

# The war in Somalia in 2019

## Summary

The year 2019 saw the effect of allied response to Al-Shabab's focus on assassinations in 2018, when it had ratcheted up assassinations and reduced direct military raids. The allied response led to a significant reduction in assassinations, SVBIEDs, massed military attacks, and complex attacks. However, this forced AS to instead focus on IED attacks and small-scale military attacks. By the end of 2019, allied efforts seemed to be drawing down, and AS accordingly responded by increasing its operations across the board.

## Introduction

The year 2019 started with Al-Shabab under pressure from the allies who had regained some initiative with the help of American strikes that had forced the group to scale back its rural operations. As a result, the year began with AS trying to adapt itself to the new reality by focusing on its urban operations in and around Mogadishu. Specifically, assassinations and IED attacks had shot up in 2018, and the group was trying to continue and build on its successes.

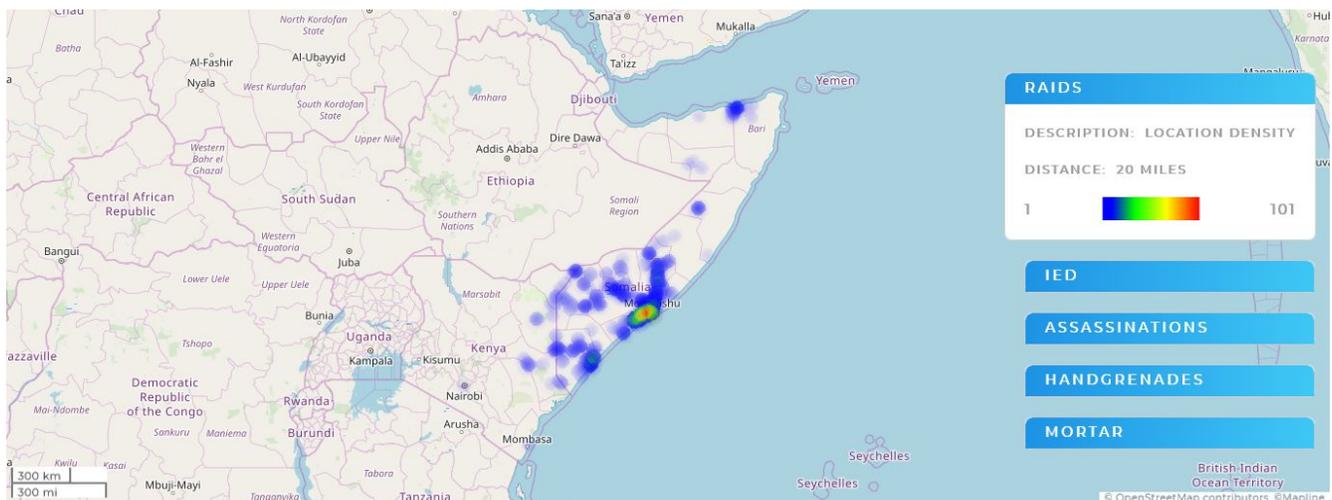


Figure 1: AS Attacks in 2019

Incident	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	
IED		22	16	36	17	26	24	14	14	29	28	16	18
Assassinat ons		18	3	12	4	26	9	9	9	8	17	14	11
Raid		12	13	16	7	24	20	22	17	28	11	9	30
Hand grenade		8	3	4	2	11	11	12		6	2	3	2
Ambush		4	3	2	0	5	4	6	6	7	2	6	6
VBIED		2	1	1	1	4	2	2					
Failed VBIED/SVBIED			1			1							
SVBIED			3	3	1				2	3			2
SVBIED-Supported Raid		1	1							2			
HBIED								2					

