role. However, there is some room for optimism given the lead role Somali government forces and the clan militias/Community Defense Forces have played in recent months in dislodging al-Shabaab from large areas of central Somalia. Somali leaders and partners now acknowledge the need for Somali leadership and ownership in any response to the group in order to defeat it.

The Need to Win Hearts and Minds

Between 2007 and 2015, A.U. forces and the SNA engaged in significant counterinsurgency efforts against al-Shabaab. These operations succeeded in routing the terrorists from the capital city and other major towns and ports, but still did not strike a decisive blow against the group. One of the key features of these campaigns was their inability to win 'hearts and minds.' This was attributable to a number of factors, but key among them was the externally led security operations. The African Union is credited for the political and security progress made by Somalia over the past 15 years. However, the mission has faced several challenges that have impacted its performance. Initially, A.U. troops operating under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) were deployed from non-neighboring countries, such as Uganda and Burundi, to replace Ethiopian troops and avoid the challenges of neighboring states' vested interests in Somalia.²⁹ Finding African governments

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willing to send troops to a high-casualty arena was challenging, and this affected the mission in its initial years. Nevertheless, there were significant military achievements in 2011, including the liberation of several strongholds in south-central Somalia from al-Shabaab's control.³⁰ This included the capital city of Mogadishu, which created great momentum and optimism that al-Shabaab was indeed on the decline.

However, the optimism at the time was short-lived, as a resilient al-Shabaab soon reemerged. This was due in part to the intervention by Somalia's neighbors in the conflict. In October 2011, Kenyan forces unilaterally invaded southern Somalia, citing their right to self-defense against al-Shabaab.³¹ The “Linda Nchi” offensive operations were conducted in response to al-Shabaab kidnappings in Kenyan border towns with Somalia. Kenya would later join AMISOM, validating its presence in Somalia in February 2012, while Ethiopia redeployed 4,000 troops to join the peacekeeping mission in 2014.³²

In 2014 and 2015, there were four major offensive and consolidation operations jointly conducted by SNA and AMISOM:^b Operation Eagle, Operation Indian Ocean, Operation Ocean Build, and Operation Jubba Corridor.³³ The goals of these operations were three-fold: freeing cities, disrupting the terrorists' supply routes, and preventing the imposition of illegal taxes on the population. In early March 2014, Operation Eagle recovered 11 districts from al-Shabaab.³⁴ In November 2014, Operation Indian Ocean was initiated to push al-Shabaab out of critical towns and main supply routes.³⁵ Simultaneously, from November 2014 to July 2015, AMISOM undertook Ocean Build to consolidate these gains.

Beyond the removal of al-Shabaab from many areas, SNA and AMISOM faced significant limitations in the theater. Aside from

b In April 2022, the African Union replaced the AMISOM mission with ATMIS—the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia—encompassing military, police, and civilian dimensions.



Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud looks on during a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh, and Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit 2022 on December 13, 2022, in Washington, D.C. (Evelyn Hockstein/Pool via AP)

the resourcing and coordination challenges faced by AMISOM, the counterinsurgency efforts in Somalia lost valuable psychological ground by emphasizing the use of force at the start but neglecting the follow-along stabilization and rehabilitation aspects. The operations were also perceived to be externally led, denying the Somali authorities the local legitimacy needed to augment the military operations. The kinetic operations also merely displaced al-Shabaab, as the group, rather than confront the joint SNA and AMISOM forces, withdrew.³⁶

Al-Shabaab leveraged clan politics to win local support, and it was able to melt into the population. A key source of al-Shabaab strength has been that it is an indigenous Somali movement rooted in local communities, and notwithstanding its brutality and its coercion, its provision of governance and services in areas under its control has won it support. Al-Shabaab regularly releases videos and images demonstrating its provision of health services, education, and drought relief.³⁷ In its provision of education, the group's jihadi ideology has been emphasized, creating an ongoing recruitment pool for the group, with orphans also targeted by the group for enlistment.³⁸

After a brief fall-off following its defeat in Mogadishu in 2011, al-Shabaab reemerged, conducting terrorist attacks against the Somali government, A.U. troops, and other international partners. In 2014, al-Shabaab started using improvised explosive devices as its primary weapon, cutting off supply routes and conducting complex attacks on AMISOM and SNA forward operating bases.³⁹

