



Hiraal Institute

Escalation and Adaptation

Assessing President Hassan
Sheikh's War on Al-Shabab

May, 2024

Executive Summary

This report examines the security dynamics in Somalia during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure from May 2022 to May 2024, with a particular focus on the trends in Al-Shabab attacks and the effectiveness of allied operations. It provides a comprehensive analysis of data on various types of incidents, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), raids, ambushes, assassinations, grenade attacks, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs), shelling, and person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs). The report also explores internal security issues such as infighting among security forces and the impact of government policies on clan rivalries and civilian protection.

During the period from 2020 to 2021, the frequency of Al-Shabab attacks across various categories remained relatively stable or exhibited a slight decline. However, this trend reversed dramatically during the 2022-2023 period. Notably, the number of raids conducted by Al-Shabab surged by 75%, from an average of 280 per year in 2020-2021 to 490 per year in 2022-2023. This sharp rise indicates a strategic shift towards more aggressive and direct confrontations, underscoring the group's enhanced operational capacity. Similarly, the use of IEDs saw a substantial increase, with incidents rising by 50%, from an average of 166.5 per year in 2020-2021 to 249.5 per year in 2022-2023. This surge highlights Al-Shabab's continued reliance on asymmetric warfare tactics designed to inflict maximum damage while minimizing its own casualties. Other categories of attacks, such as ambushes, grenade attacks, and VBIEDs, also saw increases, albeit more modest compared to raids and IEDs.

The frequency of allied operations, including airstrikes and raids by Somali National Army (SNA) special forces, showed a slight increase during President Mohamud's tenure. However, the effectiveness of these operations in significantly degrading Al-Shabab's operational capacity and territorial control remains questionable. Airstrikes by the United States and raids by SNA special forces increased, but these efforts did not result in a notable reduction in Al-Shabab's activities. The group's ability to adapt to these tactics and maintain its operational cohesion suggests limited impact from these measures.

Infighting among security forces and incidents of security forces targeting civilians have increased during President Mohamud's tenure. The number of incidents involving security forces killing civilians rose by 47%, from 36 in 2020 to 53 in 2023. Clan infighting has also escalated dramatically, with incidents increasing by 163%, from 41 in 2020 to 108 in 2023. This surge can be attributed to the government's policy of arming clan militias to counter Al-Shabab, which has inadvertently exacerbated existing clan rivalries.

President Mohamud's administration has faced significant political challenges, including mishandling the constitutional amendment process and deteriorating relationships with key regional allies. These issues have further strained the government's capacity to address security and economic challenges effectively. The lack of accountability and oversight in military operations, combined with widespread corruption and mismanagement within the security forces, has undermined the effectiveness of counter-insurgency efforts.

To address these challenges, it is essential to improve coordination and integration among various security agencies, including the SNA, police forces, and intelligence agencies, to enhance the effectiveness of counter-insurgency operations. Better cooperation between the federal government and regional states is also crucial to addressing the security challenges cohesively. Implementing stronger accountability and oversight mechanisms within the security forces can help address issues of misconduct and improve relations with the civilian population. Establishing effective mechanisms to hold perpetrators of civilian harm accountable and ensuring transparency in military operations is vital.

Reassessing the policy of arming clan militias and developing strategies to mitigate the risks of exacerbating clan rivalries is necessary. Promoting inclusive dialogue and reconciliation efforts can help address the root causes of inter-clan violence. Developing a comprehensive security strategy that goes beyond military means, incorporating economic development, political reforms, and community engagement, is essential to address the underlying drivers of instability. Increased international support and collaboration are also needed to bolster counter-insurgency efforts, including intelligence sharing, capacity building, and targeted assistance for security sector reforms.

This report underscores the complexity of the security landscape in Somalia and highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to effectively combat Al-Shabab and restore stability. The findings and recommendations aim to provide a roadmap for enhancing security operations and addressing the broader challenges facing the country.

