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POLICY BRIEF

**Somalia's Fight Against Violent
Extremism**

Al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia

APRIL 2025

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This policy brief provides a comprehensive analysis of Somalia's fight against violent extremism. It contrasts the strategies, structures, and threat levels of Al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia, reviews recent developments such as Al-Shabaab's post-Osweyne resurgence and Puntland's counter-ISIS campaign, and evaluates policy options for Somali authorities and international partners.

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Introduction

Somalia is at a pivotal juncture in its decades-long battle against Islamist insurgencies. Since 2022, the Federal Government of Somalia under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has waged an ambitious “total war” to defeat Al-Shabaab – Al-Qaeda’s powerful Somali affiliate. Early military gains in 2022 kindled optimism, as clan militias dubbed Ma’awisley and Somali National Army (SNA) forces, backed by international partners, liberated swathes of central Somalia from al-Shabaab control. However, the conflict’s trajectory since 2023 has taken a more pessimistic turn, underscoring the insurgency’s resilience and the complexity of Somalia’s security landscape. Major setbacks – notably an al-Shabaab counteroffensive that overran newly liberated towns in Galmudug such as Osweyne, blunted the government’s momentum. By 2024, stalled operations, major political rifts, and surging insurgent attacks eroded initial gains and dampened public morale.

The year 2025 opened with intensified extremist activity on multiple fronts. Most notably, Puntland State independently waged an effective offensive against the Islamic State in Somalia (ISIS-Somalia) in the country’s northeast gaining traction and recording major successes. Puntland State led by state President Said Abdullahi Deni, with minimal international support, determinedly reclaimed militant strongholds in the Bari mountains. On its part, al-Shabaab taking advantage of the political divisions and stalled “total war” launched a large-scale Shabelle offensive named Operation “Ramadhan” - in February 2025, striking back aggressively in Middle Shabelle and Hiraan regions and even encroaching on Mogadishu’s outskirts.

This policy brief provides a comprehensive analysis of Somalia’s fight against violent extremism. It contrasts the strategies, structures, and threat levels of Al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia, reviews recent developments such as Al-Shabaab’s post-Osweyne resurgence and Puntland’s counter-ISIS campaign, and evaluates policy options for Somali authorities and international partners. This brief considers not only military aspects but also governance challenges – from corruption and clan dynamics to the drawdown of African Union forces – that continue to shape the outcome. The goal is to inform Somali and international policymakers of the current state of the conflict and pragmatic steps to advance Somalia’s security and stability.

The Evolving Threat Landscape

Al-Shabaab and ISIS–Somalia

The 2022 offensives against al-Shabaab that begun in Hiraaan region initially scored notable wins against the group. By leveraging local clan uprisings in Hiraaan and Galgaduud, Somali forces liberated strategic towns like Adan Yabal in Middle Shabelle in late 2022, which had been a longtime militant stronghold. These operations, mainly led by Somali forces and local counterparts were supported by some U.S. airstrikes and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) troops. They succeeded in clearing vital roads of al-Shabaab checkpoints while at the same time linking the capital to central Somalia.



Maj. Hassan Tuure

Image Source - <https://greydynamics.com/danab-the-lightning-brigades-of-somalia-2/>

However, by the end of January 2023, the SNSF had lost a visionary and key commander, Maj. Hassan Tuure, who had played a crucial role in connecting the SNA special forces with sector forces and integrating the clan militias. And by mid-2023, the momentum had waned. The government struggled to hold liberated areas amid widespread concerns of endemic corruption, stretched supply lines, and questionable command and control structures. Politically, the administration's focus had become divided, shifting towards prioritizing the constitutional review process. In August 2023, al-Shabaab forces mounted a fierce counterattack in Galmudug state that exposed the military's overextension. In the Battle of Osweyne, insurgents routed an SNA unit, inflicting heavy casualties and forcing a retreat. Within days, al-Shabaab recaptured Osweyne, Budbud, Masagaway, Gal'ad, and El Dheer, erasing months of territorial gains and encircling and eventually retaking the last government-held town El Buur in that region. Osweyne became emblematic of Somalia's challenges – poor planning, inadequate clan coordination, and troops ill-prepared to hold ground against a determined insurgency. Operations stalled further in late 2023 due to seasonal floods while political distractions in Mogadishu diverted attention from the frontline.

