

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1046
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	ACLED
Titel:	Situation Update, September 2023. Somalia: The Government and al-Shabaab Vie for the Support of Clan Militias
Udgivet:	15. september 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. marts 2024

Situation Update | September 2023

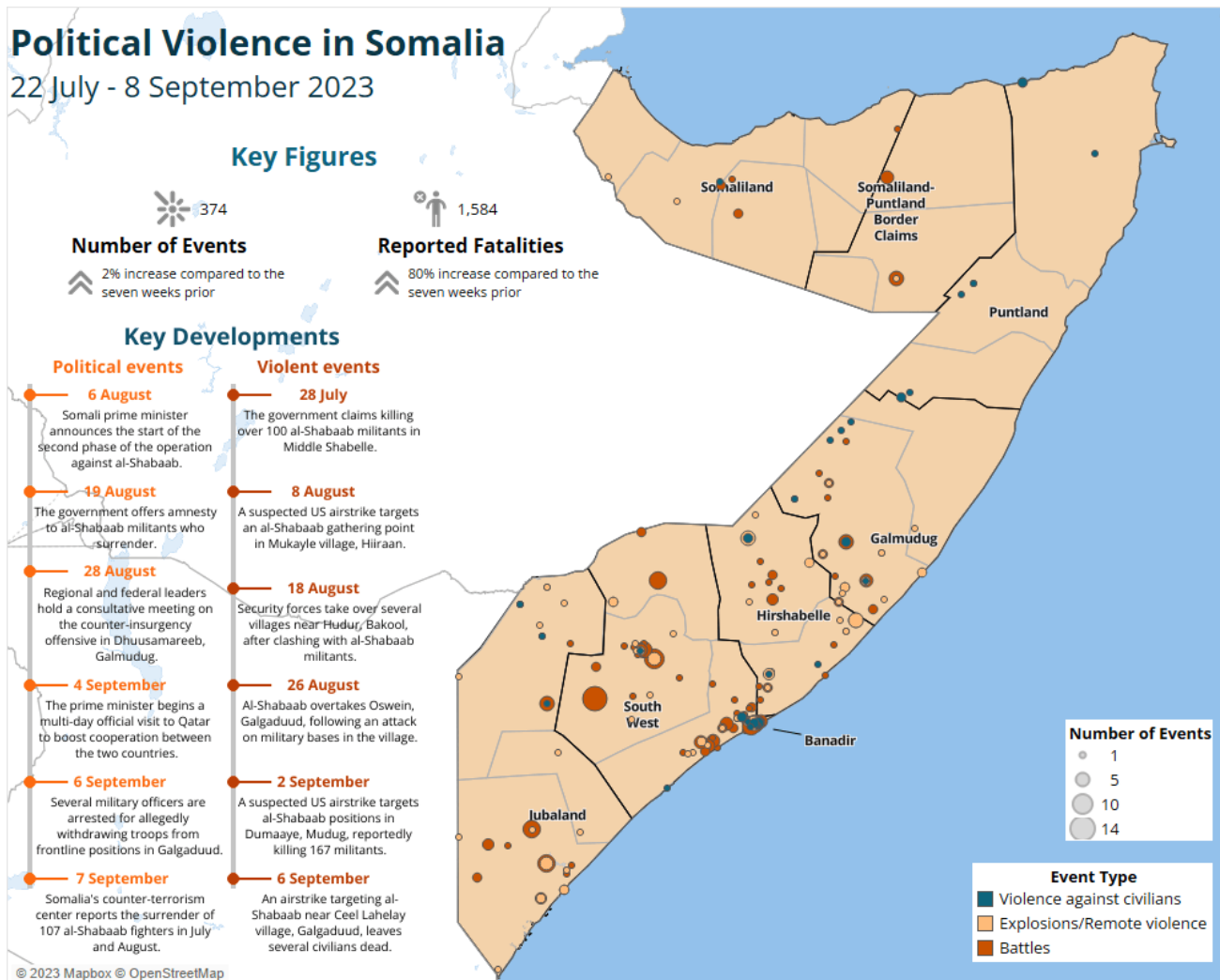
Somalia: The Government and al-Shabaab Vie for the Support of Clan Militias

