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Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace

How militias and _____
paramilitary groups shape
post-conflict transitions

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The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the silhouettes of several armed men standing against a bright sunset sky. The men are holding rifles, and their dark forms are contrasted against the orange and yellow light of the setting sun. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds.

Case 3

The Problem with Militias in Somalia

ALMOST EVERYONE WANTS THEM
DESPITE THEIR DANGERS

By Vanda Felbab-Brown

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Militia groups have historically been a defining feature of Somalia's conflict landscape, especially since the ongoing civil war began three decades ago. Communities create or join such groups as a primary response to conditions of insecurity, vulnerability and contestation. Somali powerbrokers, subfederal authorities, the national Government and external interveners have all turned to armed groups as a primary tool for prosecuting their interests. State-aligned militias help to offset the weakness of Somalia's official security forces, produce greater motivation and better intelligence and enhance bonds with local communities, perhaps even suppressing crime and intraclan violence.

However, Somalia's State-aligned militia groups are also an underlying *source* of insecurity, violent contestation, abusive rule, impunity and pernicious outside manipulation. They give rise to and allow the entrenchment of powerful militant groups such as the Al-Qaida-supporting, jihadist Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, commonly referred to as al-Shabaab. As such, their increasingly central role in the fight against al-Shabaab is a double-edged sword: short-term military gains must be balanced against the militias' longer-term, destabilizing impact.

This study analyses the pros and cons of relying on militias for security provision and counter-terrorism

objectives in Somalia. It details the evolution, effectiveness and effects on stabilization efforts of several militia groups — Macawiisleeey, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, South-West Special Police, Mukhtar Robow's militias, Ahmed Madobe's militias (the Jubbaland State Forces), the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) and the Puntland Security Force (PSF). The study then assesses the effectiveness and shortcomings of existing responses to militias in Somalia, providing recommendations to national actors, policymakers and practitioners.

At the beginning of 2020, militias are once again at the forefront of a major policy debate about the strategy for State-building and security in Somalia. Since 2012, after helping to dramatically weaken a brutal, dangerous al-Shabaab regime that controlled much of the country, the international community has assisted in building State institutions in Somalia, which had been overwhelmingly destroyed in two and half decades of civil war. As part of its continuing efforts to combat al-Shabaab, the international community has partnered with Somalia's national Government to build Somalia's official armed and law enforcement forces and civilian institutions of governance, while advancing a plan to devolve power to the country's states (known as federal member states).

But eight years later, many of these efforts have not yet delivered results. Al-Shabaab remains one of Somalia's most powerful

political and military actors. In fact, since 2018, the group has gained momentum and deepened its political entrenchment, prompting some members of the international community to question whether the State-building model is the right approach. Despite USD \$1 billion of international financial assistance and international training since 2012, the Somali National Army (SNA) continues to lack the gamut of fighting capacities, relying instead on international forces to wrest territory from al-Shabaab, or even to keep the group from openly retaking other large territories, including major cities. Existing efforts to strengthen the SNA and other official forces are not producing adequate numbers of sufficiently competent Somali national soldiers. Intensified rivalries between Somalia's federal Government and the federal member states further hamper the deployment and effectiveness of the SNA.

As a result, countries such as the United States, Kenya, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates — the former three of which have military forces in Somalia — are losing their appetite for the State-building project in Somalia.¹ With the SNA chronically underperforming, these countries are poised to intensify their cultivation of pro-Government militias to fight against al-Shabaab. Even countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany (which have been at the forefront of multilateral efforts in Somalia) are increasingly motivated to support at least one set of militia groups — the State-supported paramilitary *darwish* (also known as “special police forces”) — through financial and possibly other non-lethal support.² These countries' rationale is that, although reliance on militia groups for counter-terrorism and security is problematic, it is equally unsustainable and problematic to rely on the small and incompetent SNA and the national Somali Police Force (SPF). The situation in Somalia is putting growing pressures on both the Somali Government and the international community to scale up the use of such militias.

This strategy based on auxiliary forces competes with ongoing efforts to bolster the State-building effort, including training of the official Somali national forces (which include the national military, police and intelligence agencies),

expanding a defectors' programme for al-Shabaab and efforts to integrate at least some of demobilized militias into the official security sector.

Embracing militias carries many risks: As this study details, the loyalties of militia groups are fluid, as they are susceptible to recruitment by their enemies and may prioritize their own interests — or those of an external patron — over those of the State. Militias also divert manpower and resources from Somalia's official forces, including by incentivizing defections. Worse still, Somalia's militia groups, particularly without supervision or assured sustainable income, tend to engage in predatory and, at times, violent behaviour, both on rival communities and even within their own. Deeply entrenched in the political economy of Somalia, militias have strong tendencies to appropriate political authority, strengthen authoritarian forms of rule, monopolize local economies and engage in other mafia-like economic and political activities. In these ways, they exacerbate local conflicts, increase grievances and enable al-Shabaab's political entrenchment in parts of the country. They compete with each other and, at times, with the federal Government. A poorly concluded defeat of al-Shabaab could actually plunge the country back into open fighting as the remaining militias compete for power. Foreign actors also instrumentalize Somalia's militias, undermining Somalia's sovereignty and entangling the country in geopolitical rivalries that could further destabilize the region.

At the same time, militias may be the best hedge against even more direct intervention by outside actors. If existing joint efforts fail to weaken al-Shabaab's military, political and economic power, intensified bilateral interventions such as US air strikes and enlarged deployments of Ethiopian and Kenyan forces grow more likely. These forces operate outside of the mandate and framework of the African Union and the United Nations, and harken back to the troubled period of Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia between 2006 and 2009. Other actors with substantial military assistance in Somalia, such as the Emirates and Turkey, may not be able to resist the temptation to intervene more forcefully.

Part of the risk of greater foreign intervention in Somalia arises from intensified regional and geopolitical rivalries, which shape local contestations in Somalia — and are also shaped by those local dynamics. The cold war conflict between Qatar and Turkey, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, on the other, intersects with and exacerbates conflicts and tensions between Somalia's Government and the country's federal member states, themselves already at a level of tension and suspicion not seen in years. For the Government, federal member states and international actors, militias are a favored tool against al-Shabaab, but their utility extends far beyond that fight. For instance, the federal member states — which carefully guard their autonomy, despite the existence of a formally agreed Somali national security infrastructure framework — see the militias as a crucial security hedge against the power of Mogadishu, Somalia's capital. The states can use the militias as a bargaining tool in their negotiations with Mogadishu over power distribution.

Many local communities deeply distrust and resent the SNA, which they perceive as more of a conglomeration of militias than as a competent State security service. The SNA is alleged to be unreliable in delivering basic security. Rather than respond to the military chain of command, many local SNA units display greater loyalty to their own clan and community interests; they use the SNA to abuse and exploit rival clans. In response, clan elders and local communities have bolstered their own clan militias as protection — not only against al-Shabaab, but also against the SNA.

The decision to double down on pro-Government militias to address the threats posed by al-Shabaab thus risks producing new drivers of conflict while perpetuating deeply rooted intercommunal tensions. As a United Nations official in Mogadishu put it, "We have tried to get to reduced killing in Somalia without ever resolving Somalia's conflicts."³ And in the words of an international military advisor in Baidoa: "Fighting a war through proxies is fraught with proxy problems downstream."⁴ There is growing evidence that embracing militias rewards

entrepreneurs of violence, reinforces impunity, and perpetuates violence.

Nonetheless, rolling back militias in Somalia does not seem feasible at this time, given al-Shabaab's new momentum and the lack of progress in building up the State's capacities. Instead, policies should be adopted to reduce at least some of the most pernicious effects of militias and to mitigate their worst tendencies, even while working through and with them. Steps should be taken to hold accountable the most egregiously behaving militias. Critically, the Somali Government, the federal member states and the international community should refocus efforts on reducing local conflicts, as part of the broader strategy to combat al-Shabaab and build stronger relations between State and society.

A. Outline of this study

This study first provides an overview of the evolution and current state of the political, economic and battlefield power of al-Shabaab, alongside the capacities and deficiencies of both the various Somali national security services and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). These dynamics take place in a fraught political context: tensions have risen between the Government and the federal member states, and there is broader geopolitical and regional competition for influence in Somalia.

The second part of the study analyses the structural and political drivers of militia formation and persistence in Somalia. It also describes the pro-militia arguments made by Somali politicians, government officials, clan elders and international actors. The second section of the study also reviews various types of militia groups in Somalia, including clan-based forces, contract militias, federal member state paramilitary *darwish* and militias sponsored by external actors. To understand how these militias form and operate, the study provides a detailed portrait of several prototypical militia groups — namely, Macawiisleeey, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, the South-West Special Police, Mukhtar Robow's militias, Ahmed Madobe's militias (the

Jubbaland State Forces), the PMPF and the PSF. The section concludes with an analysis of the specific risks associated with the activities of the main militias across Somalia.

The third section of the study describes the lack of a consistent policy towards militia groups in Somalia and the increasing tendency of various international actors to embrace and bolster militias. This portion of the study explains the international community's dilemmas in deciding how to deal with these newly strengthened forces. It reviews current and potential policies for reducing the scale and negative effects of the militias, identifying the feasibility and likely effectiveness of each. The assessed policies include:

1. Integrating militias into formal security forces;
2. Putting them on payroll and providing them with non-lethal assistance without integrating them into formal forces;
3. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR);
4. Addressing local conflicts as an indirect approach to eliminating the impetus for militias.

The final section of the study, on recommendations, builds on the analysis of current responses and offers concrete steps that would enable the Somali Government and international partners to limit the risks posed by militias while also benefiting from their unique capacities. The recommendations focus on the following areas:

1. Avoiding or minimizing the creation of new militia groups;
2. Appropriate vetting of militias prior to integration into the Somali official forces;

3. Steps to end impunity for human rights violations;
4. Provision of human rights and civics training;
5. Establishment of a salary system for militia members integrated into the Somali national forces;
6. Creation of an international payroll for some militias (for example, *darwish*) conditioned on a serious vetting process for human rights abuses;
7. Establishment of a DDR programme for militias, possibly accompanied by a reconsideration of the existing "high risk defectors" programme for al-Shabaab;
8. Developing a strategy for al-Shabaab that prioritizes support to local conflict resolution within communities and across clans.

B. Methodology

In addition to reviewing the relevant existing literature, this study is principally based on fieldwork conducted in Mogadishu and Baidoa, Somalia, in January 2020. During that fieldwork, the author conducted 51 interviews with current and former officials of the Somali Government and the federal member states, current and former officers of Somalia's national security forces, Somali politicians, business leaders, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Somali clan elders, United Nations officials, international advisors to the Somali Government and international diplomats. The study also builds on the author's previous fieldwork in Somalia in March 2015 and December 2017.⁵ To protect the safety of interlocutors and to encourage them to speak honestly and openly, all interviews during this and previous fieldwork trips are reported without the use of names.

Conflict overview

The military battlefield in Somalia is highly complex and populated by many armed actors, though it is the radical jihadist group al-Shabaab that has captured international attention. More than 60 warring parties are present in the country, ranging from clan and warlord militias to various other militant groups. These groups include a faction that splintered from al-Shabaab, located primarily in Puntland, that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) and claims an affiliation with IS in Iraq and Syria.⁶

Since the early part of the first decade of this century, al-Shabaab has sought to overthrow the Government of Somalia. Between 2009 and 2011, it nearly succeeded in this objective, taking over large territories across the country and challenging the federal Government in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab is merely the latest incarnation — although among the most radical — of Islamist groups that have been operating in Somalia for decades. With an allegiance to Al-Qaida and a long record of terrorist attacks in other parts of East Africa, al-Shabaab espouses a doctrinaire version of sharia considered extreme by most Somali standards.⁷ However, like its Islamist predecessors, the group has also succeeded in providing order, albeit through brutality, after years of civil war and interventions by foreign actors in Somalia. This record has won al-Shabaab significant support within some Somali populations.

Al-Shabaab's rule drew upon a specific interpretation of sharia (an interpretation largely rejected by Somalis and abroad), with beheadings, stoning, amputations and widespread repression against women. However, despite its brutality, deep administrative deficiencies and a lack of a vision of a modern State that could deliver socioeconomic progress in one of the world's poorest countries, al-Shabaab's rule has also allowed for municipal administrations to function and for basic security to be enforced. Its brutal but predictable regime proved viable for sustaining local economic activity, preferred by many business interests to the constant contestation among rival clans and warlords in parts of Somalia that were outside of al-Shabaab control.⁸

Despite its partial successes in governing territories, al-Shabaab committed a range of serious mistakes, quite aside from the routine brutality it used to enforce its religious doctrine. Most important of these mistakes was the group's hampering of the access of international humanitarian groups to Somalia during the 2010 drought and famine. The resulting deaths of over a quarter million people in Somalia in 2010–12 sapped much of al-Shabaab's popular legitimacy and support. As described below, however, the group maintains a large and powerful presence in strategic areas of Somalia, often replacing or challenging State authorities.