1. Introduction

Since President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud took office in May 2022, the security situation in Somalia has experienced significant changes, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict with Al-Shabab. This militant Islamist group has maintained its position as a formidable adversary, continuously adapting its strategies and intensifying its operations against both government forces and civilians. Understanding the evolving nature of Al-Shabab's activities is crucial for formulating effective countermeasures and policies aimed at restoring stability in the region.

During the years leading up to President Mohamud's tenure (2020-2021), the frequency of Al-Shabab attacks across various categories—including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, assassinations, grenade attacks, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs), shelling, and person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs)—remained relatively stable or exhibited a slight decline. However, this trend reversed dramatically in the 2022-2023 period.

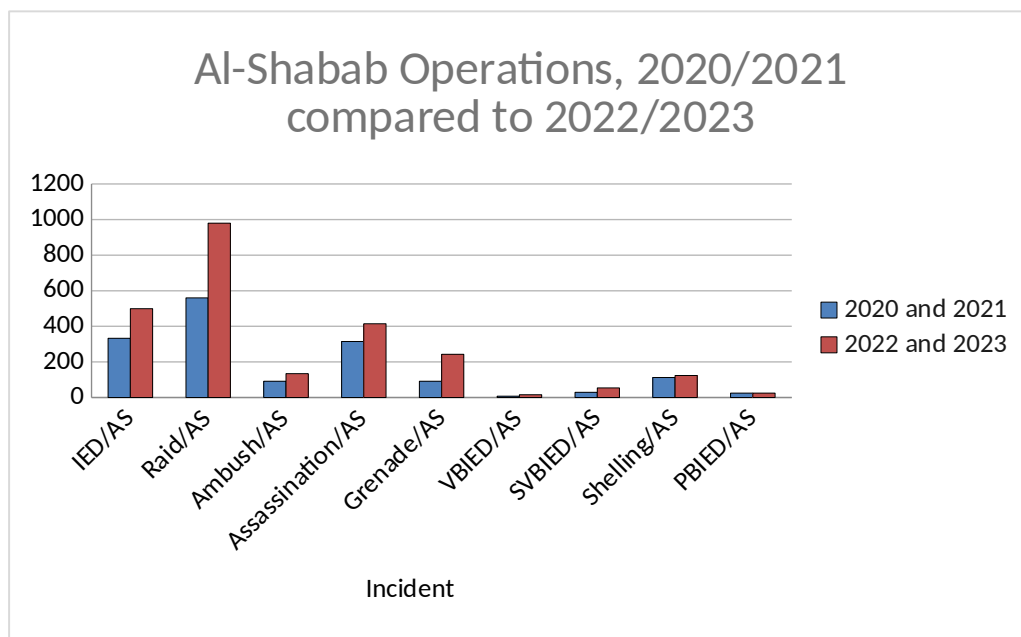
One of the most striking changes is the surge in the number of raids conducted by Al-Shabab. The average number of raids per year increased from approximately 280 in 2020-2021 to an alarming 490 per year in 2022-2023, representing a 75% increase. This significant rise indicates a strategic shift towards more aggressive and direct confrontations, highlighting Al-Shabab's enhanced operational capacity and the challenges faced by Somali security forces in containing the group's advances. Similarly, the use of IEDs has seen a substantial increase, with incidents rising from an average of 166.5 per year in 2020-2021 to 249.5 per year in 2022-2023, a 50% growth. This surge underscores Al-Shabab's continued reliance on asymmetric warfare tactics designed to inflict maximum damage while minimizing its own casualties.

Other categories of attacks, such as ambushes, assassinations, grenade attacks, VBIEDs, SVBIEDs, shelling, and PBIEDs, have shown relatively modest increases or remained consistent during the 2022-2023 period compared to the previous two years. Despite these variations, the overall trend is clear: Al-Shabab has intensified its offensive operations, particularly focusing on expanding its use of IEDs and direct raids as its primary tactics.

The comparative analysis of these trends reveals a worrying pattern of escalating violence and a resurgent Al-Shabab. The group has not only increased the frequency of its attacks but has also strategically shifted its focus towards more high-impact and direct forms of engagement. This tactical evolution suggests a growing confidence in Al-Shabab's ability to confront security forces head-on and a calculated effort to exploit the vulnerabilities within the Somali security apparatus.