15 September 2023

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VITAL TRENDS

- From 22 July to 8 September 2023, ACLED records nearly 375 political violence events and over 1,500 fatalities in Somalia. Political violence has increased by over 70% in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states over the past month compared to the month prior, after the government officially launched the second phase of the counter-insurgency operation against al-Shabaab on 6 August. Security forces have managed to inflict heavy casualties on al-Shabaab militants.
- Galgaduud region had the highest number of fatalities, with over 390 recorded during the reporting period. Middle Shabelle region followed, with more than 220 reported fatalities. The government's campaign against al-Shabaab centered in Galgaduud region, where Somali forces and Habar Gedir militias took control of multiple locations. These advancements, however, were followed by al-Shabaab overtaking territory in Galgaduud after security officers and clan militias abandoned their positions on the frontline.
- The most common event type was battles, with over 230 events, followed by explosions/remote violence, with 100 events. ACLED records 22 incidents of bombings by Somali and international forces – United States, Kenya, and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) – against al-Shabaab positions, with at least six hitting civilians.



Somalia: The Government and al-Shabaab Vie for the Support of Clan Militias

In an effort to finally push al-Shabaab completely out of central Somalia, on 6 August, the federal government announced the start of the 'second phase' of the counter-insurgency campaign, codenamed *Operation Black Lion*, in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states.¹ President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud relocated the command center of the counter-insurgency campaign from Mogadishu to Dhuusamareeb, Galmudug's regional capital. Through this decision, Mohamud expects to enhance the coordination of security forces and rally support among the Habar Gedir clan militias from Galmudug state. The federal government also announced the mobilization of thousands of new soldiers in Galmudug and Hirshabelle states.² These developments come a year after the start of the counter-insurgency push against al-Shabaab in August 2022, referred to as the 'first phase' of the campaign. This initial phase attempted to eradicate al-Shabaab from central Somalia and captured several strongholds there, but has resulted in the militants [moving to remote areas of Galmudug state](#) and [closer to the border with Kenya](#).

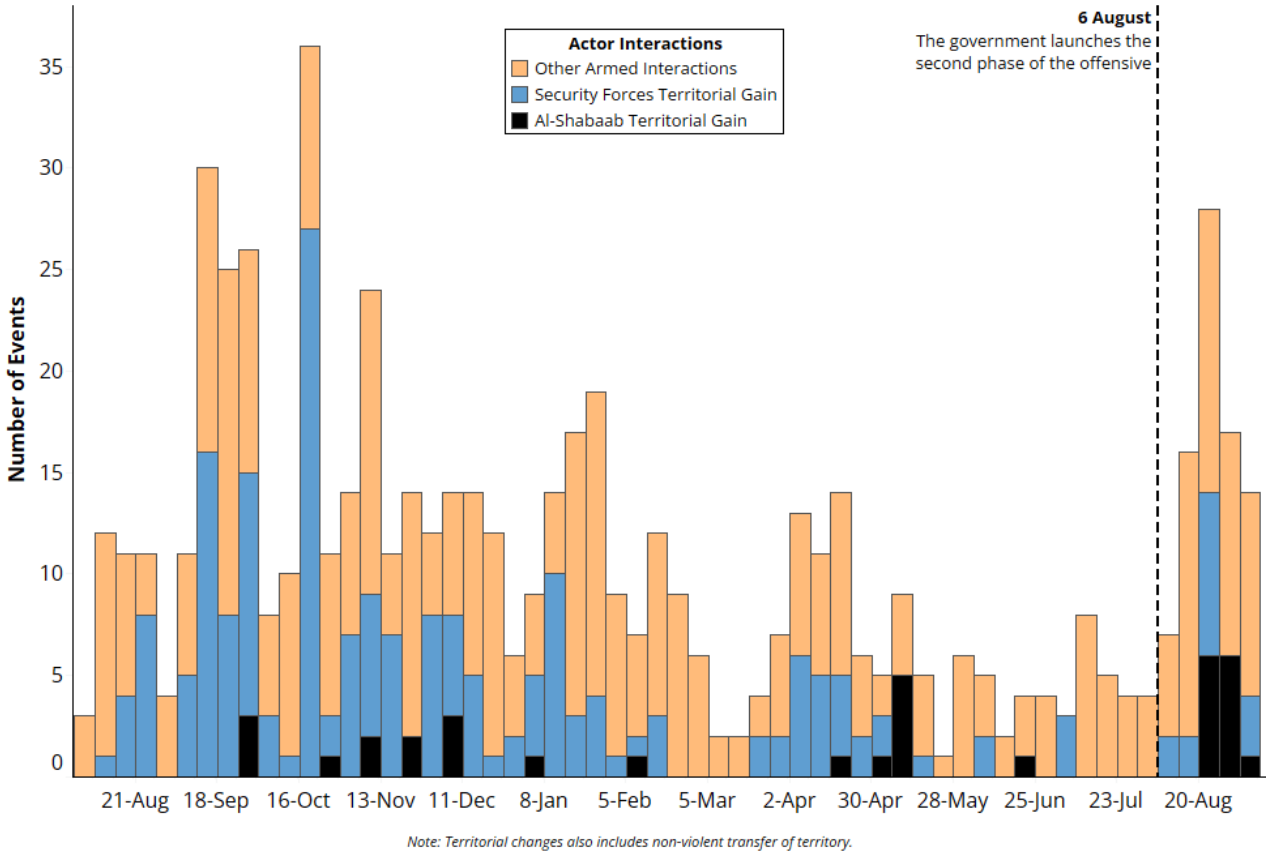
During this first phase, the federal government relied on the support of several clan militias, including the Abgal, Habar Gedir, and Hawadle sub-clans. Alliances with clans were critical to the government's initial success in dislodging the militants from their strongholds in central Somalia. However, the relationship between the federal government and some of the sub-clans involved in the operation – mainly the Hawadle – has since soured amid increasing [political turmoil](#) in the country, ultimately hampering the campaign's success. Al-Shabaab has taken advantage of this deteriorating relationship to negotiate agreements with clan militias in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states and contain local resistance. In return, the government has made efforts to enlist the support of the clan militias once again, months after [seeking support from other countries](#) in the region. This report discusses the contest over the clan militias' support by both the government and al-Shabaab as the second phase of the counter-insurgency offensive commences, highlighting the perils of relying on local clan-based armed groups in the fight against al-Shabaab.

