



Report

Playing the long game

Exploring the relationship between Al-Shabab and civilians in areas beyond state control

Mohamed Mubarak and Ashley Jackson

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About this publication

This paper is a joint output of the Hiraal Institute, ODI and the Centre on Armed Groups. The Hiraal Institute is Somalia's first independent security think tank dedicated to addressing the security challenges of the Horn of Africa. The Centre on Armed Groups is an NGO that supports efforts to analyse and engage with armed groups to reduce violence and end armed conflict. It does so through conducting innovative research, creating spaces for dialogue and providing advice.

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Contents

Acknowledgements / i

Display items / iii

Acronyms / iv

Executive summary / 1

1 Introduction / 3

1.1 Framework and approach / 3

2 Background / 5

2.1 The origins of Al-Shabab / 5

2.2 Al-Shabab's evolution (2007-2022) / 6

2.3 The 2022-2023 Macawiisley offensive / 9

3 Al-Shabab civilian governance / 11

3.1 Local governance / 11

3.2 Taxes / 13

3.3 Justice / 14

3.4 Education and indoctrination / 16

4 Al-Shabab and clan structures / 17

4.1 The evolution of Al-Shabab's clan strategy / 17

4.2 Al-Shabab's clan engagement in response to the government offensive / 18

4.3 No way back? Options for elders in areas now under government control / 19

4.4 Dynamics in areas where Al-Shabab lost control: Adan Yabal and Moqokori / 20

4.5 Dynamics where Al-Shabab remains in control: Jilib / 22

5 Conclusion / 24

References / 25

Display items

Boxes

Box 1 Historical patterns of control in case study locales / 7

Figures

Figure 1 Case study locales in Somalia / 8

Figure 2 Satellite images of Jilib / 12

Acronyms

| | |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| AIAI | Al-Ittihad Al-Islami |
| ICU | Islamic Courts Union |
| TFG | Transitional Federal Government |

Executive summary

As with many non-state armed groups, Al-Shabab's relationship with civilians has been essential to its resilience and staying power. This report examines how the dynamics between Al-Shabab and civilians have differed and why, in three areas of prolonged Al-Shabab control (Adan Yabal, Moqokori and Jilib). This report is based on in-depth research inside Somalia, including 70 interviews with businesspeople, government officials, elders, aid workers and supporters of Al-Shabab.

Al-Shabab's relationship with civilians is essential to its survival, and it has developed a clear political strategy for engaging with clans and communities. Al-Shabab exploits civilian frustration with political exclusion and government neglect, gaining traction with disaffected populations. Alongside this, it plays savvy clan politics, manipulating existing grievances and divides. But it also provides services, such as justice, and has allowed space for civilians to influence how these are provided. Communities voice their needs, seek assistance in times of crisis and even challenge the group's decisions in certain instances. Clans and communities, in turn, use this as an opening to negotiate with whatever influence they can muster.

Civilian leverage with Al-Shabab depends on an array of factors. These include the unity of clans within a given area, historical relations between communities and Al-Shabab, and the strategic value the group places on a given community (i.e., its military or political importance). Military dynamics also play a key role. When under military pressure, Al-Shabab tends to be more conciliatory, making peace with clans and relaxing the harsher

aspects of its governance. But once it regains the upper hand, Al-Shabab tends to reimpose stricter conditions and civilian influence diminishes.

Integrating civilians, particularly clan elders, into governance structures has been essential to Al-Shabab's political strategy. Although often harsh, the group's practices were seen as fair by some in our research areas, thanks to Al-Shabab's religious arguments and the inclusion of influential figures in its governance structure. The group's approach to clan structures and incorporating some traditional leaders into its governance system has allowed it to create a sense of ownership and buy-in among local populations. Some aspects of Al-Shabab's rule are more negotiable than others. Still, the involvement of clan elders in governance enables dialogue (if not always negotiation) and confers legitimacy.

All of that said, Al-Shabab's manipulation of clan dynamics can backfire, spurring uprisings against the group. And while it may bring stability and order to communities for so long as they remain under Al-Shabab control, it also creates potential for conflict and competition between clans down the road. Amid the ongoing government offensive to retake Al-Shabab areas, civilians in many areas are caught between a rock and a hard place: some have sought refuge deeper within Al-Shabab-controlled areas, while others have fled to government-controlled territory, though Al-Shabab continues to monitor them closely.

While the group has lost significant territory, Al-Shabab is playing the long game. When the government fails to fulfil its promises to retake communities, Al-Shabab has seized the opportunity to negotiate truces with disaffected

clans. This tactic is not new; Al-Shabab has long employed peace deals with various communities and clans. But it underscores the importance of understanding the group's strategy towards civilians and the factors that shape people's everyday bargaining and survival strategies vis-à-vis Al-Shabab.

1 Introduction

Al-Shabab's relationship with civilians is often painted as one of violence and victimisation. The reality is far more complex. This report explores the nature of Al-Shabab's relationship with civilians, particularly in light of the recent government recapture of significant territory from Al-Shabab. Section 2 provides the historical context relevant to these dynamics, while Section 3 explores Al-Shabab's governance structures and civilians' role in them. Section 4 further expands on the role of civilians by examining how Al-Shabab's engagement with clan structures evolved. It then explores these dynamics in the three case study areas of Adan Yabal, Moqokori and Jilib. It highlights how recent territorial control changes have affected these dynamics. The report concludes with implications for understanding civilian agency and Al-Shabab's political strategy.

1.1 Framework and approach

The Hiraal Institute carried out this research as part of a broader programme on civilian–armed groups relations led by the Centre on Armed Groups with support from ODI. This work explores how armed groups influence and control civilians – and how civilians negotiate life under their control. It urges us to think of 'civilians' and 'armed groups' as diverse, fluid and overlapping categories, and to refocus our attention on how civilians exercise agency.¹ Several questions frame this inquiry:

- How do civilians engage with Al-Shabab and why? Who engages, and to what end?

- Why and how does Al-Shabab engage with civilians? Beyond violence, how does it seek to compel civilian compliance with its objectives?
- How does this engagement differ across space and time, and why?

The primary focus of the research was qualitative interviews with those living under Al-Shabab control. A secondary literature review focused on academic publications, aid agency reports and media sources to frame the research and later contextualise findings from the field research. Preliminary expert interviews with researchers, academics and analysts working on Al-Shabab and the conflict in Somalia further informed the focus and approach.

We employed a comparative case study approach focused on three locales: Jilib, Moqokori and Adan Yabal. This mix of locations was selected to illustrate a diversity of conditions and pre-existing relations between the population and Al-Shabab, as well as with the government (more background on the case studies can be found on p. 7), to compare and contrast the factors that shape civilian–Al-Shabab dynamics. Access was an important factor in the selection of these locations, including pre-existing links and the ability to safely talk to people there. A purposive sampling approach drew on researchers' pre-existing connections, and snowballing techniques allowed researchers to expand outwards from these networks. We interviewed 54 individuals across Jilib, Moqokori and Adan Yabal (18 in each locale), including business people, government officials, elders, aid workers and supporters of

¹ See Jackson et al. (2022).

Al-Shabab. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in Adan Yabal and Moqokori, and through a combination of telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews for Jilib.² These interviews were supplemented with 16 expert interviews with analysts, academics and foreign officials.

As with any research in Somalia, numerous challenges and constraints shaped the approach. An added challenge was that the government launched an offensive to retake areas from Al-Shabab just after the field research began. While we initially started with two locales (Adan Yabal and Moqokori), once the government retook those, we added a third locale (Jilib) deeper inside Al-Shabab territory. Jilib acted as a kind of control locale, illustrating more stable civilian–Al-Shabab dynamics.

