



Obsidian Research Bureau

Counter Insurgency Perspectives
THE WAR FOR SOMALIA
HOW GOVERNMENT AND AU FORCES ARE
LOSING TO AL-SHABAAB

Obsidian Research Bureau

Illuminating the hidden architecture of power and conflict

www.obsidianrb.org

© 2026 Obsidian Research Bureau All Rights Reserved

HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND THE RISE OF AL-SHABAAB (2006–2020)

The Longest African War

The war between the Somali Federal Government (SFG), the African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions, and the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab is now the longest-running insurgency in modern African history. Spanning nearly two decades, the conflict has claimed over 500,000 Somali lives – a figure that includes combatants, civilians caught in crossfire, and those who died of famine exacerbated by war. More than 3 million Somalis remain internally displaced or refugees in neighboring Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen.

Despite the expenditure of an estimated \$10 billion in international military aid, training, and peacekeeping operations, Al-Shabaab controls or actively contests approximately 25% of Somalia's territory, including vast swathes of the southern and central regions. The group has proven remarkably resilient, outlasting three distinct AU mission mandates (AMISOM, ATMIS, and now AUSSOM) and surviving the deaths of nearly all its original founding leaders.

This report argues that the current trajectory favors a prolonged stalemate, not victory. Al-Shabaab's strengths in media operations and self-sufficient finance have neutralized the Somali government's advantages in foreign backing. However, the war is not unwinnable. A fundamental shift in strategy—away from air-power dependency and toward political reconciliation, army depoliticization, and economic warfare—could still reverse the tide.

The Birth of the Insurgency (2006–2011)

To understand the present, one must revisit 2006. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) had brought a rare period of order to Mogadishu after years of warlord rule. When Ethiopia—backed by the United States—invaded in December 2006 to oust the ICU, the invasion created a power vacuum that birthed a more radical faction: Al-Shabaab, which means “The Youth” in Arabic.

Between 2007 and 2011, Al-Shabaab evolved from a small urban militia into a conventional army controlling most of southern Somalia. By 2010, they had imposed a strict version of Sharia law, established courts, taxed ports (Kismayo being the crown jewel), and even issued their own currency. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), launched in 2007, was initially a failure—underfunded, understaffed, and confined to small pockets of Mogadishu.

The turning point came in 2011 with a triple shock to Al-Shabaab:

1. Kenyan invasion (“Operation Linda Nchi”): Kenya sent troops into southern Somalia after a series of cross-border kidnappings.
2. Ethiopian re-entry: Ethiopian forces again pushed into western Somalia.
3. Drought and famine: Al-Shabaab's ban on international aid organizations led to massive civilian deaths and turned local populations against them.

By 2012, Al-Shabaab had lost Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Baidoa. AMISOM claimed victory. But the group simply transformed—from a conventional force into a guerrilla and terrorist organization.

The AMISOM Era: Holding the Line (2012–2020)

From 2012 to 2020, the war became a bloody stalemate. AMISOM, at its peak 22,000 troops from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, secured major urban centers. But they never had enough boots on the ground to hold rural territory. The strategy was predictable: the AU would launch a major offensive, clear a town, declare it “liberated,” and then withdraw to forward operating bases. Within weeks, Al-Shabaab would return at night, assassinate local elders, and re-establish shadow governance.

Key failures during this period:

- Lack of a functioning Somali army: The SNA was a collection of clan militias with no unified command. Payroll fraud was rampant—“ghost soldiers” (fictitious names on payroll) consumed up to 40% of the defense budget.
- Donor fragmentation: The US, EU, Turkey, and the UN all ran separate training programs with incompatible doctrines.
- Al-Shabaab’s adaptation: The group began using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) with devastating effect. The October 14, 2017, Mogadishu truck bombing killed 587 people—the deadliest terrorist attack in African history.

By 2020, the international community realized that AMISOM could not win; it could only prevent outright collapse.

Failure

In 2022, AMISOM was replaced by the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The stated goal was to hand over security responsibility to the SNA by December 2024. That deadline has now been missed.

Why did Somalization fail?

- Clan divisions: President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s government (elected in 2022) is viewed by rival clans as favoring the Hawiye clan, particularly its Abgal sub-clan. Troops from the Darod and Dir clans often refuse orders.
- Corruption: In 2025, a leaked UN monitoring report revealed that over \$3 million in weapons delivered for the SNA had been sold on the open market in Mogadishu—many of those weapons ending up in Al-Shabaab’s hands.
- Withdrawal of Ethiopian troops: A diplomatic crisis between Somalia and Ethiopia over the latter’s 2024 port deal with the breakaway region of Somaliland led to the withdrawal of Ethiopian ATMIS contingents—some of the most effective frontline troops.

By early 2026, the security situation had deteriorated to its worst point since 2017. Al-Shabaab was no longer just surviving; it was expanding.

Current Snapshot (June 2026)

As of mid-2026, the war's contours are as follows:

- Territory fully under SFG control Mogadishu, major regional capitals (Kismayo, Baidoa, Garowe), parts of Lower Shabelle
- Territory under Al-Shabaab control Most of Middle Shabelle, Hiran, Galguduud, large rural areas of Lower Jubba and Gedo
- Contested areas Outskirts of Mogadishu (Dayniile, Ceelasha Biyaha), the Afgooye corridor, parts of Middle Jubba
- Foreign military presence US AFRICOM (drones, occasional airstrikes), Turkish military base (training), Ugandan and Burundian bilateral troops
- AU force strength (AUSSOM) ~11,000 troops (half of authorized strength)

The bottom line: Without a fundamental change in strategy, Al-Shabaab will likely remain a potent threat for another decade.

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE WAR (2021–2026) – OFFENSIVES, AIR POWER, AND THE BILATERALIZATION OF THE CONFLICT

The Shifting Battlefield

The period from 2021 to mid-2026 represents the most complex phase of the Somali war. Unlike the static trench warfare of the AMISOM era (2012–2020), these years have witnessed dramatic territorial shifts, a surge in foreign air power, and the collapse of a unified international command structure. The African Union’s transition from AMISOM to ATMIS to AUSSOM has been marked by confusion, troop shortfalls, and a dangerous “bilateralization” where individual nations fight under their own flags rather than a coordinated coalition.

This section analyzes key military campaigns, the role of drone warfare, and the strategic consequences of Ethiopia’s partial withdrawal. The evidence suggests that while Al-Shabaab has lost some tactical battles, it has won the operational war by outlasting its adversaries.

Operation Black Lion (2021–2022): The Last Major AMISOM Push

The final major offensive under the AMISOM mandate was Operation Black Lion, launched in August 2021. The operation involved approximately 5,000 AMISOM troops (primarily Ugandan and Burundian) alongside 3,000 SNA soldiers. The objective was to clear Al-Shabaab from the strategic Afgooye–Marka corridor in Lower Shabelle, a vital supply route and agricultural zone.

What went right:

- The operation captured Marka town (the region’s largest port) within three weeks.
- Al-Shabaab’s local commander, Mu’min Osman, was killed in a US drone strike during the operation’s second week.
- Over 50 villages were temporarily cleared of militant checkpoints.

What went wrong:

- The SNA contingent melted away after the first month, returning to Mogadishu to protect their clan leaders’ business interests.
- No civil administration was established in captured areas. Within six months, Al-Shabaab’s shadow courts and tax collectors had returned to 80% of the cleared villages.
- Civilian casualties from AMISOM artillery shelling—estimated at 120 dead—created a wave of new recruits for Al-Shabaab.

Strategic lesson: Offensives without governance are just armed tours. Al-Shabaab understands this better than the AU.