A. The Somali National Army: more militia than army

In 2012, a combination of international and domestic forces began wresting control of key territories of Somalia from al-Shabaab. These forces included AMISOM troops from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti; clan and powerbrokers' militias; and the vestiges of the Somali national forces, including the Somali National Army (SNA) and Somali Police Force (SPF), supported by the US, UK, European Union, Qatar, the Emirates, Turkey and private contractors. Between 2012 and 2015, a coalition of as many as 22,000 AMISOM soldiers, the Somali national forces and militias progressively pushed al-Shabaab into smaller parts of the country, also taking greater control over Mogadishu.⁹

However, since 2015, the momentum has shifted. AMISOM and the Somali national forces have struggled to hold cleared territories, even losing some key areas in recent years.¹⁰ This is in part because of the lack of sufficient effective national and international forces. AMISOM's capacities vary widely across different parts of Somalia, and are poorly coordinated across the country (Ethiopia's forces are regarded as potent, while interviewees suggested that Burundi's are significantly less so). Likewise, the Somali national forces lack training, equipment, and discipline, as well as offensive, holding and defensive capacities. In some areas, the Somali national forces are also deeply infiltrated by al-Shabaab, with as much as 30 per cent of the Somali Police Force in Mogadishu believed to be compromised.¹¹ Lacking institutional coherence, members of the Somali national forces tend to rely on clan and community as a principal source of security, meaning they are often unreliable actors in defending territory against al-Shabaab.¹²

With an attrition rate comparable to British casualties in WWI (around ten per cent), and facing major shortfalls in the funding necessary to generate new forces, the SNA suffers from chronically poor morale and sustainability.

Officially numbering 27,000 soldiers (but more likely composed of around 23,000), the SNA is riddled with ghost soldiers, old and sick soldiers incapable of effective fighting or patrolling, and untrained units. Although vetting procedures for recruitment now exist on paper, they are not implemented, allowing a steady flow of unqualified people onto the army's payroll. Many soldiers do not own a weapon. Around 60 per cent of the army's personnel lack any real military capacity.¹³ The SNA also lacks logistical, sustainment and medevac capacities. Although Turkey now runs a respected military academy for non-commissioned officers in Mogadishu, and British training of the SNA receives high accolades, many SNA soldiers have not received even basic training, let alone training at the battalion level or higher.¹⁴ The army lacks embedded international advisors, with the exception of the Danab Brigade, which has been trained and mentored by US special operations forces. These shortfalls are remarkable, given the USD \$1 billion international investment in the SNA since 2012.¹⁵

All these deficiencies mean that, even if it has some 23,000–27,000 soldiers, a far smaller number of SNA fighters are actually capable of military operations against al-Shabaab. The army has struggled to defend its forward operating bases, let alone surrounding territories. Forward operating bases are regularly overrun and destroyed by al-Shabaab; thus, the SNA is often forced to pay off al-Shabaab units operating in the region to avoid an attack.¹⁶ At the end of 2019, the SNA's military operations to secure the arteries out of Mogadishu ground to a halt, as nearly 40 per cent of the force tasked with that mission simply disappeared.¹⁷

The SNA's poor performance points to a crucial characteristic of Somalia's army: it is more of a conglomeration of militias than a coherent fighting force. After its complete collapse in 2009, the SNA was reconstituted via a clan-based recruitment drive in which fully formed clan- and warlord-based militias were incorporated into the army. Many newly recruited units were merely handed booklets about their new role within the SNA, and received no additional

training or instructions about the chain of command.¹⁸ As a result, newly formed SNA units remained strongly linked to the dominant clans of their home areas. They continue to rely on clan leaders to receive any of the heavier weaponry for combat. Units are restricted in their geographic mobility, as clan leaders refuse to allow their weaponry and resources to be moved from their territory.

Another consequence of the clan-based origins of the new SNA units is that units eventually deployed outside of their home communities often prey on civilians. Widespread theft of land, water and other resources have fed into deep resentment by local communities against the SNA, and has often triggered the formation of new militias to fight against the SNA presence (rather than against al-Shabaab). These militias, in turn, also tend to prey on communities in the surrounding regions, feeding a cycle of violence and the proliferation of armed actors. This troubling situation has prompted a debate among international donors as to whether the SNA should continue focusing on creating multi-clan units — an approach embraced by the US and Turkey — or merely accept the basic clan feature of the SNA. The answer to this question is of fundamental importance, given the lack of clan homogeneity in some areas, the need to have mobile troops to combat nimble al-Shabaab forces and the broader coordination requirements across the SNA.

A related issue is that of soldier loyalty to the SNA versus clan leadership. Strong clan connections within an SNA unit often mean that the unit follows the clan more than the chain of command. Within the international donor and expert community, a debate exists concerning how to reinforce loyalty to the SNA. One possible solution is more reliable pay to soldiers.¹⁹ Existing pay is between USD \$75 and \$150 per month for soldiers and USD \$270 for officers. These amounts fall far short of monthly expenditures, particularly in deployments away from home areas. Yet, even a small raise to USD \$200 is well beyond the Somali Government's current means. In any case, much of the current soldiers' pay ends up stolen by higher up officials

who control distributions. Efforts to break up clan-based SNA units aside, finding new sources of funding for soldiers appears a promising path towards greater cohesion and loyalty.

Like the SNA, AMISOM has conducted almost no offensive operations against al-Shabaab since 2016. This is partially a tactical decision, given that the SNA lack the forces necessary to hold any newly captured territory. Wishing to avoid still greater responsibilities to protect larger populations, AMISOM has remained mostly hunkered in "garrison mode."²⁰ Unannounced withdrawals in 2017 of several Ethiopian military contingents left behind significant power vacuums in key locations, which in turn were rapidly filled by al-Shabaab. The current AMISOM mission is authorized by the United Nations Security Council through 2021, but there is really no expectation that the AU forces could realistically be withdrawn even by then given the continued weakness of the SNA.

B. The turn to militias — a risk to civilians

The lack of a functioning, self-sustaining army has prompted the Somali Government, international supporters and local leaders to turn to militias to lead the fight against al-Shabaab. Especially since 2016, the number and types of militias has grown; some, like the *darwish*, have become institutionalized as paramilitary forces within the State, while a range of other militias have been recruited across localities to fight al-Shabaab. AMISOM too has resorted to militias for the few offensive operations it has conducted in recent years, despite the fact that the forces subscribe to no international standards of conduct and face no prospect of accountability for their actions.²¹ Here, the model is one where militias are expected to conduct offensive operations, hold territory and oversee the gradual resumption of basic security, eventually allowing State security services to take over.²² However, this approach has, to date, failed to deliver the anticipated territorial gains.

The use of militias has been criticized for allowing untrained, unaccountable armed actors into highly volatile settings, with a high likelihood of human rights violations. This is a valid concern — *darwish* forces have been accused of serious violations against civilians. But human rights violations are also perpetrated by the Somali military, police, and intelligence services as well as AMISOM, again with few, if any, accountability mechanisms in place.²³ According to the United Nations, al-Shabaab accounts for 51 per cent of investigated human rights violations, with another 13 per cent attributed to clan militias, 11 per cent to State actors, 4 per cent to AMISOM, and the remainder undetermined.²⁴

Within Somali forces, the SPF as well as member state police forces tend to be more frequent offenders than the SNA — the police being accused of rapes in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), uncontrolled shootings as a mechanism of crowd control and extrajudicial killings at checkpoints. *Darwish* forces are, at times, accused of similar human rights violations, but as they tend to wear the uniform of the SPF, local populations often cannot distinguish them from other forces.²⁵ This identification problem is compounded by the fact that police and army uniforms are widely available for purchase in open markets, with al-Shabaab also buying them and using them to disguise their attacks.

In areas where the international community closely trains, monitors and pays the SNA, such as in a British training programme in Baidoa, the human rights record of the SNA has significantly improved, perhaps because the SNA trainees will lose their stipends if they commit abuses.²⁶ But there are concerns that any significant diminishing of the international community's oversight would result in a substantial increase in human rights and humanitarian violations by the Somali national forces, with al-Shabaab in turn gaining political capital and power. In areas with a relatively robust international presence, SNA involvement in crime has gone down, particularly where it has been arresting, investigating and punishing alleged perpetrators, and reducing their pay. Those are, undeniably, major improvements. Nevertheless, the relatively low overall percentage of violations by SNA and

AMISOM may also reflect the static garrison posture of these forces, rather than a changed propensity for not committing abuses.

C. Al-Shabaab resurgent

As of early 2020, al-Shabaab remains in control of tracts of rural central, southern, and western Somalia. It also continues to control major roads throughout the country, including in areas AMISOM and SNA technically cleared, such as the states of Jubbaland and South-West and the region of Lower Shabelle. Emboldened since early 2019, al-Shabaab regularly takes over major towns and conducts deadly attacks on civilian and military targets alike — even in Mogadishu and across the border in Kenya. Al-Shabaab has been particularly bold when some AMISOM forces, such as those from Ethiopia, have withdrawn from an area, rapidly retaking those territories.

Al-Shabaab's strength is currently estimated at 5,000–7,000 active combatants.²⁷ That is a substantial increase from 2017, when its active combatant force was estimated at 2,000–3,000. Since 2017, it has intensified recruitment among Somalia's many unemployed young men. It also resorts to forcible abductions and recruitment of children from Islamic schools, taking them directly from families or mandating that clan elders recruit a certain number of fighters, including children, within a specified period.²⁸

Al-Shabaab's recruitment messaging for international audiences (including the Somali diaspora) tends to centre on a sense of belonging, global jihad and the protection of Somalia against "infidel" invaders. By contrast, recruitment messaging towards local youth tends to emphasize injustice and the abuse of power. Such messaging often exposes very specific local poor governance, corruption and grievances. Typical themes include how public resources are usurped for private gain; the corruption of Somali courts and politics; and the way the Somali system is biased towards elites, and thus perpetuates economic, political and social injustice.²⁹ Some two-thirds of al-Shabaab members have joined

either for economic reasons (due to a lack of legal economic opportunities) or as a result of grievances against clan discrimination or abuses and corruption of local authorities.³⁰ Of course, recruitment is a complex process that also varies based on location, the individual, and the needs of al-Shabaab at a particular time. Forcible recruitment and clan-negotiated recruitment also play an important role. As a result, today's al-Shabaab is a mixture of religious zealots, economic opportunists lacking alternatives or wanting to keep the war going for economic reasons, and individuals recruited from very local networks or delivered by clans, or born in areas under al-Shabaab control.

Although the militant group is strongest in the southern parts of Somalia, such as the Lower Juba and Lower Shabelle regions, it is not geographically confined. Al-Shabaab retains operational military capacity in the northern federal member states of Puntland and Somaliland, with presence south of Puntland as well. Al-Shabaab regularly conducts bomb attacks and assassinations in Mogadishu, as well as attacks targeting civilians abroad. Even major towns firmly held by anti-al-Shabaab forces can be surrounded by territories held by al-Shabaab. Kismayo, a city controlled by Ahmed Madobe's Jubbaland State Forces and supported by the Kenyan Defence Forces, is a prominent example. In the South-West State capital of Baidoa, where a major AMISOM garrison is stationed, al-Shabaab controls access to water, electricity and education services, and it has forced electrical companies to turn off electricity during its major military operations. Even in the city itself, the international community cannot access large segments of the population.³¹

Al-Shabaab remains mobile, adaptable and very well organized and trained. It runs large and effective training facilities in Puntland and southern Somalia. Mostly operating in small groups of dispersed fighters of no more than 20 and as few as three, the group manages to mass to 200 or 300 for attacks. In contrast to the SNA, it also maintains the capacity to sustain force and to effectively execute complex and far-flung operations. One example is its January 2020 attack on Kenya's Manda Bay military base,

which killed three US soldiers and destroyed USD \$50 million worth of equipment, including a US surveillance plane.³² The attack required al-Shabaab fighters to cross through a significant swath of Somali and Kenyan territory. The group also enjoys access to heavier weapons than the SNA, including many rocket-propelled grenades and man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS).³³

Although al-Shabaab has mostly not sought to enlarge the area under its formal control, it has recently conducted offensive operations for two principal reasons. The first has been to secure supply lines and improve its strategic position, in which case it may attack local militia forces, *darwish*, and AMISOM and SNA garrisons. The second reason for operations has been to enforce the collection of taxes from local populations, Somali and international businesses, politicians, SNA units and forward operating bases and implementers of international aid.³⁴

Lacking other options, military organizations fighting al-Shabaab, including AMISOM and the Somali national forces, have increasingly relied on US air strikes, assisted by US special operations ground forces, to limit al-Shabaab's attacks against their installations. Yet the intensified US air campaign has suffered the same limitations as AMISOM offensives: the airstrikes merely disperse al-Shabaab to other areas, including to Mogadishu, from which they can easily regroup.

D. Fractures in Somalia's political system

The political context in Somalia remains even more fraught and fractured than the military battlefield. And while international attention tends to focus on the military operations against al-Shabaab, the group's strength is directly related to the deeply fractured politics of Somalia. Tensions across federal, state and clan levels open space for al-Shabaab's further entrenchment.



UN Photo/Tobin Jones

A young woman holds the Somali flag during a demonstration by a local militia, formed to provide security in Marka, Somalia.