More generally, conducting research of this nature on Al-Shabab presents a number of safety and ethical challenges. To deal with these, researchers took extensive safety and data protection measures. The research design was reviewed from an ethical standpoint to make sure appropriate safeguards were in place. No names or identifying details are provided for those interviewed to reduce the potential risks of participation in the research. Still, as with any research in areas of active conflict, certain concerns or biases may have influenced what people said (i.e., downplaying or exaggerating certain events). This was a particular concern with the ongoing offensive, shifting allegiances and fluid dynamics. To mitigate against this, interviewee statements were cross-checked to triangulate accounts of events or Al-Shabab behaviour.

2 Some sources were interviewed in person in Kismayo about Jilib; in-person interviews in Jilib were not possible.

2 Background

Al-Shabab's roots extend back to the 1970s and 1980s. The Somali state at the time invested mainly in the capital of Mogadishu and neglected the countryside, leaving rural communities with weak government support. This created an opportunity for non-state armed groups, which were typically clan based, to gain a foothold from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, particularly in the north-east and north-west of Somalia. Fighting among these groups intensified after the collapse of the Somali government in 1991, with many civilians forced to flee from less populated areas to the main cities or across borders. Without stable government and rule of law, local conflicts escalated with much bloodshed over grazing lands and other resources.

2.1 The origins of Al-Shabab

In the 1990s, local Islamic courts restored some semblance of governance to the Middle Shabelle region in response to widespread kidnappings, rapes and general lawlessness. These structures brought a few years of stability before being disbanded.³ The Supreme Union of the Islamic Courts (commonly referred to as the Islamic Courts Union, or ICU) later emerged as a more coherent actor (albeit one that was still largely an umbrella organisation). The ICU nevertheless positioned itself as an alternative to the internationally recognised Transitional Federal Government (TFG) based in Baidoa.⁴ The ICU was opposed by the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism, a loose coalition

of warlords backed by the United States. The ICU prevailed, coming to control its capital Mogadishu by June 2006. Yet the ICU's victory was short-lived: an invasion by Ethiopian forces forced the ICU from power in January 2007.

Against this backdrop of civil war, Al-Shabab was formed around 2002. Its founders were mainly former members of Al-Ittihad Al-Islami (AIAI), an Islamist group established during the late 1980s, primarily in response to the Siad Barre regime's repression and the subsequent political chaos in Somalia. Some founding and early members of Al-Shabab were, by its own account, former AIAI members disillusioned by the AIAI's demobilisation and shunning of violent jihad.⁵ In its early years, from 2002 to 2005, it was the smallest of the jihadi groups fighting in Mogadishu against kidnappings and criminal gangs. Of the groups comprising the ICU when it took power in 2006, three others were already aligned with Al-Shabab, giving it significant influence within the ICU, and it used its influence to sabotage talks with the TFG. After the Ethiopian invasion and the fall of the ICU, Al-Shabab gained greater prominence in its own right, seeking to drive out foreign forces, oppose the TFG and establish its vision of an Islamic state.

Al-Shabab's strongest foothold then, as now, has been rural communities lacking connection to the state. The group also capitalised on the Ethiopian intervention to recruit new fighters. It used its superior media to showcase itself as the only real

3 See Barnes and Hassan (2007).

4 Barnes and Hassan (2007).

5 Al-Shabab propaganda video (2019).

Salafi Jihadi group in the region, and intimidated and fought smaller groups that refused to join its ranks. While the group later swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda, its aims have generally been national rather than transnational.⁶

Initially, Al-Shabab rule was resisted by some clans choosing to fight the group while others welcomed it. At that point, Al-Shabab had a somewhat antagonistic relationship with clan structures, but that changed over time as the group recognised the political necessity of engaging with them.⁷ Those elders that resisted the group have been targeted and at times replaced. But those elders and clans that welcomed the group seem to have gained favour and have been accorded most of the benefits, unlike other clans that opposed it. The group's rule typically ensured peace between the clans. Clan elders were held responsible for any violence started by their own clan and for ensuring that members of their clans paid blood money whenever they killed someone from another clan. As the group developed governance systems later on, the elders quickly gained power and were made administrators, tax collectors and recruitment officers by the group. Over time the group's stance shifted towards seeking to 'shape existing social structures and identities to their benefit rather than combat or attempt to uproot them entirely'.⁸

2.2 Al-Shabab's evolution (2007-2022)

By 2010, Al-Shabab controlled a considerable portion of central and southern Somalia, including several cities and ports, which helped the group generate revenue. It also built a governance system to administer these territories during this period. But – without getting into an extensive history of Al-Shabab and the wider conflict – it is important to note that its territorial footprint and capacity have waxed and waned over time. Al-Shabab's adaptive nature and opportunistic behaviour enabled its expansion and resilience. With each new effort to contain or defeat Al-Shabab, the group's tactics and strategy have evolved. For instance, when the group began losing territory to government forces and international troops from around 2012, it stopped trying to conventionally hold and govern towns and cities and shifted its tactics to focus on guerrilla warfare against these forces.

Al-Shabab continues to exploit the grievances of local communities against the government. In recent years, the African Union Mission to Somalia estimated that the group controlled 20–30% of rural south-central Somalia. This is significant, albeit a sharp reduction from the height of its power between 2007 and 2014, when it controlled an estimated 80% of the country.⁹ That said, Al-Shabab control means that, for millions of Somalis, the only government they have known for the past decade or so is the shadow government that Al-Shabab operates. Additionally, these kinds of territorial estimates do not capture the full capacity of the group

6 See Marchal (2009); Bacon (2018).

7 See Skjelderup (2020).

8 Anzalone (2023).

9 Estimates via NATO SDS Hub (2021).

and its reach into government-controlled areas, including the capital of Mogadishu. Indeed, through various components of its governance, Al-Shabab has preserved its influence despite significant military pressure.¹⁰ The group's ability to recruit fighters and generate income through taxation, even on businesses in Mogadishu and other government-held areas,¹¹ has been integral to its survival and growth.

Al-Shabab's current strategy can be thought of as dual in nature, applying different tactics in areas under its control and in areas beyond its control. It operates relatively sophisticated governance structures in the areas where it has the most influence and presence. Al-Shabab earned compliance from people in areas under its control by providing security, establishing order and resolving disputes between rival clans. As the government struggled to maintain control and provide basic services, Al-Shabab continued to strengthen its foothold in these areas, further undermining state authority and legitimacy. This enabled the group to maintain a significant presence in remote and rural areas, despite losing territory elsewhere after 2014. In areas where the government is dominant or control is murky and contested, Al-Shabab prefers to infiltrate and exert coercive influence over existing structures, undermining the state through threats and violence. The group's extensive intelligence capability allows it to obtain important information from government officials and others via coercion and bribery, allowing it to target its threats, collect taxes and generally exert influence over civilian behaviour *without* significant territorial presence or influence.¹²

Box 1 Historical patterns of control in case study locales

In the areas covered by this study, Al-Shabab exerted fairly consolidated control for more than a decade but there have been notable differences in patterns of control.

Adan Yabal: The town experienced multiple changes in control between April and June 2016. The government took the town on 6 April 2016, only for Al-Shabab to retake it on 10 April 2016. The government regained control on 15 May 2016, but Al-Shabab retook the town on 11 June 2016. The government most recently took Adan Yabal on 6 December 2022.

Moqokori: The government took the town from Al-Shabab control on 22 July 2015, but Al-Shabab retook it on 15 September 2016. The government retook Moqokori on 27 December 2016, only for Al-Shabab to retake it the following day, on 28 December 2016.