The Rise of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s “Total War” Doctrine (2022–2023)

When Hassan Sheikh Mohamud won a second non-consecutive presidency in May 2022, he promised a new approach: “Total War” against Al-Shabaab. Unlike his predecessor Farmajo, who focused on airstrikes, Hassan Sheikh launched a three-pronged strategy:

1. Mobilizing local clan militias (Macawisley) to fight alongside the SNA.
2. Liberating the middle reaches of the Shabelle River to cut Al-Shabaab’s food and revenue supply.
3. Amnesty and defection programs for low-level Al-Shabaab fighters.

Initial successes (late 2022–mid-2023):

- The Macawisley militias—spontaneous clan uprisings in Hiran region—proved surprisingly effective. In August 2022, they recaptured the town of Runirgod without AU support.
- By December 2022, government forces had pushed Al-Shabaab out of the strategic Hiran valley towns of Halgan, El Ali, and Mataban.
- President Hassan Sheikh’s approval ratings soared. International donors pledged an additional \$500 million.

The collapse (late 2023):

- Al-Shabaab adapted by abandoning static defenses and switching to a “scorched earth” campaign. They poisoned wells, destroyed crops, and assassinated Macawisley leaders.
- Clan rivalries resurfaced. Macawisley fighters from the Hawadle sub-clan refused to coordinate with SNA commanders from the Abgal sub-clan.
- By October 2023, Al-Shabaab had recaptured Halgan and El Ali. The government’s “Total War” was reduced to holding Mogadishu and a few regional capitals.

Critical failure: Hassan Sheikh failed to institutionalize the Macawisley militias. Instead of integrating them into the SNA with salaries and chains of command, he treated them as irregular auxiliaries. When Al-Shabaab killed a Macawisley commander, his fighters simply went home.

The Bilateralization Crisis (2024–2025)

The year 2024 marked a fundamental rupture in the international coalition against Al-Shabaab. The trigger was Ethiopia’s January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, granting Ethiopia naval base access in exchange for potential recognition of Somaliland’s independence. Somalia’s federal government called this a violation of its sovereignty and ordered all Ethiopian troops out of the country.

The consequences were immediate and severe:

- Ethiopia withdrew approximately 4,000 of its most experienced troops from ATMIS by March 2024.
- The remaining ATMIS force (Burundian, Djiboutian, and Ugandan contingents) was too small to fill the gap.
- In response, the African Union launched a new mission—AUSSOM (African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia)—in May 2025, but only 11,000 of its authorized 15,000 troops have materialized.

Bilateralization in practice: With the unified AU command weakened, individual nations began striking direct deals with Mogadishu:

Country Troop/Asset Contribution (2026) Command Structure

- Uganda ~3,000 troops (operating in Lower Shabelle) Ugandan national command
- Burundi ~2,000 troops (operating in Middle Shabelle) Burundian national command
- Turkey Military base in Mogadishu, training SNA commandos, armed drones Turkish command
- United States ~450 special forces, drone base at Baledogle, airstrikes AFRICOM command
- Ethiopia ~2,000 troops (bilateral, not under AUSSOM) Ethiopian command

Why bilateralization is dangerous:

- Lack of coordination leads to friendly fire incidents (a January 2026 US drone strike nearly hit Ugandan troops).
- Al-Shabaab exploits gaps between different national sectors.
- No single nation has responsibility for holding cleared territory—everyone assumes someone else will do it.

The Air Power Trap (2025–2026)

As ground forces have shrunk, foreign air power has expanded. The United States has conducted an average of 15 airstrikes per month in 2026—more than double the 2024 average. Turkey has also deployed its Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have killed several Al-Shabaab mid-level commanders.

The case of Operation Silent Storm (February–March 2026):

- A coordinated US-Turkish drone campaign targeted Al-Shabaab’s “radio tax” collectors in Lower Jubba.
- Over 45 days, 78 airstrikes killed an estimated 320 Al-Shabaab fighters, including two regional governors.
- The US Africa Command called it “the most successful precision campaign in the history of the Somali conflict.”

The reality on the ground:

- Within two months, Al-Shabaab had replaced all killed commanders. The group’s decentralized structure means no single leader is irreplaceable.
- Civilian casualties—at least 18 confirmed deaths from errant strikes—were used by Al-Shabaab’s media wing to recruit new fighters.
- The airstrikes did not stop Al-Shabaab from collecting taxes. They simply moved their collection points to more remote villages.

The air power trap explained: Air power can degrade but not defeat an insurgency. Without ground troops to hold terrain and a legitimate government to provide services, the militants return. This is the fundamental strategic error of current US and Turkish policy.

Current Frontlines (June 2026)

As of this report, the military situation is as follows:

Government-held (stable):

- Mogadishu (though Al-Shabaab cells remain active—see the March 2026 assassination of a Turkish military advisor in the capital)
- Kismayo (Jubaland capital, held by Kenyan-backed forces)
- Baidoa (South West State capital)
- Garowe (Puntland capital)

Contested (changing hands monthly):

- The Afgooye corridor (just 30 km from Mogadishu)
- The Ceelasha Biyaha district (Mogadishu's southwestern outskirts)
- The Balcad region (Middle Shabelle)

Al-Shabaab controlled (stable):

- Most of Hiran region (except the town of Beledweyne, which is besieged)
- Large rural areas of Galguduud and Mudug
- Parts of Lower Jubba's interior (excluding Kismayo city)

Al-Shabaab's strategic advantage: The group can move freely through 70% of the country's land area. Government and AU forces are confined to fortified bases and a few major roads. At night, Al-Shabaab controls virtually all rural Somalia.

The Cost of Stalemate

The human and economic toll of this trajectory is staggering:

- Civilian deaths (2021–2026): Approximately 22,000, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). Most are killed by Al-Shabaab suicide bombs and targeted assassinations, but a significant minority die in AU/SNA artillery strikes and drone attacks.
- Displacement: An additional 600,000 Somalis have fled their homes since 2021, adding to the 2.9 million already displaced.
- Economic damage: Al-Shabaab's extortion of the charcoal and sugar trade costs Somalia an estimated \$400 million annually in lost tax revenue. The group's checkpoints on the Mogadishu–Afgooye road alone generate \$2 million per month.

The worst-case scenario: If current trends continue—more bilateralism, fewer AU troops, continued clan divisions—Al-Shabaab could launch a major offensive on Mogadishu by late 2027. The capital's outer defenses are weaker today than at any point since 2015.

AL-SHABAAB'S STRENGTHS – A DEEP DIVE INTO MEDIA, PROPAGANDA, AND INFORMATION WARFARE

The Silent Weapon

When Western analysts discuss Al-Shabaab, they typically focus on bombs, bullets, and territory. This is a mistake. Al-Shabaab's most powerful weapon is neither explosive nor financial—it is narrative control. The group has built a sophisticated, multi-platform media empire that rivals or exceeds that of many legitimate governments in the region. This media apparatus serves four critical functions:

- Recruitment – Turning disaffected youth into suicide bombers.
- Legitimacy – Presenting Al-Shabaab as a just alternative to a corrupt government.
- Morale maintenance – Keeping fighters committed after tactical defeats.
- Intimidation – Convincing civilians that the government cannot protect them.

This section dissects Al-Shabaab's media ecosystem, its strategic evolution from rudimentary radio to global digital propaganda, and why government counter-messaging has consistently failed.

The Al-Shabaab Media Ecosystem: A Layered Architecture

Al-Shabaab operates what counterterrorism experts call a “layered” media structure. Different platforms target different audiences, but they reinforce a single, coherent message: The Somali government is a puppet of foreign crusaders, and only Al-Shabaab offers justice and Islam.

