



Hiraal Institute
Addressing Horn of Africa's Security Challenges

STRATEGIC MISSTEPS AND TACTICAL FAILURES

REASSESSING THE SOMALI GOVERNMENT'S COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL SOMALIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent counterinsurgency operation and subsequent withdrawal of forces by the Somali government in central Somalia has exposed several glaring deficiencies in strategic planning, military execution, and political alignment. Utilizing analytical lenses spanning military strategy, counterinsurgency doctrine, local legitimacy frameworks, and elite bargaining theories, this report conducts an in-depth diagnosis of the factors underlying this reversal.

The challenges that severely constrained operational effectiveness included inadequate logistical arrangements such as insufficient supplies and highly vulnerable supply lines that hampered ground forces. Additionally, overreliance on external support coupled with lack of critical indigenous capabilities such as air power and intelligence created a fragile ecosystem for the offensive. Political interference from the national leadership and competing interests of local power brokers added layers of complexity that often clashed with military imperatives. The failure to maintain stability in reclaimed territories and alienation of local actors through exclusion cost the government much-needed local legitimacy. Moreover, the absence of elite bargains with influential local stakeholders reflected a lack of political acuity with far-reaching ripple effects.

Compounding these obstacles was the mismatch between the government's ambitious military objectives and its actual capabilities and resources on hand. There was also a noticeable lack of strategic flexibility to adapt to fluid conditions on the ground. The initial phase witnessed tangible gains by leveraging local uprisings, lending some credibility. However, the decision to transition to external forces without consulting local powerholders backfired dramatically, severely compromising both military effectiveness and local goodwill.

The report strongly advocates urgent and sweeping reforms across multiple domains. There is a need to end political interference within the military establishment and unify all disparate command structures under centralized leadership.

Fortifying vulnerable logistics and building sustainable, self-sufficient technical capabilities will bolster ground operations. Earning local legitimacy through active community engagement and redressal of grievances is indispensable. Additionally, military leverage should be utilized to bring militant groups into negotiations in order to align political and military aims. Most importantly, coherent and realistic objectives that match available resources must be formulated.

Failure to implement reforms risks inflaming anti-government sentiments among local communities and splintering state authority further. The analysis makes a compelling case for calibrated military actions synchronized with overarching political strategy, robust grassroots relationships, and clear-eyed policy objectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent offensive in central Somalia, initiated by the Somali government, ended in an abrupt and disheartening withdrawal, providing a compelling backdrop for nuanced scrutiny. The operation, initially aimed at establishing governmental control over contested areas, unravelled in a manner that wiped out nearly nine months of hard-fought territorial gains.[1] Further exacerbating the situation was the lack of local support, a consequence that does not merely compromise the immediate objectives of the operation but also casts a pall over broader ambitions related to state-building.

To understand the underpinnings of this setback, it becomes essential to employ a multi-disciplinary lens that integrates elements of military strategy, counterinsurgency doctrine, local legitimacy, and elite bargaining theories. Utilizing this holistic approach allows for a nuanced comprehension of the intersecting variables at play—such as clan dynamics, religious extremism, and geopolitical interests—which in turn helps elucidate the operational and strategic deficiencies that have compromised the effectiveness of the offensive.

From a military standpoint, the operations in question have suffered from inherent contradictions. While the initial phase of the operations saw considerable success, the subsequent stages were marred by logistical inadequacies, such as shortages of essential supplies and vulnerable supply routes. Furthermore, military decisions appeared to be heavily influenced by political considerations, often undermining tactical necessities and operational effectiveness. Such politicization of military strategy is not only operationally perilous but also erodes the morale of the fighting forces.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) theories emphasize the critical need to gain and maintain the support of local populations. However, the Somali government's operations demonstrate a significant gap in applying these principles. An assassination attempt on the President of Galmudug and federal parliamentarians and rising disaffection among local communities post-withdrawal reveal a civil-military relations strategy that is anything but robust.[2]

The question of local legitimacy is equally compelling. The shift from employing local forces in Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions to mostly non-local forces in Galgaduud in the later stages of the operation underscored a lack of understanding of the operational environment. Such a shift neglects the crucial tenets of local legitimacy and alienates the very population the government aims to protect and win over.