Al-Shabaab took advantage of this lull and by early 2024 it had regrouped and intensified attacks, especially around Middle Shabelle and Lower Shabelle, reclaiming influence in areas near Mogadishu. The insurgents were reportedly “buoyed” by local clan frustrations while the controversial Somaliland-Ethiopia port deal was also exploited to win local support. 2024 also witnessed the ill-fated Ras-Kamboni mission where Somali federal forces engaged in an internal conflict with Jubaland’s regional troops, diverting attention and resources from the critical battle against al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab or Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen remains Somalia’s most formidable extremist threat. At its core, al-Shabaab is an entrenched insurgency with deep local roots and a resilient insurgent network. It fields an estimated 5,000–8,000 fighters and exerts control or influence over vast rural areas in southern and central Somalia, despite facing sustained military pressure. The group’s strategy blends terror tactics with insurgent warfare and shadow governance. It has established parallel administrations in areas under its sway, enforcing strict Islamist rule and levying taxes (zakawaat) on businesses and farmers. This financial racket yields millions of dollars annually, financing operations and buying loyalty.

Al-Shabaab’s operations range from high-profile terrorist attacks in urban centers, such as suicide bombings, complex assaults on hotels and government sites, to hit-and-run raids and roadside bombings targeting security forces. Throughout 2022–2023, the group demonstrated an ability to adapt under pressure, retreating when confronted by superior force but surging back when the military’s presence thinned or political divisions emerged.

Entering 2025, Al-Shabaab has shifted from a two-year defensive stance to an aggressive offensive posture, attempting to seize the initiative before Somali forces and ATMIS, now reconfigured as the AU Support and Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM), could launch a new phase of offensive operations. In a propaganda video released in February, al-Shabaab’s emir urged fighters to “prepare for a new stage in the war,” signaling intent to escalate operations.

On 20 February 2025, the militants announced their coordinated offensive dubbed “Hawlgalka Ramadaanka” - Operation Ramadan - across central Somalia. Al-Shabaab militants simultaneously attacked multiple SNA bases and towns in Middle Shabelle, Hiraan, and Galgaduud, with an apparent aim to encircle Mogadishu and overturn the government’s 2022 gains. The offensive featured brazen tactics, waves of fighters backed by suicide vehicle-borne IEDs storming towns like Runirgod and Masagaway and briefly overrunning several locations.

By late February, insurgents briefly seized the district capital of Bal'ad, just 40 km northeast of Mogadishu, freeing prisoners from the jail before being driven out by reinforcements a day later. Al-Shabaab also dramatically expanded its presence in the countryside south in Lower Shabelle and just outside Mogadishu. In mid-March, Somali media reported militants infiltrating the main highway between Mogadishu and Bal'ad Afgooye, patrolling villages on the capital's outskirts.

Perhaps most alarmingly, on March 14, 2025, al-Shabaab attempted to assassinate President Mahamud with a massive roadside bomb as his convoy traveled near Mogadishu's airport. The blast killed at least four people and underscored the insurgents' reach, though the President was unharmed.



Presidential vehicle wreckage, March 2025 Image Source -[Abdalle Ahmed Mumin @Cabdalleaxmed](#)

Recent data illustrate the escalating intensity of the conflict. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED), al-Shabaab dramatically increased its rate of attacks in early 2025. In Hiraaan and Middle Shabelle regions, the group carried out roughly 50% more attacks per month in Jan–Feb 2025 than the 2024 average. The resulting clashes have been extraordinarily deadly. Al-Shabaab's 2025 offensive caused over five times more fatalities of both combatants and civilians, in the first three months than all insurgent attacks in 2024. For instance, in the Beledweyne bombing of March 11, 2025, al-Shabaab struck a gathering of clan elders with a suicide assault on a hotel, killing dozens in the city's worst attack since 2022.

In Middle Shabelle alone, conflict-related deaths by March 2025 had nearly doubled the total fatalities of the previous year. Somali forces, including Danab commandos and local militias, have mounted a stiff defense, aided by U.S. drone strikes and even Ethiopian air support. Yet, the insurgents have demonstrated a capacity to mass forces and exploit security gaps. The federal government's insistence that al-Shabaab can still be defeated by 2025 appears increasingly unrealistic in light of these trends.