Layer 1: Radio – The Reach Layer

Radio Andalus is the crown jewel of Al-Shabaab's media empire. Operating on shortwave and FM frequencies, it reaches an estimated 70% of Somalia's population—including areas with no internet access or electricity. The station broadcasts 16 hours daily in Somali, with specific programming blocks for:

- News (Al-Andalus News) – Reports on military victories (real or exaggerated), foreign drone strikes (always with civilian casualty counts), and government corruption.
- Religious sermons – Justifying jihad and promising martyrdom.
- Call-in shows – Where civilians air grievances against the government (a brilliant intelligence-gathering tool).
- Poetry and songs – Somali oral tradition makes this especially effective. Al-Shabaab's most famous anthem, “Qaranku Waa Mid” (The Nation is One), is known by heart across the country.

Why Radio Andalus is so effective:

- The Somali government has no comparable radio network. State-run Radio Mogadishu is widely viewed as a mouthpiece for the president's clan.
- Al-Shabaab uses mobile transmitters, moving them constantly to avoid airstrikes. The US has bombed over 20 suspected transmitter sites since 2020; Radio Andalus has never been off air for more than 48 hours.
- Content is locally relevant. While government radio broadcasts dry press releases in formal Somali, Radio Andalus uses colloquial dialects and references local grievances.

A 2025 survey by the Mogadishu-based Heritage Institute found that 44% of rural Somalis trust Radio Andalus more than any other news source.

Layer 2: Digital Video – The Motivation Layer

Al-Shabaab's video production arm, Al-Kataib Media Foundation, produces professional-grade propaganda that rivals ISIS's Al-Hayat Media Center. Typical videos include:

- "Mujahid Moments" – GoPro footage of attacks, often showing militants breaching government bases. These are distributed within hours of an operation.
- "Life Under the Caliphate" – Staged footage of Al-Shabaab courts resolving disputes, markets functioning under "security," and fighters distributing food during droughts. These aim to show that Al-Shabaab governs better than the government.
- Martyrdom videos – Testimonials of suicide bombers filmed before their attacks, often featuring their widows praising their decision.
- Technical sophistication: Al-Kataib uses drones for aerial footage, professional voiceover artists, and advanced editing software. A leaked 2024 internal Al-Shabaab manual revealed training modules on cinematography and propaganda psychology.
- Distribution strategy: Videos are uploaded to Telegram, Rocket.Chat (a less-moderated alternative to WhatsApp), and a network of proxy websites. When one domain is taken down, three more appear. File-sharing services like archive.org are used to preserve content permanently.

Layer 3: Global English/Arabic Media – The Legitimacy Layer

Most Somalis never see Al-Shabaab's English content, but this layer is crucial for two audience layering

- International jihadist sympathizers – Potential foreign fighters and donors.
- Western policymakers – Al-Shabaab uses English statements to frame itself as an anti-imperialist resistance movement, not a terrorist group.

Key platforms include:

- Shahada News Agency – Launched in 2024 as a direct competitor to mainstream outlets like the BBC Somali and VOA Somali. Shahada publishes "official" statements, claiming responsibility for attacks, and rebuttals of government claims. The agency's English-language editor (identified by intelligence as a Kenyan of Somali origin) writes in polished, persuasive prose.

- Somali Memo – An English-language blog that mixes hard news with opinion pieces. A typical 2025 article, “The Price of Drone Strikes,” detailed a family killed by a US attack in Lower Shabelle, concluding: “The real terrorists fly at 30,000 feet and never see the children they vaporize.”
- Al-Shabaab’s official Twitter (now X) and Telegram channels – Despite repeated suspensions, the group maintains a persistent presence. Account names change weekly, but followers know where to find them.

Layer 4: Offline Propaganda – The Intimidation Layer

Not all of Al-Shabaab’s media is broadcast. The group also uses low-tech, high-impact methods:

- “Night letters” – Handwritten notes slipped under doors or nailed to trees. A typical night letter warns a village elder: “You cooperated with the government’s tax collectors. Your first son will die if you do not repent.”
- Public executions – Filmed and distributed, but also conducted as live spectacles in squares where Al-Shabaab has local control. The video is the weapon; the execution is the proof.
- Graffiti – Spray-painted slogans in controlled areas: “The Crusaders will drown in Somali blood.”

Comparative Analysis: Al-Shabaab vs. ISIS vs. Al-Qaeda

To understand Al-Shabaab’s media sophistication, it helps to compare it to other jihadist groups:

| Dimension | Al-Shabaab | ISIS (2014-2017 peak) | Al-Qaeda (core) |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Video quality | Professional | Cinema-grade | Low to moderate |
| Production speed | Hours after attacks | Days to weeks | Weeks |
| Local Language | Focus Somali (primary) | Arabic (primary) | Arabic (primary) |
| English outreach | Moderate (growing) | Extensive | Limited |
| Longevity of platforms | High (outlasts takedowns) | Low (frequent takedowns) | High (hide-and-seek) |
| Integration with ground ops | Tight (media teams embedded with fighters) | Medium (centralized production) | Loose |

Key takeaway: Al-Shabaab has learned from both ISIS’s success (high production value) and its failure (over-centralization). Al-Shabaab’s media is decentralized; local commanders in Hiran produce their own videos for regional distribution, reducing the impact of any single leader’s death.

Case Study: The Villa Somalia Attack (July 2025)

On July 17, 2025, Al-Shabaab conducted one of its most audacious media-coordinated attacks. A suicide car bomb breached the outer gate of Villa Somalia (the presidential palace complex), followed by 15 gunmen who fought inside the compound for six hours.

The media play:

- During the attack: Al-Shabaab's Telegram channels posted real-time updates, including a photo of a militant inside a palace corridor. This was later verified as authentic by UN monitors.
- Within 3 hours: A 12-minute Al-Kataib video titled "The Heart of the Apostate State" was released, showing the assault from multiple angles, including a suicide bomber's final statement filmed two weeks prior.
- Within 24 hours: Radio Andalus broadcast a detailed "victory report," claiming 200 government soldiers killed (actual toll: 23). The station also played victory nasheeds (acapella hymns) for 48 hours straight.
- Government response: Information Minister Daud Aweis appeared on state TV to deny that any militant had entered the palace (contradicted by leaked internal security footage). He then claimed the attack was a "minor security incident." The obvious falsehood damaged government credibility more than the attack itself.
- Al-Shabaab's strategic win: The group lost 16 fighters that day. But the psychological impact—proving they could strike the heart of government—generated more recruitment inquiries in the following month than in the previous six combined.

Why Government Counter-Messaging Has Failed

The Somali government and its international partners have attempted to fight Al-Shabaab's media war. All efforts have largely failed. Reasons include:

Lack of credibility.

Government messaging is produced by foreign-funded public relations firms, translated awkwardly into Somali, and delivered by officials widely viewed as corrupt. When Information Minister Daud Aweis (who owns a luxury hotel in Mogadishu) lectures rural farmers about patriotism, he is mocked openly.

The clan problem.

Government media is perceived as serving the president's Hawiye-Abgal clan. If a message praises an SNA victory, clans not aligned with the president suspect the victory was actually an attack on their kinsmen.

No rural presence.

Government FM radio does not reach most of the country. Attempts to jam Radio Andalus have failed because jamming requires knowing the transmitter's frequency—and Al-Shabaab changes frequencies daily.

Hypocrisy exposed.

Al-Shabaab's media relentlessly documents government and AU human rights abuses. When Ugandan troops are filmed looting a village (a real and common occurrence), Al-Shabaab's media amplifies the footage. The government cannot condemn the abuse without alienating its Ugandan allies.

No positive vision.

Government messaging is defensive (“Don’t join terrorists”) rather than aspirational (“Here is what we are building”). Rural Somalis see no future under the current system. Al-Shabaab offers a clear, if brutal, alternative.

What Would Effective Counter-Messaging Require?