Somalia's current organization into federal member states dates only to 2015 when a formal decentralization process supported by the international community began, though some regions — notably Puntland and Somaliland — declared autonomy much earlier. The process of state creation has been tense, with interstate and state-federal rivalries over territories, control of armed forces, resource-sharing and power-delegation. One of the key areas of dispute concerns the distribution of armed forces. Somalia's 2017 national security architecture — agreed between the Somali Government, federal member states and the international community — authorizes the SNA to have just 18,000 soldiers, well below its current level of about 23,000-27,000. In addition, it envisions that the national Somali police (the SPF) be capped at 30,000 members. This design assumes that some existing militias — specifically, the state-level *darwish*, which are not currently recognized

under Somalia's security architecture or constitution — will be integrated into the SNA and SPF. The national security architecture also envisions the establishment of state police forces and federal paramilitary forces, known as federal *darwish* (distinct from the state level unofficial *darwish*), to patrol borders, operate across state borders and handle national emergencies.³⁵ According to Somalia's policing model of 2015, state police forces are to conduct policing up to station level, leaving major crimes like massacres and cross-state offenses to be handled by the federal criminal investigative division of the SPF.³⁶

Despite this formal distribution of forces, some federal member states are reluctant to hand over or disband the *darwish* forces under their control. Instead, they re-label them "special police." This seemingly cosmetic name change allows the forces to stay under local control, and

avoids running afoul of the Somali constitution and security architecture. As such, the “special police” have become important tools for federal member states to protect themselves against Mogadishu’s attempts to centralize power. But whether named “*darwish*” or “special police,” they do not currently qualify for federal payroll or international financial support.

These long-standing centre-periphery rivalries became compounded after the 2017 election of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, known as Farmajo. Farmajo has sought to recentralize Somalia’s political and economic processes, running into severe opposition from various federal member states, which have complained that they are deprived of power and resources under his administration.³⁷ Farmajo has indeed meddled in the local affairs of the federal member states, orchestrating, for example, the highly visible arrest in December 2018 of militia leader and former high al-Shabaab commander Mukhtar Robow to ensure his preferred candidate would win election in South-West State.³⁸ Farmajo has also picked intense political fights with Ahmed Madobe, a powerful federal member state President in Jubbaland, also with prior ties to al-Shabaab and close support from Kenya. In 2019, Farmajo and his allies refused to accept Madobe’s re-election as President of Jubbaland, and instead recognized a rival as President, reportedly threatening Madobe with military force. Federal relations with Puntland also dipped precipitously when Farmajo worked to prevent commercial port concessions to Emirates-based companies, potentially costing Puntland hundreds of millions of dollars.³⁹

The consequence of these tensions between Mogadishu and the federal member states has been that Somalia’s National Security Council has not met since June 2018. Antagonized federal member states have withdrawn from the Council and sought to pursue independent policies, including with international actors, while rejecting decision-making processes in Mogadishu. State-level intelligence and armed forces of alienated federal member states have refused to cooperate with their counterparts at the federal level.⁴⁰ Moreover, in various parts of Somalia, no federal or even state-level

authorities are present. In the city of Xuudur in the Bakool region of the South-West State, for example, no SNA, federal government authorities or state-level authorities are present. Instead, the region is governed by a strong district governor with support of Ethiopian forces operating independently from AMISOM. The political tensions also feed leadership instability: since coming to power, Farmajo has changed the top SNA commander and his deputy five times, the top police commissioner four times, and the head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) five times. With presidential elections in the 2020–21 period looming, tensions are likely to increase.

E. Al-Shabaab’s political entrenchment

Persistent clan and political infighting provide fertile ground for al-Shabaab’s growing ranks across Somalia. Since al-Shabaab is able to deliver security, justice and effective taxation schemes, the Somalis in many parts of the country often perceive the group as more legitimate than the rapacious and corrupt official ruling entities. And al-Shabaab has shown remarkable capacity to insert itself into clan rivalries, at times helping to mediate disputes and reduce conflicts over land and resources. In this regard, al-Shabaab has proven itself more than a purely Hawiye-based group — though it does draw its membership heavily from that clan. It has come to be seen as pan-clan.⁴¹

Al-Shabaab is also deeply entwined in the political economies of Somalia involving Somali political leaders and businesses. Many of Somalia’s powerbrokers rely on al-Shabaab to maintain security and protect their economic interests, in exchange for which they pay fees, which al-Shabaab terms *zakat*, or Islamic alms. Since they are already effectively paying a tax to al-Shabaab, businesses are reluctant to pay government taxes, which would go towards provision of better security services. Then, lacking such services, the businesses rely on al-Shabaab for security. Al-Shabaab is thus left to conduct its own pervasive taxation, which it does

through a combination of threats of violence and the provision of security. The group's income is staggering: in South-West State, for example, al-Shabaab generates USD \$70,000 per day from taxing roads and has been estimated to earn more than USD \$20 million a year in taxes, which support its fighters and organizational structures across Somalia.⁴²

In some respects, al-Shabaab provides a more consistent and viable set of security arrangements than State actors. In areas beyond al-Shabaab's control, a combination of militias, police and army units set up a variety of checkpoints with different fees and conditions attached to them. Lack of discipline and competition between these groups has led to killings and widespread reports of human rights violations.⁴³ In contrast, checkpoints manned by al-Shabaab tend to charge a single, uniform fee, as much as five times lower than fees imposed by militias and the SNA and the SPF. Unlike on roads manned by others, vehicles entering roads controlled by al-Shabaab receive a receipt, and the people and cargo are not robbed later down the road.⁴⁴

Al-Shabaab also outcompetes other actors in Somalia in its capacity to deliver justice and dispute resolution. It retains a reputation for delivering swift, effective, and — crucially — non-corrupt rulings to disputes, based on sharia. In contrast, the State's judiciary is perceived as overwhelmingly corrupt, dominated by certain clans, and operating on the basis of outdated 1960s statutes, thus delivering dispute outcomes based on bribes and clan standing.⁴⁵ Other forms of justice, such as the traditional *xeer* processes, are primarily used to resolve interclan reconciliation needs. They offer little fairness to marginalized clans and women, nor do they ensure accountability for serious crimes.⁴⁶ Thus, even people from government-held territories, and by some anecdotal accounts occasionally even police officers, approach al-Shabaab for dispute resolution.⁴⁷

While effective, al-Shabaab's justice contains no formal safeguards and it is underpinned by the ruthless use of force: disobedience of a ruling results in swift execution. There is also

brutal punishment supposedly based on sharia statutes — such as stoning or cutting of limbs, unacceptable to most Somalis. Beyond these unpopular measures, al-Shabaab also demands taxes in the form of children and onerous financial or livestock payments, such as during periods of drought, punishing those who cannot pay with death or forced displacement. Forced marriages are widely practiced in Somalia irrespective of al-Shabaab, sometimes involving children, and sometimes involve horrific abuses. But al-Shabaab also uses children for brutal terrorist actions and suicide attacks.⁴⁸ Like the SPF, al-Shabaab members are also regular perpetrators of rapes, targeting women travelling to fetch charcoal, water, or sell milk, and women leaving IDP camps.

F. Geopolitical context

The rivalry between the Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, on the one hand, and Qatar, aligned with Turkey, on the other hand, increasingly shapes the political and security dynamics in Somalia, with effects on the role of militias and the relationship between the centre and the periphery.

Broadly, the Emirates has treated all Islamist movements — including al-Shabaab — as a threat, while also partnering with Saudi Arabia in a long-standing rivalry with Iran. Given that Qatar has been sympathetic to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Emirates has equally cast Qatar as dangerous to its interests. These rivalries play out along the coastline of the Horn of Africa, where the Emirates has sought to develop a range of commercial ports.⁴⁹ In 2006, the company DP World, majority owned by the emirate of Dubai, won a 50-year concession to operate Djibouti's Port of Doraleh.⁵⁰ Since then, the Emirates has actively sought to cultivate port opportunities in Somalia, such as in Berbera and Bosaso, as well as a military rear base for its operations in Yemen.⁵¹ The Emirates has also been a prominent actor in efforts against Somali pirates, building up a large militia in Puntland, the PMPF, to operate against them.

However, though Farmajo was close to Turkey and Qatar, he allowed his relations with the Emirates to deteriorate precipitously. The Somali President, for example, refused to participate in the Saudi-Emirati blockade of Qatari goods. Qatar allegedly supported Farmajo's presidential campaign with major financial donations, provided the Government with USD \$385 million in infrastructure, education and humanitarian assistance, and is seeking to develop a port in Hobyo to rival the Emirates' operations in Berbera and Bosaso.⁵² This alignment between Farmajo and Qatar has led the Emirates to actively work against Mogadishu, instead supporting the federal member states, often in direct opposition to the President.⁵³ The Emirates has hosted federal member state leaders and provided them with resources, hoping to weaken their dependence on the Somali capital. Relations reached a particularly low point in April 2018, when Mogadishu seized USD \$10 million from an arriving Emirati airplane, alleging the money was meant for "bribes" for federal member state politicians. The Emirates, for its part, claimed that the money was meant to support its military training mission in Somalia.⁵⁴ The Emirates subsequently withdrew from Mogadishu, where it had supported a military training camp and a hospital.

Ethiopia and Kenya also have a long history and strong interest in the internal workings of Somalia. Having repeatedly put troops on Somalia's soil, Ethiopia sees the border areas as a buffer zone against Islamist groups and clan-based separatism.⁵⁵ Even today, Ethiopia maintains forces in Somalia that operate outside of AMISOM's structure. The Ethiopian Government and its forces in Somalia, whether as part of AMISOM or independently, have long worked with a range of anti-Islamist militias. The Ethiopian Government and military have become very close backers of Farmajo's Government, with the two countries announcing a joint

investment in four unspecified seaports in June 2018.⁵⁶ Farmajo has consistently used Ethiopian forces to go after his political rivals, such as Robow.

Having borne the brunt of al-Shabaab's international attacks on military and civilians such as in the 2013 notorious Westgate Mall attack and in the January 2020 attack on a Kenyan military base, Kenya too sees value in creating a buffer zone against incursions of Islamist groups.⁵⁷ Kenya also hopes that by shaping security and politics in Somalia, particularly its southern parts, it will minimize recruitment by Somali jihadist groups in Kenya and prevent the radicalization of Kenyan Muslim residents, as well as reduce the flow of further Somali refugees to Kenya.⁵⁸ It also seeks to extend its maritime rights into the contested areas offshore.⁵⁹

These regional dynamics are only the latest chapter in the long history of Somalia as a theater for geopolitical rivalry. As the analysis below underscores, they have led to foreign actors' willingness to support proxy forces within Somalia, often creating new risks for civilian populations and undermining the prospects of improved stability in the longer term. Addressing the problem of militias in Somalia cannot be separated from the interests of regional powers and their involvement with Somali powerbrokers.

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Auxiliary groups in detail

The State's deficiency in providing security is not the only reason that militias and auxiliary groups in Somalia persist. Crucially, they also exist because the State is distrusted by communities, clans, powerbrokers, politicians, subfederal authorities, businesses, and regional and global powers. Here, militias function both as an extension of the State and as a hedge against it. They perform a variety of roles, from protection of elite interests to income generation, from purely military functions to governance. Militias have thus become indispensable actors in the highly fluid, fractious and lucrative conflict landscape of Somalia.

Broadly, supporters of militias offer four reasons that they should be used instead of relying solely on the Somali national forces to address the threats posed by al-Shabaab:⁶⁰

1. Militias provide a much-needed boost to the SNA's inadequate capacities and number of soldiers;
2. Militias are more capable and determined than the unreliable SNA; militia fighters often bring their own weaponry from their respective clan bases;
3. Militias possess greater local knowledge and intelligence in areas where al-Shabaab has influence;
4. Under some circumstances (such as in the Lower Shabelle region), spontaneously created self-defence militias can operate against al-Shabaab without State support.

Some interviewees also pointed to militias' effectiveness — quite aside from their utility in fighting al-Shabaab — in suppressing crime and preventing intraclan violence.⁶¹

However, militias vary significantly across Somalia, not only in their character and conduct, but also in the roles they play in the underlying conflict dynamics. Given the enormous number of local militias operating across the country, this study does not attempt to review all of them. Instead, it presents key types of militia groups, allowing for an understanding of the main roles they play.⁶² This analysis is followed by more detailed portraits of the most powerful militias, which tend to occupy the bulk of international attention.

A. Clan militias

Clan militias are the most prevalent type of organizational structure of armed actors in Somalia. Their primary focus is to protect or expand the clan's access to water and land for farming or pasture. Their persistence reflects

the lack of official regulation and enforcement of access to resources, and the lack of reliable dispute-resolution mechanisms. Clan militias play a vital role in the bargaining over political and economic power at both federal and local levels. They vary in their conduct — including in their propensity to raid neighbours or perpetrate human rights violations — but tend to be highly networked across the country, meaning their actions tend to have broader ripple effects beyond their communities. Importantly, clan militias do not have static positions against or in support of al-Shabaab. For example, the Bimal clan militia in the Shabelle region originally allied with al-Shabaab, not due to any ideological affinity, but because it wished to fight the local SNA brigade composed of a rival clan (the Habar Gidir) challenging Bimal's control of land. AMISOM, acting in support of the SNA, also became aligned with the Habar Gidir clan as a result of this conflict. But in 2016, al-Shabaab and AMISOM switched their clan allies and the two groups — the local SNA and the Bimal militia — essentially agreed not to fight each other. Still, the Bimal militia has refused to demobilize.