Islamic State - Somalia



Seal of the Islamic State in Somalia

In contrast to al-Shabaab’s broad insurgency, ISIS-Somalia poses a more localized but still menacing challenge. ISIS’s Somalia, led by Sheikh Abdulkadir Mumin, is concentrated in the rocky highlands of Puntland’s Bari region particularly the Cal Miskaad mountains far to the north. Initially estimated at a few hundred core fighters at its inception, ISIS-Somalia grew modestly by attracting foreign jihadists and disenfranchised youth. By early 2023, Puntland officials assessed ISIS’s strength at up to 1,500 fighters with roughly half of them foreigners drawn from Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia, and beyond.

Unlike al-Shabaab’s clan-centric recruitment, ISIS in Somalia has relied heavily on foreign fighters and non-local recruits. This composition gives it some unique capabilities – foreign recruits sometimes bring funds, technical skills, or combat experience from other warzones – but also critical weaknesses. Lacking deep clan ties in Somalia, ISIS-Somalia has never managed to embed itself in local communities the way al-Shabaab has. It holds no major population centers; instead, it survives by extorting businesses mainly around the port city of Bosaso, trafficking in arms and migrants, and offering wages to impoverished youth. ISIS-Somalia’s operations have also been smaller in scale with targeted assassinations, bombings of civilian officials, and occasional raids. Notably, al-Shabaab considers ISIS a rival; the two groups have clashed violently in past years, with al-Shabaab killing ISIS members in southern Somalia, which has further confined ISIS to the far north.

By 2022, ISIS-Somalia was entrenched in parts of eastern Puntland, but it faced growing pressure as Puntland authorities, under President Said Abdullahi Deni, turned their focus to eradicating the group. Puntland’s security forces including the Puntland Security Force and Puntland Maritime Police Force launched Operation Hilaac “Lightning” – a sustained campaign to dislodge ISIS from the Bari highlands in late 2024. This offensive accelerated with Puntland receiving support from U.S. and partner militaries including training, air surveillance, and air strikes. Local communities, weary of ISIS’s extortion and foreign influence, also began to provide critical support.



Final preparations by PL forces to complete Phase 3, April 13, 2025
Image Source - Puntland Counter-Terrorism Operations @PL_CTOperations

By February 2025, Puntland officials declared major victories; security forces had swept through the Cal Miskaad Mountains from Balidhidin to Dhaasaan, capturing what had been ISIS's main bases and hideouts. In this phased offensives over 95% of areas once under ISIS control were seized, including cave complexes, training camps, weapons stockpiles with machine guns, explosives and even modified drones, and supply caches. Over 400 fighters were reportedly killed and 120 captured during operations. Puntland forces effectively dismantled ISIS-Somalia's logistical networks, disrupting its funding and arms channels. By March 2025, the ISIS insurgents were fractured and pushed into scattered hideouts. The offensive moved into a third phase aimed at mopping up ISIS remnants and hunting down fugitives in urban centres like Bosaso.

Despite these gains, ISIS-Somalia is not yet fully eliminated. Pockets of fighters went to ground in difficult terrain, and ISIS has shown resilience by avoiding last-stand battles – instead melting into caves or blending in with nomadic populations. Although the casualty count has been substantial, there has been limited detailed reporting on the fate of the leadership of the organization. Moreover, ISIS's external linkages mean it remains a concern for regional security beyond Somalia. The group has served as a financial and communications hub for the broader Islamic State network – its al-Karrar office was channeling funds to ISIS affiliates in Mozambique, DR Congo, and Afghanistan at one point. If ISIS-Somalia survives in any form, it could enable international jihadist connectivity or serve as a rallying node for foreign fighters.

Even as Al-Shabaab occupies most of Somalia's security bandwidth, Somali authorities and their partners must ensure ISIS does not regenerate in the margins. The contrasting profiles of these two groups, al-Shabaab's large-scale insurgency vs ISIS's concentrated militant enclave require tailored counterinsurgency approaches under a cohesive national strategy.

Securing the Gains – Evaluating Next Steps

In the current climate, where trust among political stakeholders has eroded, the morale of security forces has reached its lowest point, and local populations are growing increasingly disillusioned with the anti-Al-Shabaab campaign, a major shift is imperative. This would necessitate the leadership moving beyond superficial engagements and mere reorganization of the SNA headquarters to really examining and addressing the root causes of these challenges. Effectively combating these terrorist groups requires a multifaceted strategy that maximizes the potential of available forces, tackles nepotism and corruption within the security sector, and actively engages political and societal leaders. So far, this approach has been lacking.