In the subsequent sections, this report will delve deeper into the specific types of attacks conducted by Al-Shabab, the effectiveness of allied operations under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's leadership, and the broader implications of these trends for Somalia's security and stability. The analysis will provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing the Somali government as it continues its efforts to combat Al-Shabab and restore peace and security to the nation.

2. Al-Shabab Attacks



Incident	2020	2021	2022	2023
IED/AS	184	149	184	315
Raid/AS	299	261	308	672
Ambush/AS	47	44	58	76
Assassination/AS	147	167	224	190
Grenade/AS	51	40	89	153
VBIED/AS	3	4	5	10
SVBIED/AS	13	16	25	28
Shelling/AS	59	53	49	74
PBIED/AS	11	13	13	11

The data reveals a significant shift in the pattern of Al-Shabab's offensive operations during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure, which began in May 2022. In the two years prior to his presidency (2020-2021), the frequency of attacks across various categories, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, assassinations, grenade attacks, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs), shelling, and person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs), remained relatively stagnant or even exhibited a slight downward trend. However, the data indicates a dramatic increase in certain types of attacks, particularly IED attacks and direct raids on allied positions, during the 2022-2023 period.

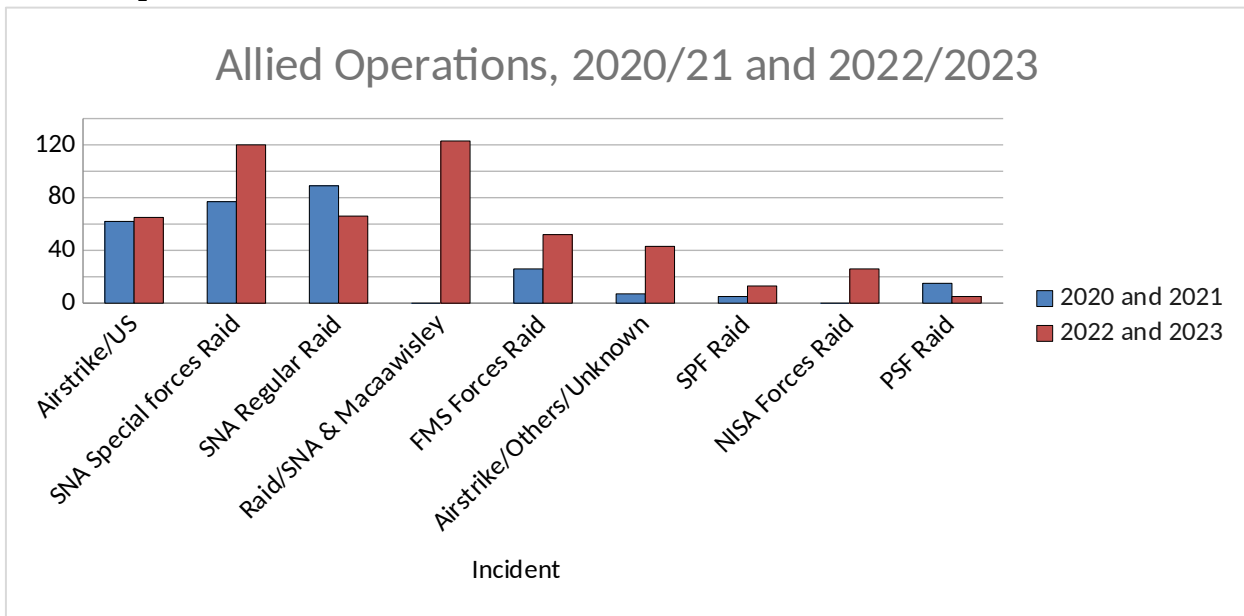
The most striking escalation can be observed in the number of raids conducted by Al-Shabab, which surged from an average of 280 per year in 2020-2021 to an alarming 490 per year in 2022-2023, representing a 75% increase. This sharp rise suggests a significant shift in Al-Shabab's strategic approach, with a greater emphasis on direct confrontation and territorial control. The group's ability to execute such a high volume of raids within a relatively short timeframe highlights its enhanced operational capacity and the challenges faced by Somali security forces in containing its advance.