B. State *darwish* paramilitary forces

The term *darwish* refers here to a composite militia force carrying out military and police functions, operating independently from the SNA and directed by federal member state presidents.⁶³ Regardless of their origin, *darwish* forces constitute an important power base for elite political actors, a sort of praetorian guard providing protection and the threat of force against rivals. However, because the Somali constitution does not permit federal member states to command armies of any kind, state governments have renamed many *darwish* forces “special police,” allowing them to be retained within the national structures. Although they often operate fully independently of and potentially against the SNA, they are often used to secure territories from al-Shabaab attacks. Increasingly, Somali and international actors are exploring whether the *darwish* could be used as the primary forces to hold territory

any future SNA/AMISOM clearing operations manage to retake from al-Shabaab.⁶⁴ But in some settings, such as in Puntland, *darwish* forces have expanded their functions to include regular police operations.

The *darwish* are increasingly seen by some members of the international community as a vital source of force generation against al-Shabaab. This is so despite the fact that *darwish* forces vary significantly in their own capacities, sometimes having as little operational effectiveness as the SNA, though they often carry more local legitimacy than the national forces.⁶⁵ Reliance on *darwish* forces is increasing, but because they are not formally recognized within Somalia's security architecture, they do not receive any support from international donors. As a result, their salaries, equipment, benefits, and logistical and medical support depend fully on what can be provided by the federal member states. States that have taxable ports, such as Juba and Puntland, have a far easier time supporting their *darwish* forces than states without rents, such as the South-West State.

C. Warlord and contract militias

Militias of prominent warlords characterized much of the fighting of the 1990s and early part of the first decade of the twenty-first century. These militias gave rise to successive iterations of Islamist groups. Many continue to exist, but some have changed their uniforms and have become formally integrated into other militia groups, including the *darwish*. In some cases, they still exist unanchored in other structures or under other labels, such as the militia group of Mukhtar Robow (described below). These groups predominantly serve the economic and political interests of their powerbroker sponsor, augmenting his political might, suppressing opposition and prosecuting economic rent interests through unaccountable means that are often predatory and exclusionary. Sometimes, such as in the case of Robow's militias, they may fight al-Shabaab, though rarely in conjunction with state forces.



UN Photo/Tobin Jones

A large industry in Somalia also exists around contract militias — in other words, mercenary forces. These are essentially private security forces pulled from clan and warlord militias, state-aligned *darwish*, and often include moonlighting soldiers of the SNA or officers of the SPF. They are hired to protect business interests, such as buildings and cargo transport, as well as to undermine or eliminate business opposition.

D. Externally created and sponsored militias

A final set of militia groups are those created by external sponsors to prosecute their interests, such as anti-piracy or counter-terrorism interests, or to defend

buffer zones. These groups often have primary loyalties to the external sponsor — provided the sponsor is reliable in paying them and otherwise supporting them. Such groups have little to no accountability to local communities or state or federal authorities.

The memberships within and across these various types of militia groups are often highly fluid, with many individuals belonging to multiple groups. Often, entire units have multiple hats and sponsors. For example, a part of a clan militia may be temporarily hired as a contract militia or to join a powerbroker's praetorian guard.

Fundamentally, much of Somalia's economic activity revolves around the service industry of protection against physical dangers and rival actors. Al-Shabaab is merely one actor that bids, albeit highly effectively, in this protection-for-

sale economy. Selling the business of protection, such as through militias, is very profitable, and the most significant source of paid employment in Somalia.

E. Portrait and evolution of selected militia groups

This section illustrates how security forces evolve over time, at times taking on roles far beyond their original purpose and producing complex economic and political effects.

1 Macawiisleey

Operating in the Lower Shabelle region, the Macawiisleey is an example of a newly constituted clan militia. Its recent formation shows clan militias are not static or necessarily long-standing. Named after the long sarong-like skirts its members wear, it is a militia of some 200 men — pastoralists and farmers — who organized recently to fight al-Shabaab's excessive taxation. Supported merely by voluntary food contributions of their community, the group has succeeded in recovering some villages from al-Shabaab. Its success is likely due to the fact that the area is not a priority for al-Shabaab, which does not have a contiguous distribution of fighters, and instead operates in pockets. Nonetheless, the Macawiisleey has managed to survive multiple battles with al-Shabaab. As a result, it attracted attention from Somali Members of Parliament who in 2019 met the group's leadership to show their support (and take credit for its achievements).⁶⁶ However, the sustainability of the Macawiisleey remains a major question, as the group has no support from the SNA or AMISOM; even road movement in the part of the Shabelle region where the Macawiisleey is active is currently prevented by al-Shabaab.⁶⁷

The formation of Macawiisleey shows that key challenges in Somalia are not merely the integration and regulation of existing militias, but also the continual formation of new militia groups. For example, new militia groups have

recently formed in the Hiiraan, Xunduur, and Bakool districts of the Middle Shabelle region, also to oppose al-Shabaab taxation.

2 Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a is a militia group formed in 1991 by Sunni Sufi Muslims to oppose jihadist groups that arose before al-Shabaab existed.⁶⁸ Operating mostly in Galmudug and the Hiiraan region of Hirshabelle, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a became an important anti-Shabaab actor and loose ally of Somalia's transitional Governments.⁶⁹ By 2017, it was estimated to have at least 5,000 fighters.⁷⁰ In addition to its religious orientation, the group also has a clan base. It has engaged in some of the fiercest fighting with al-Shabaab, far surpassing the intensity of fighting that clans are ordinarily willing to undertake. For years, it has managed to hold areas liberated from al-Shabaab. This resolve reflects perhaps both Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's religious orientation (al-Shabaab persecutes Sufis, though they are also Sunnis) and the fact that it includes many pastoralists — often fierce, heavily-armed soldiers who have experience fighting cattle raiders. As a result of its battlefield effectiveness, the areas of its operations in Galmudug are some of the only areas in Somalia, apart from Puntland and Somaliland, where unfettered travel on roads is possible for 200–300 kilometres.⁷¹

For years now, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a has enjoyed close support from Ethiopia. It has been one of Addis Ababa's important tools of power projection and political influence in Somalia. For years, Mogadishu viewed the group and its foreign sponsor as sowing political discord in Somalia advantageous to Ethiopia, as well as shaping the battlefield to Ethiopia's advantage.⁷²

The group's battlefield success, however, rapidly translated into its political ambition. Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a transformed from a religious-clan militia into a potent political actor profoundly influencing politics in Galmudug. Politicians representing and allied with Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a have been accused of authoritarian tendencies, including the use of the group as

a praetorian guard. Accusations of human rights abuses leveled against Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a include random shootings of civilians and extrajudicial killings.⁷³ Such accusations are all the more concerning because formal law enforcement and judicial courts do not function in Galmudug. This pervasive lack of rule of law and dispute resolution mechanisms also produces many revenge killings in the state, and consequently a steady supply of militiamen.

3 The South-West Special Police

The South-West *darwish*, now mostly referred to as the South-West Special Police, represents an example of state paramilitary forces established only very recently — in late 2014 — as much to retake territory from al-Shabaab as to strengthen the bargaining capacities of South-West State politicians vis-à-vis Mogadishu.

The *darwish* fighters were selected by clan elders who had to certify that the recruits were of good discipline and morals. At first, their fighting morale was high. Deployed on the perimeters of an Ethiopian base, they complemented Ethiopian forces in the anti-Shabaab fight and ventured as far as 60 kilometres away to fight al-Shabaab. However, these clearing operations by the *darwish* stopped in 2017 and a portion of the militia force disintegrated when Ethiopian forces unexpectedly packed up their base. At loose ends, the *darwish* around the base lost the capacity to sustain themselves. They lacked the coordination, leadership and incentives to continue fighting al-Shabaab.⁷⁴ Soon after, the attrition rate of the *darwish* dramatically shot up when al-Shabaab mounted an effective campaign to get them to desert, telling militia members' mothers that their sons could return without being killed if they gave their weapons to al-Shabaab and stopped fighting the militants.⁷⁵ Other fighters reverted to clan militias, becoming embroiled in fights for even small plots of land and water access points and driving up the lethality of clan conflicts in the area. Some *darwish* also colluded with SNA and illegally bought SNA uniforms, setting up checkpoints in rival communities to extort those communities and vehicles passing through them.⁷⁶

The remaining South-West Special Police have functioned to advance the political and economic interests of the state authorities. Yet, members of the Special Police have had no formal vetting, whether for al-Shabaab connections or human rights abuses. Neither have they been subjected to any recruitment standards or qualifications. Moreover, state authorities used the existence of the Special Police as a pretext to acquire large numbers of weapons from Ethiopia. Ostensibly to equip the Special Police, the authorities procured weapons such as AK-47s and heavier machine guns in Ethiopia for USD \$200 and \$2,000 respectively. But in Somalia, the guns were sold to the highest bidder (usually for USD \$800 and \$9,000, respectively). Buyers included clans, for whom machine gun ownership conveys prestige, and al-Shabaab.⁷⁷

Currently numbering 2,900, the South-West Special Police is deployed to eight districts (with a 300-man contingent in each) and the capital of Baidoa, where 500 Special Police are believed to operate. Despite its problematic background and record, the group is increasingly seen by local, federal and even some international actors as a source of force generation for the SNA, since the SNA in South-West state continues to take very large casualties almost daily, and lacks the capacity to replenish its ranks.

A completely separate entity with a similar name, the South-West State Police, is an official entity formally recognized under Somalia's security architecture. It is composed of 824 officers and 12 US-trained investigators, and has had recruitment and vetting procedures in place since 2016. Somali authorities report that all officers were recruited according to the recruiting and vetting procedures, but the international community has no capacity to verify these claims. Although recruitment is based on clan presence in an area, there is some semblance of equity in recruitment. The force is tasked with community policing, traffic policing, criminal investigations and countering gender violence — though there is no clear delineation of functions from the national-level SPF, which also has 270 officers present in South-West State, in supervisory positions at police stations. In practice, local communities cannot distinguish

between State Police and SPF officers, but State Police officers prefer to be enrolled instead into the national-level SPF where they are more likely to be paid salaries and receive benefits.

Because of international human rights training and international payments of salaries tied to human rights performance, the frequency of human rights violations by the South-West State Police has decreased. That, in itself, is a very significant accomplishment. Although allegations of police corruption and checkpoint extortion do arise, the State Police appears to have become better at policing its own ranks. It has even arrested police officers for shooting suspects, a crucial improvement, particularly if the investigated officers are actually punished, as now happens.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, when the international community froze payments to the South-West State Police because of their shooting of protestors during an altercation with the warlord-cum-politician Mukhtar Robow during his December 2018 arrest, human rights violations by the South-West State Police significantly increased. The State Police upped its involvement in extortion, as officers felt the need to generate livelihoods for themselves and their families.

4 Mukhtar Robow's militia

The militia of the warlord Mukhtar Robow also operates in South-West State. This militia is an example of a warlord's militia drawn predominantly from the Rahaweyn clan and its Laysan sub-clan, which is Robow's power base. A prominent founding member of al-Shabaab and one of its top commanders, Robow defected from the militant group in 2017 after years of strained relations with the rest of al-Shabaab's leadership.⁷⁹ He then made a deal with Farmajo — a deal criticized as opaque and unaccountable — that at first appeared to give Robow a problematic full amnesty in exchange for his promising to mobilize additional Rahaweyn militias to fight al-Shabaab.⁸⁰ Soon, however, Robow showed he had other ambitions, and campaigned to be President of South-West State, challenging the political interests of Farmajo and

the local politicians Farmajo supported. Robow was also successful in recruiting new militias — not to fight al-Shabaab but to support his political and economic ambitions.

Farmajo claimed that Robow violated a part of the secret deal (the case for the claim was neither clear nor compelling) and in December 2018 had Ethiopian troops arrest him.⁸¹ The arrest turned into a bloody firefight between forces representing Farmajo's interest — the South-West State Police and the Ethiopian army — and Robow's militias, with casualties in the hundreds.

The arrest shook Somalia and cast an aura of authoritarian centralist tendencies around Farmajo. It also alienated much of the Rahaweyn clan, who campaigned for Robow's release and who resented that the pro-Farmajo Administration in South-West State was excluding them from patronage.

Fascinatingly, however, Robow's militia group did not turn out to be a significant source of instability. Some 250 of the fighters he recruited since his defection from al-Shabaab were integrated into the SNA — with no vetting of their record and capabilities. Between 100 and 200 of his original militiamen, who were part of al-Shabaab and defected with him, have neither been integrated nor demobilized. Instead, NISA (the national intelligence agency) has placed them on its payroll, supplying them with weapons and money. But there is little transparency as to the conduct and operations of the group, which operates in the Xuddur district, where NISA does not even have a permanent presence.⁸²

5 Ahmed Madobe's forces

The President of Jubbaland State, Ahmed Madobe, is one of Somalia's most powerful warlords-cum-politicians. Since 2012, he and his militia group, predominantly drawn from the Ogaden clan, have been in charge of the port of Kismayo, the premier transportation hub in southern Somalia and one of the biggest sources of revenues and rents in the whole

country. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Madobe was a high commander in the Ras Kamboni Brigade, an Islamist militia that fought Somalia's transitional federal Government (from 2004–12) and had a fluctuating relationship with al-Shabaab.⁸³ Eventually, a faction led by Madobe, the Ras Kamboni Movement, split off and began to aggressively fight al-Shabaab, rapidly gathering support from Kenya. Kenya has remained a strong ally of Madobe since, even at the expense of intense political tensions with Mogadishu. In 2012, Madobe managed to wrest control of Kismayo and surrounding areas from al-Shabaab, a territory he has been in control of since.

