

Research Paper

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Understanding US Policy in Somalia

Current Challenges and Future Options



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Summary

- The US has real but limited national security interests in stabilizing Somalia. Since 2006, Washington's principal focus with regard to Somalia has been on reducing the threat posed by al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist insurgent group seeking to overthrow the federal government.
- Successive US administrations have used military and political means to achieve this objective. Militarily, the US has provided training, equipment and funds to an African Union operation, lent bilateral support to Somalia's neighbours, helped build elements of the reconstituted Somali National Army (SNA), and conducted military operations, most frequently in the form of airstrikes. Politically, Washington has tried to enable the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to provide its own security, while implementing diplomatic, humanitarian and development efforts in parallel.
- Most US resources have gone into its military efforts, but these have delivered only operational and tactical successes without altering the strategic terrain. The war against al-Shabaab has become a war of attrition. Effectively at a stalemate since at least 2016, neither side is likely to achieve a decisive military victory.
- Instead of intensifying airstrikes or simply disengaging, the US will need to put its diplomatic weight into securing two linked negotiated settlements in Somalia. First, there needs to be a genuine political deal between the FGS and Somalia's regional administrations, the Federal Member States (FMS), that would clarify the outstanding details of federal governance for Somalia and set out a new, comprehensive security strategy.
- Concluding such a deal should be Washington's top priority on Somalia. It will require considerably strengthened diplomatic efforts, including a greater willingness to place conditions on security force assistance, airstrikes and potential debt relief to the Somali government in order to generate political leverage. Even so, this deal will be extremely difficult to achieve: it will require the FGS to accept that it cannot expect to dominate the FMS; most domestic political efforts will focus instead on the run-up to the selection of Somalia's next president (via legislative elections now most likely to be held in 2021); and continued support for the FGS by other external actors may reduce the potential impact of any US pressure and conditionality.
- If a deal between the FGS and FMS can be achieved, the US will then need to support the idea of peace talks between the reconciled Somali authorities and al-Shabaab. In line with this, Washington will have to make clear that the strategic function of its airstrikes is to incentivize al-Shabaab's leadership to negotiate an end to the civil war.

1. Introduction

As US President, Donald Trump has banned almost all travel to the US by citizens of Somalia, and relaxed military requirements for targeting people suspected of ties to al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group that emerged in 2005 and operates across the Horn of Africa.¹ His presidential proclamation of September 2017 stated:

A persistent terrorist threat ... emanates from Somalia's territory. The United States Government has identified Somalia as a terrorist safe haven. Somalia stands apart from other countries in the degree to which its government lacks command and control of its territory, which greatly limits the effectiveness of its national capabilities in a variety of respects. Terrorists use under-governed areas in northern, central, and southern Somalia as safe havens from which to plan, facilitate, and conduct their operations. Somalia also remains a destination for individuals attempting to join terrorist groups that threaten the national security of the United States.²

In line with this assessment, the Trump administration has significantly increased the US's military activity in Somalia, primarily in the form of airstrikes. This has, in turn, increased the level of US political and media attention on the country's engagement in Somalia.

In April 2019, for example, Senator Elizabeth Warren asked the incoming commander of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), General Stephen Townsend, whether the US was at war with Somalia. Townsend's response was: 'No Senator, we are not at war with Somalia but we are carrying out our operations against violent extremist organizations in Somalia.'³

In January 2020 Somalia briefly made US media headlines when three US security personnel (one service member and two Department of Defense contractors) were killed in an attack by al-Shabaab on the Manda Bay naval base in Kenya. This was the latest in a long-running spate of al-Shabaab attacks, including, in February 2016, a laptop bomb on a flight departing Mogadishu; the massive truck bomb in central Mogadishu in October 2017; and attacks on Nairobi's DusitD2 hotel in January 2019, and on the US base at Baledogle in September of that year. In a statement to the US Senate Armed Services Committee shortly after the Manda Bay attack, General Townsend described al-Shabaab as 'the largest and most kinetically active al-Qa'ida network in the world', and as being the 'most dangerous to US interests today'.⁴

Apart from the number of airstrikes, US policy on Somalia has been broadly consistent in its strategic aims across several administrations. Since the early 2000s, Washington has sought to help stabilize Somalia by working with a variety of local and international partners, including Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, the African Union (AU), the UN, the European Union (EU) and various Somali forces.⁵ The plan has been to achieve US national objectives by building an effective set of Somali

¹ For background on al-Shabaab, see Hansen, S. J. (2013), *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, London: Hurst.

² The White House (2017), 'Presidential Proclamation Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats', 24 September 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/24/enhancing-vetting-capabilities-and-processes-detecting-attempted-entry>.

³ United States Senate Committee on Armed Services (2019), 'Hearing to consider the Nominations of General Tod D. Wolters and General Stephen J. Townsend', 2 April 2019, p. 51, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-31_04-02-19.pdf.

⁴ United States Africa Command (2020), 'U.S. Africa Command 2020 Posture Statement', 30 January 2020, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/Document/32561/2020-posture-statement-to-congress>.

⁵ For an overview, see Williams, P. D. (2018), 'Subduing al-Shabaab: The Somalia Model of Counterterrorism and Its Limits', *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(2): pp. 95–111, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2018.1484227.

state institutions, including local security forces, and using US military power to help contain and degrade al-Shabaab. However, this strategic goal has been frustrated by Washington's understandable reluctance to pour large amounts of resources into Somalia's fragmented and notoriously corrupt political system.⁶

Since 2007, therefore, the US has supported AU personnel fighting alongside the federal Somali authorities against al-Shabaab, which Washington designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization in March 2008. Despite some limited progress in building a Somali National Army (SNA) and drafting a new national security architecture in 2017, the war against al-Shabaab is effectively at a stalemate. There has been very little change in terms of the territory controlled by the main conflict parties across south-central Somalia over the past few years, while in-fighting between the federal government and regional authorities persists. Furthermore, in AFRICOM's assessment for the final quarter of 2019, there had been no significant progress towards the goal of creating a 'security cocoon' around Mogadishu.⁷ In sum, given the current strategy and levels of resource investment, there are no signs that either side can achieve a decisive victory.

The stalemate leaves the US without a clear strategy for ending its intensified military engagement in Somalia. It also underscores questions about why the US should be militarily engaged in Somalia at all. The US counterterrorism effort in Somalia began in the 1990s with the search for prominent figures associated with Al-Qaeda and those responsible for attacking the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. From 2006 there was the added fear that al-Shabaab would become the de facto government in south-central Somalia, enabling the group to spread instability across the wider Horn of Africa region, as well as potentially threatening shipping lanes off the Somali coast.

Given the real but limited nature of US national security interests in Somalia, this paper makes the case that US policy should focus on securing two linked negotiated settlements. The first would involve the US redirecting more of its financial and political leverage towards securing a genuine political deal between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the regional administrations (Jubaland, Southwest, Galmudug, Hirshabelle and Puntland) of the Federal Member States (FMS). Concluding a genuine political deal will require buy-in from key Somali stakeholders; and for that buy-in to happen there will need to be a less antagonistic and domineering approach on the part of the FGS, and sustained dialogue with the FMS and other parliamentarians and opposition parties. The US role should be to facilitate such a dialogue – even though that process can only succeed if the key Somali stakeholders prove willing to compromise.

A durable agreement should be forged as soon as possible. However, arriving at a deal will undoubtedly be complicated by Somalia's election timetable, with voting in legislative elections (and through this process the selection of a new president and prime minister) now likely to occur in 2021. There are also added complexities and unknowns raised by the arrival of COVID-19 in Somalia. Whatever new FGS administration emerges from the electoral process, ensuring a sustainable deal with the FMS is essential. It should entail agreement on the architecture of the Somali federation – including distribution of power, responsibilities, resources and revenues – and a comprehensive security strategy. The difficulties already experienced in implementing the federal government's 2018 Transition Plan for assuming principal responsibility for securing Somalia mean that this will need to be thoroughly revised as part of a new security strategy.

⁶ Transparency International (2019), Corruption Perceptions Index, <https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview>.

⁷ Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress (2020), *East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations*, February 2020, p. 24, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Feb/11/2002247158/-1/-1/1/Q1FY2020_LEADIG_EA_NW%20AFRICA_CTO.PDF.