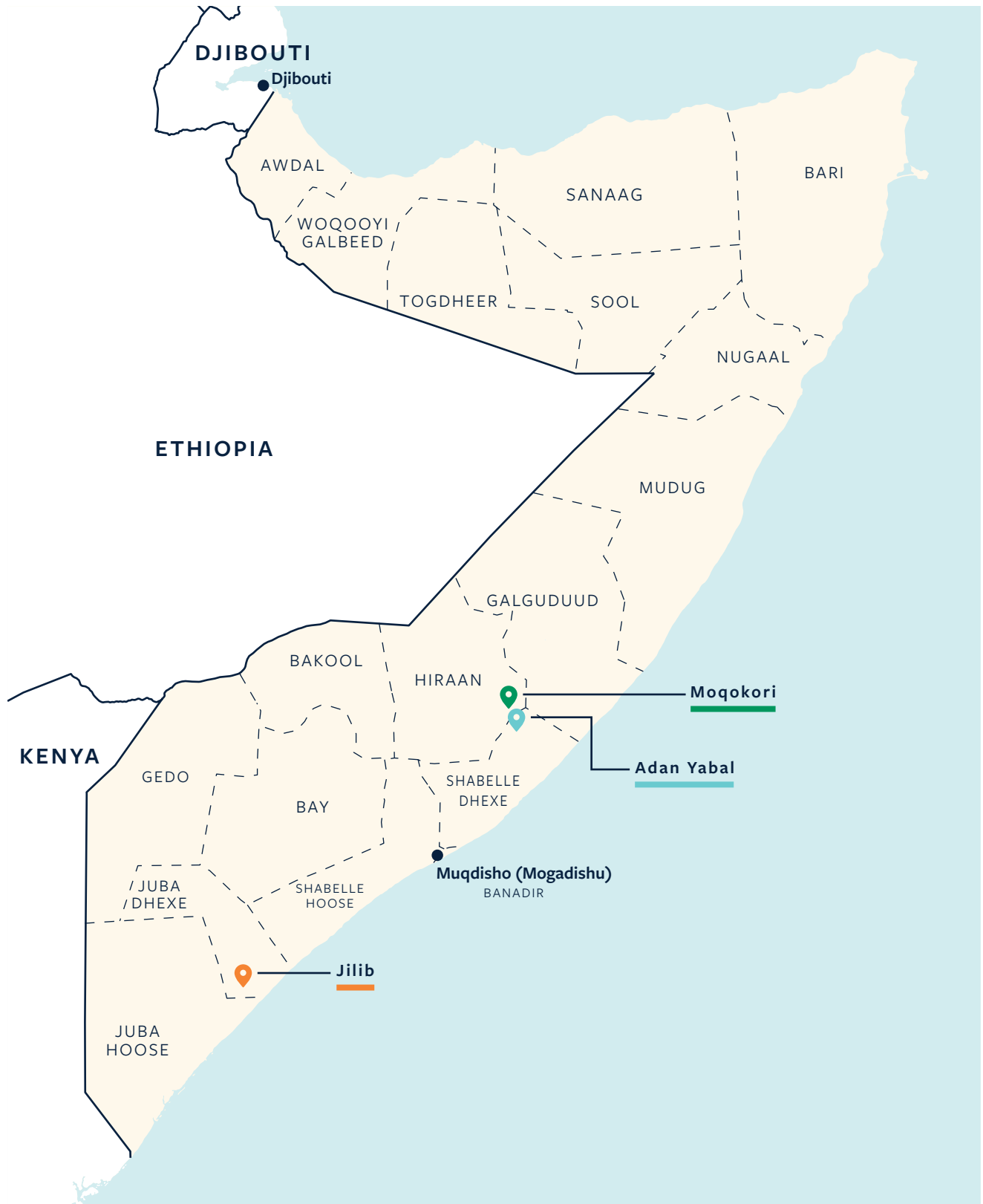
Jilib: Al-Shabab initially captured Jilib in 2009 by absorbing local forces loyal to the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia. It has remained consistently in the hands of Al-Shabab, with many of the group's leaders basing their families there. The town is considered one of its de facto capitals, housing its finance offices and the military leadership operating in Jubbaland and across the border in Kenya.

¹⁰ Bahiss et al. (2022); see also International Crisis Group (2022).

¹¹ Hiraal Institute (2020); Bacon (2022).

¹² Faruk and Bearak (2019).

Figure 1 Case study locales in Somalia



Source: ODI, 2023

2.3 The 2022-2023 Macawiisley offensive

After his May 2022 swearing-in, Federal Government of Somalia President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud made conciliatory overtones promising to pursue a dialogue with Al-Shabab as a path to peace and stability in Somalia.¹³ However, in August 2022, he took a harder line, declaring ‘total war’ on Al-Shabab and launching a new offensive against the group.¹⁴ The offensive capitalised on an uprising by clan militias called the Macawiisley. The Macawiisley were formed around 2018 in Middle Shabelle in response to excessive Al-Shabab violence and financial demands.¹⁵ But in August 2022, amid drought, rising prices and other frustrations, an Al-Shabab blockade between Matabaan and Beledweyne in the Hiran region sparked a clan rebellion. Al-Shabab brutally sought to quell the uprising, but it had the opposite effect, with the rebellion spreading elsewhere in Hiran. ‘Al-Shabab is masterful at pushing the population to the breaking point, extracting as much as they can and giving as little as they can afford to’, said one analyst interviewed, reflecting on the fact that this dynamic was not necessarily new. ‘But sometimes they miscalculate and push it too far.’¹⁶ The Macawiisley offensive seeks to build on the discontent and the momentum of clan resistance (particularly among the Hawiye clan). The offensive has relied on clan militias to rise up and combat Al-Shabab across central Somalia, with support from the Somali military and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia.

The government has since recovered significant swathes of territory from Al-Shabab. However, there is no clear plan to hold and govern these areas once retaken, and many fear that the government will not be able to do so over the medium or long term. While the offensive also aimed to leverage local connections and clan politics to better combat the insurgency, the exact political strategy for reconciliation and governance is also unclear.¹⁷ One part of the problem was the significant depopulation of many areas, including the case study locales of Adan Yabal and Moqokori. In both places, Al-Shabab left ahead of the offensive, along with much of the civilian population (i.e., either people fled ahead of the offensive or were ordered to do so by Al-Shabab to cut off potential contact between civilians and the government and undermine its strategy). In some instances, interviewees talked about women and children being transported on large trucks deeper into Al-Shabab territory. While those who went deeper into Al-Shabab territory may not have had much choice, those fleeing towards government areas don’t necessarily trust or support the government. Many of those interviewed who fled to Mogadishu still referred to the government as apostates and the group as mujahedeen, implying some sense of loyalty or preference for Al-Shabab.¹⁸ Many refuse to return home so long as the government retains control. Displacement patterns are complicated, and displacement itself is driven by multiple factors.

13 Kippahl (2022).

14 Dhaysane (2022).

15 Maruf (2022).

16 Interview with analyst, December 2022.

17 Hiraal Institute (2023).

18 Interview with security officials, Mogadishu, November 2022.

Among those who have stayed behind in Adan Yabal and Moqokori, some are reluctant to engage with the government at all. Government officials have complained in the media that locals have become supportive of the extremist group due to its longstanding rule over these areas.¹⁹ Indeed, interviews illustrated how Al-Shabab-controlled indoctrination portrayed the government as rapists, robbers and extortionists. In areas where they have uncontested control, and the government is not present, people have little access to evidence contradicting this narrative.

