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Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack

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What happened? On 14 October 2017, twin truck bombings in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, killed upwards of 300 people. Al-Shabaab, an Islamist insurgency, was almost certainly behind the attack, but has not claimed responsibility.

Why did it happen? Al-Shabaab has been fighting the government since 2007. The targets of the attack are unclear, though may have been government buildings and the base of African Union forces fighting Al-Shabaab.

Why does it matter? The attacks have united Somalis in disgust at Al-Shabaab and may shore up support for Somali President Farmajo's government. They also illustrate the challenges he faces: not just Al-Shabaab's resilience, but chronically weak security forces; escalating friction between the government and federal states, which the Saudi-Qatar spat has worsened; and longstanding clan disputes, all of which Al-Shabaab exploits.

What should be done? The first priority is to care for victims and cope with the attacks' aftermath. President Farmajo and his government should also improve relations with federal states and address disputes underpinning political infighting. Cleaning up corruption in the security sector and local reconciliation remain priorities.

I. Overview

The devastating twin truck bombings in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu on Saturday, 14 October 2017, mark the deadliest attack in that country since the current phase of its war began in early 2007. It almost certainly was perpetrated by the Islamist insurgent movement Al-Shabaab, though there has been no claim of responsibility. The death toll most likely will exceed 300, the vast majority ordinary Somalis, including dozens of children, going about their daily business. The immediate priority is to care for victims and deal with the aftermath. Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo", his government and its foreign partners should also

redouble efforts to mend the divisions in Somali society and the chronic weaknesses in the security sector that make Al-Shabaab such a persistent threat.

The first and deadliest bomb exploded at the Zoobe Junction in Hodan – a bustling commercial mini-district close to the Red Crescent office and ministries of education and foreign affairs (the foreign minister was grazed by flying glass and debris). Whether the principal targets were the government buildings, as some reports suggest, or a nearby military training camp recently built by the Turkish government, is unclear. A second and smaller blast, that killed twelve, occurred at Ceel Qalow near Halane, the base of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

Al-Shabaab, an insurgent group fighting to overthrow the Somali government since 2007, is the only organisation with the capability, motive and experience to pull off anything on this scale. That it has neither denied nor claimed responsibility may reflect its reluctance to take responsibility for an attack that has provoked unprecedented anger and revulsion (it similarly avoided claiming a 2009 attack on a graduation ceremony in Mogadishu) and/or its hope that rumours and conspiracy theories – most peddling the idea of security forces' collusion – continue to sow confusion.

Despite having suffered military setbacks since 2011 at the hands of AMISOM, Al-Shabaab remains resilient (see Crisis Group Commentary, "Somalia's Al-Shabaab Down but Far from Out", 27 June 2016. It controls tracts of rural south central Somalia and supply routes between towns, pursues a steady campaign of car bombings, assassinations and other attacks in Mogadishu and has targeted and in some cases overrun isolated AMISOM and Somali army bases.

According to multiple sources, the attack at Zoobe Junction involved an ageing TM (Bedford) truck – a model formerly used by the Somali army and ubiquitous in the country – converted for civilian use as a cargo transporter and packed with explosives. It reportedly originated from the Shabelle Valley and is thought to have passed several checkpoints manned by Somali soldiers on the Afgoye-Mogadishu road. The explosives may have been concealed by cargo, and thus harder to detect without thorough screening or specialised detectors (attempts to introduce sniffer dogs at checkpoints have run aground because many Somalis view the animal as unclean under Islamic law, though such dogs are now used at the airport). It is also plausible that soldiers were bribed to allow the truck through.

Although full responsibility for the horrific attacks lies with their perpetrators, a number of recent trends may have contributed to Al-Shabaab's ability to mount an operation of this scale and should inform the response of President Farmajo's government and its foreign partners.