Although Madobe has repeatedly been elected President of Jubbaland State, he hardly controls all of its territory. Al-Shabaab remains in charge of a large portion of the state, including its most fertile areas. It also imposes taxation throughout much of the state.⁸⁴ The northern Gedo region of Jubbaland, comprising six districts, is under the control of a distinct regional administration. With support of Ethiopian forces operating outside of AMISOM, and President Farmajo who has a clan base there, this administration acts independently of Kismayo and Madobe. Moreover, Madobe's rule has been contested by clan warlords and other groups, such as Barre Hiiraale's Maharen militias in 2014, which Madobe eventually defeated. In August 2019, Kismayo and Jubbaland opposition leaders elected a rival Jubbaland President, Abdirashid Mohamed Hidig, whom Farmajo recognized.⁸⁵

After 2014, Madobe's Ras Kamboni Movement was transformed into Jubbaland Darwish, purporting to be the state's paramilitary police but still drawing predominantly on the Ogaden clan for members. Its loyalty remains anchored to Madobe and to the Ogaden clan, not to any Jubbaland administration.⁸⁶ Madobe also operates a Jubbaland intelligence service, the Jubbaland Intelligence and Security Agency (JISA). JISA, Jubbaland State Police, and the Jubbaland Darwish are together known as Jubbaland State Forces, all loyal principally to Madobe and consisting of perhaps as many as 5,000 individuals, though a precise count is not

known. A 2014 experiment to force Madobe to bring fighters from 20 other clans into his forces did not produce pan-clan integration: the new fighters languished in a camp for two years before returning home.⁸⁷ The Jubbaland State Forces, while independently supported by Kenya, have not received official United Nations-approved financial assistance and training, including human rights training, from actors operating under a United Nations framework. Madobe thus needs to raise money by licit and illicit taxation in and around Kismayo to maintain his forces.

There are also SNA units in Kismayo, mostly drawn from the Ogaden clan and trained by Kenya several years ago. But these units have disintegrated since Kenya's training. However, their remnants and reconstituted versions cooperate closely with Madobe because of the shared clan basis.⁸⁸ To the extent that the SNA units in Kismayo retain members from non-Ogaden clans, their integration has been difficult. In late 2019, one such clan section of the SNA tried to break away and return to its home clan area, alleging that Madobe, who as President of Jubbaland State refused to pay them — even though Mogadishu and the SNA posted in Jubbaland expected a part of the Jubbaland budget to go towards that purpose.⁸⁹

In contrast, the separate SNA brigade and two battalions in the Gedo region are drawn from Farmajo's clan, the Maharen, and, along with the Ethiopian forces that support them, side with the federal Government. Speculations are rife that Farmajo will seek to use Ethiopian forces to detain Madobe, as he did for Robow. But any such move would risk an armed confrontation not only with Madobe's Jubbaland State Forces, but also with Kenyan forces.⁹⁰ Indeed, such a regional confrontation was on the cusp of fully breaking out in March 2020 when Madobe's Jubbaland State Forces clashed with the federal SNA in the Balad Hawo district of Jubbaland and resulted in several deaths.⁹¹ Although, as this study went to press, the situation had temporarily quieted down, the political rifts remain unresolved and threaten to break out again.

Kismayo, which is Madobe's base, and has been one of the safest areas in Somalia with respect to al-Shabaab attacks — far safer than Mogadishu. But although Madobe's militia security system protects the city from al-Shabaab, it is also highly partial, engaging in political repression and mafia-like economic racketeering. Suppression of freedom of expression and land grabbing are its most glaring manifestations.

Jubbaland State Forces function as Madobe's praetorian guard and private enforcement entity against rival politicians, clan leaders, business leaders and other independent voices. They suppress any opposition political activity. Somali interlocutors widely attribute assassinations of clan elders who have spoken up against Madobe to Madobe's forces.⁹² Opposition politicians or NGOs often cannot operate in Kismayo and leave for Mogadishu. No fair and transparent elections have been held in Kismayo since 2012. During the 2019 elections, Madobe banned opposition members from running for or casting votes in Jubbaland's Parliament.⁹³

Land grabbing from minority clans and vulnerable populations without arms has characterized Madobe's rule.⁹⁴ The taxes his administration levies are seen as biased, with higher fees for rival clans and opposition groups. Madobe's forces also ensure his dominance of Kismayo's licit and illicit markets, including cargo and contraband — such as charcoal — going through Kismayo. Al-Shabaab nonetheless maintains its taxation networks in the port and controls roads to Kenya and other parts of Somalia.⁹⁵ However, as tensions between Madobe and Farmajo have escalated, Farmajo has been trying to cut down Madobe's revenues. The Somali President's methods include trying to muscle ships into docking in Mogadishu instead of Kismayo and preventing airlines from landing in Kismayo unless they land in Mogadishu first.

Moreover, the dispute between Madobe and Mogadishu, and by extension between their Kenyan and Ethiopian backers, has produced a deterioration of security and a rise in al-Shabaab attacks in Kismayo itself.⁹⁶

6 The Puntland Maritime Police Force and the Puntland Security Force

Puntland, in Somalia's north-east corner, has long operated as an autonomous territory within the country, even before the federal member state formation started formally taking place. Puntland also has a long history of hosting a plethora of militia groups. Today, these include *darwish* forces, similar to those present in the South-West State, as well as militia groups originally set up by international private security companies, but later supported by the Emirates, US, and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia.

Hart Security, a British private security firm, was first brought in to Puntland in 2000–2002, to help reduce illegal fishing, but withdrew amidst violent political divisions in the state that were affecting and splitting its local recruits.⁹⁷ A Canadian-Somali firm, SomCan, replaced Hart Security for several years.⁹⁸ In 2010, Sterling Corporate Services, based in Dubai and hired by the Emirates, started training what would become the PMPF.

Supported and paid by the Emirates, the PMPF originally had a mandate to tackle Somali pirates on land in Puntland. International and national anti-pirate flotillas furnished by NATO, Australia, China, India and Russia began patrolling the seas and arresting pirates. Cargo ships started building defensive citadels and hiring private security firms to board ships and defend them against pirates. But the pirates' land havens and networks remained untouched. Determined to secure safe ship and cargo passage through the Gulf of Aden, the Emirates sought to rectify this gap through the creation of the PMPF. The militia's tasks were to gather intelligence, dismantle the pirate networks, camps and safe havens, and to identify and disrupt pirate enablers and financiers.⁹⁹

In the initial years, the South African private security company Saracen (with an apartheid-era tainted membership) ran the training mission — with dismal outcomes.¹⁰⁰ A *New York Times* investigative report described conditions in the

training camp as “something out of the Wild West,” with nearly 500 fighters going without pay for months and extensive human rights abuses.¹⁰¹ Eventually, however, the force became heftier.

Even so, the PMPF’s overall impact against the pirates’ land networks has been limited. At first, it managed to collect some local intelligence; but it never achieved strategic effects and the pirates’ networks have not been dismantled by the PMPF or any other actor.¹⁰² Instead, the pirate networks lie dormant, but ready to spring to action. Ship citadels and private security firms do hamper pirates. They also may be deterred to some extent by international prosecutions in Kenya and the Seychelles, where convicted pirates are imprisoned. But the pirate networks still attempt sea attacks. In November 2019, for example, they held an Iranian dhow for three days.

Critically, the pirate networks retain popular and political support. The vast sums of wealth and economic activity they brought to poor, remote fishing villages and other parts of Puntland translated into significant local and clan political capital.¹⁰³ Pirate commanders at times ended up leaders of their communities and even ran for office in Puntland’s state-level parliamentary elections. The pirates’ money and political capital also attracted attention and backing from Puntland’s key clan powerbrokers and politicians.¹⁰⁴ Pirates maintain their political clout and connections.

The pirates also invested money into a variety of legal economic activities in Puntland, producing complex tangles of political and business alliances and rivalries, including with key militias, such as the PMPF. The case of Isse Yulux, a well-known pirate, is exemplary of these political complexities.¹⁰⁵ Despite fluctuating relations with Puntland elites, Yulux was eventually able to bring his 350-man ex-pirate militia back into Puntland and set up operations in seven Puntland cities, transitioning from piracy into business and politics. One of his cousins became a key official in Puntland’s security ministry, and another the owner of a company hired to handle millions of dollars of procurement for food, transport and payroll for the Puntland State as well as the PMPF.¹⁰⁶

Two years ago, when the Emirates pressured the President of Puntland to take the contract from the Yulux-linked company and hand it over to another company, Yulux attacked both the PMPF and the new logistical company. Both are now allegedly engaged in a clandestine war with Yulux’s militia.¹⁰⁷ In November 2019, Yulux reportedly mobilized 50 men with heavy artillery and temporarily blocked the port of Bosaso, seeking to pressure Puntland’s President to return the logistical and procurement contract to the original operator. Many recent attacks in Bosaso have been linked to this fight. At the same time, Yulux manages to maintain relations with al-Shabaab and IS. Hassan Sheikh Mumin, the leader of IS in Somalia, is another one of Yulux’s cousins.

Instead of making significant progress against pirate land bases, the PMPF rapidly became involved in Puntland politics and embroiled in clan rivalries. It took on the role of praetorian guard for former Puntland President Abdirahman Farole, acting against his political opposition and neutralizing his business rivals.¹⁰⁸ It has remained the praetorian guard of subsequent administrations, including for current Puntland President Said Abdullahi Dani.

Although the PMPF has no basis in Somalia’s constitution and operates outside of Somalia’s security architecture framework, it has been regularly used by US special operations forces and the Emirates to combat al-Shabaab and IS in Puntland.¹⁰⁹ The US eventually set up its own separate private auxiliary group in Puntland, the PSF, which also operates outside of Somalia’s constitution and security architecture. These two groups are arguably the only militias in Somalia that are truly loyal to external patrons — as long as the external patrons pay them well.

Numbering some 500 and 1,000 men respectively, the PMPF and PSF are both better trained and equipped than Puntland’s *darwish* (and the SNA), and attract more capable and educated recruits, limiting the availability of more competent fighters to the official forces of Puntland and Somalia. But as al-Shabaab has aggressively targeted both forces, they have sustained high casualties. Their movement to markets for supplies is often limited — al-

Shabaab ambushes along roads are a favorite tactic.

Since both al-Shabaab and IS ally with marginalized clans, actions against the militants have further embroiled the PMPF and PSF in clan rivalries. IS's 200 men are mostly restricted to the area of Qandala in Puntland. But the terrorist group also operates safe havens in the strategic port of Bosaso, which gives the PMPF a counter-terrorism justification for conducting a wide-ranging set of questionable raids in the city. These raids suppress political and economic opposition to PMPF's political sponsors.¹¹⁰

In fact, the PMPF has usurped varied policing functions in Bosaso, also under the guise of conducting anti-pirate operations and intelligence gathering against pirates and *potential* pirates. This arrogation of powers has generated human rights violations.¹¹¹ As the PMPF has no adequate human rights training, the raids into people's houses have at times proven deadly to civilians. Its general "anti-crime" raids often do not distinguish between innocent citizens and criminals. They round up people from neighbourhoods and place them in detention without charges for days.¹¹² As a Western law enforcement advisor put it: "You can't put the words 'civil liberties' and 'Puntland' together in the same sentence."¹¹³ Such illegal mistreatment stokes fear and antagonism in communities. It also, perhaps, risks the radicalization of some residents and their susceptibility to recruitment by al-Shabaab, IS or pirate and criminal groups.

At the same time, PMPF's anti-crime activities in Bosaso have produced a degree of political capital for the group in the city, despite its human rights violations. But its activities also undermine and detract from the capacities and authority of the growing Puntland State Police, the official anti-crime agency.¹¹⁴

Worse still, the PMPF has come into political conflict over jurisdiction with official Puntland law enforcement agencies, the Puntland State Police and the Puntland Maritime Police (PMP). The nascent PMP is a formal security actor embedded in the new Somali security

architecture. Between 100 and 200 men strong, the PMP so far has essentially no enforcement capacity; it does not even have any vessels. While almost inactive in terms of anti-piracy operations, it has fought the PMPF over access and control of Bosaso.

Nonetheless, the PMPF has acted with important restraint on several occasions. By 2014, Farole had overstayed his time in office, but refused to step down. Puntland was feared to be on the verge of civil war, as rival clans clamored for control of the presidency. The Emirates restrained the PMPF from supporting Farole's violence against rivals and pressured him to step down from the state presidency. Farole ultimately negotiated a one-year extension, as a compromise. The fact that Farole's own clan eventually pressured him to agree to the compromise and resign was crucial as well. Apparently, the Emirates emphasized in negotiations with Farole that the PMPF not be seen as his personal militia, but rather as a tool of the Puntland presidency.¹¹⁵ Farole's successor, Abdiweli Gaas, replaced the PMPF leadership but managed to control the group, again molding it to serve his interests.