Lastly, elite bargaining theories, which focus on the importance of striking deals among local and national elites to ensure stability, also find resonance in this situation. The political leadership's risk-taking in operational decision-making failed to incorporate any substantial form of elite consensus, thereby leading to quick gains but ultimately resulting in substantial and counterproductive losses.

In light of these multifaceted challenges, this article seeks to dissect the root causes and subsequent implications of the recent withdrawal in central Somalia. It aims to identify the gaps in the current approach and offer a nuanced roadmap for achieving sustainable peace and stability in a deeply fractured socio-political landscape.

2. REASONS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL: LOGISTICAL ISSUES

One of the most striking impediments to the effectiveness of the government's military offensive in central Somalia has been the myriad logistical challenges. These challenges are not merely operational in nature; they offer insights into deeper structural deficiencies in the conduct of military operations. This section will delve into the specific logistical constraints, such as the scarcity of essential supplies and the precariousness of supply routes, that contributed to the rapid reversal of gains, using frameworks of military strategy and operational planning.

The most immediate logistical concern was the acute lack of essential supplies, including food, fuel, and ammunition. Forces deployed in Galcad and Ceel Dheer were notably under-resourced, leading to severe operational constraints. Logistically speaking, an army marches on its stomach, and the lack of fundamental provisions severely hampered the troops' operational capability and morale. Moreover, this inadequacy was not an isolated issue but symptomatic of broader supply chain problems.

Supplying remote forces is a significant military undertaking under any circumstances, but the unique geography and security dynamics of central Somalia make this task even more daunting. The long and perilous supply routes involved a level of risk that was evidently underestimated in the operational planning. These supply lines were not only lengthy but also exposed to interdiction by hostile forces. The failure to secure and maintain these key routes led to vulnerabilities that Al-Shabab could exploit, essentially cutting off deployed units from much-needed supplies. The securing of supply lines is often a pre-requisite for the launching of an offensive, something that was clearly overlooked in this case.

Furthermore, the complexities were compounded by the dual nature of the supply chains. Forces in the Galmudug region received supplies from two disparate streams—the national army and a separate channel run by the defense minister. This bifurcation led to a disorganized and inefficient supply chain, contributing to the inadequacies experienced on the ground. Such fragmentation not only introduced inefficiencies but also raised questions about the unity of command and control, which is critical for any successful military operation.

The logistical issues also have an interconnectedness with broader operational strategy. The oversight in logistical planning signifies not just a failure at the operational level but also a lack of coherence in the overall military strategy. Logistical challenges were not merely operational hurdles but indicators of a systemic failure in military planning and strategy. The lack of supplies and the vulnerabilities of long and dangerous supply routes were symptomatic of deeper issues in operational preparedness and strategic coherence. These logistical constraints, therefore, played a pivotal role in undermining the government's offensive and contributed to the subsequent withdrawal and loss of territorial gains.

3. REASONS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL: TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS

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Another significant technical limitation was the inadequate surveillance and intelligence capabilities of the military. The asymmetric warfare tactics employed by AS, including the use of suicide bombings, were not new phenomena; these were strategies that the Somali military should ideally have adapted to by this point. With appropriate surveillance and intelligence, government forces should have been well-positioned to anticipate and counter these tactics effectively. The absence of such capabilities calls into question the extent to which the operation was guided by real-time, or even retrospective, strategic intelligence. The absence of reliable intelligence markedly undermined the effectiveness of the government's offensive.

Furthermore, the technical limitations interacted in harmful ways with other aspects of the operation. For example, the absence of strong intelligence and surveillance capabilities made the already vulnerable supply routes even more susceptible to attacks and interdictions. This correlation between technical and logistical limitations exemplifies how weaknesses in one domain can amplify challenges in another, resulting in a compounding effect that undermines the entire operation.

The technical limitations in the government's military offensive were indicative of broader strategic and operational lapses. The overreliance on external air support and the inadequacies in surveillance and intelligence were not merely isolated issues but were symptomatic of a flawed overall strategy. These shortcomings had a cascading impact on the government's ability to maintain territorial gains and ultimately necessitated the withdrawal of forces. This serves as a cautionary tale for the imperative of building indigenous capabilities and integrating them effectively into a comprehensive and adaptive operational plan.