The Government Changes Direction As It Launches the Second Phase of the Counter-Insurgency Operation

In August, the Somali government officially launched the long-awaited new phase of the campaign against al-Shabaab. Despite initial plans to [expand](#) the offensive to southern regions – Southwest and Jubaland states – with the help of countries in the region, the second phase continues to focus on the central states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug, and the government has once again turned to local militias for their support. Following the launch of the new offensive, violent events between security forces and al-Shabaab in both states more than doubled relative to the month prior (*see graph below*).

Armed Interactions and Territorial Changes Between al-Shabaab and Security Forces in Galmudug and Hirshabelle States

1 August 2022 - 8 September 2023

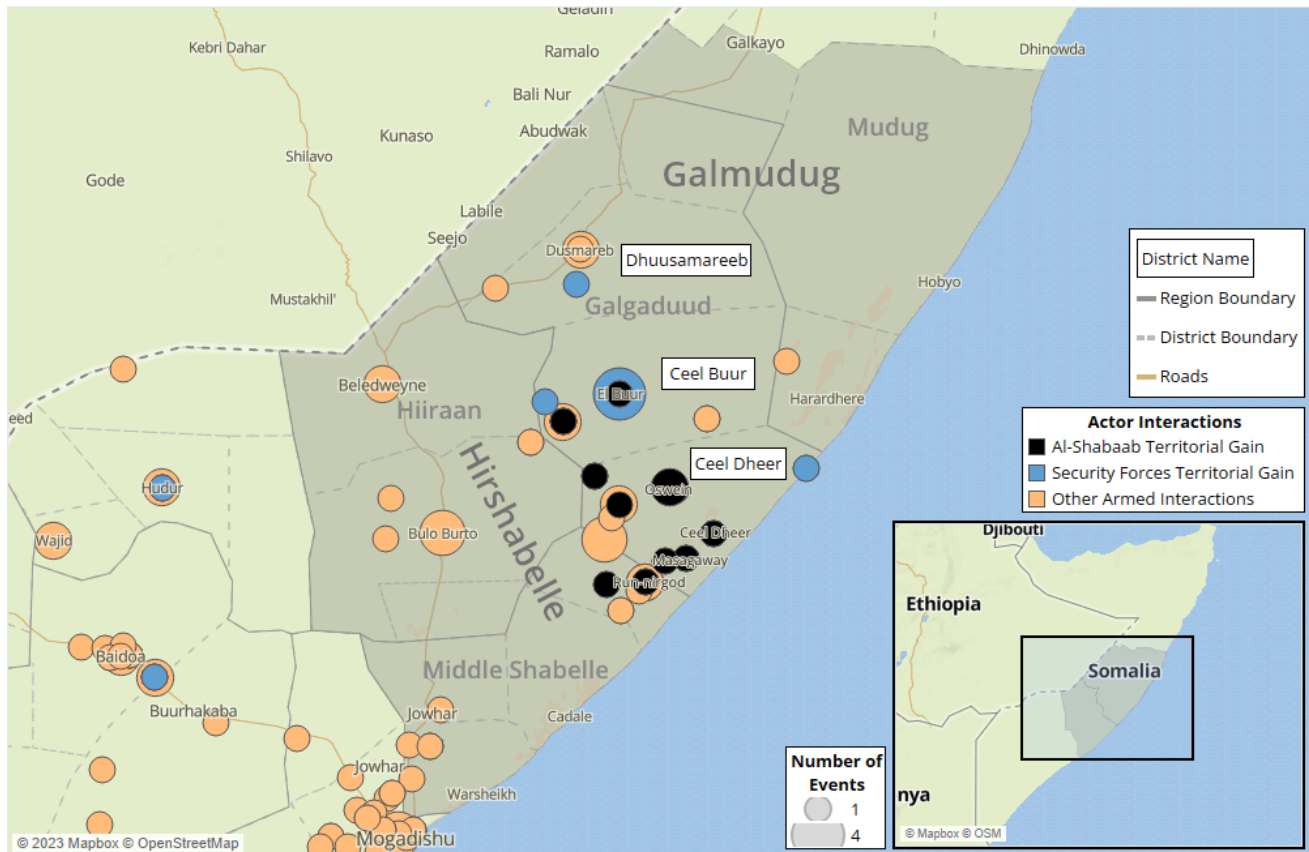


As part of the operation, security forces have been targeting al-Shabaab's main command centers in central Somalia after they failed to dislodge the militants from Hirshabelle and Galmudug states during the [first phase of the counter-insurgency offensive](#) and [the expansion to Galmudug state](#). In this initial stage, security forces regained control of over 100 locations and strongholds previously under al-Shabaab's control in the two states. Al-Shabaab, however, [regained lost territories](#) as political disputes delayed the campaign's second phase.

In this second phase, however, the government operation has mainly centered in Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle regions. In Galgaduud, the federal government called upon the Hawiye clan militias to mobilize against al-Shabaab. For its part, al-Shabaab has directed its efforts to mobilize another section of the Hawiye clan militias – mainly from Habar Gedir Mohamud Hirab, Murusade, and Abgal Wacaysle sub-clans – in Ceel Buur district. Hawiye clan is the largest Somali clan inhabiting central and southern Somalia and is divided in its support for al-Shabaab or the government. In August, the militants started negotiating and reaching agreements in Ceel Buur town with several Hawiye clan militias, who view the alliance with