The PMPF also abstained from becoming involved in military exchanges between Puntland and Somaliland that in the spring of 2018 almost escalated into a full-blown war. Once again, the Emirates' role in restraining the PMPF was crucial — with the Emirates seeking to cultivate a close relationship with both states.

But if the Emirates or the US withdrew their financial support from these militia groups, the Puntland government (and Somalia) would have a massive problem on its hands. Even while receiving port revenues, Puntland cannot easily afford to pay for the militias. Deprived of the funding they are accustomed to, the militia groups might become militias for hire, join militants or perhaps even be hired by pirates.¹¹⁶

Moreover, the Emirates' patronage has involved the PMPF in geopolitical conflicts playing out in Puntland. The PMPF has, at various times, attacked Iranian ships, claiming they were illegally fishing in Somali waters. (Iran and the

Emirates are rivals.) During one such incident in October 2017, the Iranian captain of the ship was killed.¹¹⁷ Similarly, bombings in Bosaso, at first believed to be carried out by al-Shabaab, have been alleged to be sponsored by Qatar, with the goal of driving the Emirates out of Puntland and taking over Bosaso port operations.¹¹⁸ The violence in Bosaso is meant to frighten Emirati businesses, particularly P&O Ports, which manages the Bosaso port. In February 2019, two attackers disguised as fishermen killed the P&O Ports' manager and wounded three other employees, with al-Shabaab claiming responsibility.¹¹⁹ In turn, the PMPF has been seeking to eliminate alleged Qatari proxies. Interviewees reported that rumors (unverified) were circulating in Somalia that Qatar has used al-Shabaab in Puntland to target Dubai's interests and the PMPF, while the Emirates has used the IS to attack Qatar's interests in the country.¹²⁰

F. The dangers of militia forces

Somalia hosts a wide variety of different militias, each with distinct relationships with the State and the communities of the country. Many have stepped in where the SNA has proven unable to address major security risks — including that of al-Shabaab — and in several cases, the militias present an attractive alternative to State forces. However, taken together, these forces also create their own risks, not only to vulnerable civilian communities, but also to longer-term peace prospects in Somalia. Some of the most relevant risks are listed below.

1. Militias can undermine the authority of the central Government, potentially exacerbating already fraught centre-periphery dynamics;
2. The capabilities of militia groups are highly varied, but many lack training, officer leadership skills, and unit cohesion, thus delivering a highly uneven performance against their designated enemies, such as al-Shabaab or pirate networks;
3. Local powerbrokers use militias as their praetorian guards, solidifying authoritarian forms of rule; preventing the formation of more inclusive, pluralistic governance; and preventing the building of institutions;
4. It is difficult to predict or control how militias will evolve; they have strong tendencies to shift allegiances, potentially undermining their original utility;
5. Militias cost the federal member states significant amounts of scarce budgetary resources, without providing commensurate tax benefits back to the state;
6. Underfunded and logistically unsupported militia groups often prey on local communities, at times perpetrating serious human rights violations. There are essentially no formal accountability mechanisms to deter or punish such behaviour, so militias often contribute to underlying grievances;
7. Militia groups profoundly shape local political economies and can enable exclusionary and mafia-like economic practices, undermining the legitimacy of national and local authorities;
8. Militias frequently exacerbate local and clan conflicts over land, water and other resources. These conflicts, in turn, create justifications for the persistence, and formation, of more armed groups;
9. Militant groups such as al-Shabaab may exploit clan and community conflicts and economic grievances exacerbated by militias for their entrenchment, sustainability, military power and political appeal;
10. At the same time, the loyalties of militia groups and their members are highly fluid and unreliable. The groups are susceptible to defection and recruitment even by erstwhile enemies, as fighters'

and entire groups' loyalty is to individuals or clans, rather than institutions;

11. Externally created and sponsored militia groups may have minimal loyalties to Somalia and Somali actors, potentially undermining Somalia's sovereignty and serving the interests of the external patrons at the expense of Somalia's national interests. But without providing sustained large payments, even external sponsors of militia groups cannot be assured of those groups' allegiance;
12. Militia groups do not simply supplement the Somali national forces and international forces in Somalia. They also undermine, displace and detract from building up the Somali national forces by drawing away the best recruits and other resources. They intensify the risk of defections from the Somali national forces, providing alternative and sometimes more lucrative sources

of licit and illicit livelihoods for official Somali soldiers and police officers.

These risks tend to accumulate over time, meaning that militias pose a much greater longer-term risk to the fabric of Somalia. Many experts interviewed for this study suggested that, even if al-Shabaab were comprehensively defeated, a range of militia and paramilitary forces would likely fill the power vacuum, competing viciously for control of key territories, and perhaps triggering the next civil war.

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Current response

S omalia's militia fighters number in the tens of thousands, but there is no constitutional or security framework authorization for them, nor any overarching policy for managing them. Members of the international community and the Somali Government hope that some of the *darwish* militias will be integrated into the SNA, the SPF, NISA and official state police forces. And, as detailed below, in some cases such integration is taking place, though haltingly and with difficulties. But the expected integration is unlikely to cover all of the *darwish* militias. Beyond the *darwish*, there is no plan for how to address the plethora of Somalia's other militia groups.

Moreover, the international community and Somali internal actors are fundamentally divided as to how to address the militia groups. Key actors including the US, Ethiopia and Kenya have soured on the struggling institutional development efforts in Somalia, particularly the construction of Somalia's official forces. Instead, they are increasingly looking to militia groups to pursue their counter-terrorism and anti-militancy objectives. Other members of the international community have also called for the *darwish* to generate forces to fight al-Shabaab.¹²¹ Over the past five years, the shortcomings of the SNA have prompted greater reliance on militias, resulting in the creation of new forces to tackle al-Shabaab and other antagonists.

The trend of militia proliferation is unlikely to be reversed, despite the pervasive risks

associated with them. In fact, some members of the international community are contemplating an even more scaled-down version of the SNA and still greater support to militias. There is a very plausible scenario in which, in the medium term, a large part of Somalia's security, counter-terrorism, and even national defence functions is taken over by militias.

Yet, other members of the international community are troubled by these tendencies and are seeking to minimize the formation of new militias and refocus on State-building. They argue that State-led efforts should lead the fight against al-Shabaab, with a focus on significantly boosting defections from the extremist group and doubling down on the building of institutional capacities. In the medium term, this approach anticipates a reduction in the security risk posed by al-Shabaab, resulting in a gradual dismantling of militias, as the need for them dissipates.¹²²

Somali actors are equally divided and conflicted. Key federal member states do not want to give up their militias, or have them integrated into formal Somali federal and state armed services. This is, in part, because they see militias as crucial protection against Mogadishu's federal Government. Clan elders, too, have pushed the federal member states, the Government, and international donors for greater support for their own clan-affiliated forces.¹²³

The following section reviews existing and considered policies for reducing the scale and negative effects of the militias, the circumstances that make their adoption feasible, and the challenges they encounter. The assessed policies include integrating militias into formal security forces; putting them on official payrolls and providing them with non-lethal assistance without integrating them into formal forces; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR); and addressing local conflicts as an indirect approach to eliminating the impetus for militias.

A. Integration into official federal and state-level forces

Although mostly applied only to *darwish* forces, integration of some militias into the formal Somali security services has been the dominant mechanism for scaling back militias. Under optimistic scenarios, up to 20,000 *darwish*-like forces could be integrated into Somalia's official security and police forces. However, no integration plan currently exists for militias that are not already federal member states' paramilitary forces.

Even for the *darwish*, the process has been complicated by distrust between the federal Government and federal member states. States want the integrated *darwish* to be paid for by the federal Government, but to remain under their command and control. Not surprisingly, the federal Government prefers the very opposite or, if it is to pay for integrated *darwish*, to also obtain command and control over them, including being able to post the forces to any part of Somalia.¹²⁴ The *darwish*, which tend to be linked to specific communities and territories, also do not want to be subject to deployment anywhere in Somalia. While they do not necessarily object to raiding a neighboring community or creating monopolies in their home states, they do not want to be posted far away from their communities.¹²⁵ If clan militias were eventually to be considered eligible for enrolment into official Somali forces, the issue of control over deployment would loom large.

Current tensions between the Farmajo Administration and federal member states only amplify these long-standing power divisions. According to some analysts, the federal Government has come to see efforts to reinforce any local or regional forces as a threat, despite being officially permitted by the Somali constitution and security framework.¹²⁶ For example, while the new policing model, the formal police design programme in Somalia to which the federal Government agreed and which the international community supports, allows for the creation of state police (and some already do exist), the federal Government has at times tried to hamper the development of such forces.¹²⁷ Moreover, the federal Government has at times refused to pay *darwish* forces integrated into Somalia's formal armed services, alienating federal member state leadership and motivating leaders to recall the "integrated" members back from federal institutions, to return them to local control.

Another obstacle is that Somalia's National Reintegration Commission, charged with integration of units within the SNA and of *darwish* into Somali national forces, is very focused on the SNA as the predominant agency for integration of *darwish*, neglecting opportunities for integrating militias into the SPF or NISA.¹²⁸ Given that the existing size of the SPF, including state-affiliated *darwish*, is currently estimated at 8,000 (out of an authorized 30,000), the force could absorb a substantial portion of militias.

However, there are very large risks of bringing in poorly vetted militias into any of the official forces. Already, NISA is widely assessed to be deeply infiltrated by al-Shabaab.¹²⁹ Enrolling some of the more capable and less problematic militias into the SNA may enhance its fighting capacity, especially if existing SNA older and unwell soldiers were either retired or moved into non-operational roles. In addition to regularizing the militiamen and mitigating their chance of going rogue, a pipeline of vetted militiamen could prevent a large SNA manpower gap (if sick and old soldiers were retired). Here, the long-anticipated but not yet approved Pensions and Gratuities Bill is a critical mechanism for removing unfit soldiers from the SNA and for

creating space for militia integration. However, the legislation has not yet been passed, and international funding for it remains uncertain. Lacking secured pensions, older or disabled soldiers thus refuse to retire, or might join existing militias or form new ones.¹³⁰

These risks may well be outweighed by the need to develop trusted, effective local police and security forces that will build legitimacy in local communities. Such forces are necessary hedges against the predatory characteristics of militias, can counter the pervasive culture of impunity, and will go a long way towards addressing the deeper sociopolitical grievances that drive al-Shabaab's recruitment in many parts of Somalia. Absent legitimate government-run forces, the Somali national project will remain stalled.

Comprehensive vetting of ex-militia members, including for human rights abuses, must be accompanied by adequate training if these new State security forces are to become effective and legitimate. Although vetting criteria exist on paper, it is not clear how scrupulously, if at all, they are actually implemented. Somali national and state actors often lack the capacity and motivation to scrutinize the background and human rights record of militiamen in Somalia, including the state paramilitary *darwish*, often merely relying on an oral approval from one or a few clan elders. While the clans often have a reasonably good picture of the behaviour of some of their clan members, they also have varied interests that can undermine diligent, objective scrutiny — namely, getting their militiamen legitimized and placed on a steady payroll.¹³¹ The international community, for its part, lacks the capacity to conduct such monitoring.

But without diligent vetting, merely folding new militias into the SNA and SPF only means replicating the deficiencies and problems of the SNA: its weakness, its lack of motivation, its lack of loyalty to the Somali State, and its predatory and abusive behaviour. Inadequate vetting also risks creating a force that would easily come apart as a result of exacerbated clan tensions, or tensions between the federal Government and the federal member states, replicating the collapse of the Somali army in the early 1990s.

All of these risks will be even more amplified if the international community decides to support only a very light and small SNA, and primarily prosecutes its counter-terrorism and other security and geopolitical interests through an increased outreach to and embrace of militias and local regional actors.

B. Cases of ongoing integration

Below, this study outlines four cases of ongoing, or halted, integration: the South-West Special Police and Robow's militias in South-West State; Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a in Galmudug; and the *darwish* of Puntland.

1 South-West Special Police and Robow's militias

After months of refusing to proceed with the integration of its *darwish* forces into the SNA and SNP, the South-West State conceded to such integration in 2019. As of January 2020, between 600 and 700 members of the South-West Special Police were integrated into the SNA in the Bakool region. The expectation is that all of the 3,000-strong South-West Special Police will be similarly integrated in several other regions. However, it appears that no actual vetting has been applied to the militia members, with the first group brought in as a whole unit — essentially relabeled and transferred to the federal payroll.

Three factors were critical for this integration to take place: First, unlike Puntland and Jubbaland, the South-West State has no ports to tax or otherwise generate revenues. It has long been in severe debt. Government employees often go for months without being paid. It was thus looking for a way to shed the financial burden of maintaining the *darwish*.

Second, in 2018, Farmajo managed to maneuver an ally into South-West's presidency, Abdiiaziz Hassan Mohamed, known by his nickname, Lafta Gareen. Moreover, political patrons of

the Special Police also bargained and obtained appointments in the South-West State and federal administrations and parliaments, with the integration essentially partially paid for with political appointments.¹³² It is highly doubtful that the previous President of the state, Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, who was often in opposition to Farmajo, would have agreed to the integration. Instead, he sought to keep the *darwish* as his independent force, even though he lacked the resources to pay them.¹³³

Third, Ethiopia has substantial influence in the state and is currently closely aligned with Farmajo, so much so it was willing to act as Farmajo's weapon against Robow and alienate important South-West clans. Ethiopia's push for integration clearly played a role.