4. REASONS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL: POLITICAL FACTORS

The role of political factors in the withdrawal of government forces from central Somalia is multifaceted, implicating not just the dynamics of power at the national level but also the local and regional political landscapes. The importance of local legitimacy and elite bargaining frameworks cannot, therefore, be overstated. This section will examine the complex interplay of political factors that have been instrumental in the recent setbacks faced by the government's forces.

At the national level, political interference in military affairs has been particularly detrimental. The forced retention of troops despite the soldiers' desire for withdrawal led to mutinies and defections, thereby weakening morale and combat effectiveness.[3]

Such top-down, politically motivated decisions often lack tactical and strategic wisdom, leading to discord between the political and military echelons. There is a need for unity of effort and command, both of which are compromised when politicians interfere with military operations.

Another layer of complexity is added by the regional political aspirations, such as in the case of local forces in Hiran refusing to fight without the creation of a new federal state. [4] This demonstrates how sub-national political ambitions can dramatically impact military operations. The power dynamics at the local level often involve intricate elite bargaining, where local leaders weigh the costs and benefits of aligning with national forces against insurgents.

The inability to secure local commitment through a robust elite bargaining mechanism can result in ephemeral military gains. If local stakeholders sense that their requirements are unmet or the immediate threat has dissipated, they may revert to aiding insurgents. This was evident when local traditional leaders in eastern Galgaduud, who had previously collaborated with AS, refrained from switching allegiances. Instead, they publicly reaffirmed their loyalty to the group upon the government's withdrawal.

Moreover, the government's promise to bring an end to the conflict through negotiations was not only unmet but was followed by an escalation in hostilities. Such inconsistency alienates local populations whose homes and lives are caught in the crossfire, eroding the government's legitimacy. In the local legitimacy framework, the trust and confidence of the indigenous population are critical for the success of any counterinsurgency operation. A lack of credibility makes it difficult for the government to collaborate effectively with local actors or to obtain actionable intelligence, thereby further diminishing its military effectiveness.

Lastly, the failed attempts to utilize military gains to pressure militants into peace talks indicate a misalignment between military actions and political objectives. In any conflict scenario, military operations should serve political ends, but the lack of a clear political strategy here led to missed opportunities for dialogue and, ultimately, peace in the medium term.

The political factors contributing to the government's withdrawal reflect a myriad of challenges ranging from national-level political interference to local-level aspirations and legitimacy issues. They demonstrate the necessity of an integrated, multi-level political and military strategy that is sensitive to the complexities of the internal and external political landscapes. By ignoring these elements, the government not only failed in its military objectives but also undermined its political standing, both locally and nationally.

5. ASSESSING THE GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE

The Somali government's military offensive against AS was meticulously planned around a phased approach, aiming to reclaim and stabilize territory incrementally. On paper, this strategy drew a linear path toward restoring governmental control. The plan was segmented into three distinct phases: Phase 0 targeting financial and logistical bases, Phase 1 focusing on the areas north of the Shabelle River, and Phase 2 envisaging further southern expansion. The idea of phased operations is deeply embedded in military strategy, commonly designed to build momentum, allocate resources efficiently, and adapt to unforeseen variables the enemy poses.

Initial operations, particularly those circumscribed within Phase 1, capitalized on a framework of 'local legitimacy,' employing local uprisings against the militants, especially in Hiran. This approach was rooted in COIN doctrines, which emphasize the necessity of earning the support of the indigenous population. When executed effectively, this framework could leverage local forces who are more adept at intelligence gathering, relationship building within the community, and engaging in combat on familiar terrain. However, as the offensive proceeded, a disconnection between planning and implementation became increasingly evident, bringing to light the lack of adaptability in the government's strategic formulation.