Figure 2: Breakdown of AS Attacks by Month

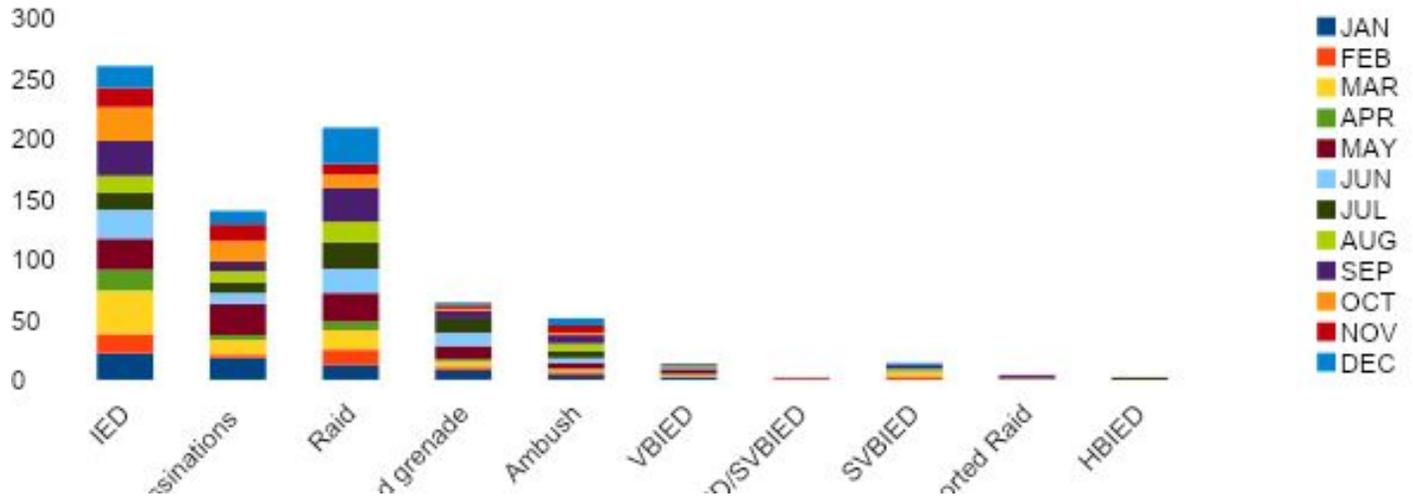


Figure 3: Type of Attacks by AS by Month

The FGS increased both its static defenses and operations against AS strongholds near the capital, disrupting the group and making it harder for it to operate there. As a result, complex attacks supported by SVBIEDs and VBIEDs decreased in number by almost half compared to 2018. Likewise, assassinations decreased by a third. This forced AS to rely more on IEDs, which collectively increased by more than seventy per cent from 2018.

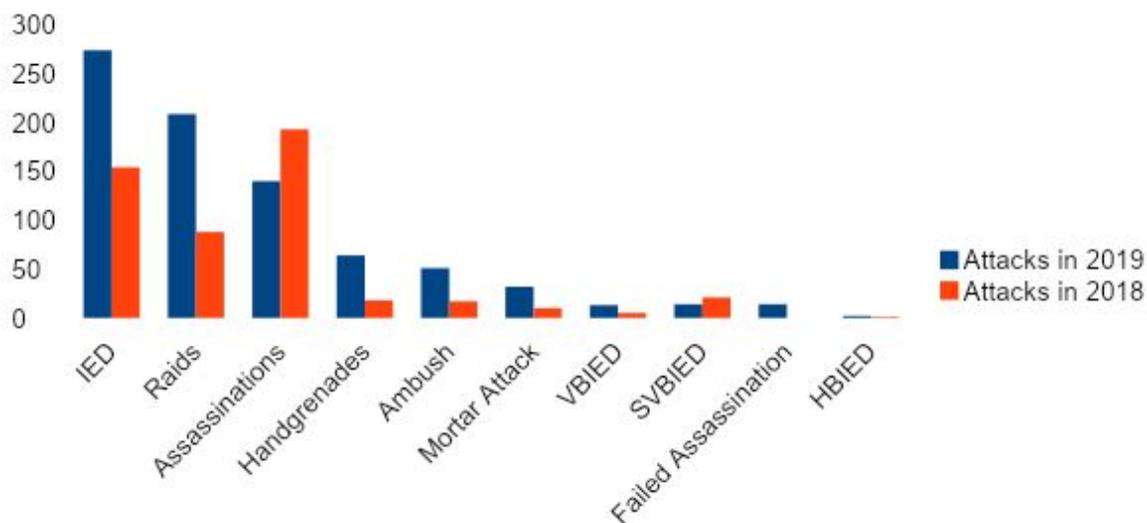


Figure 4: AS attacks in 2018 and 2019

### Trend in attacks

The frequency and lethality of AS attacks increased in the latter part of the year, after a long lull was achieved in the middle of the year of SVBIEDs, culminating in more than two straight months of no car

bombs across the country in November and October. This lull and drawback in AS attacks during this period seems to be a direct result of allied attacks on AS strongholds.