Successive US administrations have supported the objective of an agreement along these lines between the FGS and the FMS, but no deal has thus far been achieved.⁸ Facilitating such a deal is critical to stabilizing Somalia, and will be more likely to happen if the US is able to persuade Somalia's other key external partners to pursue the same goal. While the US has limited leverage over Somalia's leadership, it does play a key role in the country's security equation. Washington has the ability to withhold considerable security force assistance and reduce military operations that appear to be highly valued by the FGS.⁹ This remains the case even if the FGS has increasingly turned to other countries – notably Turkey and Qatar – for security support. Moreover, as Somalia's largest creditor, the US also has an important role to play in deciding how potential debt relief will flow to the country's authorities.¹⁰ For the US, using these potential sources of leverage would not require substantial new resources. Indeed, it might even mean using significantly fewer 'hard' military resources, but it would need the US to step up its diplomatic engagement on Somalia.

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If the FGS and FMS could work together to prioritize coordinated military operations against al-Shabaab, Somali forces would likely make considerable progress in improving the security situation. However, even in the best-case scenario, a decisive victory over al-Shabaab would be neither assured nor quick. In order to be decisive, the FGS and its partners would have to crush both al-Shabaab's key military capabilities and the will of the group's supporters. The former is difficult because al-Shabaab are adept at avoiding decisive battles, except on their own – usually very localized – terms. Al-Shabaab have also infiltrated parts of the FGS, and appear to have supporters and sympathizers – including some politicians – willing to work with it throughout Somali society. It will therefore be exceedingly difficult to deliver a fatal military blow to al-Shabaab of the kind that the Sri Lankan armed forces inflicted on the Tamil Tigers in 2009, for example.

The war against al-Shabaab has become one of attrition. Hence, the main issue facing leaders on both sides is how to balance the multidimensional costs of continuing the conflict against their interests in negotiating its end. Neither side is yet ready to negotiate, but even if the FGS or al-Shabaab do somehow gain a significant upper hand militarily, there is no avoiding a negotiated settlement of some sort with the other's supporters. Battlefield successes are useful to bolster morale on the victorious side and persuade the enemy that negotiation is best. But they can only provide political opportunities for the victors to impose terms that the other party accepts, and these must include setting out the losing side's legitimate place in any new political dispensation. It would certainly be better for Somali civilians if such negotiation happens sooner rather than later. For outside parties that are interested in stabilizing Somalia, this suggests that the principal objective should be framed as political reconciliation rather than military victory. Again, it would be better to do this sooner rather than later.

⁸ For a recent example, see United States Mission to the United Nations (2020), 'Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Somalia', 24 February 2020, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-situation-in-somalia-5/>.

⁹ In December 2017, for example, the US withheld security force assistance to non-mentored SNA units, citing concerns about corruption. It restarted a 'pilot project' supporting SNA units involved in operations in Lower Shabelle in mid-2019. Houreld, K. (2017), 'U.S. suspends aid to Somalia's battered military over graft', Reuters, 14 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-military-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-suspends-aid-to-somalias-battered-military-over-graft-idUSKBN1E81XF>.

¹⁰ At the end of 2018, Somalia had an estimated external public debt of \$5.3 billion, of which the US was owed approximately 20 per cent, or just over \$1 billion. In February 2020 the IMF and the World Bank declared Somalia eligible to receive debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. See International Monetary Fund (2020), 'IMF and World Bank Consider Somalia Eligible for Assistance Under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative', Press Release 20/48, 13 February 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/02/13/pr2048-imf-and-wb-consider-somalia-eligible-for-assistance-under-the-enhanced-hipc-initiative>.

From that point, the US should therefore support a follow-on negotiated settlement between the Somali authorities and al-Shabaab. (The case for such a settlement is set out further in Box 2.) The practical details of any talks should, of course, be determined by the parties to the conflict, and would need careful calibration between the FGS, the FMS and other political stakeholders, relevant clan leaders, as well as al-Shabaab. In the interim, the strategic function of US military strikes should be to coerce al-Shabaab's leadership to negotiate. And if preliminary talks were to begin in earnest, Washington could even signal that subsequent US strikes would be for collective defence purposes only – i.e. to protect US, AU and Somali security personnel – and take greater precautions so as to harm as few civilians as possible to avoid boosting al-Shabaab's recruitment and propaganda.

The following chapters of this paper summarize the US mission in Somalia, before analysing how it is being implemented and assessing whether US policy in Somalia is working. The paper concludes by sketching three scenarios for future US engagement, based around the ideas of maintaining the status quo, pursuing a negotiated end to the civil war, and disengaging militarily.

Box 1: Timeline, 2013–20

January 2013: The US officially recognizes the new Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).

May 2016: The US appoints its first ambassador to Somalia since 1991.

March 2017: The FGS adopts a new national security architecture framework, incorporating a decade-long timetable for full operationalization and implementation.

May 2017: Somalia's international partners commit to the London Security Pact, which endorses the new national security architecture framework.

December 2017: An operational readiness assessment of the Somali National Army (SNA) is completed by a range of partners.

December 2017: 1,000 troops withdraw from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), as authorized by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2372 (2017). AMISOM struggles to generate the additional 500 authorized police.

December 2017: Citing corruption concerns, the US pauses security force assistance to non-mentored elements of the SNA.

February 2018: The FGS develops a conditions-based Transition Plan for assuming security responsibility from AMISOM by the end of 2021. AMISOM agrees to reconfigure to support the Transition Plan.

March 2018–February 2019: An operational readiness assessment is conducted of regional forces in Somalia's Federal Member States.

December 2018: The US establishes its first permanent diplomatic mission to Somalia since 1991.

February 2019: AMISOM commanders decide their operational plans to support the Transition Plan.

April 2019: 1,000 troops withdraw from AMISOM, as authorized by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2431 (2018).

Mid-2019–present: SNA and AMISOM forces conduct Operation Badbaado, with the objective of recovering settlements in the Lower Shabelle region from al-Shabaab.

February 2020: The US resumes lethal direct security assistance to one SNA unit engaged in Operation Badbaado.

March 2020: 1,000 troops withdraw from AMISOM, as authorized by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2472 (2019).

2. What Is the US Mission in Somalia?

At his confirmation hearing in August 2018, Washington's current ambassador to Somalia, former acting assistant secretary of state for African affairs Donald Yamamoto, outlined four goals for US policy in Somalia:¹¹

- Support for the building of democratic institutions and holding politicians accountable;
- Building effective Somali security forces;
- Implementation of stabilization and economic recovery programmes; and
- Delivering humanitarian assistance across the whole of Somalia.

These goals were broadly consistent with the Trump administration's Africa strategy, publicly released in December 2018, which emphasized countering threats posed by 'radical Islamic terrorism', advancing US commercial interests on the continent, and using aid efficiently and effectively.¹² The administration's pivot away from counterterrorism towards 'strategic competition' between states as the focus of its 2018 national defence strategy also included a 'blank slate review' of all US combatant commands, including AFRICOM. The results of this shift will no doubt shape future US policy on Somalia.

In practice, successive US administrations have not given equal weight to these goals. The bulk of resources and the focus of Washington's intermittent diplomatic efforts in Somalia have focused overwhelmingly on counterterrorism efforts against Al-Qaeda in East Africa and, since 2006, al-Shabaab. This trend dates back to the late 1990s, especially following the near-simultaneous truck bombings of US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in August 1998, which killed over 200 people. US officials suspected that Al-Qaeda militants involved in the attacks had operated out of Somalia, and that they continued to receive assistance from some locals. By the mid-2000s, however, US covert efforts in Somalia were focused on using the CIA to fund local warlords to help assassinate or otherwise remove Al-Qaeda figures from Somalia and curtail their operations there.¹³ This plan imploded in mid-2006, when local Somali business leaders joined forces with a broad-based Islamic Courts Union to defeat those warlords and other gangsters who were in effect controlling Mogadishu.¹⁴

Just six months later, however, the US supported a military intervention, led by soldiers from neighbouring Ethiopia and Somalia's so-called Transitional Federal Government (TFG), to topple the Islamic Courts Union.¹⁵ The Islamic Courts were quickly driven from Mogadishu, but thousands of Ethiopian soldiers occupied the city in order to protect the TFG, which was a government in name only and in practice confined to operating in only a few blocks of the capital city. It was this

¹¹ C-SPAN (2018), 'Ambassador Confirmations', 23 August 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?450381-1/senate-foreign-relations-committee-considers-ambassador-nominations>.

¹² See The White House (2018), 'Remarks by National Security Advisor John R. Bolton on The Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy', Speech to the Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC, 13 December 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>.

¹³ Naylor, S. (2015), *Relentless Strike*, New York: St. Martin's Press, Chapter 23.