Early successes led to premature triumphant declarations from government officials. This overconfidence manifested as strategic rigidity, particularly evident when the forces had to withdraw, leaving the government in a quandary about the practicability of implementing the next phase of the operations in the foreseeable future. Adding another layer of complexity was the government's decision to phase out local forces from areas of operation in eastern Galguduud due to a lack of truly local forces, a move that signalled a departure from the elite bargaining model. In this model, local power brokers and decision-makers are actively engaged in the planning and execution to ensure that military activities are in sync with the existing political and social landscapes. The government's shift to external forces eradicated the advantage gained through local intelligence and the social capital accrued. The transition thus weakened the government's stronghold in the newly liberated areas, notably in Galgaduud.

This deviation not only disrupted the military objectives but also clashed with broader strategic aims. By omitting local elites, who frequently exert significant influence in their regions, from later stages of the planning, the feasibility of the government's long-term objectives was inevitably undermined. The overall narrative thus stresses the critical importance of integrating a political strategy that works in tandem with military objectives, specifically the necessity of aligning with local elites to ensure the stability of reclaimed areas.



HE Hassan Sheikh Mahamud arrived at the frontline district of Adanyabal in Hirshabelle flanked by his son. 6 Sept 2023

The gap between the government's military aims and its actual capabilities manifests as a disjointed approach to what should be a cohesive military-political strategy. These inconsistencies call for an immediate recalibration of the government's military tactics, as well as a more comprehensive reassessment of the overarching strategy. It becomes increasingly apparent that the operation, although ambitious in its military objectives, lacked the nuanced understanding of local dynamics and the operational flexibility required for successful counterinsurgency operations.

In retrospect, the initial phase of the operation showed promise, with indigenous forces actively participating, thus exemplifying the initial successes of Phase 1. However, the transition to external forces severely compromised both military effectiveness and the accrued local goodwill. This misalignment has left the government at a crucial strategic juncture, clouding the feasibility of advancing to the next planned stage, Phase 2. These setbacks, therefore, not only signify operational delays but also deteriorate the government's credibility, both at the grassroots level and on a broader geopolitical scale. This culminating narrative underscores the pivotal role of strategic adaptability, local engagement, and political acumen in the realm of counterinsurgency operations.

6. CHALLENGES TO REINITIATING OPERATIONS

The challenge of reinitiating operations in central Somalia looms large against a backdrop of multi-dimensional issues, each with their own set of complexities. These issues can be seen as compounding failures in both counterinsurgency strategy and the critical dynamics of local legitimacy and elite bargaining.

One of the most immediate challenges is overcoming the loss of local support. Local support functions not merely as an auxiliary factor but often as a linchpin for operational success. It facilitates intelligence gathering, ensures smoother governance transitions, and underpins the broader legitimacy of the government's actions. The initial successes in local uprisings had paved the way for a tenuous, yet critical, form of local legitimacy. The loss of this legitimacy due to changes in military strategy means the government now faces a highly skeptical, if not hostile, local populace, making any new initiatives significantly more challenging.

Moreover, the government's previous strategy resulted in substantial territorial losses, and these areas may not be easily retaken. Counterinsurgency theories emphasize the importance of controlling territory not merely for its own sake but as a platform for establishing governance and law and order. In this case, the lost territory also signifies lost opportunities to establish governance systems that could win hearts and minds.

The withdrawal and the manner in which it was executed have also resulted in the discrediting of the military leadership and, by extension, the government itself. Rebuilding this damaged credibility is a daunting task that involves more than just tactical victories; it requires a rethinking and rearticulation of strategic objectives that are both realistic and aligned with available resources.

Additionally, the government has to grapple with the divisions within its own military structure. The parallel chains of command and distribution of resources between the national army and the separate channel run by the defense minister have revealed a lack of coordination and unity of effort. The compartmentalized nature of these forces exacerbates operational challenges, requiring considerable efforts in integration before any large-scale offensive could be practically considered.

Finally, the external dynamics cannot be overlooked. The heavy reliance on foreign special forces for air support has exposed the fragility of the government's military operations. These foreign forces are subject to the geopolitical interests and policy changes of their respective governments, making them an unreliable cornerstone for any long-term strategy.