The most notable of these attacks were those on AMISOM bases in Janale, Leego, and El Adde between June 2015 and January 2016. In these instances, al-Shabaab exploited its mobility to focus its forces rapidly and overwhelm the AMISOM positions. During the June 26, 2015, Leego attack, al-Shabaab took complete control of an AMISOM base that was reportedly heavily fortified and well-guarded by Burundian troops, which signaled that al-Shabaab was far from the weakened force it was supposed to be. The besieged AMISOM contingent took heavy losses, losing as many as 50 soldiers.⁴⁰ In its attack on AMISOM in Janale on September 15, al-Shabaab destroyed bridges, making it harder for A.U. soldiers to flee and for reinforcements to respond quickly.⁴¹ The January 2016 El Adde attack had similar characteristics; despite fierce running battles that lasted for hours, neither air support nor reinforcements came to help alleviate the beleaguered A.U. forces. As many as 141 Kenyan soldiers were killed, making it one of the bloodiest military losses for the A.U. troops.⁴²

These deadly attacks were facilitated by an environment in which many locals bought into the al-Shabaab-driven narrative of a foreign agenda for Somalia, creating resentment and anger against foreign African forces. The presence of AMISOM forces across the country was also not accompanied by adequate stabilization efforts and governance. The reality was that the African Union hatting gave false legitimacy to what were often predatory practices in Somalia by the forces of neighboring countries.

In July 2015, AMISOM launched Operation Jubba Corridor,

“It is only by creating a stronger, more effective, and more professional army that Somalia can take full ownership of the fight against al-Shabaab and prevail.”

a new military offensive against al-Shabaab. It aimed to further degrade al-Shabaab by removing it from its strongholds in Somalia's Bay, Bakool, and Gedo regions.⁴³ While this operation dislodged al-Shabaab from some territory, similar to previous operations, there was only a limited focus on winning ‘hearts and minds,’ and the operation far from achieved its aims.

The lack of a long-term strategy to win hearts and minds in Somalia was also a function of the fact that countries supplying troops for the AMISOM mission naturally prioritized their own interests above the long-term interests of Somalia.⁴⁴ Ethiopia and Kenya have in different ways supported favored Somali proxies to advance their regional interests rather than focus exclusively on what is best for Somalia, risking undermining Somalia's envisioned state-building project.

The Need for Continued U.S. Military Support

The U.S. military involvement in Somalia has been based on a “tailored engagement strategy” model with a relatively light footprint.⁴⁵ The strategy has entailed a high-value target (HVT) program, including drone strikes and special operations against al-Shabaab leadership, mainly under the umbrella of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM).⁴⁶ The United States also provides intelligence while building local partners' capacity.⁴⁷ The U.S. drone strikes have achieved some success while also posing challenges. In some cases, these strikes have caused civilian casualties, adversely affecting public perceptions of the United States.⁴⁸ On the other hand, these strikes have been effective in removing several high-value al-Shabaab leaders, including the former leader of the group Ahmed Godane (also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair) in September 2014.⁴⁹ Founder Adan Hashi Ceyrow and senior commander Qoor Gaab were killed in U.S. strikes, and most recently, Abdullahi Yare (Nadir)—who the United States was offering a \$3 million reward for information on—was killed on October 1, 2022.⁵⁰ The strikes constrained the group's freedom of movement and ability to gather in large formations in open terrain.⁵¹

Aside from strikes, the United States focuses on building and supporting competent African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and Somali special operations units to combat al-Shabaab.⁵² The United States' assistance in rebuilding Somalia's military is likely its most significant contribution to Somali security, as it has allowed the Somali government to reclaim the initiative in the fight against the group. In particular, the U.S.-trained local SNA special force unit Danab (lightning) and the Alpha group for Somali Intelligence's special operations have played a very significant role in countering al-Shabaab and the Islamic State.⁵³ Danab now conducts most counterterrorism activities in the country along with the Turkish-trained Gorgor forces. U.S. intelligence, training, and equipment has played a crucial role in facilitating local forces to prevent al-Shabaab from operating freely.⁵⁴

In May 2022, the Biden administration reversed a decision to remove the majority of U.S. ground forces in Somalia made in the last days of the Trump administration by redeploying hundreds of American personnel into the nation. It was assessed that the short-duration missions conducted since January 2021—in which U.S. trainers transited in and out of Somalia—were far from optimal and were eroding the capacity and morale of the partner units.⁵⁵ On December 10, *The Washington Post* reported that “since the return of hundreds of American troops, starting in May, U.S. special operators have been scrambling to help improve Danab's battlefield logistics and accelerate training for its staff officers.”⁵⁶ Continued U.S. support in building up and training Somalia armed forces will be essential if the government is to prevail in its fight against al-Shabaab.