This section evaluates policy options for key stakeholders weighing their potential benefits and challenges. Any approach must be realistic, acknowledging Somalia’s institutional limitations and the entrenched nature of these extremist groups. However, purely military solutions, absent governance and reconciliation, have proven insufficient. At the same time, soft approaches alone cannot pacify groups that remain committed to violent jihad. A combination of security operations, political engagement, and development measures will be required to sustain progress.

Aligning Federal and State Action - Options for Somali Stakeholders

While the FGS leads national counterinsurgency strategy, success against al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia ultimately depends on coordinated, complementary action by both federal authorities and the Federal Member States (FMS). Each plays a distinct yet interdependent role. The FGS has a constitutional mandate to command national security, negotiate with international partners, and set policy direction. The FMS control key territories, command regional forces, and are often more attuned to clan dynamics and local realities. Yet too often, the lack of cohesion and at times trust between the center and regions undermines security gains, either by generating political disputes, duplicative operations, or coordination failures on the battlefield. To defeat Somalia’s insurgencies, federal and state authorities must synchronize their efforts under a shared strategy that balances national priorities with regional strengths. This section evaluates policy options available to both levels of Somali stakeholders.

I. Federal Government-Led Options

Intensified Military Offensives: The FGS can continue and escalate its military campaign to pressure al-Shabaab on all fronts. This would involve mobilizing additional troops including newly trained recruits and Darwish paramilitaries, expanding operations into remaining militant strongholds in South-West State and Jubaland, and conducting more frequent strikes on al-Shabaab leadership. The aim would be to degrade the group's capabilities significantly, preventing it from mounting attacks like the 2025 offensive. Sustained offensives could keep al-Shabaab off balance and gradually shrink its territorial footprint. Successes on the battlefield also bolster government legitimacy and public confidence as seen in 2022 when the liberation of towns triggered widespread public support.

The FGS has to however contend with the fact that nationwide offensives risk overstressing Somalia's still-developing and fragile forces. In fact the FGS has yet to effectively account for and utilize all forces on the payroll. Further, the Osweyne setback in 2023 showed that rushing into insurgent-held areas without proper consolidation leads to disaster. Somali forces are already thinly spread while mainly operating in two federal member states; pushing into Jubaland's dense forests or Bakool's hinterlands could open new vulnerable fronts. There is also the attrition factor; al-Shabaab has shown it can inflict heavy casualties with the recent attacks causing "unsustainable losses" to Somali forces. An overstretched offensive might play into al-Shabaab's strategy of drawing forces into costly guerrilla fights on unfavorable terrain. An all-out offensive would also require resetting the political landscape to its positive 2022 stance. Considering the current government's costly and misguided venture in politics, it seems unlikely they would create the space necessary for political reconciliation.

Consolidation and "Hold & Stabilize" Approach: This second approach seems the most realistic approach in the current environment that the FGS could undertake. Rather than rapid expansion, the FGS could pause major offensives and focus on defending, securing and stabilizing recovered areas. This approach prioritizes holding ground over taking new ground, fortifying liberated districts with trained local security forces, clearing remaining insurgent cells, and, critically, delivering governance and services. The government could expedite humanitarian relief, reconstruction of infrastructure, and establishment of local administrations in recovered territory. This strategy addresses a key weakness that has plagued past campaigns the failure to win over local populations after military victory. By providing security and basic services, the government can undercut Al-Shabaab's appeal and prevent its return. It also allows the SNA to recuperate and retrain while avoiding casualties from hasty offensives. International partners could redirect some military aid to stabilization projects, reinforcing a peace dividend in recovered areas.

The obvious risk is that this was the scenario for the past year. And the pause in offensive pressure seems to have only given al-Shabaab breathing space to regroup, which it could use again to infiltrate back. Moreover, stabilization is resource-intensive and slow. The FGS, with its limited budget and the reported cuts to funds by major donors, they may struggle to visibly improve local living conditions in the short term. If services and jobs don't materialize, communities could become disillusioned, and al-Shabaab's narrative that "the government cannot govern" would gain credence. A hold-and-build strategy must be paired with concrete, well-resourced plans and donor support to succeed.