The challenges to reinitiating operations are manifold and deeply interconnected. They involve restoring local legitimacy, reclaiming lost territories, realigning strategic objectives, and streamlining command structures, all while navigating a complex web of internal and external political considerations. Without addressing these challenges in a comprehensive manner, the government's likelihood of reinitiating successful operations remains dim.

7. CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of forces from key areas has unveiled a series of deficiencies in the government's strategy, ranging from logistical failures and technical limitations to deeply ingrained political hurdles. These deficiencies have far-reaching implications, not merely on the tactical level but also in terms of the broader strategy to counter militants effectively.

The urgency for reforms cannot be overstated. First, there is an immediate need to overhaul the political interference that has plagued military operations. Command structures should be unified under the national army, providing a cohesive framework for operational planning and execution. Additionally, a shift in focus is required to prioritize the long-term sustainability of military operations, particularly in the context of supply logistics and technical support.

On the counterinsurgency front, the government must reassess its approach to engage with local communities and elites. This involves recognizing the unique dynamics of each locality and the grievances that might be fueling local insurgency. Without robust local support, counterinsurgency operations are likely to continue facing significant hurdles, as evidenced by the recent withdrawals.

Lastly, it is imperative to develop realistic, coherent objectives that are in alignment with both the resources available and the geopolitical realities of the region. As military leverage is used to bring militants into talks, these objectives will serve as the backbone of any negotiations and subsequent actions, lending credence and authority to government initiatives.

Failure to address these pressing issues not only jeopardizes immediate tactical and strategic objectives but also poses long-term ramifications for the stability and governance of Somalia. Continued failure could exacerbate the disillusionment among local communities, making them more susceptible to extremist ideologies and anti-government movements.

Moreover, the disjointed military command structures could evolve into power centers with their own vested interests, further undermining the authority of the state.

In essence, the government's current course is unsustainable and fraught with risks. Only through a rigorous reassessment of its strategies, accounting for the multi-faceted challenges it faces, can there be a path forward that might offer more than just temporary gains. Ignoring these issues is not an option; doing so would risk irreversible damage to both the government's credibility and the long-term stability of central Somalia.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The predicaments faced by the government's military efforts in central Somalia are multi-dimensional and complex, necessitating a robust, integrated strategy for future engagements. To this end, several recommendations can serve as a comprehensive roadmap to inform future policy decisions and military operations.

Political and Operational Integrity

- **End Political Interference in Military Operations:** A firewall must be established between political agendas and military strategy to ensure that tactical decisions are made in the best interests of national security, rather than individual or party interests. A review board comprising independent experts could serve as a checks-and-balances mechanism.
- **Unified Command Structure:** The disparate forces operating under separate channels should be integrated into a single, unified command structure under the auspices of the national army. This would facilitate efficient coordination and prevent divergent objectives among parallel forces.

Logistical and Tactical Reforms

- **Securing Supply Routes:** The success of any military operation is heavily reliant on its logistics. Comprehensive risk assessments and subsequent fortification of supply routes are vital to ensure that forces are adequately equipped.
- **Operational Self-Sufficiency:** There is a need for the Somali army to be trained and equipped to operate independently of external support. Investment in local surveillance capabilities and ground support logistics can mitigate the overreliance on foreign special forces and air support.

Understanding Local Dynamics

- **Community Engagement:** A nuanced understanding of local socio-political landscapes is essential for effective counterinsurgency. Tailored engagement strategies should be developed to garner support from local communities and elites.

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- **Grievance Addressal:** A platform should be created for locals to voice their grievances and seek redress. This will not only serve to undercut the narrative of militants but also foster a sense of participation and ownership among the community.

Negotiation and Diplomacy

- **Leveraging Military Gains for Peace Talks:** Military operations should serve the larger objective of bringing militants to the negotiating table. Each military gain should be leveraged as a pressure point in talks, aligning military and diplomatic strategies.
- **Clarity in Objectives:** Clearly defined, realistic objectives must form the cornerstone of negotiation strategies. Vague or overly ambitious aims will not only undermine the government's position but also make any resultant agreements unsustainable.



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Cover: President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Dhusamareeb leading the military strategy discussions (Photo: Villa Somalia Twitter Aug 22, 2023)

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