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Situation Update | October 2023

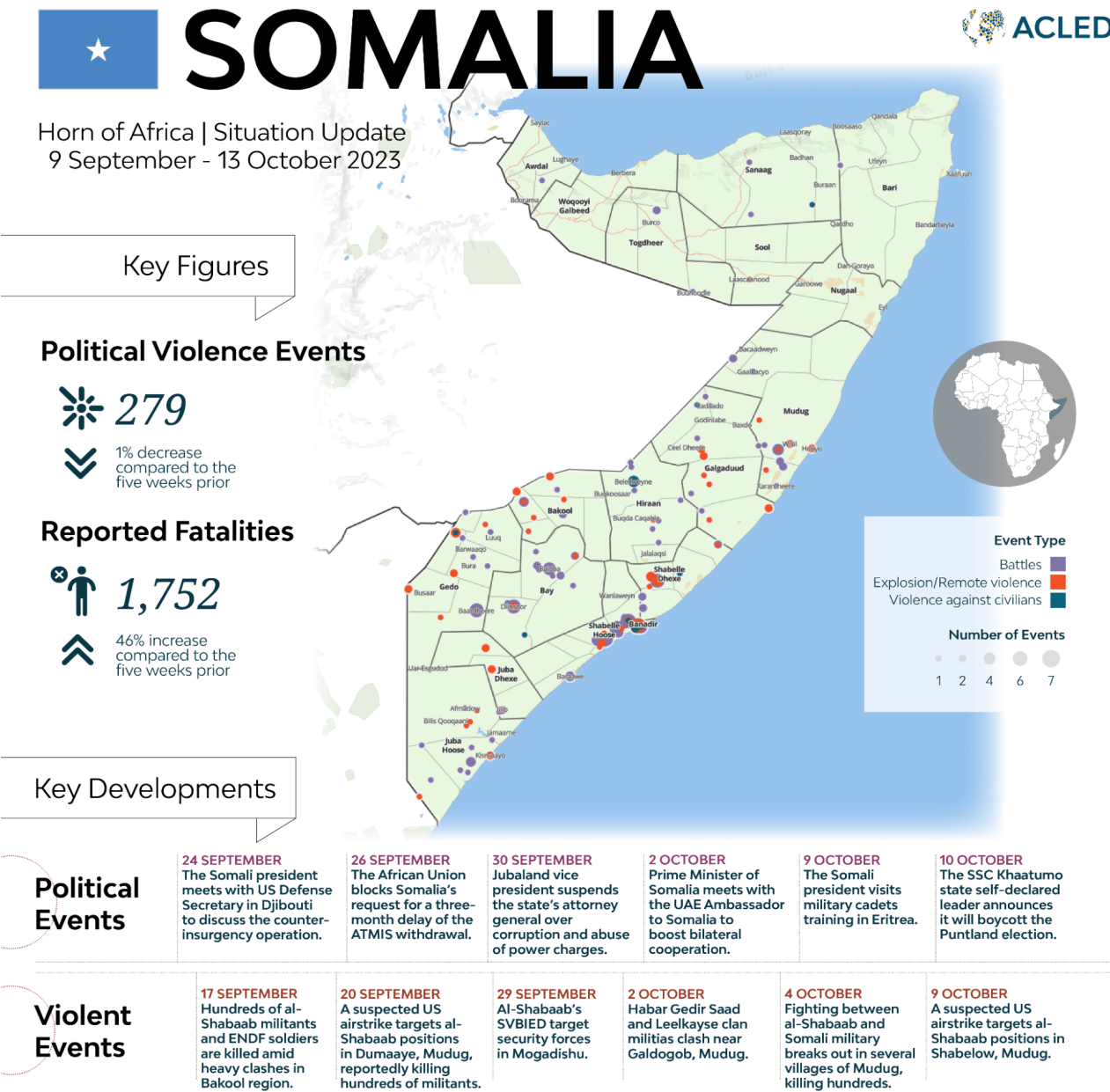
Somalia: Al-Shabaab Strikes Back at Local Administrators

