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Renewed counter-insurgency operations expected as al-Shabaab regroup

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May 31, 2024

Situation Update | May 2024

Somalia: Renewed counter-insurgency operations expected as al-Shabaab regroup

31 May 2024

Somalia at a Glance: 20 April to 24 May 2024

VITAL TRENDS

- ACLED records more than 207 political violence events and 432 reported fatalities from 20 April to 24 May 2024. Most political violence centered in the Lower Shabelle region, where al-Shabaab increased attacks targeting security forces.
- Mudug region had the highest number of reported fatalities, with 105 recorded during the reporting period. Middle Juba region followed, with 70 reported fatalities.
- The most common event type was battles, with over 119 events, followed by explosions/remote violence, with 55 events.



SOMALIA



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Horn of Africa | Situation Update
20 April to 24 May 2024

Key Figures

Political Violence Events

207

14% decrease
compared to the same
time period prior

Reported Fatalities

432

43% decrease
compared to the same
time period prior

Key Developments

Political Events

30 APR.
The Turkish intelligence chief meets with the Somali president in Mogadishu

9 MAY
The Somali government calls for the termination of the UN political mission

14 MAY
The UN secretary-general appoints James Swan as head of UNSOM

14 MAY
The Somali president opens the ninth National Consultative Council in Mogadishu

21 MAY
Somalia's intelligence chief replaces the top agency officer operating in Mogadishu

23 MAY
Somalia's cabinet approves a defense agreement with Kenya

Violent Events

20 APR.
Joint security forces clash with al-Shabaab near Jamaame town, Lower Juba, killing 50 militants

24 APR.
A suspected US airstrike kills at least 70 al-Shabaab militants near Xarardheere town, Mudug

7 MAY
Scores are killed in a suspected US airstrike on al-Shabaab positions in Kuunyo-Barrow village, Middle Juba

8 MAY
Al-Shabaab attacks security forces in K60 village, Lower Shabelle

19 MAY
An IED explodes near a military convoy in Mogadishu, killing three soldiers

22 MAY
Clan militants attack security forces in Ceel Baraf village, Middle Shabelle

In its mission to combat al-Shabaab, the government announced plans for another round of counter-insurgency operations in Galmudug and Hirshabelle states. The campaign aims to eradicate al-Shabaab from central and southern Somalia, where they hold large swaths of territory. However, this operation continues to grapple with long-standing issues that have hampered the effectiveness of counter-insurgency, including inter-clan disputes and corruption in public procurement. In the meantime, al-Shabaab militants have been regrouping and expanding in remote villages in the Middle Shabelle region since March and continue operations along the Mogadishu-Balcad main supply routes. In doing so, their aim seems to be to gain control of strategic areas along the main supply routes between the Middle Shabelle and Banadir regions.

The third round of the counter-insurgency operation and its challenges

The Somali government announced the third round of the counter-insurgency operation against al-Shabaab.¹Voice of America, 'VOA News: The Federal Government is launching a new offensive against Al-Shabaab, ' 13 May 2024 The announcement comes at a time when the government is losing the support and backing of clan elders and militias, some of which have either entered into non-aggression pacts or decided to support the militant group. The first and second rounds of the operation — which began in August 2022 and August 2023, respectively — were mired with various disputes among different stakeholders of the counter-insurgency that delayed the planned expansion to Jubaland and Southwest. The Somali government initially regained territory from al-Shabaab in the central Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, also thanks to the critical support provided by the Hawiye clan. Indeed, the first round of the government's counter-insurgency operation was launched after the Hawadle Macawiisley clan²Macawiisley militias are community-created self-defense groups initially formed by civilians in 2014 to respond to al-Shabaab's violence and excessive 'taxes.' For more information, see Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, 'Protection or predation? Understanding the behavior of community-created self-defense militias during civil wars,' Small Wars & Insurgencies, 2022. — itself a sub-group of the Hawiye — clashed with al-Shabaab in July 2022 over the taxation imposed by the militant group in Hiiraan

Since June 2023, infighting among clans and animosity towards the federal government have weakened the coalition supporting the counter-insurgency. Disputes between the Hawadle and Abgal clans over power-sharing arrangements and access to land in Hirshabelle state have undermined the effectiveness of the military campaign. Since June 2023, ACLED records at least six armed clashes between the Hawadle and Abgal clan militias in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle, reflecting the fragile order reigning in the coalition. The sacking of Hiiraan governor Ali Jeyte Osman by the Hirshabelle administration, and the lack of financial support from Mogadishu, led segments of the Hawadle clan to distance themselves from the government. As a result, clan militias fighting alongside government troops started vacating security bases in Hiiraan, causing the offensive to slow down and al-Shabaab to regain lost territories. These shifts within the coalition prevented the counter-insurgency operation from expanding into the southern Jubaland and Southwest states.