Anti-Corruption and Security Sector Reform: A necessary cross-cutting policy for the FGS is to tackle corruption, nepotism, clan favoritism, and inefficiency within the security forces and government. Major concerns of nepotism, diversion of military supplies, procurement fraud, and the return of ghost soldiers siphoning payroll have directly undermined the war effort. In the capital, the land deals that have led to squatters being cleared from government owned lands mainly affected families of soldiers in the frontlines. In the field, forces complained of lacking logistical supplies, ammunitions and rations, while the same have been available for clan militias connected to certain individuals, sapping morale.

The government can reaffirm its commitment to reforms by reviewing procurement processes, cleaning up the biometric register through comprehensive HR reforms, improving vetting and training of officers, enforcing strict prosecution of those caught selling supplies, and enhancing oversight of the logistical process. While politically challenging, such reforms are essential and would significantly boost the morale and effectiveness of the existing forces. With the same resources, a cleaner security sector could achieve better outcomes, holding ground rather than retreating when confronted. These reforms would also send a clear signal that Somalia's leadership is committed to self-reliance.

However, these reforms are likely to challenge entrenched interests and provoke resistance from powerful figures who benefit from the status quo of patronage. In the short term, crackdowns could create internal rifts if not managed carefully. Politically, the administration must balance anti-corruption efforts with maintaining its broad coalition. While the insurgency threat demands immediate action, the sequencing argument suggests that reform benefits take time to materialize; therefore, these reforms must be implemented in parallel with ongoing operations—a difficult but achievable dual task.

Negotiations and Defection Programs: Another option is to pursue a political track alongside military efforts, opening channels for negotiated settlements and encouraging defections from militant ranks. This approach is undoubtedly complex and not as straightforward as many would hope, it faces significant challenges that must be navigated carefully.

Negotiating with al-Shabaab faces domestic opposition due to past failed peace deals and the group's unacceptable demands, which many fear could legitimize extremists and undermine government credibility. Hence, while defectors should be welcomed, high-level negotiations would require careful consensus-building and likely external mediation to have a chance of success.

II. Federal Member States and Local Forces

The FMS's play a critical role in shaping outcomes on both fronts of Somalia's war against extremism. While the FGS provides overarching strategy, FMS and local actors are the implementers in territories far from Mogadishu's reach. They maintain regional forces, interact directly with communities, and shape the social contracts on which security depends. Policy options for the FMS will need to be contextualized and tailored to the unique resources and circumstances of each state.

Decentralized Counterinsurgency: In coordination with the federal strategy that would be jointly agreed, the FGS will need to empower FMS governments and local militias to lead counterinsurgency efforts in their regions. This would require sharing the security sector assistance with FMSs while acknowledging that state presidents and community forces often have superior on-the-ground intelligence and agility. For example, Puntland's campaign against ISIS succeeded largely because Puntland authorities took ownership, integrating community outreach with military operations. Similarly, Galmudug's use of clan militias in 2022 was pivotal in expelling al-Shabaab from villages. The FGS can support such local-led efforts by allowing for local command structures to direct operations in familiar terrain. This decentralization leverages local knowledge and legitimacy. Militias drawn from local clans are more invested in defending their home areas and can more easily distinguish militants from civilians. Trust between locals and security forces tends to be higher when those forces are from the community. Furthermore, some FMS leaders have valuable experience and networks that a Mogadishu-centric approach might miss.

The downside of this approach remains the risk of fragmentation and the lack of a unified command. There is a legitimate concern that arming local militias could lead to the formation of predatory gangs or factions that prioritize clan interests over broader cooperation. Additionally, FGS-FMS relations have often been strained, with some state leaders accusing Mogadishu of power-hoarding. A decentralized security strategy demands a high level of trust and coordination, which is not always feasible. The FGS must also ensure that local militias do not commit severe abuses against civilians or exacerbate clan feuds, as al-Shabaab could exploit these divisions for propaganda. Moreover, the political economy of the offensives must be considered, as the dynamics of the conflict have shifted, with some participants joining the fight not for ideological reasons but to secure a share of the spoils or to arm themselves against rivals.

Integrate and Professionalize Regional Forces: Another approach is to gradually integrate regional paramilitary forces into the national command structure, building a cohesive Somali National Army that still respects the federal framework. This would be a huge task that would involve standardizing training and salaries and embedding federal officers or liaisons within FMS forces and vice versa. Joint command centers could be established for operations spanning multiple regions. The recent creation of a National Joint Operations Center in Mogadishu is a step in this direction. Integration aims to harmonize efforts and prevent duplication or friendly-fire incidents. It can also alleviate mutual suspicions. In the long run, a unified national army is essential for Somalia to handle its security post-AUSSOM.