As shown by figure 5, threats from airstrikes reduced the number of massed attacks by AS on allied positions. AS was subjected to 40 air strikes by the US from Jan-Jun; this helped keep the AS attacks to 92. However, from July to December, AS was attacked only 13 times, providing it with the opportunity and freedom to launch 117 direct military attacks that were carried out by smaller units than in the first half of the year.

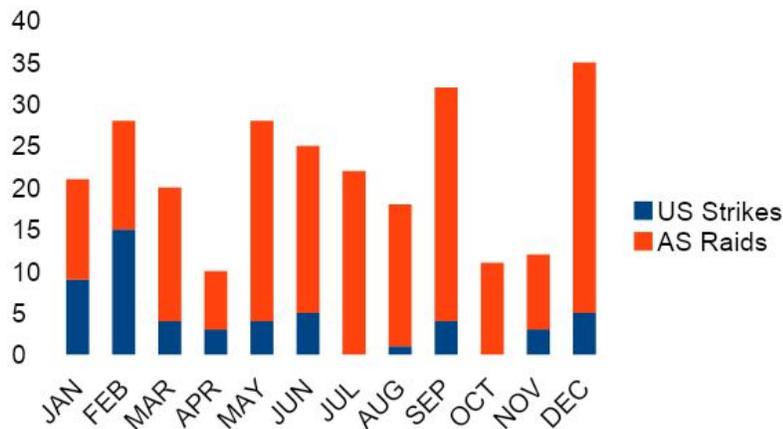


Figure 5: Effect of airstrikes on the frequency of AS massed attacks

The retaking of the riverine towns to the northwest of the capital disrupted VBIED pathways into the capital. As a result, most of AS's direct engagements with the static defenses was to the areas it lost: Sabid, Bariire, and Awdhegle saw the brunt of its raids. It also continued its pressure on the rest of Lower Shabelle and, to a lesser extent, Middle Shabelle.



Figure 6: Direct military attacks by AS

## AS Focus

AS focused its lethal operations in the capital, focusing on security forces and civil servants. As shown on figure 7, its assassinations were concentrated around the main markets and the northwestern outskirts of the capital. As can be seen on figure 8, IEDs and hand-grenade attacks were also prevalent in the same areas, suggesting that there must be a common vulnerability that is being exploited by the *Amn* teams operating in these areas. Likewise, as shown on figure 9, assassinations and IED attacks are conducted almost at the same rate across all cities, further suggesting that cells responsible for these attacks are closely interlinked and may share local command and sources of information.