The Need to Create a Stronger Army

It is only by creating a stronger, more effective, and more professional army that Somalia can take full ownership of the fight against al-Shabaab and prevail. Somalia's security forces are constrained by limited means and abilities, and as such, the A.U. forces' presence has been a linchpin of Somalia's security infrastructure. Progress has been made in the professionalization of Somalia's security forces, specifically with the special forces trained by the United States and Turkey.⁵⁷ But while they can conduct effective mobile operations, the building up of SNA capabilities will have to progress much faster to be able to take over from A.U. forces in December 2023 when the ATMIS mission is due to end. To augment the national army, federal member state (FMS) forces will also be critical.^c The sustained thorny relationship between the federal government and the FMS has not allowed for coordination and cooperation between federal and regional forces. In 2017, Somalia's leaders agreed on a national security architecture that articulated division of labor and the resourcing.⁵⁸ However, the limited means of the federal government has ensured the relationship remains combative rather than collaborative.

The Need for a Comprehensive Strategy

The Somali government, because of the pace of events, has not yet put together a comprehensive strategy involving FMS leaders and other key stakeholders. Without such a strategy, there is a high risk the current effort will eventually falter. Arguably, it is only by creating community ownership of security in federal states with a significant al-Shabaab presence that lasting progress can be made. In the absence of a comprehensive strategy, the various clan militias being brought into the fight against al-Shabaab as Community Defense Forces are not participating in counterinsurgency operations in a joined-up manner. Instead of simultaneous offensives, over recent months the Ma'awisley forces have mobilized themselves to conduct operations emotively and thus have commenced operations at different times. The lack of concurrent operations is advantageous to al-Shabaab as it executes its responses against one community at a time. Anti-al-Shabaab offensives gathered force in Hiran in September, progressed to Galgaduud in November before shifting again to Middle Shabelle where the current offensives are focused.

c Somalia is divided into six federal member states (FMS): Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, Puntland, South West, and Somaliland, which is a self-declared autonomous state.

As well as the military campaign, President Mohamud has also urged a broader national effort to counter al-Shabaab beyond simply a kinetic response.⁵⁹ The Somali president chaired a special cabinet meeting in October where he directed ministries to each take a role in the anti-al-Shabaab efforts rather than rely on the military response. Thus far, the ministries of information, religious affairs, commerce, telecommunications, and justice have announced initiatives to counter the group.⁶⁰

In recent months, the Somali government has successfully seized the initiative and put al-Shabaab on the backfoot. In the Hiran region, all the districts in the eastern flank have been liberated with just one district under al-Shabaab control. In Middle Shabelle, Runirgood is the only remaining stronghold for the group.⁶¹ The success is attributable to the fact that Ma'awisley militias provide local knowledge and legitimacy while granting command of the operations to the SNA and the federal government. This Somali ownership has been a game changer. The fight against al-Shabaab has for too long been perceived as an externally led one, linked to the war on terror and destructive interventions by Somalia's neighbors, but that narrative is now changing. The offensives against al-Shabaab and the terrorist group's reprisal attacks have exposed the very real and Somali nature of the conflict.

While the Ma'awisley operations have yielded several battlefield successes, the government and FMS must begin to adequately prepare the formal structures and forces to sustain and stabilize reclaimed territories. In the past, clan-led offensives delivered rapid victories on the battlefield, but Somali governments failed to implement the necessary follow-up actions to win the war. For example, in 2018, Ma'awisley forces engaged al-Shabaab fighters in similar offensives in Middle Shabelle after the group took over a village. A community elder and farmer, Hibad Ali Dasar, led the rebellion, but due to limited government support and a lack of a wider strategy, the group managed to subdue the Ma'awisley fighters and Hibad was killed in October 2018 in an al-Shabaab ambush.⁶²

Somalia's leaders have yet to develop a nuanced, comprehensive, locale-specific strategy. The administration appears to be addressing at least the need for a locale-specific approach, albeit sluggishly. The president has called for several National Consultative Councils with the FMS leaders with the latest in October discussing the offensives and the need for cooperation between the FMS and the federal government.⁶³ The Somali leadership has also attempted to address some of the reconciliation imperatives that are obstructing progress. Specifically in Middle Shabelle, in November, President Hassan Sheikh brokered a peace agreement between warring communities in order to shift the focus back to al-Shabaab.⁶⁴

The Need to Address Clan Differences

The government must seek to address the underlying clan differences to foster better cooperation and thus facilitate broad-scale action against the group. This will need to be handled judiciously as some argue that utilizing clan forces as the pointed tip of the spear in Somalia's COIN strategy is risky and reminiscent of the clan mobilization that preceded state collapse in 1991. The tribalized society of the 1990s contributed to the emergence of al-Shabaab, and the group has since then adeptly manipulated historical grievances between clans to play them off each other in order to gain sanctuary and support. It has also exploited grievances among minorities in Somalia and the marginalized. This