In some retaken areas, the government-backed forces have reinforced negative perceptions of the government, setting up illegal checkpoints and extorting money from the locals without giving anything in return to the community. People interviewed in Adan Yabal and Moqokori unfavourably compared the behaviour of the clan militias with Al-Shabab, arguing that Al-Shabab at least provided protection and security in exchange for collecting a 5% tax on income.²⁰ There is also doubt about whether the government will stick around or have the resources and strategy required to retain control.²¹

19 Calanka (2023) "Maxaa kala qabsaday Gudoomiye Cali Jayte iyo gabadhii ugu yeertay murtadka?" Available at: <https://calanka.net/maxaa-kala-qabsaday-gudoomiye-cali-jayte-iyo-gabadhii-ugu-yeertay-murtadka/>.

20 Interviews with businessmen in Adan Yabal and Moqokori, November and December 2022, respectively.

21 Houreld (2022).

3 Al-Shabab civilian governance

Al-Shabab's civilian 'governance' is defined here as a set of tactics and tools which allow them to exert control over civilian behaviour. While there is much media focus on Al-Shabab's use of violence against civilians and the strict sharia it seeks to impose, this set of tactics and tools is more complex and multidimensional than typical portraits of the group imply. They use services and governance to incentivise civilians to comply with its rule and buy in to its ideological project, but also to enforce its will and consolidate control. Coercion is always in the background but services such as healthcare and justice support Al-Shabab's narrative of providing for the population. Moreover, Al-Shabab governance is not homogenous. Instead it reflects and is adapted to different political realities and military constraints. In its deals with communities in contested and more strategic areas, for example, they have made concessions, relaxing some of the harsher restrictions on social behaviour and women.

While this paper does not provide a comprehensive overview of Al-Shabab's governance, this section explores three key governance areas – justice, taxation and education/indoctrination – reflecting on how things worked in the three areas examined. In particular, it highlights how customary authorities are integrated in the administration of Al-Shabab's local governance systems, and the degree to which they are able to influence it. It also looks at how pathways for civilian bargaining are systematised into various aspects of Al-Shabab governance and public goods provision.

3.1 Local governance

Where Al-Shabab has more or less complete control, its governance structures are designed to involve local elites in its administration in ways that enhance its legitimacy and give the perception of community involvement. This sense of ownership and legitimacy is crucial for Al-Shabab to maintain control in the regions it governs. All of that said, one caveat is required: the power and coherence of these structures on the ground vary according to whether Al-Shabab's presence is contested and how strong the government or military presence is.

There are two key aspects of concern in this study regarding local governance, regional administrations and governors. Al-Shabab has 9 regional administrations for the 11 regions in southern Somalia. This covers areas where the group has no overt military presence, such as Banadir (Mogadishu), and areas with substantial military presence. However, each Al-Shabab office reports to its respective official structures (i.e., ministries, such as finance and education ministries), not the regional governor. Whereas the regional administrations are upwardly accountable, the role of the governor is more complex.

As the head of the political and regional issues in their region, governors are responsible for maintaining contacts with clan elders, ensuring they get stipends and involving them in the governance of their areas. At the district level,

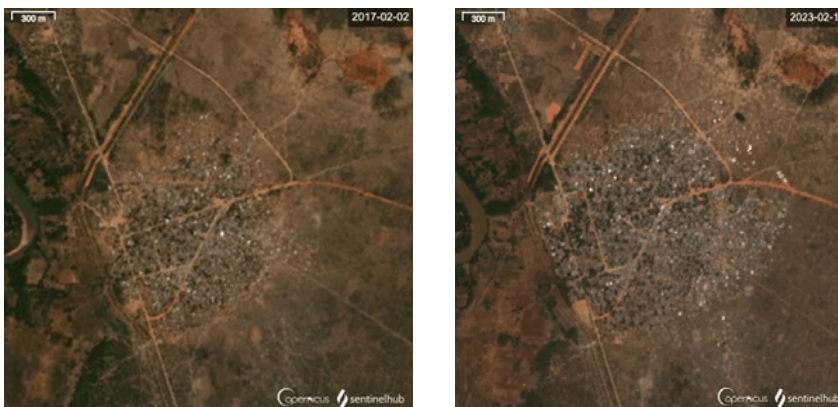
the local governor has the additional task of directly overseeing recruitment, imposing Al-Shabab regulations and, most importantly, keeping track of the population and making sure they pay taxes. They are assisted by local elders who receive salaries and a share of the collected taxes. The governors act almost like coordinators at each level, although they have discretionary budgets to cover local officials' needs. They can also request monthly budgets, depending on needs.

Insurgent governance of this nature co-opts customary authority and facilitates a deal between the armed group and the population. The scholar Zachariah Mampilly calls this 'an informal social contract', arguing that such arrangements 'can render an insurgent government a legitimate authority, thereby bolstering its position in its competition with the incumbent state'.²² In Al-Shabab's competition with the state, these arrangements have allowed

it to consolidate control where it is uncontested and expand its presence into areas where it cannot (yet) dominate.

Where its systems function fully (i.e., Al-Shabab's control is not contested), Al-Shabab governance creates a harsh but stable environment, collecting taxes, providing security and resolving disputes between clans and individuals. Businesses are able to function with a greater degree of predictability and stability, with courts enforcing contracts and jailing those who commit fraud, provided they pay taxes and follow Al-Shabab's laws. Several interviewees talked about the services Al-Shabab provided. An elder from Adan Yabal, for example, referring to Al-Shabab as 'the administration', detailed how they returned 'taxes to the underprivileged', especially during periods of hardship. 'The collected tax revenue is used to purchase foodstuffs which are then distributed to those in need', he said. 'They also distribute livestock to those who have lost their own to help them get back on their feet.'

Figure 2 Satellite images of Jilib



Note: Image 1 and 2 showing Jilib in 2017 and 2023, respectively showing significant development in the town

22 Mampilly (2011).

That has also attracted some people to its areas of control. For example, satellite imagery from Jilib indicates significant expansion in density and area since 2017, far more than comparably sized government-controlled towns (see Figure 2). In this way, Al-Shabab's local governance fulfils many aims: to secure, surveil and control the population; to begin to enact its model Islamic state in reality; to embarrass the TFG through its provision of more or comparatively more responsive services and public goods; and to draw recruits and businesses to its areas, in order to expand its reach and revenue.

3.2 Taxes

Al-Shabab taxes are more widespread than those implemented by the government and are too extensive to detail here.²³ Other research has suggested that some Somalis perceive their taxes as harsh but generally predictable and, to some degree, fair.²⁴ It helps that the group justifies its taxation system through religious arguments and by adhering to its interpretation of sharia principles, which dictates the redistribution of some revenue back to the community. This approach helps to foster an image of fairness and accountability in the eyes of the local population. Its tax system has also been incredibly resilient despite the efforts of the government and international actors to undermine it. When challenged or attacked, the group has managed to replace and reposition tax collectors. The group conducts its tax collection in some areas even without a permanent presence.²⁵ In 2020, the BBC reported that the group's efforts earn them

more revenue than the government collects.²⁶

This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the consequences of not paying can be deadly. In sum, most civilians and businesspeople recognise that there is little alternative but to pay when Al-Shabab demands taxes.²⁷

While most insurgent groups rely on external sponsors to varying degrees, Al-Shabab does not. It relies, financially speaking, almost entirely on civilian compliance – and its help in collecting these taxes. Tax demands are non-negotiable in theory, but people can bargain to some extent. They can, for example, contest taxes that they feel are excessive or unfair. A resident of Moqokori described how this worked, alluding to the longstanding nature of tax bargaining:

Yes, it is possible to negotiate. I remember around 10 years ago, I used to pay a family tax of 80 dollars annually. Being a single individual without a spouse or children, I complained that the tax was too burdensome for a small household like mine. The taxation officer relayed my concern to the administration, and in light of my situation, they decided that I should be exempt from the tax from that date forward.