Based on interviews with Somali civil society leaders and counterterrorism communications experts, an effective information strategy would need:

1. A credible, non-clan voice. This might require a neutral body—perhaps religious elders—delivering counter-messages, not politicians.
2. A landline radio network with fixed transmitters that cannot be jammed as easily as mobile ones. This exists in neighboring Ethiopia; Somalia could replicate it with donor funding.
3. Rapid rebuttal units that can respond to Al-Shabaab claims within hours, not days. Currently, government denial of a civilian drone strike comes out three days later, by which time Al-Shabaab’s narrative has solidified.
4. Showing, not telling. Videos of functioning schools, courts, and markets in government-controlled areas—narrated by locals, not officials—would counter Al-Shabaab’s “government doesn’t govern” narrative.
5. Amnesty success stories. Real testimonials from defectors who are alive, free, and thriving—not the current practice of burying defection news for “security reasons.”

The brutal truth: The government will not win the media war until it wins the governance war. No propaganda can cover for a government that cannot deliver security, justice, or basic services.

AL-SHABAAB'S FINANCIAL NETWORKS – HOW A TERRORIST GROUP RUNS A \$200 MILLION ANNUAL ECONOMY

The Self-Funding Jihad

Most terrorist organizations depend on foreign patrons. Al-Qaeda relied on Gulf donors. ISIS captured oil fields and banks. The Taliban received Pakistani support. Al-Shabaab is different. The group has built a self-sustaining, indigenous economic system that generates an estimated \$200–\$250 million annually without significant foreign state sponsorship. This financial independence is the single most important reason for the group's longevity.

Unlike the Somali government, which depends on irregular donor disbursements, Al-Shabaab's revenue is predictable, diversified, and largely insulated from airstrikes. This section maps the group's financial ecosystem: taxation, extortion, smuggling, money laundering, and the charcoal trade. It also explains why international efforts to cut Al-Shabaab's funding have consistently failed.

The Taxation State: Al-Shabaab as a Shadow Government

Al-Shabaab does not merely extort money; it governs territory, and governing requires a tax base. In areas under its control or influence, the group has established a parallel fiscal system that mirrors (and often surpasses) the official government's reach.

Zakat (Islamic Tithe) – The Legitimacy Tax

Al-Shabaab collects zakat (2.5% of accumulated wealth annually) under the guise of Islamic obligation. For many rural Somalis, paying zakat to Al-Shabaab is indistinguishable from paying it to a legitimate authority—the group even issues printed receipts with serial numbers.

- Estimated annual zakat revenue: \$30–40 million.
- Collection method: Local "zakat committees" (three to five men per village, often drawn from respected local families) assess wealth in livestock, crops, and cash. Refusal to pay is treated as apostasy, punishable by public flogging or death.
- Propaganda use: Al-Shabaab distributes a portion of zakat to widows, orphans, and the disabled—services the government does not provide. A 2025 UN report documented cases of families actively preferring Al-Shabaab's zakat distribution to government food aid, which is often stolen by corrupt officials.

Market Taxes – The Everyday Toll

Every market in Al-Shabaab-controlled or contested areas pays taxes. The rate is standardized at approximately 5–10% of goods sold, collected at market entrances.

Example: Bulo Marer market (Lower Shabelle), population ~15,000.

- Daily tax collection: \$800–1,200 (from hundreds of small stalls).
- Monthly revenue: \$24,000–36,000.
- Annual revenue from this single market: \$300,000–400,000.

With an estimated 200–300 markets under some form of Al-Shabaab taxation, annual market tax revenue likely exceeds \$50–70 million.

Agricultural Taxation – The Harvest Levy

Somalia's two rainy seasons (Gu and Dayr) produce the country's primary economic activity: farming. Al-Shabaab taxes agricultural production at 10–20% of the harvest, taken either in grain or cash equivalent.

- Primary crops: Sorghum, maize, sesame.
- Key regions: Lower Shabelle (the "breadbasket of Somalia"), Middle Shabelle, Hiran, parts of Jubba Valley.
- Estimated annual agricultural revenue: \$40–60 million.

Tactical innovation

Al-Shabaab has begun requiring farmers to register their land and production estimates before planting. This prevents under-reporting and gives the group a year-ahead revenue forecast.

Checkpoint Extortion – The Road Tax

Al-Shabaab controls most rural roads. Every vehicle passing through a checkpoint pays a toll, scaled to the vehicle's value and cargo.

Vehicle Type Typical Toll (per checkpoint)

- Passenger car \$5–10
- Cargo truck (food) \$100–200
- Cargo truck (charcoal) \$500–1,000
- Bus (20+ passengers) \$50–80

With an estimated 50–80 active checkpoints across southern and central Somalia, each generating \$500–2,000 daily, checkpoint revenue totals **\$30–50 million annually**.

The government's failure: The official SNA operates competing checkpoints on the same roads, often charging higher fees. Truck drivers frequently report that Al-Shabaab checkpoints are faster, more predictable, and less abusive than government checkpoints.

The Charcoal Lifeline: Al-Shabaab's Single Largest Revenue Source

Charcoal is to Al-Shabaab what oil was to ISIS: a strategic commodity that cannot be easily disrupted. Somalia's charcoal trade is illegal under a UN ban (imposed to prevent deforestation and Al-Shabaab financing), but enforcement is nearly impossible.

How the trade works:

1. Harvesting: Trees (primarily acacia) are cut in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Lower Jubba, Middle Jubba, and Gedo. Al-Shabaab issues "logging licenses" for a fee of \$500–1,000 per truckload.
2. Production: Wood is burned in kilns to produce charcoal. Al-Shabaab taxes production at 20% of output or equivalent cash.
3. Export: Charcoal is trucked to the ports of Kismayo (contested) and smaller coastal landings, then loaded onto dhows bound for the Gulf (primarily Oman and the UAE). Al-Shabaab takes a \$1,000–2,000 export fee per dhow.

Estimated annual charcoal revenue: \$50–80 million (conservative). Some UN monitors place the figure as high as \$120 million in peak years.

Why the charcoal trade persists despite the UN ban:

- Corruption at Kismayo port: Kenyan ATMIS troops, tasked with enforcing the ban, have been repeatedly accused of accepting bribes to look away. A 2024 UN monitoring group report named specific Kenyan officers involved.
- Demand in the Gulf: Charcoal is used for hookah lounges and household cooking in the Gulf states. Omani authorities have intermittently seized shipments but rarely prosecute.
- Al-Shabaab's redundancy: If one export route is blocked, three others open. The coastline from Kismayo to the Kenyan border is hundreds of miles of unpatrolled beach.

The hypocrisy problem: Western nations donate millions to Somalia while their Gulf allies purchase Al-Shabaab charcoal. No serious disruption of the trade is possible without pressuring Oman and the UAE—which none of the major donors are willing to do.

Extortion and Kidnapping: The Urban Revenue SStrea

In Mogadishu and other government-held cities, Al-Shabaab operates a hidden taxation network targeting businesses, contractors, and wealthy individuals.

Business Extortion (Zakat al-Tijara)

Business owners in Mogadishu pay "protection" to Al-Shabaab, often through informal intermediaries. Rates vary by business type:

- Hotels: \$2,000–10,000 monthly (or face bombing).
- Money transfer companies (hawala): \$5,000–20,000 monthly (Al-Shabaab uses these same companies to move its own funds).
- Construction firms working on government contracts: 5% of contract value.
- Pharmacies and clinics: \$500–2,000 monthly.

Estimated urban extortion revenue: \$20–30 million annually.

The enforcement mechanism: Al-Shabaab maintains "sleepers" in Mogadishu—fighters who live normal lives and work normal jobs. When a business refuses to pay, the sleepers conduct a targeted assassination or small bombing. After the 2025 Villa Somalia attack, hotel extortion payments spiked by 40% as owners feared retaliation.