¹⁴ See Ahmad, A. (2015), 'The Security Bazaar: Business Interests and Islamist Power in Civil War Somalia', *International Security*, 39(3): pp. 89–117, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00187.

¹⁵ The Ethiopian intervention had initially taken US special forces by surprise, and it subsequently took three to four months for US forces to link up with Ethiopian operations in Somalia. Naylor (2015), *Relentless Strike*, p. 335.

Ethiopian-led intervention that turned al-Shabaab from a tiny radical faction into a large and well-funded insurgency.¹⁶ In recent years, too, a small faction of the Islamic State has emerged in Somalia, and has also been the target of a handful of US strikes.¹⁷

Today, the US mission in Somalia involves both political and military tracks. On the political track, the recent focus has been on helping build an effective set of Somali state institutions, including security forces – primarily the SNA and federal and regional police forces.¹⁸ The US has endorsed a federal model of government for Somalia, including a new constitution that remains in provisional, draft form after more than seven years, due in large part to the lack of political settlement between Somalia’s federal and regional authorities. Since the early 2000s, US diplomatic efforts have oscillated between engaging federal and regional authorities. By early 2020, the official US position was that ‘reconciliation between the Federal Government and Federal Member States is [a] vital step towards reestablishing governance, security, and prosperity for all Somalis’.¹⁹

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After the collapse of Somalia’s central government in 1991, it was not until 2000 that various international actors supported the establishment first of a Transitional National Government for Somalia in Djibouti, and then of the TFG in Kenya in 2004. While the Djibouti process saw considerable participation from members of Somali civil society, the TFG that emerged in 2004 was led by Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, who had been president of Puntland, and forged largely from warlords, few of whom had any legitimacy in south-central Somalia. The TFG first set foot in Somalia in 2005, and was brought to Mogadishu in late 2006 by thousands of Ethiopian soldiers.²⁰

This ‘transition’ lasted for a further six years, until a new federal government was established in September 2012; the new administration was formally recognized by the US in January 2013. Meanwhile, because of frustrations with the TFG over corruption and inefficiency, and the transitional authorities’ limited reach across the country, US diplomats also engaged intermittently with Somalia’s regional administrations. This included engagement with Puntland and Somaliland under the then assistant secretary of state for African affairs Johnnie Carson’s ‘dual track’ approach between 2010 and 2012.²¹ Since 2013, US policy has also engaged with the newly established FMS across south-central Somalia (Jubaland, Southwest, Galmudug, and Hirshabelle). The FMS were intended to form the building blocks of a united Somalia, under a federal system of governance that enables greater power sharing, political reconciliation, and security force integration. In practice, however, these entities were largely clan-dominated, with regional leaders focused on protecting their own authority and

¹⁶ For the relevant background, see Hansen (2013), *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

¹⁷ Warner, J. and Hulme, C. (2018), ‘The Islamic State in Africa’, *CTC Sentinel*, 11(7): pp. 21–28, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTC-SENTINEL-082018-final.pdf>.

¹⁸ Somalia also has an air force, coastguard and navy, but these have received much less attention and international assistance than have the army and police.

¹⁹ U.S. Embassy in Somalia (2020), ‘United States Restarts Limited Direct Assistance to the Somali National Army’, press release, 12 February 2020, <https://so.usembassy.gov/united-states-restarts-limited-direct-assistance-to-the-somali-national-army/>.

²⁰ Menkhaus, K. (2007), ‘The Crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in five acts’, *African Affairs*, 106(424): pp. 357–390, doi:10.1093/afraf/adm040.

²¹ Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia in 1991.

territorial control, limiting the FGS's ability to project its power beyond Mogadishu. Hence, the FGS has tried to ensure its preferred candidates won out in subsequent subnational electoral processes, as occurred recently in both Galmudug and Southwest states.

On the military track, Washington's principal goal since 2007 – when the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) deployed to the country – has been to degrade and contain al-Shabaab, including by targeting certain key leaders. Successive US administrations have considered al-Shabaab to be an 'associated force' of Al-Qaeda, for the purposes of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. To that end, Washington has provided considerable security force assistance to the countries that contribute to AMISOM, both back home in terms of training and equipment, and in Somalia where their personnel also receive field mentoring.²² More recently, as discussed below, the US has also provided security assistance to Somali forces. These assistance programmes are considered necessary to establish greater stability in Somalia and to facilitate AMISOM's drawdown and eventual exit.

²² For an analysis of the support provided to AMISOM's troop-contributing countries and why they joined the mission, see Williams, P. D. (2018), 'Joining AMISOM: why six African states contributed troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12(1): pp. 172–192, doi:10.1080/17531055.2018.1418159.

3. How Is the US Implementing Its Mission in Somalia?

On the political track, US diplomatic engagement has been lacklustre. After officially recognizing the new Somali federal government in 2013, it took another three years for the Obama administration to appoint an ambassador to Somalia (the first since 1991). Subsequently, from 2017, the Trump administration was also slow to fill relevant diplomatic posts, including at the National Security Council and the State Department, where there was only an acting assistant secretary of state for African affairs until July 2018. It was not until November 2018 that the US ambassador took up full-time residence in Somalia, in a new embassy compound, rather than commuting back and forth from Nairobi as had been the routine for US representatives previously.²³ In the interim, the then US permanent representative to the UN, Nikki Haley, and AFRICOM commander, General Thomas D. Waldhauser, influenced many of the key political decisions on the Trump administration's Somalia policy.²⁴ Waldhauser's successor, General Stephen Townsend, appears to have been similarly influential in policy decisions.

There have not been elections under universal suffrage in Somalia since 1967, except in Somaliland, which has held a number of one-person-one-vote presidential and parliamentary elections.

The US has continued to support improved electoral processes in Somalia. There have not been elections under universal suffrage in Somalia since 1967 (just before the long-standing dictator Siad Barre took power in a coup in 1969), except in Somaliland, which has held a number of one-person-one-vote presidential and parliamentary elections. Instead, there have since the early 2000s (when the TFG was established) been various selection processes whereby different formulations of clan elders and elites have chosen the country's politicians. In September 2012 the first 'non-transitional' federal government was selected by a small group of clan elders and Somali political elites. The next such process for a new FGS took place in late 2016 and early 2017, when some 14,000 Somali traditional elders and clan delegates elected 275 members of parliament and 54 senators. The process was marred, however, by reports of vote buying, intimidation and bribery, and of leading candidates taking money from external actors including Qatar, Turkey and the UAE.²⁵ Notably, in both 2012 and in 2016–17 the incumbent president lost. Democratic (one person, one vote) federal elections have been slated for 2020 or 2021, but – even without the likely impact of the coronavirus pandemic – the prospects of the polls going ahead in 2020 are close to zero, given current security conditions and technical challenges (including voter registration) across much

²³ It is worth noting that Ambassador Yamamoto has previous experience in the Horn of Africa, and was the most senior ambassador in the US foreign service at the time of his appointment.

²⁴ Author's interview with former US official, Washington DC, September 2019.

²⁵ See for example Gettelman, J. (2017), 'Fueled by bribes, Somalia's Election Seen as Milestone of Corruption', *New York Times*, 7 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/africa/somalia-election-corruption.html>; Marqaati (2017), *Somalia State of Accountability 2016*, 7 February 2017, <https://marqaati.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Marqaati-2016-Corruption-Report.pdf>.

of the country.²⁶ On 27 June 2020 the chair of the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC), Halima Ibrahim, outlined two electoral options to parliament, with elections concluding by March or August 2021 (depending on whether biometric voting was included). In response, some domestic opponents of the FGS criticized this move as an unlawful extension of its term, while most international actors, including the US, supported the delay.²⁷

With regard to humanitarian assistance and foreign aid, the US has been one of Somalia's biggest donors, making important contributions particularly in response to the major famines and droughts that have afflicted Somalia on a regular basis (see Figure 1).²⁸ Assistance for humanitarian relief and good governance has represented the majority of US aid disbursements to Somalia since 2006, although since 2015 smaller amounts have been disbursed as part of USAID's transition initiatives for stabilization.²⁹ US humanitarian initiatives have been complicated by domestic counterterrorism legislation that makes it difficult to provide assistance across substantial parts of south-central Somalia – where there is deemed to be a risk that such aid might benefit al-Shabaab. In 2010, however, with a major famine looming, the humanitarian advocacy community persuaded the US and the UN to grant an exception for humanitarian action under the Somalia sanctions regime.³⁰ This meant that relief was able to flow to all areas in need of assistance, including those under al-Shabaab control.