“The government must seek to address the underlying clan differences to foster better cooperation and thus facilitate broad-scale action against the group. This will need to be handled judiciously as some argue that utilizing clan forces as the pointed tip of the spear in Somalia's COIN strategy is risky and reminiscent of the clan mobilization that preceded state collapse in 1991.”

is demonstrated by the great numbers of minorities recruited into the terrorist group.⁶⁵

Al-Shabaab has pragmatically engaged with and exploited traditional clan structures, entering peace treaties with clan elders in the territories it governs. Through these agreements, the group has administered territories by proxy, gaining local legitimacy and support. When clans have resisted their governance, as was the case with the recent and continuing uprising in Hiran, al-Shabaab has confronted them militarily and utilized rival clans to weaken them.⁶⁶ This dynamic was recently evident in central Somalia as some clans in Hiran were reluctant to join the civilian uprising. For the government to overcome al-Shabaab's manipulation of the clans for its own ends, it must walk a fine line. To some degree, it will have to utilize clan structures. And it will need to reconcile or at least pacify feuding communities. But it will also need to still maintain a national approach.

Conclusion

Despite the setbacks suffered by al-Shabaab in the Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions, the group still controls vast territory in south-central Somalia's rural areas. The offensives are currently limited to the Middle Shabelle and Hiran regions, which constitute Hirshabelle FMS. South West and Jubaland FMS farther south are yet to begin operations while operations in Galmudug stalled in early November after the recapture of Wabxo town by al-Shabaab two days after its recovery due to lack of holding forces.⁶⁷ Operations have peaked and ebbed in different regions for a number of reasons. One cause is the limited number of national forces available to conduct simultaneous operations in several regions. Another emerging scenario in Galgaduud region is the need for national holding forces to collocate alongside Ma'awisley forces. This has not been the case in Hiran and Middle Shabelle, as the generated Community Defense Forces have managed to hold the territories despite the withdrawal of the national mobile forces.

Al-Shabaab has also stepped up its attacks in Mogadishu and other FMS capitals. The group continues to conduct bombings, assassinations, and raids in government-dominated cities such as Mogadishu, targeting non-combatants and government officials. In one recent attack in late November, six al-Shabaab fighters besieged the Villa Rosa hotel, hundreds of meters from the Somali president's residence and the home to a number of government officials. A clan

meeting was taking place at the hotel at the time. Nine people were killed with over 60 others rescued from the hotel in the 24-hour siege.⁶⁸ In another brazen attack, on October 25, 2022, the group killed 11 people at the Tawakal Hotel in Kismayo. A Somalia-based security analyst told Voice of America that this demonstrated the group could still attack anywhere in the country at any time.⁶⁹

Between 2007 and 2012, Somalia and its allies first concentrated on removing al-Shabaab's grip on urban areas and did so successfully. However, they have been less successful in winning the battle of hearts of minds of the population of rural areas of south and central Somalia and have lacked a strong enough army to hold territory, and this has resulted in the failure to root al-Shabaab out of these areas.

While the higher degree of Somali ownership in the recently launched counterinsurgency efforts against al-Shabaab should be welcomed, the government still faces significant challenges. Although Mogadishu has sought to capitalize on the momentum generated around the current popular uprising against al-Shabaab, the underlying conflicts and grievances between communities continue to complicate efforts to root out the terrorist group. Furthermore, utilizing clan militias (or Community Defense Forces, as the government calls them) across the board will not necessarily deliver the same results because the communities living farther south have deep grievances against other clans and the central government in Mogadishu, having experienced historical injustices

and continuing to face socioeconomic inequalities. Here, it is important to note that the current successes recorded in Hirshabelle and Galmudug occur in localities where the populations have long resisted al-Shabaab rule. The communities residing in those areas are not as clan diverse, and thus al-Shabaab has had a more difficult time taking advantage of tensions or frictions between clans. The communities in Hirshabelle and Galmudug are also among the most armed in Somalia post-1991 and have had access to state resources in the years since. They are therefore better able to militarily confront al-Shabaab. The same formula cannot be applied to South West State and some parts of Jubaland.

The grassroots uprising against al-Shabaab in central Somalia and gains made by Somali forces with air support from the United States and Turkey has rocked al-Shabaab onto the backfoot, but the experience of the last 15-plus years suggests that the gains may only be fleeting unless Somalia takes full ownership of the fight, focuses on winning hearts and minds, receives and embraces continued U.S. support, makes significant further progress in building up its military, addresses the clan rivalries that al-Shabaab has been so adept in exploiting, and implements a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that unifies stakeholders. The challenges may be daunting, but the recent military breakthroughs against al-Shabaab have provided Somalis with an historic opportunity to now do what is necessary to bring lasting security to the country. **CTC**

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