In recent weeks, however, the government attempted to revive clan support for a third round of the counter-insurgency operation. On 11 May, some members of the Somali parliament and the director of the Somali National Security and Intelligence Agency met with residents and traditional elders in Belet Weyne, Hiiraan's regional capital, to discuss the Hawadle clan's participation in the fight against al-Shabaab.³Hiiraan, 'NISA director, federal lawmakers start al-Shabab meetings in Beledweyne town,' 12 May 2024 The Hawadle clan, and especially the Ali

Madaxweyne sub-clan, announced holding consultative meetings in Maxaas to discuss their cooperation with the government and interest in the Hirshabelle administration. On 26 May, delegates, including politicians and clan elders, began arriving in town for the meetings.⁴Youtube, @Hiiraanweyn, 'Sanbaloolshe and politicians from Cali Madaxweyne opening a meeting in Mahaas,' 26 May 2024; Facebook, @Telefishinka Qaranka Soomaaliyeed 'Vice President of Hirshabeelle, meet with the community in Maxas District, 28 May 2024

Power-sharing disputes were not the only challenges affecting the first two rounds of the counter-operation. Corruption involving senior military officials who diverted the food rations donated by the United States to the elite Danab forces for commercial uses has serious implications for the operations. On 25 April, the government suspended and detained several members of the Danab forces in connection with the corruption scandal.⁵Harun Maruf, 'Somalia reports food diversion involving US-trained soldiers, ' The Voice of America, ' 26 April 2024; Abdi Sheikh, 'Somalia detains U.S.-trained commandos over theft of rations, ' Reuters, ' 26 April 2024 This action was taken days after the US announced the suspension of food rations to Danab forces due to corruption.⁶The Somali Digest, 'U.S. Stops Rations to Danab Amid Corruption Scandal [Exclusive], ' 25 April 2024 Despite this measure, the US Department of Defense continued to support the forces in other ways, including with equipment. On 15 May, it donated 96 vehicles, including 11 ambulances, to Somali National Army (SNA) forces.⁷Somali Dispatch, 'US donates Military Vehicles to Danab Forces,' 16 May 2024

The fallout of the corruption scandal led to the withdrawal of security forces from several strategic villages and their subsequent recapture by al-Shabaab. Among the villages seized by the militants are Caad, Shabeelow, Camaara, Xinlabi, and Badaweyne in the southern part of Mudug and Masagaway in Galgaduud.⁸Hiiraan, 'Somali Defense Minister vows legal action against U.S.-trained forces in ration theft, ' 28 April 2024 Danab forces play a critical role in support of the Somali National Army (SNA), conducting reconnaissance activities on al-Shabaab positions. The Danab forces are trained and equipped by the US, thus enhancing the forces' counterterrorism capabilities.⁹Amanda Sperber, 'The Danab Brigade: Somalia's Elite, US-Sponsored Special Ops Force, ' The Mail & Guardian, ' 11 August 2020

Additionally, long-standing coordination issues between the SNA command center and the Ministry of Defence continue to hamper the ability of the security forces to hold the territory seized from al-Shabaab. Throughout both phases of the counter-insurgency operations, special forces like Danab and Gorgor — trained by the US and Turkey, respectively — and clan militias were used as holding forces at government-controlled bases, while the SNA advanced towards the more remote al-Shabaab-controlled areas. However, the government failed to deploy more holding forces in newly liberated areas and conduct a coordinated operation across southern and central Somalia. In this regard, there is evident indication that al-Shabaab has been taking advantage of the government strategies by advancing toward