In practice, however, full integration is challenging to achieve in the short term. Federal Member States (FMS) have fiercely protected their security autonomy, with Puntland even declaring in 2023 that it would not take orders from Mogadishu on security matters. Rushing integration could provoke resistance or outright refusal by regional forces to participate in national missions. Furthermore, varying levels of capacity exist, with some state forces being relatively well-armed while others are weak; this imbalance could lead to resentment if roles within an integrated force are not allocated fairly. A more feasible approach might be a phased integration, starting with joint units for specific tasks, such as a combined counterterrorism force composed of troops from multiple states, rather than an immediate merger of all forces.

Local Reconciliation and Addressing Grievances: FMS and local governments should prioritize resolving clan disputes and grievances that al-Shabaab frequently exploits. In recently liberated areas, communities often clash over land, water, or seek revenge for past abuses. Empowering traditional elders, religious leaders, and local administrators to mediate these conflicts is essential. Additionally, ensuring inclusive local governance will undercut one of al-Shabaab's key recruitment strategies; its claim to offer "justice" through its courts when government courts fail to provide effective solutions. Stability at the grassroots denies al-Shabaab its narrative as the provider of order.

However, achieving reconciliation is often time-consuming, with outcomes not guaranteed, as some grievances are deeply entrenched. Furthermore, federal authorities assert the need to intervene, as local governments often lack the resources for effective reconciliation efforts. This approach should not be viewed as a stand-alone policy, but rather as a crucial complement to any security strategy—without it, military gains are unlikely to be sustained.

International and Regional Partners - Sustaining Strategic Support Amid Reduced Engagement

Over the past decade, Somalia's counterterrorism efforts have depended heavily on the African Union, U.S. military and diplomatic support, and contributions from partners including the EU, Turkey, the UAE, and regional troop contributors. But, since 2022, there has been a marked shift. Donor fatigue has increased, global counterterrorism funding has declined, and regional troop-contributing countries have become more cautious about sustaining protracted and costly deployments. As the African Union transitions to a leaner AUSSOM model, and global crises compete for international attention, Somalia faces the challenge of consolidating gains with fewer external enablers.



Prioritize Strategic, Mobile Support over Presence-Based Missions: Rather than advocate for indefinite extensions of ATMIS/AUSSOM, Somalia and the AU should recalibrate support toward light-footprint, rapid-reaction capabilities and advisory functions. While some AU troop presence may remain necessary in key areas, the focus should shift to intelligence sharing, operational mentoring, and limited-force protection roles. Countries like Ethiopia and Kenya whose troops remain deeply involved should coordinate border security and counter-infiltration measures, especially following Al-Shabaab's 2025 resurgence. This model aligns with the global realities that most donors are unwilling to fund large-scale stabilization deployments. A shift toward agility allows AU troops to reinforce Somali efforts without overstressing logistics. It also reinforces Somali leadership and builds sustainability. This proposal may seem overly optimistic especially after recent developments. Withdrawal of static AU units has exposed security gaps, particularly as Somali forces appear not yet ready to fill them. To avoid this, the AU and partners should co-develop risk-based handover plans and invest in Somali readiness assessments.

Focus External Military Support on Targeted Enablers: U.S. and allied kinetic support especially air and drone strikes remains critical. However the emphasis must be on impact, not presence. Targeted strikes to neutralize leadership, defend frontline forces, and pre-empt large-scale attacks can help offset troop limitations. Where possible, partners should continue mentoring Somalia's elite Danab and Gorgor forces. The partners should also maintain and sustain support to Puntland and other FMS's. This approach maintains critical CT capabilities at a low cost and footprint. However this should be approached cautiously as the risk of civilian casualties and propaganda backlash must be mitigated through improved target vetting and post-strike transparency. Additionally Somali reliance on external strikes may slow development of independent force enablers.

Continue Soft Power Investments in Prevention and Stabilization: While global CT funding may be declining, partners can have lasting impact through education, economic opportunity, and trauma rehabilitation programs particularly in liberated and at-risk areas. Projects that provide livelihoods, support local peacebuilding, or scale up civic education offer long-term inoculation against extremist recruitment. These efforts should prioritize efficiency, local ownership, and partnerships with Somali civil society. This would build community resilience against extremist resurgence. Such programs are generally more cost-effective and politically acceptable to fund than large military packages. However, impact is long-term and historically they have easily been disrupted by insecurity. Coordination with security actors is needed to ensure implementation viability.