20 October 2023

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VITAL TRENDS

- From 9 September to 13 October 2023, ACLED records 279 political violence events and 1,752 reported fatalities in Somalia. Political violence has increased by over 80% in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states over the past 10 weeks – since the government officially launched *Operation Black Lion* against al-Shabaab on 6 August – compared to the 10 weeks prior.
- Bakool region saw the highest number of reported fatalities, with over 800 recorded during the reporting period. Mudug region followed, with 400 reported fatalities. The government's campaign against al-Shabaab centered in Galmudug state – which consists of Mudug and Galgaduud regions – where Somali forces and Habar Gedir militias took control of several locations.
- The most common event type was battles, with 172 events, followed by explosions/remote violence, with 87 events. ACLED records 32 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 about 10 reportedly affecting civilians.



Al-Shabaab Targets Local Administrators During the Counter-Insurgency Operation

Since August 2022, the Somali federal government has engaged in a counter-insurgency campaign against al-Shabaab. Somali troops achieved some successes, including [dislodging the militants from hundreds of locations previously under al-Shabaab's control](#) in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states in central Somalia. Clan militias and local power brokers provided active support to the counter-insurgency, sharing operational information with the government and giving legitimacy to government forces. This collaboration proved to be instrumental in weakening al-Shabaab's support base and enabling the government's advances.

Yet, over the past year, al-Shabaab has turned against Somali state officials in an effort to discourage support for the campaign. Al-Shabaab militants staged attacks against local officials to either retaliate against those who support the counter-insurgency or intimidate others to prevent further support. This report discusses how these attacks have taken place not only in central Somalia, but have also expanded to southern Somalia and the capital Mogadishu, in a sign that al-Shabaab is conducting such attacks to strategically weaken the government's local support more broadly.

Local Officials and al-Shabaab Compete for Clan Support

In July 2022, shortly before the beginning of the operation against al-Shabaab, the Hawadle Macawiisley and other clan militias took up arms against the group in Hiiraan. This uprising was a prelude to the government-backed counter-insurgency campaign launched the following month. Alliances with local clans, including the Abgal, Habar Gedir, and Hawadle clan militias,¹ were [key to enabling the initial successes of the military operations](#) in Hiiraan, Middle Shabelle, Mudug, and Galgaduud regions. Clan support had long allowed al-Shabaab to retain control over large swathes of territory in central and southern Somalia, and their defection to the government therefore proved essential.

Competition over local governance has been at the heart of the decade-long conflict with al-Shabaab. The militant group has established its own local governance institutions, justice mechanisms, and tax collection to sustain its operations.² In addition to appointing officials within the territories under its control, al-Shabaab also created shadow local administrations known as *Wilaayaats*, installing self-styled governors hailing from influential local constituencies.³ One al-Shabaab *Wilaayat* consists of two regions. For instance, *Wilaayat* Jubooyinka consists of Middle Juba and Lower Juba regions. This creates a competitive relationship between the local officials and al-Shabaab by contesting for the support of local clans. As the federal government is weak in providing services across central and southern regions, it relies on the clans' support to mitigate this weakness.⁴

Without support from local power brokers, the Somali federal government found itself unable to reclaim control over territories fallen under al-Shabaab. Local officials in the Somali government assumed a new role in the counter-insurgency, spearheading the mobilization of clan militias in support of the government and visiting the freed locations to boost support among clan leaders.⁵ Some members of parliament, regional governors and other local officials have joined the fight against al-Shabaab.⁶ At the same time, al-Shabaab continues to negotiate with clan leaders to contain local resistance and support the operation.