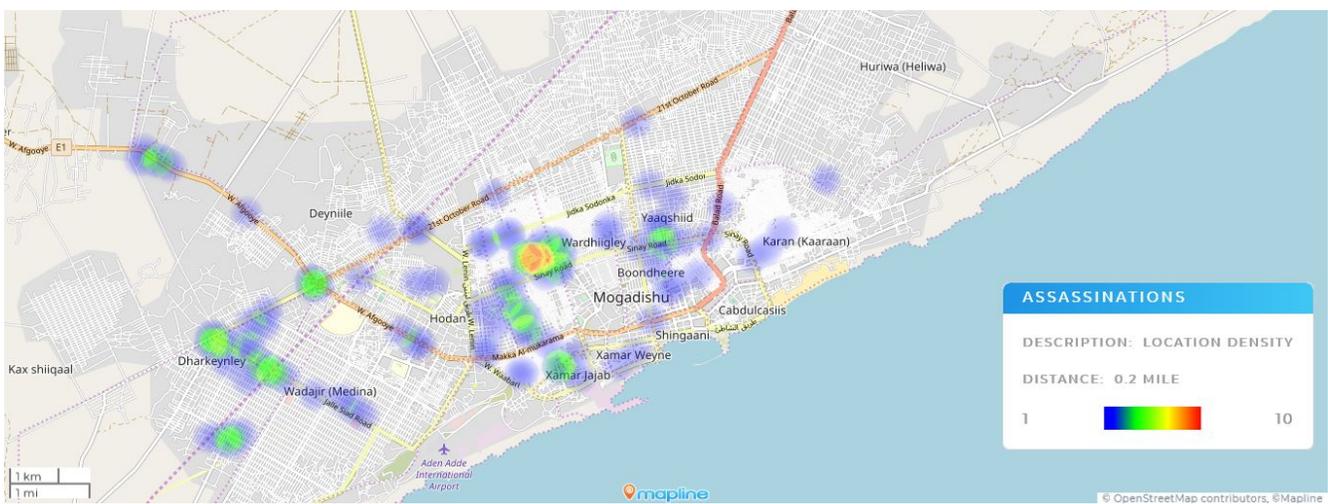


Figure 7: Concentration of Assassinations in the Capital

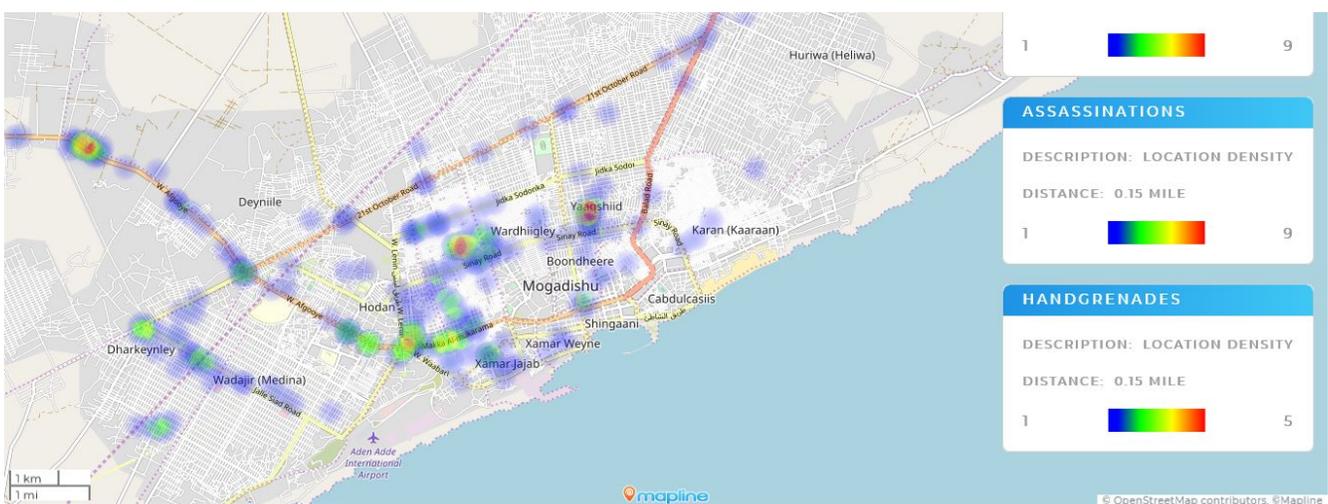


Figure 8: Concentration of Assassinations, IEDs, and Hand-grenade Attacks in the Capital