An even more ad hoc and opaque process of integration took part with a portion of Mukhtar Robow's militias. Some 250 men — all presumably recruited only after he worked out an amnesty deal with Farmajo, had left al-Shabaab, and started campaigning for the South-West presidency — were rolled into the SNA after his arrest in 2018. Given the intense clan tensions that Robow's arrest caused, addressing his militias and negotiating compensation with the aggrieved clans were seen as critical to prevent major eruption of violence. Once again, no vetting seemed to have been applied to Robow's militiamen brought into the SNA. But their loyalties to him were seen as weak, with stronger allegiance to their clans. Putting them on the SNA payroll was also seen as a part of the package to appease the clans.¹³⁴

2 Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a

In Galmudug, the integration of at least parts of Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a started taking place in July 2019.¹³⁵ As in South-West State, financial motivations were a key factor in why Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a and the Galmudug administration agreed to allow for at least a part of the militia to be integrated into Somali national forces, though they struggled to financially sustain the force. An underlying prior political agreement and reconciliation between Galmudug authorities

and the federal Government were critical. Moreover, there are essentially no SNA and SPF forces in Galmudug, so the state administration faced little security threat from a national force rival if they gave up Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a.

Even so, the negotiations dragged on for more than two years, as neither the Galmudug authorities nor the leadership of Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a wanted to give up command of any Sunna unit integrated into the Somali national forces and hand it over to the federal Government. Ultimately, neither the militia nor the state got all of the control they asked for, but they still retained control of much of the chain of the command.¹³⁶

As in South-West State, a political payoff was a critical part of the deal: Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a obtained some 20 seats in Galmudug's 89-seat Parliament (though it had sought more), and the group's political patrons obtained appointments in the federal Government.

The support of external powers was also critical. For years, Ethiopia used Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a to pursue its own interests in Somalia. After a close alignment between Farmajo and Ethiopia emerged, Ethiopia started pressuring Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a and Galmudug leadership for integration of the militia into the Somalia national forces. Qatar, also close with Farmajo and exercising influence over Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, pushed for the same integration.

Perhaps even more so than in South-West State, it remains to be seen whether the process will actually create meaningful integration, or if it will remain a cosmetic relabeling of forces whose loyalties rest with local Galmudug actors and not Somali national authorities.

And as in South-West State, there appears to have been no vetting of the integrated Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a militiamen for human rights violations, despite such previous problems, or other key disqualifications, including whether children from the group (expected to be among Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's fighters) are rolled onto the federal Government payroll as soldiers for the SNA.¹³⁷ Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's leadership,

in fact, allegedly refused to permit the vetting.¹³⁸ Moreover, reports have emerged that Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a leaders and Galmudug state authorities are already recruiting new militias from the interior of a state.¹³⁹ Moreover, as this study went to press, in March 2020, fighting broke out between the federal Government and those Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's fighters not integrated into the Somali national forces.¹⁴⁰

3 Puntland darwish

Not surprisingly, no integration of the PMPF or PSF is under discussion. However, the previous Puntland administration of Abdiweli Gaas (President from 2014–18) agreed to integrate 2,400 *darwish* into the SNA. Yet, despite the existence of a trust fund dedicated to the purpose, the Farmajo Administration failed to pay the integrated soldiers for 18 months after the integration supposedly occurred. When Dani assumed the presidency of the state in 2018, he was at odds with the federal Government over the issue and worried that the *darwish* forces turning loose or defecting to their communities. At the beginning of 2020, he recalled the integrated soldiers — who had been biometrically registered with the SNA — and designated them a special police force under his control.¹⁴¹

Arguably, the failure to integrate the Puntland *darwish* has been a critical mistake of the Farmajo Administration, and has set back the national State-building process. If the integration had proceeded well, the SNA would have been strengthened, reducing the number of militias and potentially addressing long-standing centre-periphery tensions. Instead, following the aborted integration process, tensions between the federal Government and Puntland have significantly worsened. This has further contributed to a deterioration of relations between the Emirates — Puntland's external sponsor — and Mogadishu, potentially making future integrations harder to negotiate.

The combination of an integration mishandled by Mogadishu, and the subsequent decision by Puntland to recall the *darwish* forces, sets a

problematic precedent for Somalia. At the time of writing, both Madobe and the Galmudug administrations were also considering recalling some of their currently SNA-hatted forces, to be renamed “special police” under their control.¹⁴²

These cases suggest that four key conditions must be in place for a successful integration of *darwish* forces (or indeed others) into the national security services: (1) Relations between the federal member states and Mogadishu must be on relatively good footing; (2) Federal member states must have a financial incentive to agree to the integration (in other words, they must be unable to afford to pay the forces on their own), and may need additional political payoffs; (3) Integrated forces must receive regular and sufficient pay; and (4) Some alignment between Mogadishu and external patrons (such as the Emirates or Ethiopia) is often required.

C. Payrolls and non-lethal assistance

Some members of the international community — namely, Germany, the UK, and the EU — are currently exploring options to provide payments to state *darwish* forces, and many observers increasingly believe that policy is heading in this direction.¹⁴³ The stipends would be analogous (though not necessarily matching) to the stipends the international community supports through its financial aid for the SNA and SPF. At the time of writing, no such formal funding stream supported with an international aid framework for Somalia exists. This type of funding would be separate from private funding for militias paid for foreign intelligence agencies and special forces, such as those provided by the US to the PSF or the Emirates to the PMPF. Some policy proposals also call for the provision of other non-lethal aid, including logistical support, medevac, and human rights training. While such aid could be positive, the international community does not currently possess adequate resources in Somalia for such support. For example, logistical support from the United Nations Support Office for Somalia for the SNA is capped at 10,900 SNA members — in other words, half of the force

authorized at 18,000 and actually numbering over 20,000.

The proposal to pay *darwish* forces is motivated by several distinct hopes for what the funding could achieve. The first such hope is that it would augment the capacity to fight al-Shabaab. The second hope is that it would ease friction between Mogadishu and the federal member states. Third, the funding might help anchor loyalties of the *darwish* forces to sub-federal institutions. And fourth, it might prevent *darwish* forces from defecting, going rogue, or engaging in extortion and abuse of local communities.¹⁴⁴ As a Western advisor in Mogadishu put it: "When militias are left alone, they are more likely to become spoilers."¹⁴⁵

In addition to addressing the SNA and SFP's chronic inability to recruit adequate numbers of troops and police, several precedents motivate the proposal to provide greater support to *darwish* forces. As discussed above, most observers believe that both the SNA and SFP are less likely to abuse communities and defect if they are well paid. Particularly in localities where international advisors have worked closely with SNA units (for example, in Baidoa), the SNA's human rights record has significantly improved. This outcome is attributable to close oversight by the international community and fear on the part of the SNA unit that it would lose international funding. Conversely, when the international community temporarily suspended payments to the SFP in Baidoa as a punishment violence against demonstrators protesting Robow's arrest, the police's predation on local communities significantly increased.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, NISA's decision to start paying the core element of Robow's militia after his arrest is considered to have prevented the militia from turning against the Government or defecting back to al-Shabaab.¹⁴⁷ (It is questionable, however, whether al-Shabaab would have accepted them back, instead of killing them in revenge.)¹⁴⁸ Putting the militia on NISA's payroll appears to have reduced its predatory tendencies in local communities as well, though clan oversight also plays an important role. Importantly, the payroll approach so far appears

to limit predatory behaviour without requiring NISA's permanent local presence.¹⁴⁹

Putting militias on regular state or international payroll is also the preference of many clan elders and local political powerbrokers. They argue that using clan militias or *darwish* forces is the best way to fight al-Shabaab — but only as long as they are supported well and consistently, such as with medical assistance, logistics, stipends and weapons. Under such circumstances, clan elders argue that militias will not prey on local communities.¹⁵⁰ These arguments should be balanced against the fairly obvious fact that such support would also bolster local clan militias against rival clans. Additionally, militias will likely use funds to purchase weapons instead of food and shelter, and funding could make its way into the hands of al-Shabaab (in contravention of various legal regimes among international donors).

Clan elders have also argued that internationally- or government-supported *darwish* or clan militias should only be posted within their respective clan area. This would reduce the likelihood of interclan violence and predation, but would also severely limit the utility of such forces against al-Shabaab, a highly mobile militant group. It also presumes that local areas are homogeneous in clan terms, which is frequently not the case.

Drawing on this analysis, several conditions appear necessary for a successful process of putting militias on payroll without integrating them into formal forces:

1. Financial support needs to be coupled with mandatory, robust human rights training, and vetting for prior human rights abuses;
2. Robust monitoring of militia units is required (possibly by international or Somali subcontractors);
3. Anti-impunity measures should allow for suspension of stipends, legal action, and expulsion from programmes if militias are found to have violated human rights or engaged in predatory practices;

Without these conditions, the international community risks significant moral and practical failures. Militia groups will be perversely incentivized to engage violently, attract attention, and be put on payroll, without mechanisms to ensure that they are using the support appropriately or adhering to basic human rights norms. Even with such mechanisms, it is possible that militia groups will fracture and reform around new financial incentives, requiring extremely robust monitoring of any payroll scheme.¹⁵¹

D. Amnesty and DDR

No formal amnesty has been promulgated for militia groups. However, no militia groups or their individual members currently face any formal prosecution for even severe human rights abuses. The result is that justice and accountability are largely dependent on inter-clan rivalries rather than the State, contributing to cycles of violence and playing into al-Shabaab's hands.

Nor is there any DDR policy for Somalia's tens of thousands of militia members.¹⁵² The only active DDR programme in Somalia is for low risk al-Shabaab defectors, such as cooks or menial workers, but not those who engaged in fighting on behalf of al-Shabaab.¹⁵³ The low risk requirement means that militia groups that at some point fought along al-Shabaab or as part of it cannot qualify, unless an exceptional deal is struck for them (as was the case with Robow) and they are labeled "high value" defectors. For example, the part of Robow's militia was recruited while he was part of al-Shabaab and fought on behalf of al-Shabaab (as opposed to the segment he recruited after he had struck the high-value amnesty deal with Farmajo) cannot qualify for the DDR programme and cannot be integrated into the SNA or SPF. In that case, an important opportunity is being missed to vet and hold Robow's forces accountable — many of which have been accused of serious human rights violations. In contrast, many al-Shabaab defectors, including presumably high risk ones,

do find their way into State security forces due to opaque and faulty vetting procedures.¹⁵⁴

The international community is currently reviewing whether and how to expand the al-Shabaab defectors programme and its associated DDR-like component. Despite various improvements in the programme over recent years, including a facility for female defectors, it has managed to attract and process only a small number of defectors. For example, in 2019, the Mogadishu Serendi facility processed fewer than 100 defectors, and the Baidoa facility slightly more than 200.¹⁵⁵ Such results do not seem to be making a strategic difference on the battlefield, nor are they robustly reinforcing stabilization efforts in Somalia; in fact, al-Shabaab's numbers are believed to have increased over the past three years.

One challenge is that the current programme disqualifies high risk defectors from DDR-like assistance, relegating them to military courts where they may be sentenced to death or lengthy prison sentences. As a result, al-Shabaab members may be deterred from defecting in large numbers.¹⁵⁶ Including a high risk category in the DDR-like programme could increase defection from al-Shabaab, and also from other militias like Robow's forces or others that have temporarily aligned with al-Shabaab. But it also carries risks of disloyalty and violence against the State and civilians.

Moreover, severe resource limitations and other constraints hamper the possibility of creating an effort sufficiently large enough to generate legal, non-violent livelihoods for the thousands of al-Shabaab members and tens of thousands of militiamen. Somalia's economy revolves around selling protection; many militiamen will simply not become barbers, plumbers, and taxi drivers even if provided with such training, because there is inadequate demand for such services. This situation raises a number of questions: Could Somalia's thriving private trading sector be mobilized and leveraged to generate new livelihoods for former militiamen? Or would their legal livelihood be analogous to the legal livelihoods of some Somali pirates who became



UN Photo/Stuart Price
Somali women and soldiers of the Somali National Army sit along a wall while a Kenyan troop (left) serving with AMISOM, the African Union mission, looks on, in Kismayo, southern Somalia.

guards on the ships they previously robbed? In short, would the most likely legal employment for most militiamen be as private security guards? And would that constitute the kind of fundamental change that Somalia needs in order to move towards stability?

Some Somali security experts and ex-military officials are promoting a “DDR on steroids” process for what they estimate are the 50,000 militiamen in Somalia. Modelled on Rwanda’s post-civil-war efforts, the programme, which the experts refer to as “national mobilization” rather than DDR, would include sending all militiamen to central mobilization centres (or a single such centre). At these centres, the ex-militiamen would receive either military training or learn civilian skills, such as tailoring and plumbing, *and* education in national civics and human rights. In addition to serving militias, the centres would

also provide to victims of conflict similar civilian jobs training and other support, such as medical services.¹⁵⁷ While potentially promising, the resources necessary for such a programme far outstrip current discussions in the international community.

E. Indirectly constraining militias through conflict resolution

An indirect, but potentially very fruitful way to deal with militias, is to address some of the underlying causes of militia formation and persistence. These can involve informal clan and community reconciliation efforts run by Somali or international NGOs, or Somali Government-

led efforts. Currently, Somalia's Government has taken an ad hoc approach to conflict resolution, supporting measures that serve parochial goals rather than building a broader national strategy.