Al-Shabaab Turns Against Somali Local Officials

Confronted with the government's advances, al-Shabaab has responded in various ways. Militants engaged in heavy clashes with government forces and clan-based militias, often staging [sophisticated attacks against troops and institutions](#). The group also began [negotiating with various clans](#) to consolidate or regain support among local constituencies in Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, where the government had co-opted local elites away from al-Shabaab. In parallel, the militants also waged violence against the local representatives of the Somali state that they deemed disloyal or threatening to their power.

Between August 2022 and October 2023, ACLED records 76 instances of violence perpetrated by al-Shabaab against local Somali state officials. Since the beginning of the operation, one of the biggest attacks against local officials occurred on 3 October 2022, when several Hirshabelle local officials and members of the federal parliament were among the 64 people killed by a suicide bomb inside the Lamagalay administration center in Belet Weyne town of Hiiraan region. Overall, most attacks take place in the capital Mogadishu, followed by Hiiraan and Lower Shabelle regions in Hirshabelle state. Even though the counter-insurgency operations against al-Shabaab do not include Mogadishu, local officials in Mogadishu have been soft targets for al-Shabaab because the militants have a high number of operatives within the capital. As the 17 districts in Mogadishu have their own administration services, the lack of a unified administration creates more opportunities for al-Shabaab to target local officials in the city.

When comparing the two phases of the operation, some differences arise. During the first phase of the operation, most of the attacks were concentrated in Mogadishu and central Somalia. The number of attacks against local officials then slightly decreased starting from February 2023 until the beginning of the second phase in August. This might be linked to the [political turmoil](#) in Hiiraan, Lower Shabelle, Nugaal, and Gedo regions, which put a pause on the counter-insurgency operation and also gave an opportunity for al-Shabaab to renegotiate with clan leaders to regain the territories that were lost during the operation (*see graph below*).