That clan elders play a crucial role in tax collection enabled further negotiation in ways large and small. For example, one person described how Al-Shabab came to collect his tax payment while he was in Mogadishu and didn't respond to their calls. He recalled how Al-Shabab contact his clan elder and the elder explained the situation. 'Luckily, they exempted me from

23 Hiraal Institute (2020); J. Bahadur (2022) *Terror and Taxes: Inside Al-Shabaab's revenue collection machine*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime.

24 Hiraal Institute (2020).

25 Hiraal Institute (2018a).

26 Harper (2020).

27 Hiraal Institute (2020).

the tax for that period’, he said. ‘My elder later confirmed that there was no need for me to pay tax for that term.’

Perhaps more importantly, clan elders help to determine their clans’ size and wealth, based upon which Al-Shabab calculates taxes and the number of required fighters from each clan. While Al-Shabab’s taxation system is much more extensive than covered here, there are two taxes worth highlighting for the role played by civilians in their collection or distribution: zakah and infaq.

The annual wealth tax – zakah – is non-negotiable and is fixed at 2.5% of accumulated wealth, according to sharia. A formula is used to determine this tax on livestock, depending on the type and quantity of livestock in one’s possession. Cash taxes are straightforward and paid directly to the group, but livestock zakah is where the group gives some livestock back to the communities and those that work in its local administrations. Local tax collectors are given part of all agricultural tax collections, and the rest is given to the poorest members of society. Likewise, traders with ties to the communities or Al-Shabab officials convert the livestock and other agricultural products into cash, creating another layer of benefits to local and regional elites. Al-Shabab provides aid and some of the zakah it collects to local communities. The group’s Al-Ihsan Foundation distributes aid specifically to the areas in which it needs to win hearts and minds and cement clan alliances (although it is hard to know how consistent or widespread this practice is). For instance, when the group signed a peace deal with the Dir clan in Bacaadweyne in May 2021, it distributed aid to the locals.²⁸

That said, people could still bargain this tax down under certain circumstances, particularly economic hardship and drought. An elder from Adan Yabal described how he had done this in the past:

Back in 2018 during a harsh, dry season, a tax officer came to my livestock field to collect tax. My goats were weak from hunger, but the officer wanted to take some of the healthier ones. I argued that I wasn’t sure if the remaining goats would survive and that it was unfair to choose the healthier ones. After hearing my case, the officer contacted the administration, and they granted me an exception.

The second type of tax – infaq – is more fluid and perhaps the most flexible of all Al-Shabab taxes. Infaq is not mandated in Islamic Law. It is a special tax which local Al-Shabab officials impose based on need, which the elders and the Wilayah officials then use. The expenditure of infaq is mainly concerned with the needs of the local administration and is sometimes requested by local communities. Elders often receive a portion of infaq, typically at least 10%. Al-Shabab-run schools are funded through infaq, with clans expected to provide either money or students. In this way, the payment of infaq can also provide loopholes: some clans prefer to pay for the students of other clans to go to Al-Shabab schools instead of sending their own children.

3.3 Justice

Al-Shabab’s courts allow it to present a more positive image to civilians, counterbalancing its use of violence with security and justice. At the same time, they rest on intimidation and use coercion to force civilians to comply with Al-Shabab rules. Nevertheless, they ensure a

²⁸ Al-Shabab media, May 2021.

modicum of peace and security in the areas the group controls. They also allow Al-Shabab to exploit government weaknesses and look more responsive by comparison, with state courts generally regarded as ineffective, inaccessible or corrupt.²⁹ Courts tend to be located in widely known areas of consolidated Al-Shabab presence. They are also accessible to people living in government areas, some of whom prefer to take their grievances to the insurgency rather than the state courts. Some people living in government-controlled areas travel 30 or 40 kilometres to reach them, feeling that there is no alternative given the failure and corruption of the state justice system.³⁰ One businessman described travelling from Mogadishu to a court in an Al-Shabab area to get a supplier who had defaulted to return the businessman's money.³¹

Al-Shabab has four types of courts: the common issues court for matters between communities (excluding land disputes), the special court for land disputes, the appeals court and the security forces court. Land disputes have special courts because they are more complicated and require specialised knowledge that most Al-Shabab judges may not have. The appeals court deals only with land issues as they are open to interpretation and can be appealed. All other matters are handled according to written rules based on the Quran and the Sunnah. The first three types of court may exist in every region and district. Separately, the security forces court deals with crimes committed by Al-Shabab forces or alleged spies. It makes public judgements only when sentencing spies; the group does not publicise the crimes its fighters commit.

Adan Yabal had the main court in the region and the regional appeals court, which also covered Moqokori. The judges are from various clans, as the group does not consider clans of judges (unlike their practice with political appointees). To some degree, the structure and set-up of courts are shaped by local issues. For example, unlike other regions, there are few major land issues in Middle Shabelle. This is because the clans living here are well armed and are more likely to take land from other clans further south in Lower Shabelle than vice versa. By contrast, Jilib has a large land court to cover issues in the Jubba areas where land grabbing and squatting was widespread during the civil war of the 1990s–2000s. This court is also responsible for areas held by the Jubbaland administration.

One Al-Shabab judge interviewed in Jilib described how the group does not allow any bargaining on its decisions or punishments. But, again, the role of elders provides some leeway. Elders routinely described playing a role in vouching for or otherwise interceding on behalf of those involved in cases, and detailed how their authority was typically recognised in this respect. 'Any intercession can be done before a judgement is rendered', said one elder from Moqokori. 'Once a judgement is rendered, it will be executed as it is unless a higher court says otherwise.' They have the power to intercede with Al-Shabab on anything that does not involve espionage or personal injury crimes that require the wronged party's forgiveness. For instance, Al-Shabab requires anyone caught with cigarettes to buy an AK-47 and 120 rounds of bullets. Elders can convince local Al-Shabab not to implement that provision, and they have done that many times.

29 Rollins (2023); Expanding Access to Justice Program (2020).

30 Interview with a Somali journalist, September 2022.

31 Interview with a businessman, September 2022.

Elders also routinely confer protection by, for example, vouching for individuals. One elder in Moqokori, for example, described how Al-Shabab ordered a clansman to pay the money he owed to someone else. ‘The debtor was allowed to go free on my word that he would pay back the money’, said the elder. By giving the impression that their authority is respected, and providing clans with a sense of power and influence, the group can further consolidate local compliance with its rule. But the extended reach of the courts also allows Al-Shabab to reinforce its control over the population and its ability to force them to go along with the group’s interpretation of sharia.

3.4 Education and indoctrination

Al-Shabab created an educational system geared towards producing recruits. It banned other Islamic schools and created its own, known as Islamic Institutes, under its Office for Education. The Islamic schools are based on clan boundaries and paid for by clansmen, under strict supervision by local Al-Shabab authorities. These schools indoctrinate students into Al-Shabab’s worldview, including the illegitimacy of the government and the obligations of jihad, and they usually funnel graduates into training camps. In some areas, Al-Shabab also runs more ‘regular’ schools, although they too operate according to the group’s ideology.³² The Islamic Institutes act as a pipeline to military training camps, with graduates often going into Al-Shabab training camps. Al-Shabab mandates weekly indoctrination events that locals must attend to ensure community ideological conformity.³³ These events cater to

different groups, such as housewives, shopkeepers and schoolteachers, and non-attendance is only excused in cases of illness. This systematic approach to maintaining control over civilian life further reinforces the group’s power and influence in the areas under its rule. Moreover, Al-Shabab regularly publicises its education institutes with media and photos showing girls and boys participating in classes, receiving prizes, graduating from the institutes, etc.³⁴

Al-Shabab’s (often forced) recruitment of children³⁵ is often deeply unpopular. Here, there is more obvious bargaining – or at least some communities have found workarounds. When the group demands a specific number of students for its schools, for example, a clan can either send children to attend these schools or pay for a specific number of students. Those who fail to comply are otherwise imprisoned or threatened. In practice, subclans usually send some of their boys there and buy the rest out of the demand. For instance, instead of 200 children, they might send 100 and pay \$10,000 every six months to Al-Shabab, which would collect 100 boys from other subclans within the clan.