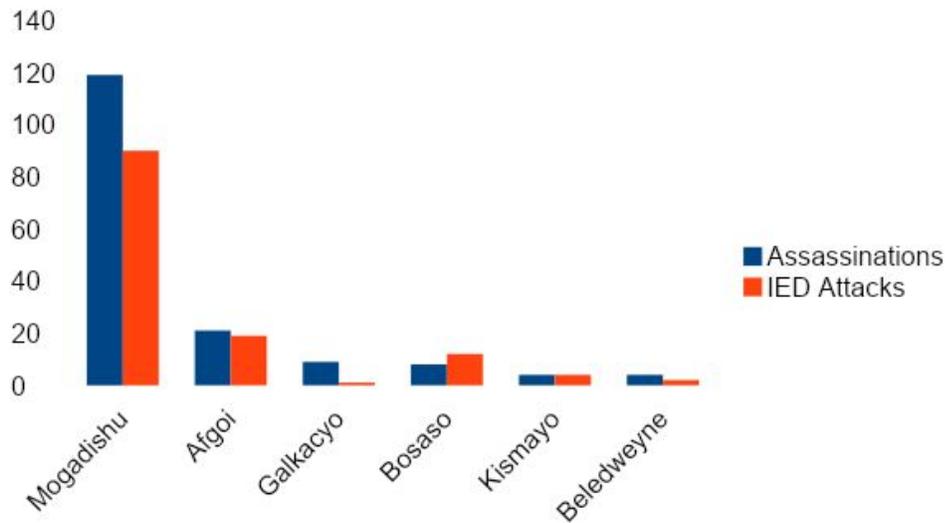


Figure 9: Assassinations and IED Attacks by City

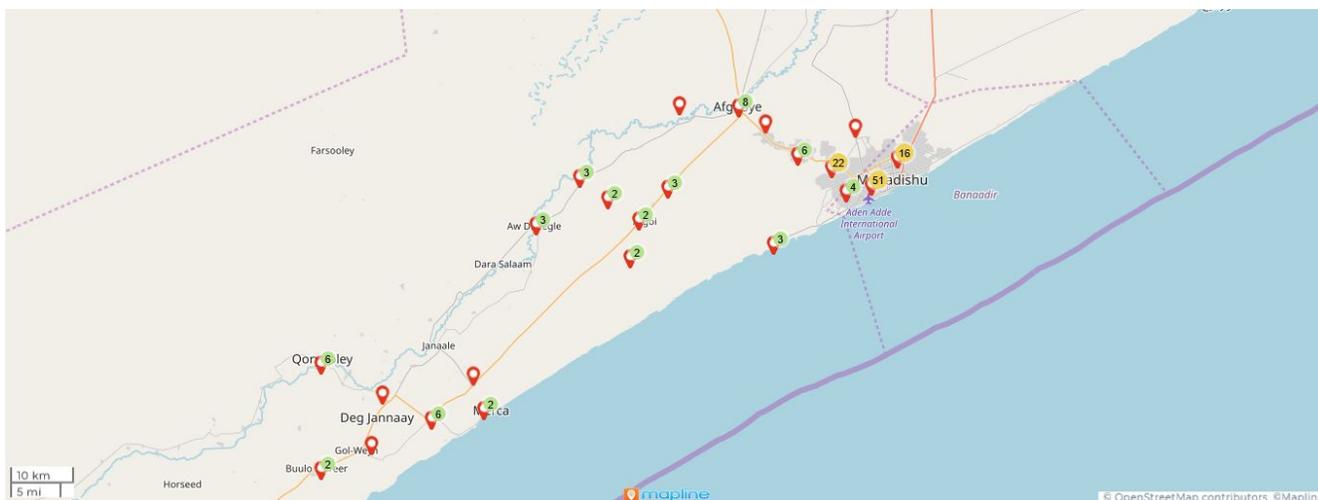


Figure 10: IED Attacks in and around Mogadishu

AS targets were overwhelmingly military in nature; for instance, it targeted the SNA almost 250 times while it targeted civil servants about fifty times. This is more of an indication of the complexity of conducting attacks in major cities than it does of AS's sensitivity to civilian casualties.