al-Shabaab as a way to defend their tribal land from those they see as a threat to Islamic Sharia law. Militias affiliated with the Habar Gedir sub-clan of Hawiye played a central role in the initial phase of the offensive. The clan militias responded to the government's call in August, joining security forces in operations in Ceel Buur, Ceel Dheer, and Dhuusamareeb districts where al-Shabaab holds its last remaining strongholds in Galgaduud region (*see map below*). US forces provided air support and information about al-Shabaab movements and positions.

Armed Interactions and Territorial Changes Between al-Shabaab and Security Forces in Central Somalia

6 August - 8 September 2023



The renewed push against al-Shabaab has forced the militants to vacate several remote villages in Ceel Buur and Ceel Dheer districts as a defensive measure to avoid casualties. Security forces also claimed to recapture Ceel Buur town on 25 August, after deadly clashes against al-Shabaab.

These territorial gains, however, faced a setback as the military reportedly withdrew from frontline positions, fearing attacks from the militants against poorly protected locations. In one notable incident, al-Shabaab stormed a military base in Oswein village. The detonation of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades initiated the raid, followed by a heavy exchange of gunfire. Al-Shabaab claimed to have killed 178 soldiers and injured several others. The militants also claimed they captured several soldiers, looted weapons, and destroyed vehicles. The attack occurred one day after an al-Shabaab suicide bomber targeted a military convoy heading towards Ceel Buur town on 25 August, reportedly killing dozens of soldiers. Fear of more deadly al-Shabaab attacks reportedly resulted in clans calling on their members, including those in security forces, to leave the frontline. Al-Shabaab thus claimed they overran several strategic locations, including Ceel Buur and Ceel Dheer towns, which had recently been captured by government forces.³ Security forces and allied clan militias also withdrew from Galcad and Masagaway – liberated during the first phase – and Ceel Buur, Wabxo, and other recently captured villages fearing al-Shabaab attacks.