II. Losing Territory around Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab recently recaptured several areas in the Shabelle Valley, including the town of Bariire, only 45km outside Mogadishu and on a major route to the capital. Those areas fell to the movement after government forces pulled out early this month, in protest that some had not received salaries for three months. Averting attacks in Mogadishu is ever harder when surrounding districts revert back to

Al-Shabaab control or when communities, incensed by government corruption and dysfunction or by civilian deaths during counter-terrorism operations, provide the movement tacit backing. Al-Shabaab consistently plays on anger at officials' graft – Somalia is ranked the world's most corrupt country by Transparency International – to win support.

The government's efforts to secure Mogadishu largely involve mopping up illicit weapons, reigning in clan militias and putting up barriers on arterial roads into the city. But these measures are not enough. Corrupt, unpaid soldiers and discontented clans on the city's peripheries enable Al-Shabaab operatives to infiltrate. The organisation's elite *Amniyat* (intelligence) cells for years have been active in the city, penetrating state security structures, gathering intelligence and assassinating government officials and informants.

III. Infighting among Security Forces

The Somali army and other branches of the security services have been under considerable recent strain.¹ Rising factionalism and clan tensions triggered skirmishes in September, when a Somali army unit and elements of the newly-established Mogadishu Stabilisation Unit engaged in a firefight² that left six soldiers dead. Such clashes often involve competition for control of turf, checkpoints and other sources of revenue. They undermine morale and cohesion in the security forces, erode the military's effectiveness and make it more likely that troops or factions collude with the enemy. The defence and army chiefs recent resignations, as well as the army's retreat from parts of the Shabelle Valley, may have been related to such problems.

Until the tragic attacks, Mogadishu's overall security this year had seen gradual if modest improvements.³ Assassinations and car bombings have been less frequent and deadly than in past years (of which 2016 was the deadliest) and Somali security forces have foiled several attempted vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks. Better training, vehicle checks and patrols on major urban roads have almost certainly helped. But the endemic wrangles between official security forces appear to have allowed insurgents an opening to mount a major attack.

IV. Political Tensions

Mounting tension between Mogadishu and Somalia's federal states has also impacted security. The rift between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on one hand, and Qatar on the other, has aggravated such friction. As the Saudis and Emiratis develop direct links with federal states and undermine their relations with the federal government, tensions have grown over which side of the Gulf dispute to back. This also diverts attention from security problems in Mogadishu.

¹ Crisis Group's Watch List 2017, 24 February 2017.

² "At least six killed as rival Somali troops clash in Mogadishu", Voice of America, 16 September 2017.

³ "SRSG Keating briefing to the Security Council", UN Assistance Mission in Somalia, 13 September 2017.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also have stopped direct budgetary support to Somalia, affecting the federal state's ability to pay soldiers, police and intelligence officials. Saudi Arabia in October agreed to release \$50 million to the Somali government,⁴ but sources say this is a one-time donation, not a resumption of its previous budgetary support. So long as Mogadishu remains "neutral" – ie, refuses to explicitly back the Saudis and Emiratis in their dispute against Qatar – Riyadh is unlikely to resume its prior assistance. Yet, with Qatar and its ally Turkey also major donors, the Somali government is understandably reluctant to pick sides in this dispute between its partners.

V. Priorities for the Government

The next weeks will be crucial for President Farmajo's government. Fury on the street at Al-Shabaab could shore up support for the government and provide momentum for efforts to overcome divisions in Somali society. But there is also a risk that the president's opponents, especially those in the federal states, could attempt to capitalise on the crisis with the goal of ousting him and his government. Even in the weeks before the attacks, rumours of plans by regional governments to introduce a no-confidence vote in parliament were intensifying. The federal states' formation of a caucus and issuance of a critical communiqué at the end of an 11 October meeting in Kismayo only deepened speculation.⁵ Such upheaval could easily play into the insurgents' hands.

Of course, the government must cope with the aftermath of the attacks and ensure victims receive necessary support. But it also should work quickly to improve relations with federal states and address the constitutional questions that lie at the roots of much of the political infighting, especially those related to resource sharing and devolved powers. The government has invited the federal state presidents to discuss main points of disagreement, including the Gulf crisis, over the coming weeks. This is positive and ought to be supported.