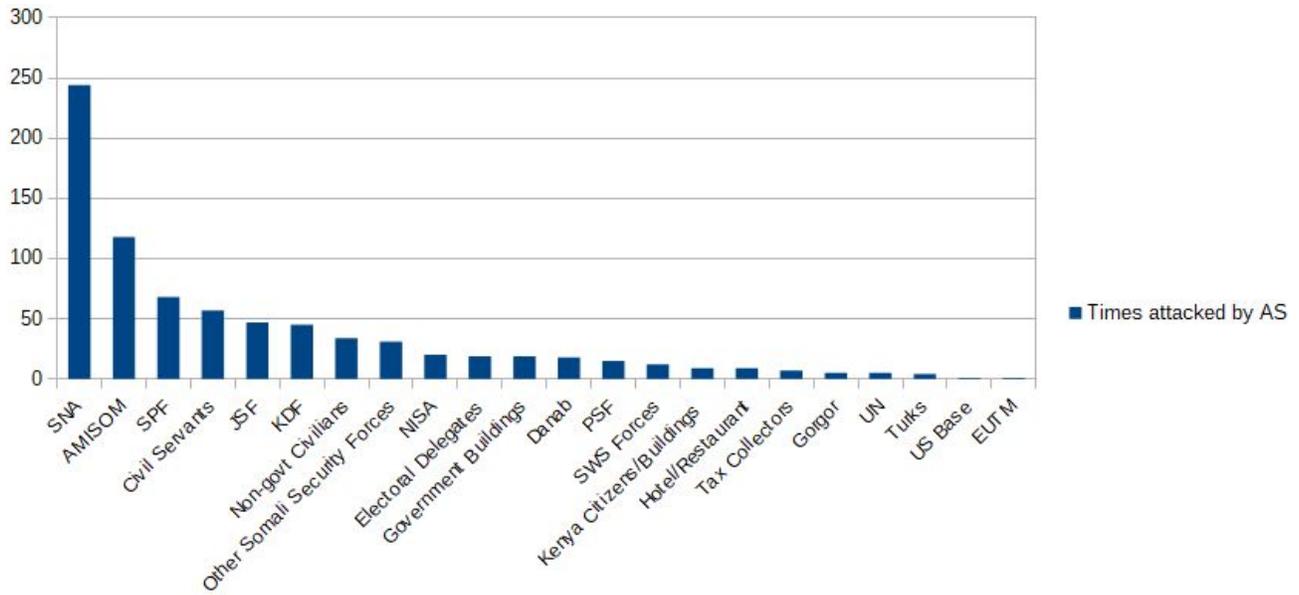


Figure 11: Entities Targeted by AS

### Responding to AS Attacks

The allied response to AS was significantly improved from 2018, increasing by more than 100% and helping to disrupt its operations. As shown by figure 13, US airstrikes and the Special Forces, Danab and Gorgor, are together responsible for more than two-thirds of operations against AS.