In early 2019 Kenya called for this exception to be revoked, presumably with the aim of reducing al-Shabaab's access to resources, but the call came amid political tensions with Somalia, notably over the ongoing maritime boundary dispute. Kenya's proposal would probably have made it much harder to engage in independent, impartial and neutral humanitarian activities in Somalia, and at least initially would have generated considerable uncertainty as to how to comply with any new legal framework. In due course the UN Security Council rejected Kenya's proposal.³¹ At present, US contractors and grantees can engage in official assistance activities in Somalia under a system of controls aimed at preventing the diversion of humanitarian aid to prohibited groups or activities.³² Even so, organizations engaged in humanitarian assistance in areas where al-Shabaab are active have to navigate many operational risks and challenges.

²⁶ Under the terms of the new (but controversial) electoral legislation that was signed into law in February 2020, Somalis will vote directly for political parties, with seats in the federal legislature allocated according to each party's share of the votes cast. The next president will then be voted on by the members of the federal parliament, and, in turn, the new president will select the prime minister. Hassan, M. O. (2020), 'Somali President Signs Historic Election Bill Into Law', *Voice of America*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somali-president-signs-historic-election-bill-law>.

²⁷ See Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (2020), *Finding a Way Out of Somalia's Manmade Electoral Crisis*, 1 July 2020, <http://www.heritageinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HIPS-commentary.pdf>.

²⁸ By way of comparison with other donors, OECD data suggest that from 2011 Somalia was receiving between \$1 billion and \$1.3 billion annually in total overseas development assistance. Office of the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Somalia (2017), *Aid Flows in Somalia: Analysis of aid flow data*, Office of the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Somalia Aid Coordination Unit, April 2017, p. 5, <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/unct/somalia/docs/publications/Aid%20Flows%20Booklet%20FINAL.pdf>.

²⁹ For details, see United States Agency for International Development (2020), 'Transition Initiatives for Stabilization + (TIS+)', 10 March 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/somalia/fact-sheets/transition-initiatives-stabilization-tis-somalia>.

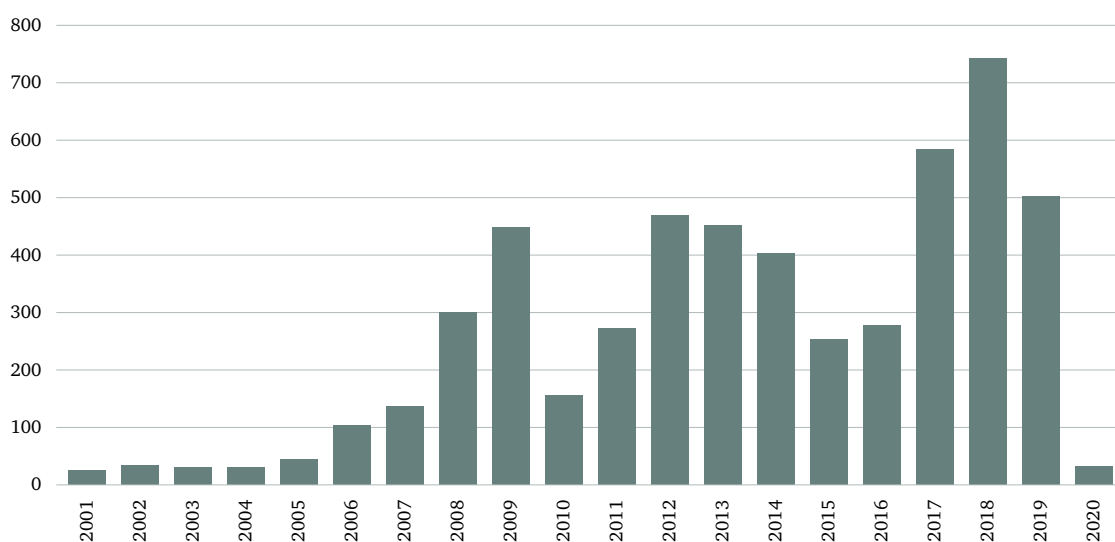
³⁰ 'The obligations imposed on Member States ... shall not apply to the payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources necessary to ensure the timely delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance in Somalia, by the United Nations, its specialized agencies or programmes, humanitarian organizations having observer status with the United Nations General Assembly that provide humanitarian assistance, or their implementing partners.' UN Security Council (2010), 'Resolution 1916: The situation in Somalia', S/RES/1916, 19 March 2010, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1916>. It has been renewed annually e.g. in Resolution 2444 (2018).

³¹ See Baeder, L. (2019), 'A Small Victory for Somalis at the UN Security Council Blocks Measure Jeopardizing Aid', Human Rights Watch, 4 September 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/04/small-victory-somalis-un#>.

³² U.S. Department of the Treasury (2020), 'OFAC FAQs: Other Sanctions Programs', https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/faqs/sanctions/pages/faq_other.aspx#somalia.

On the military track, several hundred US troops are now regularly deployed in Somalia. They operate out of several commands, including AFRICOM, US Army Africa, the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, Joint Special Operations Command, as well as a Military Coordination Cell based in Mogadishu since at least 2014. In 2016 the Obama administration moved to expand US military action in Somalia.³³ The primary objective was to defend US, AU and some Somali security personnel in parts of Somalia that were not officially considered ‘areas of active hostilities’. The Trump administration went a step further in March 2017, designating parts of Somalia an ‘area of active hostilities’, which gave US military commanders greater leeway in defining targets and approving airstrikes.³⁴ Under these expanded authorities, US troops have continued several longer-standing activities.

Figure 1: US foreign aid (obligations) to Somalia, \$million, FY2001–20 (partially reported years 2019–20)



Source: United States Agency for International Development (2020), ‘U.S. Foreign Aid by Country’, https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SOM?measure=Obligations&fiscal_year=2019.

First, the US military and State Department have been involved in providing security force assistance to AMISOM. Since 2006 the US has spent nearly \$2 billion on bilateral and multilateral forms of security assistance for AMISOM’s contributing countries.³⁵ This has been in the form of training, equipment and advising programmes – often implemented by contractor firms – as well as the US contributions to the UN Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS), which since 2009 has provided AMISOM with logistical support.

³³ Savage, C., Schmitt, E. and Mazzetti, M. (2016), ‘Obama Expands War With Al Qaeda to Include Shabab in Somalia’, *New York Times*, 27 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/27/us/politics/obama-expands-war-with-al-qaeda-to-include-shabab-in-somalia.html>.

³⁴ Savage, C. and Schmitt, E. (2017), ‘Trump Eases Combat Rules in Somalia Intended to Protect Civilians’, *New York Times*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/world/africa/trump-is-said-to-ease-combat-rules-in-somalia-designed-to-protect-civilians.html>.

³⁵ See Congressional Research Service (2015), ‘Statement of Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs, Congressional Research Service, Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health’, 4 June 2015, p. 2, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/060415_Blanchard_Testimony.pdf; and author’s calculations. AMISOM’s troop-contributing countries have been Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia.

Second, the US has since 2009 provided security force assistance to the SNA, including for tactical engagement for military operations, logistics, medical support and communications capabilities, and institutional reform (including civilian control of the military), as well as stipends to help offset the non-payment of soldiers' official salaries.³⁶ From 2014, and especially after the suspension of US security assistance for non-mentored SNA units in December 2017, the principal operational focus of US efforts has been the Danab advanced infantry units, which currently stand at about battalion strength.³⁷ As envisaged in Somalia's new national security architecture, the plan was to build a brigade-sized Danab force of 500 troops in each of the SNA's sectors by the start of 2018.³⁸ This did not happen, primarily because the Danab struggled to recruit sufficient numbers of soldiers from across Somalia's regions, and sometimes suffered setbacks when the FGS ordered its units to perform tasks for which they were not prepared. In December 2017 the US government paused security forces assistance to all the non-mentored SNA units (i.e. excluding Danab) citing concerns about corruption. In July 2019, however, after some of these concerns had been allayed, Washington resumed some non-lethal assistance to SNA units engaged in Operation Badbaado with AMISOM in the Lower Shabelle region, southwest of Mogadishu.³⁹ The US also provided information and surveillance support for these operations. Then, in February 2020, the US resumed lethal, direct security assistance to one SNA unit (the EU-trained 143rd battalion) engaged in those operations.⁴⁰

Third, in addition to assistance packages, US forces have also conducted offensive ground and other kinetic operations, usually in partnership with Somali special forces and Danab units (see Figure 2), targeting important al-Shabaab figures and facilities. So far, two US soldiers have been killed in such operations, and several others injured.⁴¹

Broadly speaking, the Obama administration focused on conducting fewer strikes, mostly aimed at high-value targets. While the Trump administration has also targeted such figures, it has conducted many more strikes, often against rank-and-file al-Shabaab fighters – usually when they have threatened US, AMISOM or SNA personnel.