Reforming and cleaning up the security sector is another imperative. Unless the Somali leadership prioritises such efforts, the significant external investment in that sector will fail. Present rates of corruption fuel insecurity. For its part, AMISOM has made significant inroads in reversing Al-Shabaab's territorial control, but it is overstretched and struggles to fight a non-conventional war against a resilient insurgency that feeds off local conflicts and, frequently, the heavy-handed tactics of its enemies, whether African, Somali or U.S. forces. Somali forces' inability to secure and govern areas taken, often with heavy losses, by AMISOM saps morale. Partly in an effort to force the government to prioritise security sector reform, some troop contributors now threaten to wind down operations in the next two years. While Somali forces must gradually assume more responsibility, a hasty AMISOM withdrawal would be disastrous, almost certainly ceding larger parts of the country, including main towns, to Al-Shabaab.

⁴ "Somalia gets \$50m in Saudi aid", Middle East Monitor, 3 October 2017.

⁵ "Somalia: Federal states suspend constitutional reviews", Garowe online, 11 October 2017.

Political divisions – between the government and federal states and among clans – pose a grave obstacle to reforms. Redoubling efforts to address such divisions, including through clan-level reconciliation, are critical in themselves but also a prerequisite for security forces' coherence and motivation. If not built on solid political foundations, training and arming units in the Somali forces could end up aggravating instability.

In this light, a bottom-up, national reconciliation process and political settlements between the government and federal member states, and among those federal states, should be a top priority. Somalia's key partners, the European Union (EU), UK, U.S. and the African Union (AU) should continue to promote such efforts. In tandem, federal states, supported by Mogadishu, should launch grassroots initiatives to reconcile clans and make local governance more inclusive. Somalia's Western partners could accompany this process by supporting state administrations to boost their role in intra- and inter-clan reconciliation and help reinforce local security forces.

Nairobi/Brussels, 20 October 2017

Appendix A: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2014

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Central Africa

Fields of Bitterness (I): Land Reform in Burundi, Africa Report N°213, 12 February 2014 (only available in French).

Fields of Bitterness (II): Restitution and Reconciliation in Burundi, Africa Report N°214, 17 February 2014 (only available in French).

The Security Challenges of Pastoralism in Central Africa, Africa Report N°215, 1 April 2014 (also available in French).

The Central African Crisis: From Predation to Stabilisation, Africa Report N°219, 17 June 2014 (also available in French).

Cameroon: Prevention Is Better than Cure, Africa Briefing N°101, 4 September 2014 (only available in French).

The Central African Republic's Hidden Conflict, Africa Briefing N°105, 12 December 2014 (also available in French).

Congo: Ending the Status Quo, Africa Briefing N°107, 17 December 2014.

Elections in Burundi: Moment of Truth, Africa Report N°224, 17 April 2015 (also available in French).

Congo: Is Democratic Change Possible?, Africa Report N°225, 5 May 2015.

Burundi: Peace Sacrificed?, Africa Briefing N°111, 29 May 2015 (also available in French).

Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalism, Africa Report N°229, 3 September 2015 (also available in French).

Central African Republic: The roots of violence, Africa Report N°230, 21 September 2015 (also available in French).

Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility, Africa Report N°233, 30 March 2016 (also available in French).

Burundi: anatomie du troisième mandat, Africa Report N°235, 20 May 2016 (only available in French).

Katanga: Tensions in DRC's Mineral Heartland, Africa Report N°239, 3 August 2016.

The African Union and the Burundi Crisis: Ambition versus Reality, Africa Briefing N°122, 28 September 2016 (also available in French).

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Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram, Africa Report N°241, 16 November 2016 (also available in French).

Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures, Africa Report N°246, 8 March 2017 (also available in French).

Burundi: The Army in Crisis, Africa Report N°247, 5 April 2017 (also available in French).

Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads, Africa Report N°250, 2 August 2017 (also available in French).

Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic, Africa Report N°253, 28 September 2017 (only available in French).

Time to Reset African Union-European Union Relations, Africa Report N°255, 17 October 2017 (also available in French).

Cameroon: A Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures, Africa Briefing N°130, 19 October 2017 (also available in French).

Horn of Africa

Sudan's Spreading Conflict (III): The Limits of Darfur's Peace Process, Africa Report N°211, 27 January 2014.

South Sudan: A Civil War by Any Other Name, Africa Report N°217, 10 April 2014.

Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War, Africa Briefing N°99, 26 June 2014.

Eritrea: Ending the Exodus?, Africa Briefing N°100, 8 August 2014.

Kenya: Al-Shabaab – Closer to Home, Africa Briefing N°102, 25 September 2014.

South Sudan: Jonglei – "We Have Always Been at War", Africa Report N°221, 22 December 2014.

Sudan and South Sudan's Merging Conflicts, Africa Report N°223, 29 January 2015.

Sudan: The Prospects for "National Dialogue", Africa Briefing N°108, 11 March 2015.

The Chaos in Darfur, Africa Briefing N°110, 22 April 2015.

South Sudan: Keeping Faith with the IGAD Peace Process, Africa Report N°228, 27 July 2015.

Somaliland: The Strains of Success, Africa Briefing N°113, 5 October 2015.

Kenya's Somali North East: Devolution and Security, Africa Briefing N°114, 17 November 2015.

Ethiopia: Governing the Faithful, Africa Briefing N°117, 22 February 2016.

Sudan's Islamists: From Salvation to Survival, Africa Briefing N°119, 21 March 2016.

South Sudan's South: Conflict in the Equatorias, Africa Report N°236, 25 May 2016.

Kenya's Coast: Devolution Disappointed, Africa Briefing N°121, 13 July 2016.

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Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?, Africa Briefing N°127, 22 June 2017.

A New Roadmap to Make U.S. Sudan Sanctions Relief Work, Africa Briefing N°128, 29 September 2017.

How to Ensure a Credible, Peaceful Presidential Vote in Kenya, Africa Briefing N°129, 2 October 2017.

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A Cosmetic End to Madagascar's Crisis?, Africa Report N°218 (also available in French), 19 May 2014.

Zimbabwe: Waiting for the Future, Africa Briefing N°103, 29 September 2014.

Zimbabwe: Stranded in Stasis, Africa Briefing N°118, 29 February 2016.

West Africa

Mali: Reform or Relapse, Africa Report N°210, 10 January 2014 (also available in French).

Côte d'Ivoire's Great West: Key to Reconciliation, Africa Report N°212, 28 January 2014 (also available in French).

Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency, Africa Report N°216, 3 April 2014.

Guinea Bissau: Elections, But Then What?, Africa Briefing N°98, 8 April 2014 (only available in French).

Mali: Last Chance in Algiers, Africa Briefing N°104, 18 November 2014 (also available in French).

Nigeria's Dangerous 2015 Elections: Limiting the Violence, Africa Report N°220, 21 November 2014.

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Burkina Faso: Nine Months to Complete the Transition, Africa Report N°222, 28 January 2015.

Security Sector Reform in Guinea-Bissau: An Opportunity Not to Be Missed, Africa Briefing N°109, 19 March 2015 (only available in French).

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Burkina Faso: Meeting the October Target, Africa Briefing N°112, 24 June 2015 (only available in French).

The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm, Africa Report N°227, 25 June 2015 (also available in French).

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The Politics Behind the Ebola Crisis, Africa Report N°232, 28 October 2015.

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Boko Haram on the Back Foot?, Africa Briefing N°120, 4 May 2016 (also available in French).

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Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance, Africa Report N°240, 6 September 2016 (also available in French).

Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency, Africa Report N°242, 5 December 2016 (also available in French).

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