In the neighboring Middle Shabelle region, the federal and regional governments mobilized security forces and clan militias in Adan Yabaal district, which shares a border with Ceel Dheer and Ceel Buur.⁴ The objective is to foil al-Shabaab attacks in the region and support forces on the frontline in Galgaduud. As the government shifted tactics to flush out al-Shabaab from its last remaining stronghold in Galmudug state, al-Shabaab has also resorted to clan militias to defend Ceel Buur, Ceel Dheer, and other controlled areas from security forces. Clans remain divided in their support for al-Shabaab and the government based on who controls the areas where each clan is prominent. This division plays a critical role in how the counter-insurgency operation unfolds.

Local Disputes and the Fight Against al-Shabaab

The operation, particularly the government's reliance on clan militias, has come under attack by several Somali leaders who see it as an inadequate response to an ongoing security crisis. On 26 August, federal and state member presidents held the National

Consultative Council meeting in Dhuusamareeb town to discuss the fight against al-Shabaab and the planned expansion to Jubaland and Southwest states. At the closing of the meeting, Jubaland President Ahmed 'Madobe' Mohamed Islam criticized the slow progress in the counter-insurgency operation in Galmudug, warning that al-Shabaab may benefit from the weapons provided by the government if the operation fails.⁵ Additionally, in an interview, former Hirshabelle President and now Special Presidential Envoy for Civilian Protection and Stabilization Mohamed Abdi Ware pointed out the internal division between the chief of armed forces and minister of defense as one of the reasons for the failure of the ongoing operation, accusing the minister of "overstepping" and "interfering" in the operation.⁶ He also warned that Habar Gedir clan militias are not committed to the fight against al-Shabaab despite receiving weapons from the federal government.⁷

By deploying local clan militias, the government aims to create resistance within clans against al-Shabaab, pushing them to liberate their regions from the group's control. As the first phase of the operation is largely considered a success, the government is replicating the same tactics used in the Hiiraan region of Hirshabelle state, where the Abgal, Habar Gedir, and Hawadle militias supported the operation. Additionally, the government is again turning to clan militias due to a lack of enough support from neighboring countries – despite their initial commitments to send additional troops.⁸ The chief of the Somali Armed Forces pointed out that their support is not imminent and no preparation is underway.⁹

In Galgaduud, al-Shabaab has succeeded in establishing better relations with clan elders from Hawiye sub-clans than the government. In al-Shabaab-controlled areas, the militants rely on clan elders to help them with recruitment and the collection of *zakat* (or alms). As the government mobilizes clan militias from specific sub-clans, the militants respond by entering into negotiations with those sub-clans and then imposing blockades to restrict the movement of trucks carrying goods in government-controlled areas to target the sub-clans' prominent towns and force them to give in and cooperate. Moreover, some sections of sub-clans are willing to enter into alliances with al-Shabaab to defend the Islamic Sharia law and defeat what they see as an 'apostate' government. These factors have arguably made clans susceptible to al-Shabaab's influence, making them unreliable partners for the government in Galgaduud.

A dispute between Galmudug leaders risks further endangering the prospects of the government's counter-insurgency campaign. In September, Galmudug's vice president sacked the state minister of interior, reportedly due to incompetency and allegedly sabotaging the fight against al-Shabaab. The state president, however, revoked the decision by the vice president and reinstated the sacked minister.¹⁰ This leadership wrangle happens at a critical time as security forces face setbacks in the operation in Galgaduud, with al-Shabaab retaking several locations at the end of August. A similar dispute in Hiiraan region between the Hirshabelle state deputy president and the Hiiraan governor over [tax collection](#) jeopardized the support of the Hawadle sub-clan in Hiiraan during the first phase of the campaign.

Al-Shabaab largely benefits [from political disputes](#) as they threaten the unity needed across the country to fight insecurity. The divisions, combined with the backfoot from which security forces are fighting the militants, have undermined Somalia's progress in its fight against al-Shabaab. For the government to defeat the militants, security forces must stop relying on clan militias' support in order to eliminate the risks of uncertainty and unreliability. The government must also learn from its past operations and increase the capacity and role of its security forces in the campaign against al-Shabaab, particularly now as ATMIS is preparing a complete withdrawal of forces from the country.

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