Fourth, since January 2007 the US has used airstrikes against various targets in Somalia. Between 2007 and June 2011 these were conducted by cruise missiles, gunships and attack helicopters. Since then, armed drones have also been used, with the number of US strikes increasing dramatically from 2015 (see Figure 2). Most US strikes have in recent years been conducted in defence of US personnel, in collective defence of AMISOM and SNA troops, or to deny al-Shabaab 'safe havens'. A smaller number have been offensive strikes designed to kill 'high-value' members of al-Shabaab. Broadly

³⁶ Between 2010 and May 2017, the US obligated approximately \$66 million for SNA stipend-related activities. Cited in Williams, P. D. (2020), 'Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of Failure, 2008-2018', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43(3): pp. 366–391, doi:10.1080/01402390.2019.1575210.

³⁷ Williams, P. D. (2018), *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.245–6; and Rempfer, K. (2019), 'Lightning Brigade', *The Military Times*, 27 March 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/03/27/lightning-brigade-training-advanced-infantry-not-airstrikes-is-africom-primary-effort-in-somalia/>.

³⁸ London Conference on Somalia (2017), *Security Pact*, 11 May 2017, p. 6, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/613720/london-somalia-conference-2017-security-pact.pdf. Although this did not happen, efforts continue to expand Danab forces, including by training additional companies in Kismayo and Galkayo, and by also referring to some Turkish-trained SNA 'Eagle' battalions as Danab.

³⁹ For an overview of these operations, see Williams, P. D. (2019), 'Stabilisation 2.0? Insights from the Somali and African Union operations in Lower Shabelle', *Wavell Room*, 3 December 2019, <https://wavellroom.com/2019/12/03/stabilization-2-0-insights-somali-african-union-operations-lower-shabelle/>.

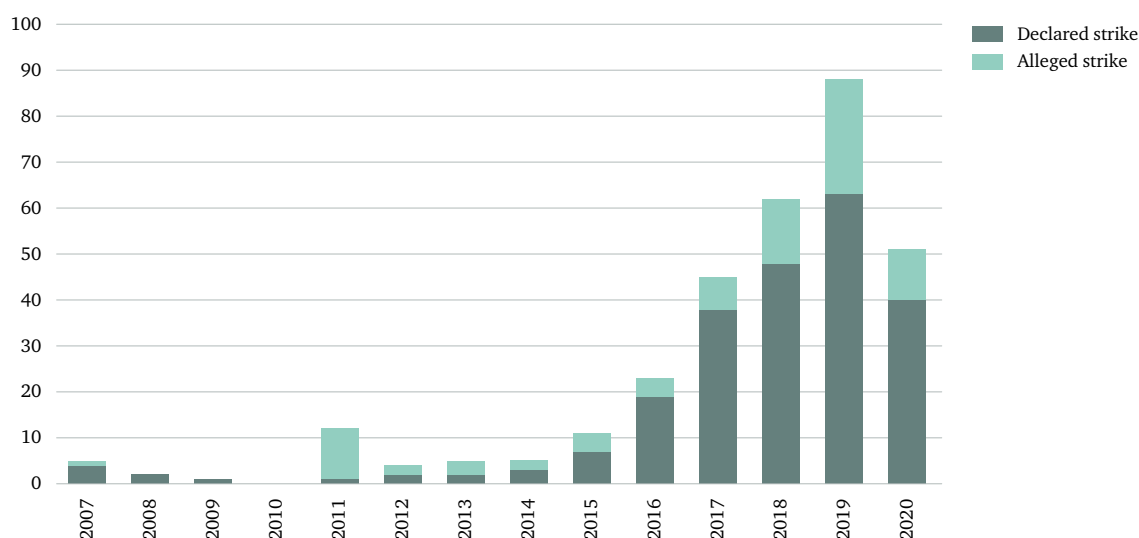
⁴⁰ U.S. Embassy in Somalia (2020), 'United States Restarts Limited Direct Assistance to the Somali National Army'.

⁴¹ The two US soldiers were killed in May 2017 and in June 2018.

speaking, the Obama administration focused on conducting fewer strikes, mostly aimed at high-value targets. While the Trump administration has also targeted such figures, it has conducted many more strikes, often against rank-and-file al-Shabaab fighters – usually when they have threatened US, AMISOM or SNA personnel. In February 2020 an AFRICOM spokesperson described the purpose of US strikes as being ‘to degrade the al-Qaida-aligned group’s ability to recruit, train, and plot terror attacks in Somalia and beyond’.⁴² Some of these strikes were coordinated out of the Manda Bay base in Kenya, which had been attacked by al-Shabaab forces in the previous month.⁴³

Finally, the US has also been part of an international coalition engaged in various maritime security and counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. Countering sea piracy remains a US objective; although the severity of this problem was reduced significantly over the last five years, it remains a focus of some ongoing international operations.

Figure 2: Declared and alleged US actions in Somalia, 2007–20 (partially reported year 2020)



Source: AirWars (2020), ‘Declared and alleged US actions in Somalia’, 23 June 2020, <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/?belligerent=us-forces&country=somalia>.

⁴² Snow, S. (2020), ‘Record breaking US airstrikes pushing al-Shabab fighters into urban areas’, *Military Times*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2020/02/20/record-breaking-us-airstrikes-pushing-al-shabab-fighters-into-urban-areas/>.

⁴³ For details, see United States Africa Command (2020), ‘U.S. Africa Command Investigation Update: Al-Shabaab Attack in Manda Bay, Kenya’, US Africa Command Public Affairs, Stuttgart, 23 January 2020, <https://www.africa-newsroom.com/press/us-africa-command-investigation-update-alshabaab-attack-in-manda-bay-kenya>. In response, the US deployed the 101st Airborne’s 3rd Brigade Combat Team, a unit assigned to AFRICOM for crisis response, to Kenya.

4. Is US Policy Working in Somalia?

Opinions vary greatly on the degree to which – if at all – US policy in Somalia has had any positive impact. Supporters of the current approach argue that US diplomatic, humanitarian and military actions have made a terrible situation somewhat better.⁴⁴ This has been encapsulated in the idea that Somalia is now a ‘fragile’ rather than a ‘failed’ state. They point to the many negative legacies of over two decades of state collapse in Somalia, and claim that, for all its shortcomings, AMISOM’s successes and progress in improving the SNA mean that al-Shabaab no longer pose an existential threat to the government, as was the case in 2009. Moreover, since 2012 the pillars of a federal system of government for south-central Somalia have been established – i.e. the FGS and the FMS. In 2017 the Somali authorities finally agreed on a new national security architecture, which was endorsed at the London Conference in the form of the Security Pact.⁴⁵ This provided the first blueprint and roadmap for how the Somali security sector should be organized and function. Moreover, although al-Shabaab continue to conduct many deadly attacks against Somali officials and civilians as well as international personnel, it is no longer the dominant political force in south-central Somalia, and controls less of the country’s population than a decade ago.⁴⁶

In contrast, critics of US policy argue that its focus on re-establishing a central government in Somalia and its support for the 2006 Ethiopian intervention contributed directly to turning al-Shabaab from a small extremist faction into a powerful insurgency.⁴⁷ From this perspective, US policy supported a largely ineffective and corrupt government that was sustained by external actors and often harmed Somali civilians, either through violence or extortion. This had two major negative effects. First, it strengthened local perceptions of the central government as a predatory entity, which, in turn, encouraged the subsequent regional administrations to push for greater autonomy. Second, it strengthened al-Shabaab’s propaganda machine and recruitment base.

Today, critics point out that the Trump administration views Somalia primarily through a counterterrorism lens, albeit with additional – often forced – rhetoric about ‘great power competition’ in Africa. The White House relies too heavily on airstrikes and special operations forces to eliminate al-Shabaab leaders, despite successive AFRICOM commanders and diplomats emphasizing that reforms to promote good governance hold the key to dealing with groups such as al-Shabaab.⁴⁸ The bottom line is that US military actions have failed to blunt al-Shabaab’s ability to attack Somalis and international personnel using a combination of asymmetric tactics – including ambushes, IEDs, suicide commando raids and assassinations – and more conventional assaults on forward-operating bases. Nor have they curbed al-Shabaab’s ability to launch significant terror attacks abroad, as demonstrated by the attack

⁴⁴ For a generally positive assessment of US policy in Somalia, see Jones, S. G., Liepman, A. M. and Chandler, N. (2016), *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against Al Shabaab*, RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1539.html.