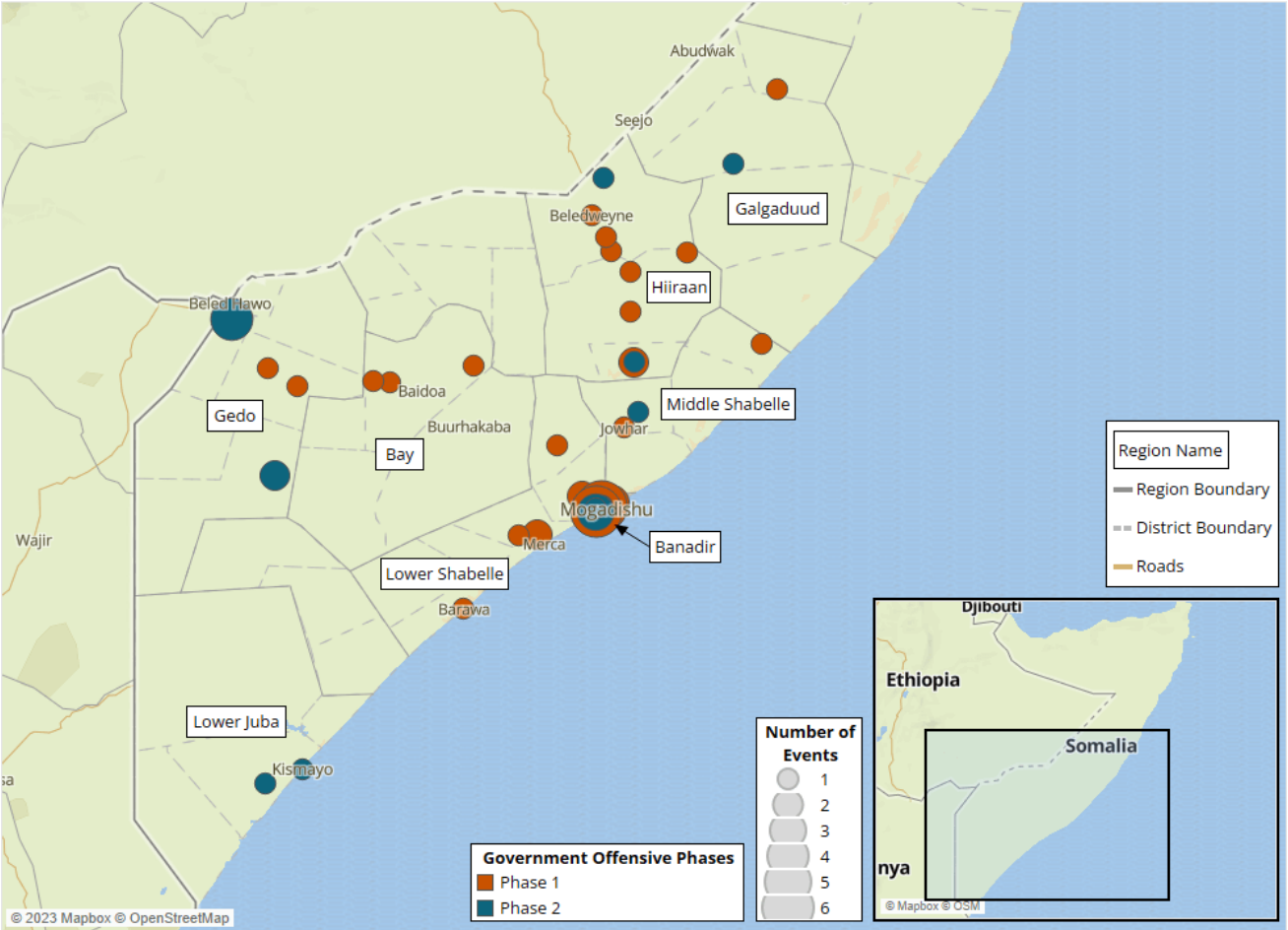


In contrast to the first year of the counter-insurgency, the number of attacks against local officials began to rise again in August 2023, [after the beginning of Operation Black Lion](#). Attacks increased in Somalia's south, and especially in Gedo region (*see map below*). Here al-Shabaab has taken advantage of an ongoing dispute between Jubaland security forces and the Somali National Army (SNA) allied with the former administration in Gedo to target local officials who support the counter-insurgency operation.⁷

Al-Shabaab's attacks against local state officials in Gedo are likely a reaction to an attempt initiated in April 2023 by the local administration to [mobilize local clan militias to participate in the military operation against al-Shabaab in the region](#). The Jubaland state government opposes their mobilization, due to fear of creating a power imbalance between Marehan and Ogaden sub-clans of the Darod clan – which have been feuding for control in Jubaland state for decades.⁸ The majority in Gedo region are Marehan sub-clan and participating in the operation would give the clan militias access to more weapons provided by the federal government.

Violence Against Local Officials by al-Shabaab

23 August 2022 - 13 October 2023



In September, al-Shabaab shifted their targets to several high-profile officials. On 11 September, a member of the Galmudug state parliament and an official from Dhusamareb municipality were killed in an explosive attack near Ceel Garas town in Galgaduud region. These officials were visiting Ceel Garas town, which the SNA recaptured that same day. Four days later, two members of the federal parliament and the Galmudug state president were injured in a vehicle-borne suicide attack while they were touring liberated areas to show support to the security forces and clan militias. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for both attacks.⁹

Through these attacks, al-Shabaab aims to portray itself as a powerful entity capable of striking top government officials while boosting the morale of its existing fighters. Such attacks also have the potential to limit the movement of local officials to administer newly liberated areas, frustrating mobilization among the clans and providing an opportunity for al-Shabaab to regain control of areas in Galgaduud, Hiiraan, and Mudug regions.

The geography of the attacks also reveals al-Shabaab's strategy to weaken the government's local support. In order not to lose its stronghold areas in southern Somalia – where the government plans to expand the operation next – it is likely al-Shabaab will intensify its attacks against local administrators as one of its techniques to retaliate against the government's operations against the group.

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