Overall, international and regional partners must adapt to a new reality; fewer boots on the ground, tighter budgets, and growing pressure for Somali-led solutions. But with calibrated support military, political, and developmental they can remain force multipliers in the fight against al-Shabaab and ISIS. The key is focusing on quality of engagement, not quantity of presence.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The period from 2022 to 2025 has demonstrated both encouraging breakthroughs and sobering reversals. Al-Shabaab, deeply embedded and strategically adaptive, remains a potent insurgent force, capable of mounting multi-front offensives and exploiting weaknesses in governance and military cohesion. Its territorial ambitions were checked in 2022 by a Somali-led uprising, but its resurgence in early 2025 highlighted by its Ramadhan offensive and a failed assassination attempt on the President signals that it has neither collapsed nor capitulated. Meanwhile, ISIS-Somalia has been largely dismantled in Puntland through a focused, community-supported campaign demonstrating that locally owned, strategically coordinated counterinsurgency can succeed when sustained over time.

Looking ahead, Somalia and its international partners must build on what has worked; i.e. phased offensives, localized stabilization, and community mobilization, while candidly confronting what has not; over-extension, fragile coordination, and governance gaps. Given the constrained fiscal and political environment globally, the focus must shift from more to smarter engagement. The following recommendations offer a pathway to consolidate gains and avert further reversals.

Maintain Relentless Pressure on Al-Shabaab, But Avoid Overextension: Somali forces should continue offensive operations, but in a calibrated and prioritized manner. Priority should be given to securing and consolidating areas where al-Shabaab is actively conducting offensives, such as Middle Shabelle and Hiraan, before moving focus to deeper strongholds in Jubaland or Bakool. Where offensives do occur, they must be matched with holding forces and immediate establishment of local administration. International partners can enhance this approach through targeted, responsive air support and technical assistance. A phased campaign, rather than a broad push, reduces the risk of sudden collapses.

Prioritize Stabilization and Governance Reforms: Military victory alone is insufficient. Without responsive governance and visible service delivery, liberated areas risk relapse. The FGS and FMS;s should accelerate deployment of trusted local administrators and prioritize basic services. Meanwhile, anti-corruption measures such as transparent auditing of military logistics and salary disbursement must be demonstrated, not just declared. Conditional aid tied to clear governance benchmarks can strengthen donor trust and support Somali reform efforts.

Exploit Fissures Between and Within Extremist Groups: The Somali government, with support from its partners, should expand psychological operations and community amnesty initiatives that capitalize on divisions within al-Shabaab. Mid-level and foot soldiers may be more open to laying down their arms if given credible exit pathways. ISIS-Somalia's foreign-heavy composition and punitive tactics offer Puntland an opportunity to document and publicize the relief felt by communities after its retreat. Further, the enduring hostility between al-Shabaab and ISIS can be leveraged tactically.

Ensure AU Forces Draw Down Responsibly and Strategically: ATMIS's transition into AUSSOM must reflect ground realities, not donor calendars. While complete withdrawal may be unrealistic in the short term, a leaner, more agile AU mission with rapid-reaction capacity and mentoring functions can still play a stabilizing role. Troop-contributing countries must be reassured of political backing and financial continuity. The goal should not be permanence, but a bridge to viable Somali self-reliance.

Calibrate Allied Counterterrorism Engagement to Emerging Needs: Key security partners should maintain a light but capable presence, prioritizing strategic airstrikes, intelligence support, and mentoring of elite Somali units. Where possible, partners should provide non-lethal enablers, such as surveillance drones, protected mobility, and communications equipment. As donor funding for CT tightens globally, resources should be directed where they produce multiplier effects. Equally, Somalia must prioritize integrating these capabilities into its national systems to reduce overdependence.

In conclusion, countering al-Shabaab and defeating ISIS will require sustained Somali leadership, targeted external backing, and relentless adaptability. The courage shown by Somali forces, Puntland's success against ISIS, and community resistance to extremist ideologies are signals that extremism can be rolled back, but only if that momentum is matched with governance, reconciliation, and pragmatism.

The challenge now is not just to keep fighting, but to out-govern and outlast the insurgents in the places that matter most.

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Contact Us

www.balqiiis.org
info@balqiiis.org