⁴⁵ London Conference on Somalia (2017), *Security Pact*.

⁴⁶ For example, al-Shabaab conducted approximately 300 IED attacks in Somalia in 2016, 400 in 2017, and 500 in 2018. This is in addition to its commando raids, suicide bombings, ambushes of convoys, and attacks on AU and Somali forward-operating bases. United Nations Mine Action Service (2018), *UNMAS in Somalia: 2018 Annual Report*, p. 6, https://unsos.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unmas_annual_report_2018sml.pdf.

⁴⁷ For a generally critical assessment of US policy in Somalia, see Suri, S. (2016), *“Barbed wire on our heads”: Lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Somalia*, Saferworld, January 2016, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1032-barbed-wire-on-our-heads>.

⁴⁸ See for example United States Africa Command (2020), ‘U.S. Africa Command 2020 Posture Statement’, pp. 5–7.

on the DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi in January 2019 and regular smaller-scale attacks on civilians in northeast Kenya.⁴⁹ In September 2019 al-Shabaab attacked the US base at Baledogle, not far from Mogadishu, with a huge vehicle-borne IED. And in January 2020 the group launched its first attack on a military base outside Somalia, at Manda Bay in Kenya, from which US forces conduct a number of their air operations. Ultimately, critics of the US's present policy call for it to disengage militarily from Somalia in order to make way for what the country really needs: grassroots-led political reconciliation.

What, then, is the balance sheet for US policy on both the political and military tracks? On the political track, arguably Washington's biggest problem is the lack of substantive agreement and genuine cooperation between the FGS and the FMS. This has made it very difficult to achieve US goals, in that it has revealed that the primary US objective of reducing the threat from al-Shabaab is not the top priority of Somalia's key political leaders. As General Townsend put it, 'political friction between the Federal Government of Somalia and Somali Federal Member States threatens to distract Mogadishu from the fight'.⁵⁰ So too, for several FMS,⁵¹ and Somalia's intended federal elections (through which a new president will be chosen) will only distract them further. In sum, while Washington's priority is to reduce the threat of al-Shabaab and transnational terrorism, most of Somalia's political leaders have been more concerned with fending off local political – often clan-based – opponents. This has meant that they have often been reluctant to work together to defeat al-Shabaab. To complicate the situation still further, neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya have backed rival political leaders in some of Somalia's regional administrations, such as Jubaland, and this has intensified domestic divisions.⁵²

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In order to make real progress, the US (along with other international partners) should push for an agreement between the FGS and the FMS made up of two elements. First, in the short term, a deal needs to be reached on a viable model for the federal elections intended for 2020 or 2021 (with the latter now looking more likely). Such a breakthrough could pave the way for the constitution to be finalized, which would signal that Somali political elites had finally reached a workable consensus on how to define a federal system of government, including clarity on the respective roles of the FGS and the FMS. Second, there needs to be a detailed plan to operationalize and implement a comprehensive security strategy for Somalia, which will require a rethink of the

⁴⁹ Bryden, M. and Bahra, P. (2019), 'East Africa's Terrorist Triple Helix', *CTC Sentinel*, 12(6): pp. 1–11, <https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africas-terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/>.

⁵⁰ U.S. Africa Command (2020), 'U.S. Africa Command 2020 Posture Statement'.

⁵¹ See Bryden, M. (2020), 'Guerres par procuration en Somalie: qui manipule qui?' [Somalia's Proxy Wars: Who is Manipulating Whom?], *Diplomatie*, Les Grands Dossiers No.54: pp.76–77, <https://www.arenion24.news/produit/les-grands-dossiers-de-diplomatie-n-54/>.

⁵² The role of regional players in Somalia is one of the keys to understanding (and influencing) the future of FGS–FMS relations. Jubaland's President Ahmed Madobe has been a long-time ally of Kenya, which has supported his push for regional autonomy in order to maintain a buffer on the Kenya–Somalia border. Under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has since 2018 supported Mogadishu's desire for a more centralized governance structure, prompted in part by concerns about insecurity in its own Somali region. Kiruga, M. (2019), 'Jubaland election results mired by conflicting regional interests', *The Africa Report*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/16524/jubaland-election-results-mired-by-conflicting-regional-interests/>.

federal government's 2018 Transition Plan.⁵³ To date, however, the leaders of Somalia's political units have not reconciled with one another, and thus have not been pursuing a coordinated agenda to weaken al-Shabaab.⁵⁴

One positive recent development for the federal government is the growing levels of support and financing it has received from the World Bank and the IMF. This has included disbursed aid to particular government programmes, including in the security sector, and, most recently, the declaration that Somalia is eligible for significant debt relief.⁵⁵ In the longer term, if properly accounted for and distributed transparently, the new injection of financial resources to the FGS might provide some incentive for the FMS to cooperate with it. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent any such assistance from the Bretton Woods institutions may offset funds given to some Somali politicians by rival Gulf states as part of ongoing efforts to gain leverage in the region.⁵⁶

On the other hand, increased resources for the FGS could simply increase its ability to dominate FMS administrations. Arguments between the FGS and the FMS are frequent, and sometimes even bloody – as has recently been the case in federal–regional standoffs in both Galmudug and Jubaland. In one instance, in late 2018 the FGS, with support from Ethiopian soldiers, arrested Mukhtar Robow, a former al-Shabaab senior figure who by this time was a leading candidate for the presidency of Southwest state, thus forcibly removing him from the electoral process. This example underscores some of the major political problems that have yet to be addressed as to how the Somali authorities might deal with al-Shabaab in the absence of a peace process. Moreover, the fact that the FGS subsequently expelled the head of the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), who had raised legitimate concerns about the use of force against civilians in the Robow affair, highlights the government's intolerance of criticism. Robow's evident popularity among ordinary people in Southwest state also served to demonstrate that previous connections to al-Shabaab are not the crucial determinant of local support. Indeed, in some parts of Somalia al-Shabaab's ability to dispense 'justice' through its informal courts is seen as more legitimate and effective than either the federal or regional authorities.

There are also considerable problems to be overcome on the military track. The main difficulty for the US is that of achieving a decisive victory over al-Shabaab, because military power alone cannot defeat an organization with many 'faces' – variously a social movement, a pseudo-government and a transnational criminal network, alongside elements of a more traditional insurgency.⁵⁷ In tandem with AMISOM and some SNA activities, US strikes have delivered some positive operational and tactical gains. First, a number of al-Shabaab leaders have been captured or killed, creating some (albeit short-lived) operational disruption. Second, rank-and-file al-Shabaab forces have become

⁵³ For a relevant discussion, see Blyth, F. (2019), *Transitioning to National Forces in Somalia: More Than an Exit for AMISOM*, International Peace Institute, April 2019, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/1904_Transitioning-in-Somalia.pdf.

⁵⁴ These issues are unlikely to be substantively resolved until after Somalia's presidential (s)election process. Nevertheless, some attempts to reconcile the FGS and the FMS continue. See for example U.S. Embassy in Somalia (2020), 'Statement by the United States Calling for a Meeting Between the Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States', 10 June 2020, <https://so.usembassy.gov/statement-by-the-united-states-calling-for-a-meeting-between-the-federal-government-of-somalia-and-federal-member-states/>.

⁵⁵ See, respectively, World Bank (2017), *Somalia – Security and justice sector public expenditure review*, World Bank, February 2017, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/644671486531571103/Somalia-Security-and-justice-sector-public-expenditure-review>; and International Monetary Fund (2020), 'IMF and World Bank Consider Somalia Eligible for Assistance Under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative'.

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group (2018), *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, Africa Report no.260, 5 June 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/260-somalia-and-gulf-crisis>.