32 For more on the Al-Shabab education system, see Hiraal Institute (2018b).

33 Al-Shabab Ulema in Jilib, January 2023.

34 See, for example, Calamada, Beesha Xawaadle Oo Machad Sharci Ah Kusoo Xiratay Jubbooyinka, 15 December 2020; Calamada, Degmada Jilib iyo Xamlada Waxbarashada Jubbooyinka, 16 November 2022.

35 For background, see UN Secretary-General (2022).

4 Al-Shabab and clan structures

As Section 3 explored, clan engagement is integral to Al-Shabab's political and military strategy. This section outlines the evolution and current state of Al-Shabab's engagement with clan structures, going more deeply into the factors that influence clan leverage with the group. After an overview of Al-Shabab–clan dynamics, the section then explores these relations in Adan Yabal, Moqokori and Jilib through the prism of the recent government offensive.

4.1 The evolution of Al-Shabab's clan strategy

Somali society is dominated by clan politics, which many Islamist movements in the country have tried to distance themselves from. Al-Shabab takes a somewhat different approach. It recruits across clans and professes not to favour any one clan over another, yet it has excelled at manipulating clan dynamics to its advantage. However, Al-Shabab's approach towards the clan system has gradually evolved from a more traditionally anti-clan politics stance, particularly after the Ethiopian withdrawal from Mogadishu in 2009. At this point, unarmed and marginalised clans joined the group to settle scores with so-called majority clans and protect their interests. With time, actors from across most clans started joining the group, for political reasons and because Al-Shabab adopted a system to encourage local clans to join it regardless of affiliation. Around 2014, it reversed its longstanding exclusion of clan elders from its governance structures and in 2016 formed

a Council of Elders, realising that extending a degree of respect and legitimacy to the clan elders would, in turn, enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of civilians.³⁶ At this point, Al-Shabab had lost significant territory and was likely forced to further rethink its more harshly coercive attitudes towards elders and civilians in general. Since then, clan elders have variously played key roles in releasing hostages or detainees held by Al-Shabab, negotiating humanitarian access, brokering temporary ceasefires with the government and vouching for members of the government who want to join Al-Shabab.³⁷

While promoting a group identity that puts religion above all else and supersedes clan affiliation, Al-Shabab uses the clans to further its local legitimacy. One of the key aspects of Al-Shabab's strategy is to empower clans by involving them in its administration.³⁸ Co-opting local elites into its governance structure also lessens the administrative burden for Al-Shabab. It created a subdivision of its internal affairs ministry, the Wilaayaat, to deal with clan affairs and traditional leaders, allowing the group to more systematically direct its engagement with the local communities across the territories it controls. For communities, having representatives of their clan as part of the Al-Shabab power structure gives them a sense of ownership, which in turn contributes to the group's local legitimacy and civilian compliance. By recognising traditional elders as local representatives, Al-Shabab establishes a channel of communication that allows for some degree of negotiation. Elders

³⁶ Shire (2021).

³⁷ Maruf and Joseph (2018); Göldner-Ebenthal (2019).

³⁸ See also Hiraal Institute (2018c).

have the authority to settle disputes, petition for infrastructure projects and request drought aid. It gives locals the impression that their identity and traditions are respected by Al-Shabab, even when that may not necessarily be the case.

When Al-Shabab gains the loyalty of clan elders, it draws them in further by increasing their influence (via participation in Al-Shabab governance) and benefits (such as salaries and cash payments). As clans vie against one another for resources and benefits, they become more invested in Al-Shabab's rule, increasing local support for the group. This competition between the clans also benefits Al-Shabab, as it can exploit these rivalries to consolidate its power. In this way, it manipulates clan dynamics and politics, using them to its advantage without necessarily being seen to be partisan.³⁹ Part of the reason is that they balance this exploitation with efforts to manage and resolve clan conflicts. Utilising clan elders, Al-Shabab forces clans to pay blood money to each other and holds clan elders accountable for any failure to comply. That neither the state nor any other actors are capable of quelling interclan violence to the same degree further enhances Al-Shabab's comparative legitimacy.

Finally, the group solidifies these links through whatever social services and infrastructure exist in the areas it controls, which can include healthcare, education and dispute resolution. In the areas where we did research (i.e., those under fairly longstanding and consistent Al-Shabab control), Al-Shabab's service delivery helps establish a sense of governance and legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. When civilians have problems, they often turn to Al-Shabab for help. But clan elders in particular were strategic about how they

did this, often preferring to go to those with whom they had personal relationships. 'Officials within Al-Shabab who are from the local communities were most inclined to address local concerns,' said one Moqokori elder, 'and we used them to ask things from the group.'

Feeling abandoned by the government, it is easy to see why communities and clans – particularly those who lack the military might to defend themselves against better-armed and more resourceful clans – are more likely to turn to Al-Shabab for protection or support. Indeed, Al-Shabab's image as a champion and protector of those marginalised in the current political system, and the professed desire to present an alternative to Somalia's current political system, is understandably attractive to those who feel most excluded from it.

4.2 Al-Shabab's clan engagement in response to the government offensive

In reaction to the government offensive, Al-Shabab has responded with a mixture of violence (specifically attacks in Mogadishu and more recently on Somali National Army and African Union bases) and a conciliatory political strategy which aims to sway the civilian population. The group also seems to have moved away from the civilian targeting that characterised its initial response to the clan uprisings in Hiraan. From December 2022, Al-Shabab started signing 'peace deals' with clans across the country, beginning with elders from the Saleban clan in Galgaduud. Later that month, Al-Shabab signed its first deal with subclans within the Hawadle.⁴⁰ Formal deals with clans are not necessarily new

³⁹ Schaefer and Black (2011).

⁴⁰ Hiraal Institute (2023).

and have long been used by Al-Shabab to end conflicts with the clans and cement alliances.⁴¹ But this time around, the government's failure to secure retaken areas in the past undermined local trust in its authority and pushed clans to consider signing deals with Al-Shabab to ensure their safety.⁴²

These agreements typically entail in-person negotiations with clan elders and senior Al-Shabab officials. They conclude with a formal written agreement committing both sides to specific actions. In the case of the Saleban, the terms included Al-Shabab returning 67 prisoners to the community, agreeing not to carry weapons in community areas and allowing movement and trade. In exchange, the Saleban elders agreed to a range of conditions, including neutrality and non-interference ('staying away from enemy camps' and agreeing 'not cooperate with the enemies of the Sharia, such as the infidels, the apostates and the polytheists'), implementation of sharia, protection of the land and prevention of environmental degradation, and a promise to 'protect the good neighborliness of the clans as they are brothers'.⁴³

These deals are highly performative. In March 2023, the Al-Shabab governor for Hiran met with elders from the Hawadle clan on the western bank of the Shabelle River. The conflict between the Hawadle and Al-Shabab has been especially bloody: clan sources working with the wounded have told us that more than 700 Hawadle had been killed by April and that the number of