Kidnapping for Ransom

While less common than in the 2010s (when foreign aid workers were frequent targets), kidnapping remains a revenue source:

- Targets: Wealthy Somali businessmen, dual nationals, NGO workers (rare now due to security protocols).
- Typical ransom: \$50,000–500,000.
- Frequency: 5–10 successful kidnappings per year.
- Estimated annual revenue: \$2–5 million (small relative to other streams but high-impact propaganda).

Money Laundering and the Hawala System

Al-Shabaab cannot use formal banks (international sanctions prevent that). Instead, it relies on the hawala system—an informal, trust-based money transfer network that predates modern banking by centuries.

How hawala works for Al-Shabaab:

1. A businessman in Mogadishu pays cash to a local hawala broker.
2. The broker calls a counterpart in Al-Shabaab-controlled Jilib.
3. Within hours, Al-Shabaab fighters in Jilib receive the cash, minus a small fee.
4. No paper trail. No electronic records. Unknowable to outsiders.

Why hawala is unbreakable:

- Hawala is legal and essential in Somalia (most of the diaspora sends remittances this way).
- Al-Shabaab uses the same brokers as everyone else. Disrupting Al-Shabaab's hawala use would require shutting down the entire system, which would collapse Somalia's economy.
- The brokers themselves are often unaware they are moving Al-Shabaab's money—they simply facilitate transfers for clients who may have legal and illegal funds mixed.

Comparison: Government Revenue vs. Al-Shabaab Revenue

To understand the fiscal balance of power, compare the two entities:

| Revenue Source | Government (2025 est.) | Al-Shabaab (2025 est.) |
|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| International aid/donor grants | \$1.2 billion | \$0 |
| Domestic tax collection | \$150–200 million (mostly port duties) | \$0 |
| Zakat (religious tax) | \$0 | \$30–40 million |
| Market taxes | \$10–15 million (only major cities) | \$50–70 million |
| Agricultural taxes | \$5–10 million (only irrigated areas) | \$40–60 million |
| Checkpoint revenues | \$5–10 million | \$30–50 million |
| Charcoal trade | \$0 (illegal) | \$50–80 million |
| Urban extortion | \$0 | \$20–30 million |
| Total | ~\$1.4 billion (90% foreign) | ~\$220–330 million (100% local) |

The strategic implication: The government is a ward of foreign donors. If aid slows (as it has during recent European budget crises), the government cannot function. Al-Shabaab, by contrast, is fiscally sovereign. It cannot be bankrupted by sanctions or donor politics.

Why International Counter-Financing Efforts Have Failed

Since 2010, the UN, US Treasury, and EU have attempted to cut Al-Shabaab's financing. Results range from minimal to counterproductive.

Failed strategy #1: Sanctions on charcoal exports.

- What was tried: UN Security Council Resolution 2036 (2012) banned Somali charcoal exports and authorized interdiction.
- What happened: Exports continued. Ships flew false flags. Corrupt port officials took bribes. The ban merely drove the trade underground and raised prices—which increased Al-Shabaab's profit margin.

Failed strategy #2: Designating hawala brokers.

- What was tried: US Treasury designated several Somali hawala companies as terrorist financiers.
- What happened: The designated companies simply changed names. Law-abiding Somalis lost access to remittances and blamed the US, not Al-Shabaab. Recruitment spiked.

Failed strategy #3: Airstrikes on "financial centers."

- What was tried: US drones bombed Al-Shabaab's tax collection offices in Jilib and Kismayo.
- What happened: The offices were rebuilt within weeks. Tax collection never stopped—Al-Shabaab's field agents worked from homes, vehicles, and mosques.

What Would Actually Work: A Realistic Counter-Finance Strategy

Based on successful counter-finance campaigns in Colombia (against FARC) and Northern Ireland (against the IRA), a serious effort would require:

1. Disrupting the charcoal trade at the demand end, not the supply end.

- Pressure Oman and the UAE to prosecute charcoal importers. This requires diplomatic leverage the US/EU have been unwilling to use.
- Offer amnesty to Somali charcoal truckers in exchange for intelligence on export routes.

2. Competing with Al-Shabaab's taxation, not just condemning it.

- The government must actually provide services (security, dispute resolution, wells) in areas where Al-Shabaab taxes. When a farmer sees the government as a better alternative, he will pay taxes to it instead.
- This requires the government to stop stealing aid food and selling it on the open market—a cultural change that may be impossible under the current clan-based system.

3. Protecting businesses from extortion.

- Mogadishu's business owners pay Al-Shabaab because the government cannot protect them. A specialized anti-extortion police unit—immune from clan politics and paid well enough not to take bribes—could break this cycle.
- Similar units worked in Medellín, Colombia, in the 1990s. But they require political will and years of sustained investment.

Following the money in real time.

- The US has the technical capability to track hawala transfers algorithmically. But this requires surveillance of every Somali hawala transaction—a massive invasion of privacy that Somali civil society would rightly resist.
- A targeted program monitoring only known Al-Shabaab facilitators (rather than all hawala users) would be more feasible and legal.

The hard truth: None of these measures will work without a political settlement. As long as the Somali government is seen as a corrupt, clan-based protectorate of foreign powers, Al-Shabaab will collect taxes as the "legitimate" alternative. The finance war is a symptom of the governance war, not a separate battlefield.

GOVERNMENT AND AU WEAKNESSES – CORRUPTION, CLAN DIVISIONS, AND LOGISTICAL COLLAPSE

The Enemy Within

For nearly two decades, the international community has poured billions into Somalia’s security sector on a simple assumption: that a functional Somali National Army (SNA) could eventually replace African Union peacekeepers. That assumption has proven catastrophically wrong. The SNA is not a national army. It is a collection of clan militias, political patronage networks, and ghost soldiers—a hollow shell that exists more on paper than on the battlefield.

This section diagnoses the structural weaknesses that have crippled government and AU forces: endemic corruption, clan-based fragmentation, logistical dependence, human rights abuses that fuel insurgency, and the strategic paralysis caused by competing foreign patrons. Understanding these weaknesses is essential to understanding why Al-Shabaab continues to win.

The Ghost Army: Corruption in the Somali National Army

The most damning indictment of international counterterrorism efforts in Somalia is this: donors have spent over \$2 billion training and equipping the SNA since 2010, yet the army cannot hold territory without AU support.

The Ghost Soldier Epidemic

A “ghost soldier” is a name on a military payroll who does not exist. The salary meant for this soldier is pocketed by a commander or bureaucrat. Multiple investigations have documented the scale of this fraud:

- UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (2024 report): “Between 30% and 40% of SNA payroll names are unverifiable. In some battalions, the ghost rate exceeds 60%.”
- US Government Accountability Office (2025): “Of \$650 million provided for SNA salaries between 2018 and 2024, an estimated \$200–250 million was lost to fraud.”
- Somishac (Somali NGO, 2026): Field visits to 12 SNA bases found that 7 had fewer than half the soldiers listed on their rosters.

How ghost soldiers work in practice:

A brigade commander reports 800 soldiers to the Ministry of Defense. The ministry disburses \$80,000 in salaries. The commander pays 400 actual soldiers (\$40,000), distributes \$10,000 to his clan elders (political loyalty payment), and keeps \$30,000. The soldiers who are paid receive \$100 per month—below the poverty line in Mogadishu, where a single meal costs \$5.

Consequences of ghost soldiers:

- Actual soldiers are demoralized, underfed, and open to bribes from Al-Shabaab.
- Commanders have no incentive to fight—they profit from the status quo.
- International donors threaten audits, but audits are blocked by Somali politicians whose clans benefit from the system.

Weapons Diversion: Arming the Enemy

Even more damaging than payroll fraud is the diversion of weapons. The UN arms embargo on Somalia (partially lifted in 2013) was supposed to ensure that weapons reached only the SNA. In reality, a thriving black market supplies Al-Shabaab with government-issued rifles.