⁵⁷ For overviews of al-Shabaab, see Maruf, H. and Joseph, D. (2018), *Inside Al-Shabaab*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; and Harper, M. (2019), *Everything You Have Told Me Is True: The Many Faces of Al-Shabaab*, London: Hurst.

increasingly worried about US airstrikes, and this has affected their freedom of movement and ability to muster for large attacks.⁵⁸ US strikes are also important because they provide AMISOM and the SNA with a capability to strike al-Shabaab from depth and to defend their own forces.⁵⁹

But these tactical benefits have not altered the strategic terrain, and US operations have sometimes backfired. Al-Shabaab have essentially weathered the comparative storm of airstrikes, have continued to make regular assaults on Mogadishu, and have retained most areas of territorial influence since 2016. There are also reports that al-Shabaab continue to operate a very effective underground extortion of businesses in Mogadishu.⁶⁰ Building effective Somali security forces also remains behind schedule, with huge problems stemming from historical legacies of state collapse, clan politics, corruption, and a host of technical challenges.⁶¹ As a result, there still isn't anything close to an effective *national* army. Most reliable assessments suggest that the SNA has an operational force of about 5,000 troops – a similar number to most estimates of al-Shabaab's own fighting strength⁶² – and these personnel have widely varying levels of skills, and possess different types of equipment, depending on who was responsible for their training.⁶³ This figure is all the more troubling given that tens of thousands of Somali fighters have received some form of military training from external actors over the last decade, with many having subsequently deserted or defected.⁶⁴

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The FGS has attempted to overcome these problems through various mechanisms, including replacing the SNA's senior leadership, registering personnel more effectively through biometric forms of identification, and a new system for electronic payment of salaries, as well as paying greater attention to transitioning inactive soldiers by providing pensions and gratuities to enable retirement. However, it appears that most of the frequent leadership changes in the SNA and the intelligence services have been both politically motivated and somewhat haphazard. Furthermore, the recent clashes in Gedo, Galmudug and Baidoa suggest that the FGS has also prioritized fighting against certain FMS over the war against al-Shabaab. Clearly therefore, technical improvements will not produce effective forces if the FGS and FMS cannot resolve the fundamental issues of authority, financing, and command and control.

Finally, and probably most visible of all in terms of media and political discourse, have been controversies surrounding US airstrikes and offensive ground operations. Key issues raised about US strikes in Somalia have included AFRICOM's earlier tendency to acknowledge strikes only after an explicit request for information; the failure of US officials to consistently provide fatality or casualty

⁵⁸ Hiraal Institute (2018), 'Al-Shabaab's Military Machine', December 2018, <https://hiraalinstitute.org/al-shababs-military-machine/>.

⁵⁹ AMISOM did not have any of its own military helicopters until December 2016, when it received three Kenyan military helicopters that operated in only two of the mission's sectors. AMISOM was slated to receive four Ugandan military helicopters in December 2019, but these remained delayed as of June 2020.

⁶⁰ See for example Schaap, V. F. and Werner, C. (2017), 'The business of fear in boomtown Mogadishu', *Der Spiegel*, 27 October 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-business-and-violence-driving-the-boom-in-mogadishu-a-1174243.html>; and Makori, A. (2020), 'Al-Shabaab expands tax empire in Mogadishu under government control', *Garowe Online*, 16 February 2020, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-expands-tax-empire-in-mogadishu-under-govt-control>.

⁶¹ Williams (2020), 'Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of Failure'.

⁶² A recent US Inspector General report noted that while most estimates suggest there are 5,000–7,000 al-Shabaab fighters, the Defense Intelligence Agency recently estimated there could be as many as 10,000. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress (2020), *East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations*, p. 20.

⁶³ Author's communications with AU, UN and US officials.

⁶⁴ Williams (2020), 'Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of Failure'.

estimates, including for civilians; and the fact that strikes conducted by the CIA may go completely unacknowledged.⁶⁵ The issue of civilian casualties has been particularly sensitive in the context of the increased number of strikes conducted under the Trump administration. Such deaths – seldom acknowledged by the US military – are often reported in Somali media, leading to some animosity from civilians who fear they will themselves become accidental victims of attacks.

Box 2: A case for negotiating an end to Somalia's civil war

Both the FGS and al-Shabaab are reluctant to negotiate peace. Each hopes to endure the current stalemate better than the other, and perhaps make enough gains to compel their opponent to compromise from a position of weakness. Overall, however, the arguments for pursuing negotiations are more persuasive than those for not doing so.

There are four main reasons to pursue negotiations. First, a decisive victory is likely to prove elusive. Scholars agree that civil wars have broadly three possible futures: victory, negotiated settlement, or prolonged stalemate.⁶⁶ And in the case of Somalia specifically, most analysts see victory as unlikely. As concluded by one former US official: 'The inability to decisively defeat al-Shabaab leaves only negotiated settlement or prolonged fighting and the certainty of continued terrorist activity as plausible near-term outcomes to the ongoing conflict.'⁶⁷ A Somali scholar reached a similar conclusion: 'Without negotiating with Al-Shabaab, it is unlikely that the conflict will end but likely that Al-Shabaab will continue controlling the remote rural areas outside of the center.'⁶⁸

Second, recent academic research has emphasized the importance of policy choices, concluding that civil wars tend to end the way key external actors think they should end.⁶⁹ Hence, it matters whether important external actors such as the US promote or denounce the idea of peace talks in Somalia. Critically, however, the details of how to negotiate should not be determined by external actors.

Third, negotiations could avoid an even longer, more costly war – in terms of human lives, damage to infrastructure and the environment, financial losses, and opportunity costs.⁷⁰

Fourth, negotiations might work, at least for some elements of al-Shabaab, and would be worth pursuing given the huge costs of 'business as usual'. As Stig Hansen argued in 2013, negotiating with al-Shabaab 'is a challenging task; and it should not be believed that the whole of the organization could be included in any negotiated solution, but it might be worth an attempt'.⁷¹

Moreover, the main arguments against the FGS pursuing negotiations are weak. First, the claim that negotiations will be likely to fail is unduly fatalistic. Negotiations in civil conflict have a good general track record worldwide, and have already taken place with al-Shabaab over specific issues such as the release of Kenyan prisoners of war⁷² and ensuring the safety of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.⁷³ The FGS has also negotiated with senior

⁶⁵ Amnesty International has provided the most thorough independent assessment of the level of civilian casualties caused by US operations, although its researchers were only able to examine a small number of strikes that occurred for a limited time period in Lower Shabelle region. Amnesty International (2019), *The Hidden US War in Somalia*, March 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr52/9952/2019/en/>. See also Goldbaum, C. (2017), 'Strong evidence that US special operations forces massacred civilians in Somalia', *The Daily Beast*, 29 November 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/strong-evidence-that-us-special-operations-forces-massacred-civilians-in-somalia>; Sperber, A. (2019), 'Inside the secretive US air campaign in Somalia', *The Nation*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/somalia-secret-air-campaign/>; Turse, N. (2020), 'New data shows the US military is severely undercounting civilian casualties in Somalia', *The Intercept*, 25 February 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/25/africom-airstrikes-somalia/>.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Toft, M. (2010), 'Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory', *International Security*, 34(4): pp. 7–36, doi:10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.7; Nathan, L. and Toft, M. (2011), 'Correspondence' *International Security*, 36(1): pp. 202–10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41289693>.

⁶⁷ Hartwig, J. (2019), 'How to end the civil war in Somalia: Negotiate with al-Shabaab', *War on the Rocks*, 13 May 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/how-to-end-the-civil-war-in-somalia-negotiate-with-al-shabaab/>.

⁶⁸ Ingiriis, M. H. (2018), 'Building peace from the margins in Somalia: The case for political settlement with Al-Shabaab', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39(4): pp. 512–536, doi/full/10.1080/13523260.2018.1429751.

⁶⁹ Howard, L. and Stark, A. (2018), 'How civil wars end: The international system, norms, and the role of external actors', *International Security*, 42(3): pp. 127–71, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00305.

⁷⁰ See for example Ingiriis (2018), 'Building peace from the margins in Somalia', pp. 514, 527.

⁷¹ Hansen (2013), *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, p. 142.

⁷² Ingiriis (2018), 'Building peace from the margins in Somalia', p. 526.

⁷³ Admittedly, the details of the South African–al-Shabaab dialogue on this issue are hazy. See Hansen (2013), *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, p. 96.

al-Shabaab defectors such as Ahmed Madobe (the current president of Jubaland), Mukhtar Robow and Hassan Dir Aweys. While none of these cases has produced ‘ideal’ outcomes from the perspective of either the FGS or most international actors, the results are arguably significantly better than the *status quo ante*.

Second, the argument that the ‘international community’ has ‘closed any door for negotiation with al-Shabaab’ is not persuasive, because most international partners will likely follow the FGS lead on this issue.⁷⁴ The often-declared principle that ‘we don’t negotiate with terrorists’ can be quickly dismissed. Refusal to negotiate with ‘terrorists’ is not a law of warfare: it is a public diplomacy tool for political leaders that holds true only until it doesn’t. With regard to ethical concerns about al-Shabaab’s use of terror tactics, transitional justice mechanisms could be built into any peace settlement.