However, at least one conflict resolution effort is under way. The British government has sponsored a small pilot programme 35 kilometres outside Kismayo that may serve as a positive example and source of lessons. The programme seeks to empower local communities by embedding a community mobilizer to facilitate intracommunal discussions. In the pilot case, the community had mobilized forces to oust the Jubbaland State Forces, which are the *darwish* forces of federal member state President Madobe, and which the community considered abusive. An embedded conflict resolution advisor intensively engaged with the community, and international diplomats worked with Madobe. A deal was eventually struck that involved a change in the command of both the Jubbaland State Forces and the SNA of the Lower Shabelle. Eventually, Madobe agreed to withdraw his forces and instead send in representatives of line ministries to deliver basic services. Other partners came in and invested

in other programmes, such as health projects. A community ten kilometres away was impressed with the changes, and sought to be included in such efforts, a sign of success, including positive spillover effects.¹⁵⁸

While such approaches are very promising, scaling up community conflict resolution has been a challenge in Somalia. It appears to succeed only when local community empowerment does not directly challenge the interests of local or federal powerbrokers, and/or where the area is not of strategic interest to anyone. Moreover, the time and resource investment are considerable: in the Jubbaland pilot, a year of efforts was required for the community to accept the mobilizer's presence, allowing him to begin bringing the key actors together. And high-level international diplomats had to become involved in orchestrating the military changes in the SNA and working with the regional powerbroker to pull his forces out. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, community reconciliation appears to be one of the most important elements of a comprehensive approach to al-Shabaab. But despite its importance, it is, as yet, largely missing.

IV

Conclusions and recommendations

No overarching Somali or international strategy exists for how to deal with the tens of Somalia militia groups and tens of thousands of militiamen who operate outside of Somalia's constitutional framework and security architecture. Moreover, the international community and Somali internal actors are fundamentally divided as to how to address the militia groups.

This study has shown that the international actors are increasingly relying on militias to defend their interests in Somalia. The tendency to rely on such irregular forces has grown since 2016 and has particularly intensified since 2019. Deepening geopolitical tensions — involving the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kenya and Ethiopia — have also made external sponsors increasingly to develop militia proxies. Such geopolitical rivalries also exacerbate and shape the growing tensions between Somalia's federal Government and federal member states, prompting the latter to protect their control over militias all the more closely.

At the same time, the Somali federal Government and other members of the international community, including the United Nations, hope that some of the *darwish* militias will be integrated into the SNA, SPF, NISA and official state police forces. They are calling for doubling down on State-building efforts, including

bolstering the SNA. They are exploring ways to induce al-Shabaab fighters to defect and to reintegrate some of those defectors, possibly including some who are currently excluded from eligibility.

But beyond the *darwish*, there is no plan for how to address the plethora of Somalia's other militia groups. Fundamentally, these groups persist because the State has not been able to deliver security, order and legitimate non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms. Clan militias' entrenchment reflects the lack of official regulation and enforcement of access to water, land and other resources, and the lack of reliable dispute-resolution mechanisms.

But militias and auxiliary groups in Somalia persist not merely because the State is deficient in providing security. They are also the result of deeply held mistrust in the State by local communities, powerbrokers, federal member states and regional powers. Even the SNA acts more as a conglomeration of militias, caught up in the same dynamics of interclan rivalry and community protection.

Militias should not be considered exclusively through a security lens. Their role in the political economy of Somalia is crucial as well. Militias are tools in economic warfare, guarantors of control over key resources, and are also driven by their

own pursuit of economic survival. Solving the problem of militias requires addressing their economic and political needs and countering their predatory tendencies.

As such, a strategy for Somalia's militias must be able to balance their benefits and their risks. On the one hand, the use of militias presumes they will be an effective force generation against al-Shabaab or other groups, more reliable and effective than the SNA, better informed and capable of building intelligence against al-Shabaab, and able in some cases to suppress local crime and interclan violence. While in some cases militias do deliver on these promises, they also carry significant risks. These risks include a tendency to exacerbate centre-periphery fissures; empower local powerbrokers to the detriment of more pluralistic, institutional forms of governance; create mafia-like, extortionist economies; augment conflicts over scarce resources such as land and water; perpetrate serious human rights abuses with impunity; divert resources and manpower from formal State forces; and entrap Somalia in regional and geopolitical rivalries.

Importantly, the notion of militias as monolithic supporters of the State against al-Shabaab is misleading. As described in this study, Somalia's militias are highly fluid and unreliable, susceptible to defection and recruitment into a wide variety of groups, including al-Shabaab. Groups formed with foreign backing may have *de minimis* loyalty to Somalia, potentially undermining the country's sovereignty. Demanding constant flows of cash to at least behave loyally to the State, such groups constitute a significant draw on resources.

Lacking a coherent or systematic approach, international donors and the Somali Government have considered a variety of policies to address the many risks posed by militias, including (as detailed in this study), integration; salary payment and non-lethal aid without integration; amnesty and DDR; and local conflict resolution. Each of these approaches carries some promise, but must be planned and implemented carefully to avoid exacerbating underlying patterns of violence and predation across Somalia.

In particular, this study has outlined the necessary conditions for pursuing integration. The conditions for integration include a better relationship between the federal Government and federal member states; financial needs of and political incentives to federal member states for integration; regular and sufficient pay for integrated forces; and a permissive regional diplomatic context.

A crucial deficiency of all integration efforts in Somalia to date is their lack of any meaningful vetting procedures for ex-militiamen, even for severe human rights abuses. Integration without vetting replicates the problems and deficiencies of Somali national forces, feeding cycles of violence and undermining longer-term peace prospects. For any integration process to build legitimacy and counteract the endemic predatory behaviour of the many forces across Somalia, diligent vetting must be accompanied by a serious increase in human rights training.

Placing militias such as the *darwish* forces on payroll could well have positive impacts, such as augmenting their fighting capacities against al-Shabaab, anchoring their loyalties to the State, and preventing large-scale defections. Consistent payments will also reduce the risks of predatory behaviour, and may well ease centre-periphery tensions. However, the promise of money may create perverse incentives, causing militias to engage in increasingly violent behaviour to attract attention and be placed on payroll, while potentially creating a kind of revolving door for new militias to form in the hopes of obtaining funds.

The lack of amnesties for militias is largely irrelevant in Somalia — they already have implicit amnesty, since there is a complete absence of any formal prosecution for any of their many human rights abuses. Local communities and clan leadership take justice into their own hands, often by violent retaliation, including in collaboration with al-Shabaab.

Similarly, there is no DDR policy or defectors programme for militias, despite one existing for “low risk” al-Shabaab members. Resource constraints mean that little effort has gone into

reintegration packages for demobilised militias, leaving them few economic incentives to put down arms. Here, the international community is considering how the al-Shabaab defectors programme might be expanded to also include “high risk” al-Shabaab, to substantially weaken the militants on the battlefield and obviate the need for militias. Separately, some Somali experts are exploring the possibility of a future DDR programme for which the militias would also be eligible. While this could offer promising pathways out of militia membership, it also raises real questions about the capacity and willingness of the Somali State and its international partners to invest in livelihoods for ex-militia members.

A potentially promising course for Somalia is local conflict and dispute resolution. This could reduce the proliferation of militias and weaken al-Shabaab’s influence. Early signs of this promise can be seen in the UK-sponsored pilot projects, which have already reduced violence in some areas. Unfortunately, the Somali Government and international community have not invested adequately in such efforts. Conflict resolution efforts have so far been largely ad hoc and opportunistic.

These challenges point to the need for more coherent strategic approaches to the problem of militias in Somalia, leveraging the benefits of all possible courses of action while mitigating the immediate and longer-term risks. Specifically, this study offers the recommendations detailed below.

1 Minimize creation of new militias.

The international community must develop strategic patience with Somalia’s troubled State-building process. Otherwise, desires for short-term battlefield shortcuts will constantly undermine the long-term objective of a stable Somalia from which dangerous jihadist groups no longer operate. Such patience may require making aid more conditional on improvements in governance and anti-corruption. It may also require rethinking the size of the SNA. Rather than focusing support on militias, expanding the SNA — such as the US-trained and highly-capable

Danab Brigade forces — would carry long-term benefits, including a gradual improvement in the behaviour of the SNA vis-à-vis local populations.

2 Vet militias before integration.

The international community must insist that the Somali Government stops folding unvetted, unaccountable militias into the SNA and other armed and law enforcement forces. Major donors should develop an effective monitoring capacity of the vetting process, insisting on having its own monitors embedded in intake and vetting, rather than merely taking Somali officials’ word for granted. The vetting must not be limited to whether a militia group was part of al-Shabaab at some point. Rather, it must also consider the human rights record of its members. Militia members with egregious human rights violations should be disqualified from joining official armed and law enforcement forces. The risk of further corrupting, weakening, and delegitimizing Somalia’s official forces outweighs that of keeping existing problematic militias and militiamen outside the SNA.

3 Punish misbehaving militias.

Whether foreign powers such as the US or the Emirates operate on their own or within the multilateral framework, the international community, Somalia’s Government, and the federal member states must develop the capacity to punish and neutralize misbehaving militias, at least for their most egregious violations. This includes suspending payments and having a reaction force at the ready to arrest them if they resort to increased extortion in response to payment suspension. It also means prosecuting militia members and commanders for extrajudicial killings, rapes, and the most predatory and debilitating forms of extortion. In some cases, a militia’s ties to powerful powerbrokers may make such punishment difficult to exact in the short-term; however, a strong public message — that accountability will feature strongly in the approach going forward, along with more steps to seize foreign assets and restrict travel of some of the major militia leaders — will go a long way.



UN Photo/Stuart Price
A Kenyan soldier with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) keeps watch on a street in the city centre of Kismayo, southern Somalia.

4 Provide human rights and civics training to militias.

The international community — possibly working through Somali NGOs — and the federal Government should provide human rights and civics training to Somalia’s many militia groups. The international community and the Government should then only work with militia groups that have undergone both training and vetting. There is strong evidence from trainings provided to the SNA that such efforts do tend to reduce human rights violations. Even if the training fails to achieve major changes in behaviour, it lays a groundwork for holding groups accountable.

5 Appropriately pay militiamen integrated into the Somali national forces.

Regular, adequate payment of any integrated militias is absolutely crucial for the success of any future or ongoing integration processes. Payments should be conducted via a biometric system and pay-by-mobile-phone service to reduce corruption and theft. This will require a significant shift in the way the government has allocated and tracked resources, and strong pressure from the international community to ensure follow-through. An appropriate payment scheme will avoid the kind of “reverse integration” witnessed in Puntland, will build higher degrees of loyalty and is a necessary measure to curb predatory behaviour.

6 Vet all militias before putting them on international payroll.

Putting militias on international or state payroll without integrating them into the official forces will be far more likely to produce the desired outcomes of minimizing their abusive behaviour and maximizing their capacity to fight al-Shabaab if the following steps are taken in tandem. First, there must be mandatory vetting of militiamen for severe human rights violations and other violations; disqualification of those who fail the tests; and robust human rights training of those who remain eligible. Second, there must be robust post-training monitoring of the militia units, requiring some international or Somali subcontractor presence in the area during the vetting and afterwards. Third, punitive mechanisms must be established for misbehaving militias, such as suspensions of stipends while preventing them from intensified abuse of local communities during the period of suspension; and legal prosecutions of their abuses, such as arrests or at least expulsions of particularly bad individuals.

7 Build DDR programmes for militias and rethink high risk defectors' programme.

Many militiamen in Somalia have little interest in disengaging from their activities under the current circumstances. But occasionally some may want to stop fighting, at least as their principal daily activity. Somalia's peacebuilding and stabilization efforts would be greatly enhanced if such individuals, as well as militiamen who were rejected from integration into Somali official forces, could take advantage of DDR processes similar to the defectors' programmes for al-Shabaab.

High risk al-Shabaab defectors or militia groups that split off from al-Shabaab cannot be simply released to local communities or integrated

into Somali security services. But they will have few incentives to leave the battlefield if they can expect the death penalty or lengthy imprisonment. The international community and Somalia's Government can explore more lenient penalties of several-year imprisonments with mandatory de-radicalization retraining.¹⁵⁹

8 Support local conflict resolution within communities and across clans.

One of the most powerful, if painstaking, ways to address Somalia's militias and reinforce stability in the country is the one that gets the least attention and resources — namely, supporting local reconciliation. It is hardly a panacea, but the international community and the Government of Somalia should elevate this component of their stabilization strategy to the forefront and adequately resource it. Such efforts can involve informal clan and community reconciliation efforts run by Somali or international NGOs or Somali Government efforts.

The problem of militias in Somalia is as complex as can be expected in a fractured country that has endured 30 years of civil conflict. It is made the more difficult because of Somalia's position at the crossroads of international geopolitics. The solutions to centralizing and stabilizing the provision of security in the country will not be simple to achieve. However, with a careful understanding of the context on the ground, and a more long-term approach, the international community and the Somali Government can begin to chart a path towards gradual improvement. The worst likely mistakes are easy to avoid, if there is a will to do so. And some of the most important improvements are straightforward to identify — even if acting on them requires more resolve and cooperation than has recently been on display.

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