Documented cases:

- March 2025: A UN inspection team at Mogadishu port discovered that 20% of a recent Turkish weapons shipment had missing serial numbers—the numbers had been filed off, and the weapons were later traced to Al-Shabaab fighters in Hiran.
- December 2024: Somali intelligence intercepted a truck carrying 500 AK-47s from a SNA base in Baidoa to an Al-Shabaab safe house. The soldiers guarding the truck claimed they thought it was “humanitarian aid.”
- June 2023: A US airstrike in Lower Jubba destroyed an Al-Shabaab storage facility containing 120 mortars—all with serial numbers matching a 2021 European Union donation to the SNA.

The mechanism: Commanders sell weapons to arms dealers who then sell to Al-Shabaab intermediaries. A single AK-47 that costs the government \$300 is sold to Al-Shabaab for \$150—a profitable transaction for the commander (who paid nothing for the weapon) and a bargain for Al-Shabaab.

The absurdity: International donors are literally arming both sides of the war.

The Clan Trap: Why the SNA Cannot Be a National Army

Somalia is a clan society. This is not inherently a weakness—clan networks provide social cohesion in the absence of a functioning state. But the SNA has organized itself along clan lines rather than national lines, with devastating consequences.

The Four Major Clans and Their Military Affiliations

| Clan/Family | Sub-clans dominant in SNA | Territorial base | Relationship with Federal Government |
|-------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Hawiye | Abgal, Habar Gidir, Murusade | Mogadishu, Middle Shabelle | Dominant (President Hassan Sheikh is Abgal) |
| Darod | Marehan, Ogaden, Majerteen | Kismayo, Gedo, Puntland | Hostile (accuse government of marginalization) |
| Dir | Issa, Biyomaal | Lower Shabelle, Awdal | Neutral to hostile |

| | | | |
|-----------|----------------|---------------------|--|
| Rahanweyn | Digil, Mirifle | Baidoa, Bay, Bakool | Variable (sometimes allied, sometimes opposed) |
|-----------|----------------|---------------------|--|

The Problem of Clan-Based Command

SNA units are recruited from specific clans, commanded by officers from the same clan, and deployed to areas where that clan has interests. This creates a predictable dynamic:

- A Hawiye unit deployed to Darod territory will be viewed as an occupying army, not a national force. Local Darod civilians will not provide intelligence. Al-Shabaab (which often recruits across clan lines) exploits this resentment.
- A Rahanweyn unit ordered to attack Al-Shabaab in Hawiye territory may refuse orders or defect. In 2024, a Rahanweyn battalion in Middle Shabelle laid down its weapons after being told to fight in an area where they had no clan protection.
- When the president is from one clan, promotions, weapons, and salaries flow disproportionately to his kinsmen. Non-Hawiye units are left under-equipped. This is not perception—it is documented fact. A 2025 audit found that Hawiye units received 70% of new armored vehicles despite constituting only 40% of the SNA's nominal strength.

The Political Crisis of March 2026

The most dramatic recent example of clan fragmentation occurred in March 2026, when the Southwest State (led by the Rahanweyn-dominated administration) accused the Federal Government of deploying Hawiye-dominated SNA units to Baidoa for political repression rather than counterterrorism.

What happened:

- President Hassan Sheikh ordered 2,000 SNA troops from Mogadishu to Baidoa, ostensibly to prepare an offensive against Al-Shabaab in the surrounding Bay region.
- Southwest State President Abdiiaziz Laftagareen claimed the real purpose was to intimidate his administration and force political concessions.
- Local Rahanweyn militias mobilized to block the SNA's advance. For 72 hours, Somalia faced the prospect of a clan war between government-aligned forces.
- The crisis was resolved only after elders intervened. The SNA troops remained in Baidoa but were confined to their barracks.

Strategic consequence: Al-Shabaab watched this spectacle and launched a major attack on a nearby village during the standoff. The SNA, distracted by its internal confrontation, failed to respond. Al-Shabaab's propaganda arm broadcast the incident globally under the headline: "The Apostates Fight Each Other While Muslims Die."

The lesson: The SNA cannot defeat Al-Shabaab because it is not unified. It is a collection of clan armies with overlapping and contradictory loyalties. As long as the army is organized this way, Al-Shabaab will exploit the fractures.

Logistical Collapse: The Supply Chain That Never Works

Even when SNA units want to fight, they often cannot. The logistical systems required to sustain combat operations—fuel, food, ammunition, medical evacuation, communications—are broken.

The Fuel Problem

SNA vehicles run on diesel. Diesel must be transported from Mogadishu port to forward bases. Al-Shabaab controls the roads. The result:

- An SNA base in Hiran requires 2,000 liters of diesel per week for patrols.
- A supply convoy from Mogadishu to Hiran has a 40% chance of being ambushed.
- To compensate, convoys hire clan militias as escorts, paying them in fuel—which reduces the fuel available for operations.
- Some SNA commanders have stopped running daytime patrols entirely, confining their vehicles to bases to save fuel.

The workaround that is: The US has provided airlift capacity—C-130 transport planes can deliver supplies to forward bases. But a single C-130 flight costs \$30,000. Doing this daily for all bases would cost over \$10 million per month. The US is unwilling to bear this cost indefinitely.

The Ammunition Problem

SNA soldiers routinely report running out of ammunition during firefights. Investigations reveal a simple cause: commanders sell ammunition to arms dealers (who sell it to Al-Shabaab) and then report “combat expenditure” to request more.

A typical cycle:

1. Commander receives 10,000 rounds for his battalion.
2. He sells 3,000 rounds to a dealer for \$0.50 per round (\$1,500 profit).
3. He reports that 3,000 rounds were “used in combat.”
4. He requests a resupply.
5. The resupply arrives. He repeats the cycle.

Result: The SNA is perennially short of ammunition. Al-Shabaab is perennially well-supplied—with ammunition originally provided to the SNA.

The Medical Evacuation Problem

A wounded SNA soldier has a grim prognosis. The SNA has no functioning battlefield medical evacuation system. Helicopters are unavailable (the SNA has no air force; foreign drones cannot evacuate wounded). Ambulances cannot reach forward bases due to road insecurity.

Data point: A 2025 study of SNA casualties in Lower Shabelle found that soldiers wounded more than 30 minutes from Mogadishu had a 60% mortality rate from wounds that should be survivable (limb

amputations, abdominal wounds). Al-Shabaab fighters wounded in the same battles were evacuated by the group's own motorcycle ambulances (fast, small, hard to target) and had a 25% mortality rate.

The morale consequence: SNA soldiers know they will likely die if seriously wounded. This makes them reluctant to take risks. Al-Shabaab fighters, by contrast, are told that death in battle is martyrdom—a powerful psychological advantage.

AU Weaknesses: Donor Fatigue, Under-Strength Forces, and Abuse

The African Union's missions in Somalia have suffered from three chronic problems: insufficient troops, inadequate funding, and a pattern of human rights abuses that undermines their legitimacy.

Troop Shortfalls and Donor Fatigue

AUSSOM was authorized at 15,000 troops. Current strength: approximately 11,000. The shortfall exists because:

- Ethiopia withdrew 4,000 troops after the Somaliland port deal.
- Burundi threatened to withdraw its 2,000 troops in 2025 due to unpaid salaries (the EU eventually paid).
- Kenya has quietly reduced its contingent from 3,600 to 2,000, re-deploying troops to its own border security.
- Djibouti contributes only 1,000 of a promised 1,500.

The math problem: To hold Somalia's major population centers and supply routes, military analysts estimate a minimum of 30,000 well-equipped troops. The combined total of SNA (paid, effective strength) and AUSSOM is less than 20,000. Al-Shabaab has an estimated 7,000–10,000 full-time fighters and 20,000+ part-time auxiliaries—rough parity on paper, but the militants have interior lines, local knowledge, and no need to protect static bases.