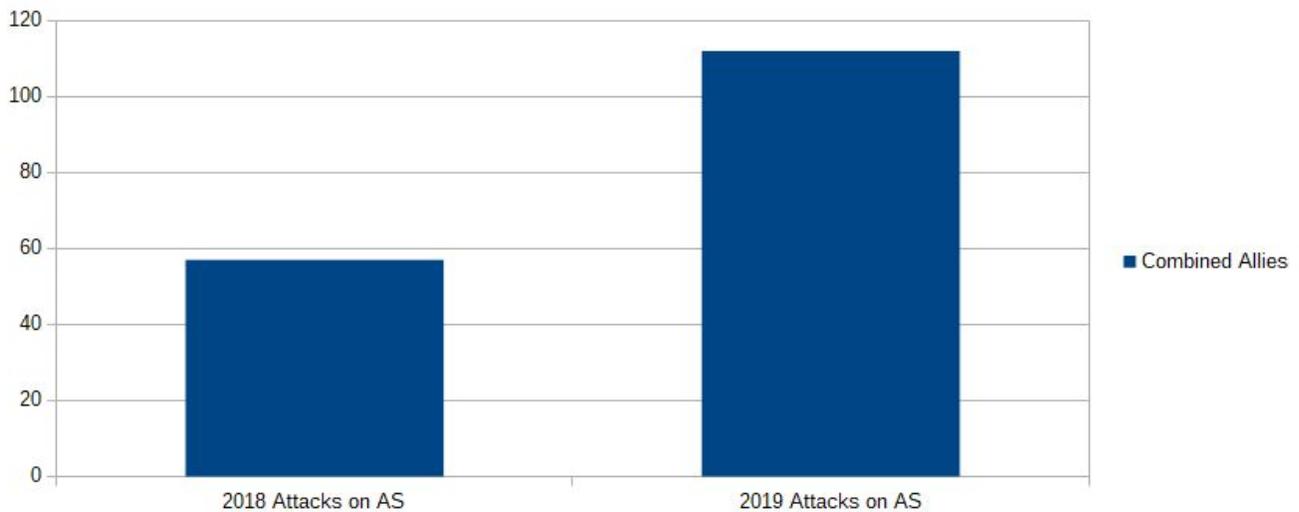


Figure 12: Allied Attacks on AS in 2018 and 2019

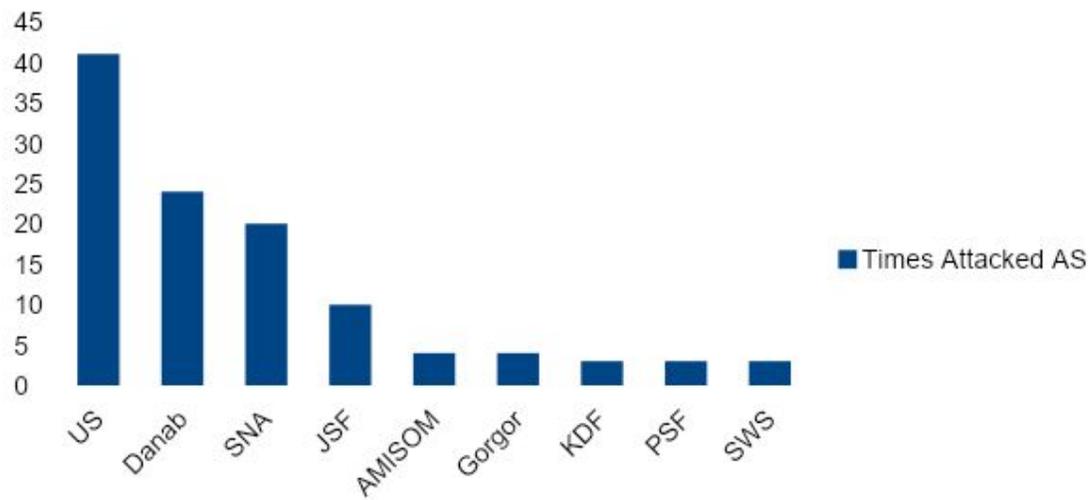


Figure 13: Attacks on AS by Major Actors

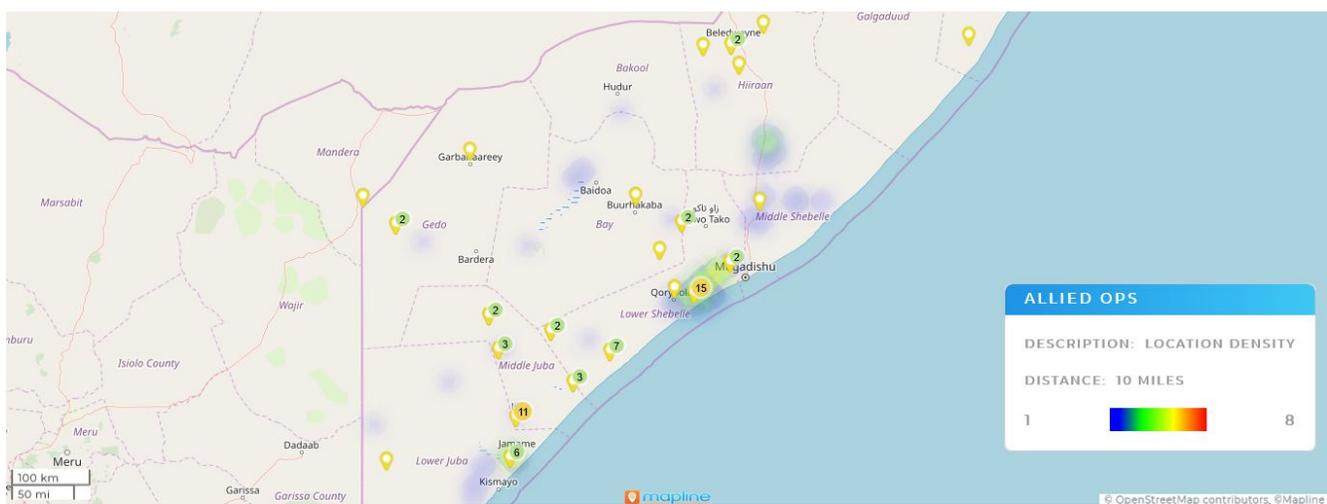


Figure 14: Heatmap Showing Areas of Allied Operations, and Pins Showing Air Strikes against AS.

## Conclusion

The allies have regained some of the strategic initiative, succeeding in forcing AS to continuously adjust. However, this opportunity may be squandered by the slowing momentum of attacks and the drawdown in air strikes against AS. Without a consistent strategy that adapts in a timely manner to the changing tactics of AS, any gains made against the group are unlikely to be maintained in the short-term. AS continues to focus on Mogadishu and the towns around it, which it needs to regain or weaken the forces stationed there in order to easily conduct operations in the capital.