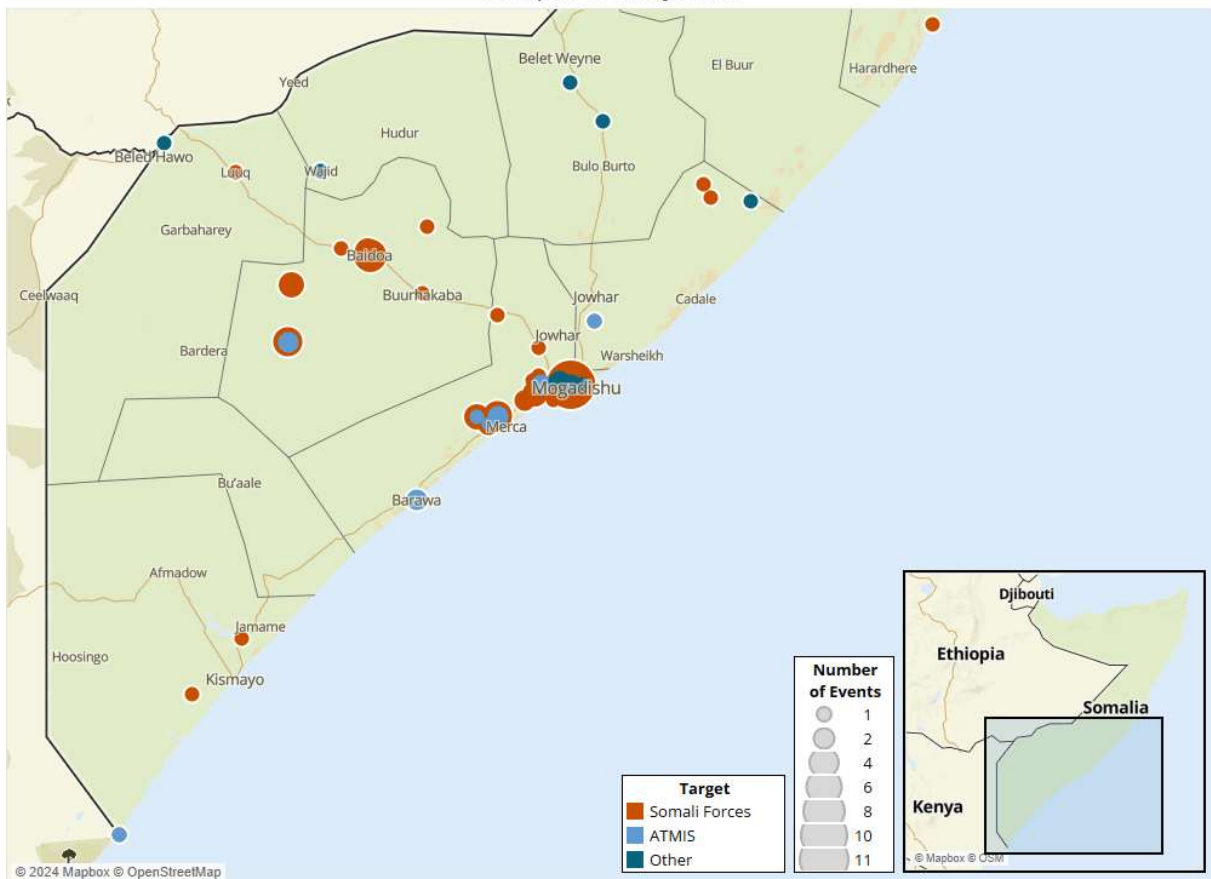
Southwest, Jubaland, and Puntland states when the operations intensified in Galmudug and Hirshabelle.¹⁰Hiiraan, 'Federal forces crush Al-Shabaab in Galmudug, Hirshabelle; militants flee to Puntland, ' 27 May 2024

Al-Shabaab prepares for a new phase of counter-insurgency operations

Al-Shabaab militants have begun to regroup in response to the government's preparations to launch the third round of the counter-insurgency operation. During the reporting period, militants began mobilization activities in the remote border villages between the Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle regions, where the Somali army — with the support of international partners — has intensified its efforts to target al-Shabaab hideouts. Al-Shabaab has also waged several attacks against army troops and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) forces in Lower Shabelle and Banadir regions, where government operations have been reduced (*see map below*). Militants are positioned along the main routes connecting the two regions. Between 19 April and 24 May, ACLED records 98 events targeting Somali security forces and ATMIS forces, with 50 in Lower Shabelle. Among the targets of al-Shabaab attacks are the Ugandan forces operating ATMIS bases and logistics convoys. The Ugandan contingent, which runs several military bases in Lower Shabelle and operates airport security, faces the most al-Shabaab attacks compared to other ATMIS forces in Somalia.

Armed Offensives by al-Shabaab

20 April - 24 May 2024



In Middle Shabelle, al-Shabaab adopted an offensive rather than a defensive tactic as security forces and clan militia operations against the group increased in Balcad and Jowhar districts. The militants are expanding their control over strategic areas and routes, exploiting the SNA's inability to maintain coordination of the holding forces. On 26 April, al-Shabaab took control over three villages in the Jowhar district, followed by the arrival of around 200 militants in Cali Fool Dheere village to set up hideout positions. In this case, the SNA and clan militia managed to recapture the three villages the next day as the militants regrouped elsewhere in Jowhar district. The SNA continued the efforts there by conducting a joint operation with the Abgal clan militia, which resulted in taking control over several villages from al-Shabaab without any confrontations on 2 May.

Al-Shabaab has also been regrouping and planning attacks against security forces in the border areas in Galgaduud and Ceel Dheer districts. In response, security forces intensified their targeting of militant hideouts in the area. On 14 May, US forces and the SNA conducted two joint airstrikes against al-Shabaab positions in Cali Xayle and Baraag Sheekh Caamir villages, killing at least nine militants. A day later, militants assaulted SNA/ATMIS forward operating bases situated near Xawaadleey village in Middle Shabelle. Al-Shabaab has previously resorted to similar tactics, forcing the government to redeploy its forces and slow down the counterinsurgency.