Al-Shabab dead is comparable. While Al-Shabab is multiclans, many of its own fighters are Hawadle. At the meeting, the Al-Shabab governor for Hiran referred to the dead from both sides as 'our people'. He lamented the high number of deaths and made conciliatory and flattering remarks to the attending elders. This shows how the group understands how to reorient itself locally for strategic purposes.⁴⁴

Al-Shabab has taken other politically astute measures to keep clans on side. In Middle Shabelle, Al-Shabab reappointed Yusuf Kabokudukade, an Abgal, as the governor of Middle Shabelle when the Macawiisley offensive started in mid-2022. In recorded speeches, Kabokudukade praised the Abgal for being on Al-Shabab's side, praising them as a God-fearing community that would not side with the 'apostates'.⁴⁵

4.3 No way back? Options for elders in areas now under government control

All of this will make it more challenging for the government to retain control, particularly in rural areas where it has historically had a limited presence. It is also not clear what the government has sought to offer those who previously cooperated with Al-Shabab. As was evident from research in Adan Yabal and Moqokori, most Al-Shabab-aligned elders tended to withdraw with Al-Shabab or lead clan militias resisting government forces.⁴⁶ But even if they wanted to switch sides, it would be risky and difficult.

41 See, for example, Hiiraan Online (2011).

42 Hiraal Institute (2023).

43 Taken from a translation of the text of the agreement reproduced in Cabdullahi Mataan (2022).

44 Al-Shabab radio, March 2023.

45 Depending on the political climate, Al-Shabab moves governors to and from their clan's strongholds. During calm periods, governors from other clans may be deployed to a region.

46 Government security source, November 2022.

The process of reintegrating former Al-Shabab members and supporters has been contested and unclear. The president criticised plans to reintegrate extremist group members without government involvement, arguing that they should undergo government reintegration programmes.⁴⁷

In our research, elders who formerly collaborated with Al-Shabab and chose to reside in government-controlled areas have faced a hostile reception. For instance, in Moqokori, after the government took the town in the Macawisley offensive, an elder claimed he joined the group solely to protect his clan. The government then arrested him based on this statement. Despite this, members of his clan, including those within the government, took his side against the government. The government's approach raises the question regarding what it is willing to offer clans whom they ostensibly want to win over to its side.

The government has also blocked individuals that previously cooperated with Al-Shabab from returning to these towns. In one case, a businesswoman was forced to leave her business and relocate to another area because she had dealt with the group and was married to one of its members. Her mother, who used to live in Mogadishu, took over her shop, and the woman moved into her mother's place in the capital.

With Al-Shabab no longer there to enforce peace between warring clans and without any government initiative for clan reconciliation, clan conflicts have resurfaced in retaken areas. For example, in November 2022, violent clan conflicts re-emerged in Middle Shabelle. Some interviewees speculated that Al-Shabab instigated the discord

among assembled clan militias; if this is true, it demonstrates how the group uses clan conflicts to ensure loyalty and punish rebellion.

4.4 Dynamics in areas where Al-Shabab lost control: Adan Yabal and Moqokori

Both Adan Yabal and Moqokori were under Al-Shabab's control for over a decade, except for brief interruptions in 2016. During this time, the group built relationships with the local population, particularly with the elders. These elders were empowered to collect taxes on Al-Shabab's behalf, represent their constituents, provide administrative duties and assist in recruiting new members. Al-Shabab's presence also fostered peace between the two main warring clans in Adan Yabal (Abgal) and Moqokori (Hawadle), forcing them to pay blood money to each other when disputes arose. In 2019, for example, the Al-Shabab Office of Politics and Regional Affairs facilitated the payment of \$260,000 in blood money between the Abgal and Hawadle.⁴⁸ While the Abgal and Hawadle have a long history of intermittent conflict in the region, skirmishes were rare during Al-Shabab's reign.

Adan Yabal is predominantly controlled by a single major clan (Abgal), similar to Moqokori. However, it differs from Moqokori in its strategic importance and greater symbolic value for Al-Shabab. Adan Yabal is strategically located on a route connecting Al-Shabab's northern and southern territories. This has given civilians more leverage with the group. Clan leaders and officials at the district and regional levels talked about how they successfully negotiated with Al-Shabab on

⁴⁷ Villa Somalia (2023), Facebook, Available at: [<https://fb.watch/IHLCOgIBsk/>].

⁴⁸ Goobjooge (2019).

behalf of the local population.⁴⁹ For example, local clans provided fewer fighters to Al-Shabab than elsewhere but were still required to send students to Al-Shabab's Islamic institutes for indoctrination.

Due to its military significance, the group encouraged residents to flee when government forces approached. In anticipation of the government and clan militia's arrival, Al-Shabab instructed the town's elders to ensure members of their subclans left Adan Yabal before its capture. Al-Shabab initially directed residents to flee towards Ceel Bacad on the border between the Middle Shabelle and Galgaduud regions, but elders managed to persuade the group to let people choose their destinations. While many relocated to areas still under Al-Shabab control, some went to Mogadishu. Only four people remained in the town after the government captured it, including an elderly man and his assistant and a disabled man and his assistant, all of whom were explicitly allowed to stay by Al-Shabab.⁵⁰

After government forces entered Adan Yabal, some businesses began to reopen. However, one business owner in Adan Yabal said they soon started receiving calls from Al-Shabab, questioning his return and reopening. They convinced the group that he had no choice but to reopen under duress. This interaction demonstrates Al-Shabab's continued awareness of the town's activities even after losing control and the self-sustaining bargaining strategies adopted by the locals. They want to avoid making an enemy of Al-Shabab while also continuing to do business with the government. Al-Shabab also contacted many of the town's inhabitants, including those who had

not lived there for over a decade, warning them against supporting the local militia project or otherwise collaborating with the government.

The dynamics in Moqokori are particularly interesting given the wider tensions between the Hawadle, the majority clan in Moqokori, and Al-Shabab,⁵¹ and how this has influenced Al-Shabab's approach. To avoid further antagonising the clan, the group did not instruct inhabitants to flee Moqokori when the government arrived, unlike in Adan Yabal and other places,⁵² although some in fact did leave. When the government reached Moqokori, it first encircled the town, preventing those who remained from fleeing at that point.

In Moqokori, Al-Shabab had a more substantial presence, and local clans played a more significant role in supporting the group than in Adan Yabal. Yet some elders and administrators, formerly affiliated with Al-Shabab, who had fled began to return. Some elders who had worked with Al-Shabab were arrested for their past affiliations. One elder stated that he had worked for his clan while with the group and would continue to do so now with the government. He saw no difference between the government and Al-Shabab, considering himself a conduit between the clan and either entity. This statement led to his arrest by the government. This situation created tension within the clans, as many still had connections to Al-Shabab and were hesitant to sever those ties completely. Consequently, the president publicly stated that defectors should not return to their communities without first going through the government.

49 Ulema and Al-Shabab members in Adan Yabal, November and December 2022.

50 Businessman in Adan Yabal, December 2022.

51 For background, see International Crisis Group (2023).

52 Businessmen in Moqokori, November 2022.

However, the clan, including Hawadle government members, welcomed back former Al-Shabab members without going through the government.

In both locales, Al-Shabab kept an eye on the civilian population long after it had ceded control to the government. But in Adan Yabal, those who returned after the government takeover were careful to balance the demands from the government with those from Al-Shabab. In Moqokori, they might have been willing to transfer allegiances to the government or otherwise cooperate, but found little interest and even hostility from the government side.