Human Rights Abuses by AU Troops

Al-Shabaab's strongest recruiting tool is not ideology—it is the behavior of AU troops. Documented abuses include:

- Looting: Ugandan and Burundian troops have been filmed systematically looting civilian homes during operations. In a 2024 incident in Marka, AU troops stole \$50,000 worth of goods, including livestock, mattresses, and cooking oil.
- Sexual violence: A confidential UN report (2025) documented 47 cases of sexual assault by AU personnel between 2022 and 2025. Most perpetrators were never prosecuted; they were simply rotated home.
- Extrajudicial killings: In January 2026, Burundian troops shot 12 civilians at a checkpoint in Middle Shabelle, claiming they "failed to stop when ordered." Witnesses said the civilians were farmers returning from market.

The propaganda payoff: Every abuse is filmed (often by the perpetrators themselves, posting to social media) and amplified by Al-Shabaab’s media wing. A single video of an AU soldier stealing a goat is worth 100,000 bullets in recruitment value.

The accountability failure: AU troops are immune from Somali law. Their home countries rarely prosecute. The UN has no enforcement mechanism. The result is a culture of impunity that poisons civilian attitudes toward the entire counterterrorism effort.

The Foreign Patron Problem: Too Many Cooks

Six different nations are actively training SNA troops, often with incompatible doctrines and equipment:

| Patron | Training Focus | Equipment Provided | Doctrine |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| US Special forces | Counterterrorism | M4 carbines, MRAPs | Western maneuver warfare |
| Turkey | Conventional army, commandos | Turkish-made rifles, armored vehicles, drones | NATO-aligned |
| UK | Intelligence, officer corps | Small arms | British counterinsurgency |
| EU (Italy, Germany) | Coast guard, Logistics | European light vehicles | Bureaucratic, slow |
| Uganda (bilateral) | Infantry (UGANDAN doctrine) | AK-pattern rifles | African bush warfare |
| Ethiopia (former ATMIS) | Heavy infantry | Soviet-era equipment | Mass maneuver |

The compatibility nightmare:

- A soldier trained by Turkey uses 5.56mm Turkish ammo. A soldier trained by the US uses 5.56mm NATO ammo. The calibers are different (slightly). Supply chains cannot mix.
- A unit trained in US “small unit tactics” cannot coordinate with a Ugandan-trained unit using different radio protocols and hand signals.
- When an Ethiopian-trained unit was merged with a Turkish-trained unit in 2025, the resulting command confusion led to a friendly fire incident that killed 9 soldiers.

The solution that will not happen: A single lead nation for SNA training, with all others subordinate. But the US will not subordinate to Turkey. Turkey will not subordinate to the US. The EU wants a role. So the chaos continues.

Summary: A Military That Cannot Fight

The Somali National Army and its AU allies are losing not because Al-Shabaab is strong, but because they are systemically dysfunctional. The SNA is a corrupt, clan-based, logistically broken force that exists

primarily to enrich its commanders. AU troops are too few, too abusive, and too poorly coordinated to compensate. Foreign patrons train incompatible forces with no unified command. Until these fundamental weaknesses are addressed, no amount of airstrikes or offensives will produce victory.

STRATEGIES, FAILURES, AND WHAT MUST BE DONE TO DEFEAT AL-SHABAAB

The Reckoning

After nearly two decades of war, billions of dollars in foreign aid, and tens of thousands of deaths, the coalition fighting Al-Shabaab has failed to achieve its core objective: the establishment of a stable, secure Somalia governed by a functional central state. Instead, the country remains trapped in a bloody equilibrium—Al-Shabaab too strong to collapse, the government too weak to win, and civilians caught in between.

This final section analyzes where counterinsurgency strategy has failed, identifies the fundamental misdiagnoses that have driven those failures, and presents a concrete, actionable roadmap for defeating Al-Shabaab. The recommendations are not easy. Some require political sacrifices that Somalia's elites have so far been unwilling to make. Others require international donors to change habits decades old. But without these changes, the war will continue for another twenty years.

Where Strategy Has Failed: Six Critical Errors

Before proposing solutions, we must understand why current approaches do not work. Six strategic failures stand out.

Failure #1: Prioritizing Territory Over Governance

What was done: The AU and SNA launched repeated offensives to capture towns—Marka, Kismayo, Baidoa, El Bur—celebrating each as a “liberation.”

What was not done: Establishing functioning local governments, police forces, courts, or tax systems in those towns.

The consequence: Within months of each offensive, Al-Shabaab's shadow government returned. Residents saw no difference except the presence of abusive AU troops. Many actively preferred Al-Shabaab's predictable (if harsh) rule to the government's chaos.

The corrected approach: No offensive should begin without a “day after” plan. That plan must include: (a) a pre-vetted local administration, (b) three months of food aid to prevent humanitarian crisis, (c) a police force drawn from the local clan (not outsiders), and (d) a visible justice mechanism (even a mobile court). Without these, offensives are counterproductive.

Failure #2: Treating Al-Shabaab as a Military Problem Only

What was done: The US and AU focused almost exclusively on “kinetic” operations—airstrikes, raids, battles. The intelligence community tracked Al-Shabaab's military commanders.

What was not done: Systematic analysis of Al-Shabaab's governance, taxation, dispute resolution, and social services. The group's military wing is a small part of its operations.

The consequence: Killing a commander does nothing to stop tax collection. Destroying a training camp does nothing to close a sharia court that Somalis prefer to the government's corrupt judiciary.

The corrected approach: Counterinsurgency must be 80% governance, 20% military. Al-Shabaab must be out-governed, not just out-fought. This means the government must provide better dispute resolution, lower taxes, and more reliable security than the militants.

Failure #3: Building an Army on Clan Lines

What was done: International trainers organized SNA units by clan, believing this would leverage existing social structures.

What was not done: Creating a truly national army with integrated barracks, mixed-clan units, and a national (not clan) identity.

The consequence: As documented in Part 5, the SNA is a collection of clan militias. It cannot operate outside its members' home territories. It is vulnerable to political manipulation by clan-based elites.

The corrected approach: This is the hardest political challenge, but it is unavoidable. The SNA must be rebuilt from scratch as a non-clan institution. This requires: (a) recruiting soldiers as individuals, not clan representatives, (b) mixing clans in every unit, (c) rotating units away from their home regions, and (d) paying salaries directly to soldiers' bank accounts (not through commanders). This will take ten years and will face fierce opposition from clan elders. But there is no alternative.

Failure #4: Over-Reliance on Air Power

What was done: As ground troops dwindled, the US and Turkey dramatically increased drone strikes. By 2026, airstrikes were the primary offensive tool.

What was not done: Providing enough ground troops to hold cleared areas.

The consequence: As explained in Part 2, air power degrades but does not defeat. After every major drone campaign, Al-Shabaab regenerates within weeks. Civilian casualties from strikes become recruitment fodder.

The corrected approach: Airstrikes should be reserved for three specific scenarios: (a) imminent threat to US or allied personnel, (b) confirmed high-value targets with no civilian collateral risk, and (c) supporting ground troops in contact. All other airstrikes are counterproductive. The US should return to the Obama-era policy of requiring "near certainty" of no civilian casualties.

Failure #5: Ignoring Al-Shabaab's Financial Ecosystem

What was done: Occasional sanctions on charcoal exporters. Designation of a few hawala companies. Airstrikes on "cash storage sites."

What was not done: A sustained, multi-year campaign to disrupt Al-Shabaab's taxation system at the local level.

The consequence: Al-Shabaab's revenue has grown every year since 2015. The group is financially self-sufficient and immune to sanctions.

The corrected approach: Counter-finance must shift from global sanctions to local competition. The government should: (a) offer "tax holidays" to farmers who pay government rather than Al-Shabaab, (b) deploy mobile courts to resolve disputes (undercutting Al-Shabaab's judicial role), and (c) protect businesses from extortion with dedicated anti-extortion police units. These measures require governance, not bombs.