Finally, the current legal restrictions that some states, including the US, place on what economic means might be used to incentivize al-Shabaab to come to the negotiating table could be addressed, especially once negotiations begin in earnest.

Negotiations offer the most viable way to break the longstanding stalemate and end the civil war in Somalia. Box 2 summarizes the main reasons why. At best, therefore, US military strikes could bring pressure to bear on al-Shabaab – or at least on major parts of the group – to negotiate peace with the Somali authorities. At worst, any tactical benefits from continued strikes will be outweighed by the boost civilian casualties can give to al-Shabaab recruitment, and their effect on undermining support from the Somali people for the FGS, the US and AMISOM.

The immediate policy challenge facing the FGS and FMS, the US and other partners is thus twofold. First, encouraging more of al-Shabaab’s rank and file to reject their irreconcilable leaders and instead align themselves with those who support talks, or leave the organization altogether. The latter would require far greater effort to engage those clan leaders who are currently working pragmatically with al-Shabaab, as well as addressing the major drivers of al-Shabaab’s recruitment of fighters.⁷⁵ Second, persuading more of al-Shabaab’s senior figures that negotiations are a reasonable way forward.

⁷⁴ See Ingiriis (2018), ‘Building peace from the margins in Somalia’, p. 526.

⁷⁵ Such as underlying political and economic grievances, and ideological, social, and cultural issues, among other push and pull factors.

5. What Future for US Engagement in Somalia?

There are, broadly, three plausible scenarios for the future of US engagement in Somalia:

Status quo

In this scenario, the US continues along much the same path as now, and is stuck investing more resources in a stalemated war. On the political track, the prospects for achieving genuine reconciliation between Somalia's elites and resolving tensions between the centre and regions remain slim, particularly in the run-up to the federal elections through which a new president will be selected (probably sometime in 2021). Greater numbers of Somalis suspect that the US is too willing to support FGS domination of the regions through manipulated electoral processes and forcibly preventing opposition candidates gaining power. As a result, the chances of arriving at a finalized national constitution and a path to operationalize a new security strategy for the FGS and the FMS look remote.

On the military track, the bulk of US resources deployed to – and in support of operations in – Somalia continue to be directed at supporting AMISOM's counterterrorism operations against al-Shabaab, and to a much lesser degree the Islamic State in Somalia. This would include maintaining a high tempo of US airstrikes and some targeted ground operations, as well as a continuation of the resumption of security force assistance for the SNA and Somali police – starting with those engaged in joint operations with AMISOM. It remains an open question as to whether the US would or should directly support 'regional forces' in Somalia (i.e. the largely clan-based militias and paramilitary forces that have not been officially integrated into the SNA).⁷⁶ However, certain other factors might undermine the case for the US maintaining a 'business as usual' approach on Somalia. Notably, US policy may be undermined if AMISOM's continued drawdown accelerates dramatically; if the EU significantly cuts its financial support for the mission following Brexit and the envisaged ending of the African Peace Facility commitments after 2021; or if other external actors assumed the role of Somalia's principal security partner.

Negotiations

A second scenario involves the US exercising considerably more diplomatic and political muscle in order to conclude the two deals outlined in this paper. First, the US would work to build a coalition of international partners with the common goal of facilitating a deal whereby the FGS and FMS would reconcile, agree on a new comprehensive security strategy and prioritize the fight against al-Shabaab. Securing such an arrangement would probably entail the US placing significant conditions on continued security force assistance, airstrikes and debt relief, in order to push the FGS to initiate this process. Ideally, this would see the FGS – either before or after the upcoming (s)election process – accept that it does not have the power to consistently dominate outcomes in the FMS.

⁷⁶ For an overview, see Felbab-Brown, V. (2020), 'The Problem with Militias in Somalia', in Day, A., Felbab-Brown, V. and Haddad, F. (2020), *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace*, New York: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, pp.112–146, <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3895/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf>.

Under this scenario, the administration in Mogadishu would accept a political status more in line with its real power projection capabilities. The US, for its part, would treat the FGS and the FMS more even-handedly, recognizing the sovereignty of the national government as defined by the provisional constitution, but also that none of these political administrations has the legitimacy of being elected by democratic (one person, one vote) elections. A new power-sharing agreement concluded between the FGS and the FMS would be a real opportunity to establish a genuine federal system of government across south-central Somalia, based on a more realistic assessment of power dynamics across the region. It would also open up an opportunity to conduct more unified – and hence more effective – cross-sector military operations against al-Shabaab.

Even with a revitalized deal between the FGS and the FMS, there is no quick and clear path to decisive victory over al-Shabaab.

Even with a revitalized deal between the FGS and the FMS, however, there is no quick and clear path to decisive victory over al-Shabaab. The US would therefore also support the principle of negotiations between the Somali authorities and al-Shabaab. This would raise a long list of complicated issues and questions, including whether negotiations could be concluded by the FGS alone, or only in partnership with the FMS; whether there should be preconditions; whether there should be phased or ‘back-channel’ talks, perhaps targeting particular clan representatives within al-Shabaab; what role would clan leaders have in such talks; whether the US would play a public or a behind-the-scenes role in the talks; and what other countries, if any, should be involved in the process.

It would remain to be seen whether the start of peace talks with al-Shabaab would attract important regional supporters, or whether some external actors might emerge as would-be spoilers. The response of leaders in Ethiopia, Kenya, Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar would be particularly salient. As for the US, it is unlikely to follow the approach adopted in Afghanistan, where Washington engaged in direct negotiations with the Taliban separately from the Afghan government.

In the meantime, the US would continue its current support to AMISOM, and be open to imposing more conditionalities on security force assistance to the SNA if its corruption concerns are not addressed. In the event of dialogue starting between the Somali authorities and al-Shabaab, Washington could signal a conditional ceasefire, and make clear that it would use airstrikes and other kinetic operations only for collective self-defence against insurgent attacks.

Disengagement

A third scenario involves a significant degree of US disengagement from Somalia, prompted by Washington concluding that al-Shabaab do not pose a major threat to its national security interests. Under this scenario, although AFRICOM continues to voice concerns about the threat posed by al-Shabaab, the general downgrading of the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ and the Pentagon’s pivot to a focus on great power competition would see the US’s engagement in Africa diminish across the continent. As part of this shift, Washington would decide to ramp down its kinetic operations in Somalia, arguing that they were too costly and that their political impact was minimal because Somali political elites continually refused to reconcile and focus on combating al-Shabaab. Corruption and political in-fighting would also continue to wreck the chances of building effective Somali national security forces. As Washington disengaged, the FGS would turn increasingly to Turkey, and to a lesser extent

the EU, for its security force assistance. The war against al-Shabaab would remain at best stalemated. However, if US disengagement came at the same time as a weakened or significantly drawn-down AMISOM, then an al-Shabaab surge would be more likely. And if, under such a scenario, the US continued to focus on its other priorities, the likelihood would be that Washington would maintain limited political engagement and a reduced degree of humanitarian assistance, but with the Somalia file deprioritized and US diplomats lacking any serious leverage to shape local outcomes.

A way forward

Pursuing negotiations while preparing for other negative contingencies is the most prudent course of action for the US in Somalia. This will require a recalibration of US resources that emphasizes sustained high-level political leadership to help forge the necessary negotiated settlements. Greater willingness to place significant conditions on kinetic operations, security force assistance and even debt relief may also be needed to catalyse a reconciliation process between the FGS, the FMS and other relevant political actors.

Of course, this scenario is not without its pitfalls. Nor is it likely to occur before the federal elections through which Somalia's next president will be selected – or indeed ahead of the upcoming US presidential election. But the plausible alternatives are worse. More than a decade of 'business as usual' has not stabilized Somalia, and there is little prospect of existing policies producing radical change. Rapid US disengagement would raise significant moral issues given the level of sunk costs and huge sacrifices made by AU and Somali security forces. It would also undermine elements of US military support that have proved critical to the operational effectiveness of elements of both AMISOM and the SNA. Without AMISOM, even the limited progress of the last decade might be lost, and the FGS would be less able to withstand sustained al-Shabaab assaults or significantly recover the territory it currently controls.

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Cover image: Second iteration of US-led Somalia Train and Equip mission ends: Somali National Army soldiers stand in formation during a logistics course graduation ceremony, 28 August 2018.

Photo credit: MC2 (SW/AW) Evan Parker

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