Al-Shabab's different approaches to Adan Yabal and Moqokori underscore the importance of hyper-local historical factors. There is a key distinction between Adan Yabal and Moqokori. Initially, during the Al-Shabab expansion into Middle Shabelle from 2009 to 2010, it did not encounter much resistance. But when Al-Shabab started a cultural war against the Sufis, digging up the graves of Sufi saints and burying them elsewhere, it encountered resistance and outright rebellion.⁵³ The group managed to crush this defiance in eastern Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle but failed to do so nearer the Ethiopian border because of the greater Ethiopian assistance to the locals. In Moqokori, Al-Shabab signed a peace deal with the Hawadle in 2009, in which the Hawadle agreed not to resist further Al-Shabab expansion. The Abgal did not speak with one voice, forcing Al-Shabab to deal with each subclan separately, with the last resisting clans giving up by mid-2010. One of the last battles by Abgal clansmen against Al-Shabab was in April 2010 in Masagawaa.⁵⁴ Arguably this resistance

contributed, together with the more strategic locale of Adan Yabal, to their comparably greater leverage vis-à-vis Al-Shabab. There was more back and forth and, in broad-brush terms, Al-Shabab's control was less homogenised than in Moqokori.

4.5 Dynamics where Al-Shabab remains in control: Jilib

Jilib, considered the de facto capital of the south for Al-Shabab, has been under the group's (or the ICU's) control since June 2006, except for a loss of control during the Ethiopian intervention. The town was retaken in mid-2008 by a coalition of forces comprising the Islamic courts and local forces that would later be absorbed into Al-Shabab.⁵⁵ Towns along the Jubba River hold particular importance for Al-Shabab due to their remote and underdeveloped nature. The land provides cover and water to hide and sustain its forces away from population centres for extended periods. The group's leadership is known to hide out in these areas. Interviewees noted that there is scarcely a family in Jilib without at least one member in Al-Shabab.⁵⁶

Jilib has a more mixed clan composition than Adan Yabal and Moqokori, and is inhabited by a variety of clans belonging to the Darod and Hawiye clan families and a significant Bantu community. Prior to Al-Shabab taking control, unarmed Bantu communities were subject to rape and pillage by more powerful clans, which Al-Shabab is credited with stopping. Al-Shabab also brought a semblance of order by cracking down on criminal activities. Some inhabitants view the group as a necessary force for maintaining peace and security.

53 For background, see Mohamed (2016).

54 BBC (2010).

55 These forces were nominally under the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia, based in Eritrea.

56 Al-Shabab members in Jilib, January 2023.

As elsewhere, Al-Shabab has made concerted efforts to gain local legitimacy by involving the various communities in Jilib in its governance. By addressing longstanding grievances and engaging with the different clans, the group has sought to position itself as a stabilising force. In addition, Al-Shabab has sought to implement a system of justice based on its interpretation of sharia. By addressing disputes and meting out punishments in a consistent manner, Al-Shabab has cultivated an image of fairness and stability among the local population.⁵⁷

The group has invested in local education and healthcare infrastructure, albeit with a strong focus on religious indoctrination. By addressing some of the population's basic needs, Al-Shabab aims to demonstrate its commitment to the welfare of the local communities and strengthen its support base. This includes building the largest hospital in all the areas it controls, which according to the group cost two million dollars.⁵⁸ This also saves Al-Shabab money that it would otherwise spend on sending its leadership abroad for healthcare and on providing health services to its fighters.

Jilib has been under Al-Shabab control for almost 15 years, allowing the group to establish deep roots within the community. There is also stricter control and a degree of surveillance and compliance not necessarily possible elsewhere. For example, locals must report whenever they have a visiting relative. The extra family member is required to attend the indoctrination sessions after being vetted by local officials. As one might expect, almost all of the families in Jilib have members within the group, and they are forced

to work with it. This would appear to leave little room for negotiation, especially as compared to Adan Yabal and Moqokori. It may have also been the case that civilians in Jilib simply did not seek to bargain as much (or otherwise seek to challenge or modify Al-Shabab's authority) in the ways that people did in Adan Yabal and Moqokori. It could be that many in Jilib have lived under Al-Shabab for nearly all of their lives, and perhaps know little else. Its identity as a stronghold for Al-Shabab has also attracted some people from outside who are voluntarily willing to live under Al-Shabab, suggesting a greater agreement with and adherence to the group's normative framework. Put differently, the patterns of civilian bargaining across the three case study locales raise new questions about why and how people bargain, and how we think about civilian agency and influence in Somalia.

It also raises questions about the nature of the government's fight against Al-Shabab, and the long-term prospects of stability and reconciliation. With government plans to extend the offensive to the south, some have pointed out that the government risks overextending itself before it has even consolidated control and governance in newly retaken areas.⁵⁹ Moreover, this research underscores that there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' or quick fix approach to rebuilding relations with local populations in these areas. Much of the south, including Jilib, has been under stronger Al-Shabab control for far longer than the more recently retaken areas, and links with Al-Shabab will be likely much harder to untangle.

57 Pro-Al-Shabab Ulema and a businessman in Jilib, January 2023.

58 Channel Four News (2022).

59 International Crisis Group (2023).

5 Conclusion

At present, many analysts and commenters insist that the Al-Shabab is on the back foot, having lost substantial territory during the current offensive. This research suggests otherwise. Al-Shabab is playing the long game, in strategically retreating ahead of the clan militias and government forces, taking some civilians with them and keeping tabs on those left behind. As Al-Shabab well knows, it is far harder to secure and govern territory than take it, and the group is betting that the government will once again fail to keep new areas for much longer. After all, this is how many such offensives have played out in the past.

While Al-Shabab relies heavily on violence and coercion, the importance of its engagement with civilians is often neglected in analyses of the group. The group deploys a sophisticated strategy of engagement tailored to local needs, social cleavages and political dynamics. Because much of Al-Shabab's relationship with civilians depends on local circumstances and clan politics, the terms of life under Al-Shabab control consequently vary from one place to the next. One constant, however, is that Al-Shabab strategically taps into and co-opts customary power structures, which in turn allows it to control the population.

Another is that by exploiting local grievances and capitalising on a weak central government, it gains a degree of legitimacy and support. Al-Shabab's interaction with civilians through dispute resolution, taxation and ideological indoctrination has created a system that, despite its harshness, is perceived as predictable and somewhat fair. But most civilians have little else to compare it to, given the absence of the government in many areas and the entrenched presence of Al-Shabab. This perception of 'fairness' is crucial for the

group to maintain control and resist government efforts to undermine its influence. Its recognition of clan structures and incorporation of traditional leaders into governance has also solidified buy-in and legitimacy among local populations.

A system of civilian bargaining further enables communities to engage with Al-Shabab through their elders, allowing them to voice concerns, seek assistance and even challenge decisions. While bargaining is not totally open and most certainly lopsided in favour of Al-Shabab, this tactical give and take builds a sense of local legitimacy as communities perceive their identities and traditions to be respected, even if not wholly aligned with the group's ideology. Military pressure also influences these dynamics: when it is under attack or its control seriously threatened, Al-Shabab tends to make more concessions and conciliatory overtures to civilians. When it has the upper hand, it tends to enforce its rules more harshly upon civilians.

Al-Shabab is deeply entrenched in local politics and customary governance within the areas it controls. Local elites actively participate in the group's governance project for personal and communal gains, and clans compete for Al-Shabab favour and resources. Any counter-approach must seriously reckon with Al-Shabab's deep roots and the governance failures that gave rise to Al-Shabab in the first place. The group's reliance on manipulating clan structures and politics also generates potential conflicts and competition among clans once Al-Shabab control recedes. Countering Al-Shabab militarily may prove to be the easy part. Without a robust political, governance and reconciliation strategy, there is little chance of establishing stability over the long term.

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