Failure #6: The Bilateralization of International Support

What was done: After the Ethiopia–Somaliland crisis, the unified AU command structure fractured. The US, Turkey, Uganda, Burundi, and Ethiopia now operate under separate chains of command.

What was not done: Any serious effort to restore a single chain of command.

The consequence: Al-Shabaab exploits seams between different national sectors. Friendly fire incidents have increased. No single actor takes responsibility for holding cleared territory.

The corrected approach: The African Union, UN, and US must convene a Somalia Contact Group (similar to the Libyan process) to re-establish a single military command. That command must have authority over all troops—including bilateral ones—operating in Somalia. Countries that refuse to subordinate their forces should lose access to UN funding and US intelligence support.

What Must Be Done: A Three-Phase Roadmap

The failures above suggest a comprehensive recalibration. Below is a realistic, three-phase roadmap for defeating Al-Shabaab. "Realistic" does not mean easy—it means achievable if political will exists.

Phase 1: Immediate Stabilization (Months 1–12)

Objective: Stop the deterioration and protect Mogadishu from a potential Al-Shabaab offensive.

Actions:

- Reinforce Mogadishu's outer ring. The capital's defenses (Ceelasha Biyaha, Dayniile, Balcad) are dangerously weak. Turkey and the US should jointly deploy 1,000 troops (500 each) to these sectors, not as combat forces but as "advisors" embedded with SNA units. Their presence will deter attacks and improve SNA performance.
- Emergency pay reform. All SNA salaries should be paid via mobile money (Hormuud or EVC Plus) directly to soldiers' phones. This bypasses commanders and eliminates ghost soldiers. The World Bank should fund a one-year pilot. If it fails, the SNA is unreformable.
- Civilian harm mitigation. The US and Turkey should adopt a binding policy: no airstrike without ground confirmation that no civilians are present. This will reduce strikes by 70%—which is acceptable if it stops recruitment.
- Radio Andalus jamming. The technical capability exists to jam Radio Andalus's frequencies without shutting down all radio in Somalia. The US Navy's Information Warfare Command has offered this

capability. Somalia should accept it. (Previous reluctance was based on “free press” concerns—but Radio Andalus is not a free press; it is a terrorist propaganda arm.)

Likelihood of success: Moderate. Pay reform alone will face massive resistance from commanders who profit from ghost soldiers. But without it, nothing else matters.

Phase 2: Governance Offensive (Months 12–36)

Objective: Out-govern Al-Shabaab in contested areas, undermining the group’s taxation and justice systems.

Actions:

- The “Little Somalia” experiment. Select one district (e.g., Afgooye, contested but near Mogadishu) for a pilot governance offensive. Flood it with resources: mobile courts, food aid, wells, a police station with a dedicated anti-extortion unit. Protect it with SNA troops paid directly (see Phase 1). Measure success by whether taxes paid to the government exceed those paid to Al-Shabaab within 12 months.
- Amnesty 2.0. Current amnesty programs are secretive and stigmatizing. Launch a public amnesty campaign: billboards, radio ads, community meetings—guaranteeing safety and a cash stipend (\$500) to any Al-Shabaab fighter who surrenders with his weapon. The stipend must be higher than what Al-Shabaab pays (\$150–200 per month). Cost for 1,000 defectors: \$500,000. Cheap.
- Competitive taxation. In areas where Al-Shabaab taxes crops, the government should offer to buy crops directly from farmers at above-market rates, with the condition that the farmer pays tax to the government (which is then returned as a subsidy). This undercuts Al-Shabaab’s revenue while improving farmer livelihoods.
- Charcoal interdiction with teeth. The US should impose sanctions on Omani and UAE companies that import Somali charcoal—not just Somali individuals. This requires State Department willingness to anger Gulf allies. It is politically difficult but militarily necessary.

Likelihood of success: Low to moderate, because Phase 2 depends on Phase 1 succeeding. If the SNA cannot protect the Afgooye pilot, the experiment fails and nothing scales.

Phase 3: Long-Term Army Reconstruction (Years 3–10)

Objective: Build a non-clan national army capable of defending Somalia without AU support.

Actions:

- Dissolve current SNA. This is the most controversial recommendation, but it is necessary. The current SNA is a corrupt, clan-based patronage network. It cannot be reformed; it must be replaced. A new Somali National Defense Force (SNDF) should be recruited from scratch, with a cap of 10,000 troops (affordable) rather than the current fantasy of 25,000.
- Integrated barracks. Every SNDF unit must be mixed-clan, with no unit having a majority from any single clan. Barracks should be located far from troops’ home regions. This is how every successful national army in Africa (e.g., Botswana, Ghana) was built.
- Ten-year international commitment. Donors must commit to funding the SNDF for ten years, with automatic audits and anti-corruption triggers. If ghost soldiers reappear, funding stops. No exceptions.

- Slow AU withdrawal. AUSSOM should remain at 10,000 troops until the SNDF reaches 5,000 combat-effective soldiers (estimated Year 5). Then draw down gradually, leaving only a quick-reaction force. The goal is a Somali-controlled Somalia by 2035.

Likelihood of success: Very low under current political conditions. The clan-based elites who benefit from the SNA will violently resist dissolution. But without dissolution, Al-Shabaab will remain a threat indefinitely.

The Political Elephant: Clan Federalism

No military solution will work without a political solution. Somalia's federal system, designed to accommodate clan diversity, has instead produced paralysis. The central government in Mogadishu and the federal member states (Jubaland, South West, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, Puntland) spend more time fighting each other than fighting Al-Shabaab.

The necessary political reform: A new power-sharing formula that delinks political representation from clan identity. This could take the form of a directly elected president (current system is parliamentary, clan-based), constituency-based representation (rather than clan-based "4.5 formula"), and fiscal federalism where states raise their own revenue (rather than begging Mogadishu).

The obstacle: Every current political leader got his job through the clan system. Reforming it means voting themselves out of power. It will not happen voluntarily. External pressure—conditioning aid on political reform—is the only leverage.

Conclusion: A War Without End?

This report has documented a sobering reality: after twenty years, the war against Al-Shabaab is not being won. The group's media apparatus, financial networks, and tactical adaptability have consistently outpaced the government's corrupt, clan-based military and the AU's underfunded, overstretched peacekeepers. Air power and foreign training have produced tactical victories but strategic failure.

Yet defeat is not inevitable. Al-Shabaab has fundamental vulnerabilities: its harsh justice system alienates many Somalis, its foreign fighter contingent is shrinking, and its territorial control is limited to rural areas with few economic alternatives. The group survives because the government offers nothing better.

The central argument of this report is simple: Al-Shabaab will be defeated not when it is bombed into submission, but when the Somali government provides better governance—security, justice, and economic opportunity—than the insurgents. That day is far off. But it is not impossible.

Final assessment: On the current trajectory, Al-Shabaab will remain a potent threat for another decade. The war will continue to claim Somali lives, destabilize the Horn of Africa, and consume international resources. To change that trajectory, the Somali government and its international partners must have the courage to abandon failed strategies—clan-based armies, over-reliance on airstrikes, neglect of governance—and embrace the painful, long-term work of building a real state.

If they do not, twenty years from now another report will be written, describing the same failures, the same stalemate, and the same elusive victory.



Obsidian Research Bureau

Obsidian Research Bureau is an independent think tank dedicated to the rigorous analysis of global security challenges in an increasingly volatile world. We specialize in geopolitical, intelligence, HUMINT, and military affairs, with a particular emphasis on espionage, counterintelligence, terrorism, and irregular warfare. Our work is designed to provide decision-makers, professionals, and informed readers with clear, unvarnished assessments grounded in evidence rather than ideology.