Similarly, the use of IEDs has witnessed a substantial increase, with the number of incidents rising from an average of 166.5 per year in 2020-2021 to 249.5 per year in 2022-2023, a staggering 50% growth. This surge in IED attacks underscores Al-Shabab's continued reliance on asymmetric warfare tactics to inflict maximum damage on government forces and civilian targets while minimizing its own casualties.

In contrast, other attack categories, such as ambushes, assassinations, grenade attacks, VBIEDs, SVBIEDs, shelling, and PBIEDs, have shown relatively modest increases or have remained largely consistent during the 2022-2023 period compared to the previous two years. This suggests that while Al-Shabab has intensified its overall offensive operations, it has particularly focused on expanding its use of IEDs and direct raids as its primary tactics.

The comparative analysis reveals a worrying trend of escalating violence and a resurgent Al-Shabab that has not only intensified its overall offensive operations but has also strategically shifted its focus towards the increased use of IEDs and direct raids. This shift in tactical preferences suggests a growing confidence in the group's ability to confront security forces head-on and a calculated effort to maximize the impact of its attacks while exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Somali security apparatus.

3. Allied Operations



While the overall frequency of allied operations has shown a slight increase from the two years prior to President Hassan Sheukh's tenure, the effectiveness of the nearly two-year offensive remains questionable, with little tangible progress to show for the efforts.

Airstrikes conducted by the United States have seen a moderate increase, rising from 43 in 2020 to 48 in 2023. However, this uptick in aerial support has not translated into a significant reduction in Al-Shabab's operational capacity or territorial control. The data suggests that the group has adapted to the increased presence of U.S. airpower and has found ways to mitigate its impact on their activities.

Raids conducted by the Somali National Army (SNA) special forces have also witnessed a notable increase, growing from 48 in 2020 to 85 in 2023. This 77% surge in special forces operations indicates a greater emphasis on targeted strikes against Al-Shabab leadership and high-value targets. However, the effectiveness of these raids in disrupting the group's command and control structure remains uncertain, as Al-Shabab has demonstrated a remarkable ability to regenerate its leadership and maintain its operational cohesion.

In contrast, raids conducted by the SNA regular forces have shown a slight decrease, dropping from 30 in 2020 to 27 in 2023. This decline may be attributed to the increasing reliance on special forces and the integration of local clan militias, known as Macawisley, into the fight against Al-Shabab. The data indicates a significant rise in joint SNA and Macawisley raids, which increased from 38 in 2022 to 85 in 2023. This collaborative approach seeks to leverage the local knowledge and legitimacy of clan militias to enhance the effectiveness of counter-insurgency operations.

Raids conducted by the Federal Member States (FMS) forces have also shown a steady increase, rising from 11 in 2020 to 29 in 2023. This growth suggests a greater level of coordination and cooperation between the federal government and the regional states in the fight against Al-Shabab. However, the impact of these FMS operations on the group's overall strength and influence remains limited, as Al-Shabab continues to exploit the gaps and vulnerabilities in the security apparatus across the different regions.

The data also reveals a modest increase in raids conducted by the Somali Police Force (SPF) and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). SPF raids grew from 5 in 2021 to 8 in 2022, before declining to 5 in 2023, while NISA raids maintained a consistent level of 13 operations in both 2022 and 2023. The smaller involvement of these law enforcement and intelligence agencies in counter-insurgency efforts highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond military means.

3.1 Effectiveness of allied operations under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's leadership

Despite the slight increase in the frequency of allied operations during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure, the effectiveness of these efforts in significantly degrading Al-Shabab's operational capacity and territorial control remains questionable.

The nearly two-year offensive launched by the government has yielded little tangible progress, with Al-Shabab continuing to maintain a strong presence in many parts of the country. The group's ability to conduct frequent and high-profile attacks, as evidenced by the data on IED incidents and

direct raids, suggests that the current approach to counter-insurgency has not succeeded in significantly weakening the group's capabilities.

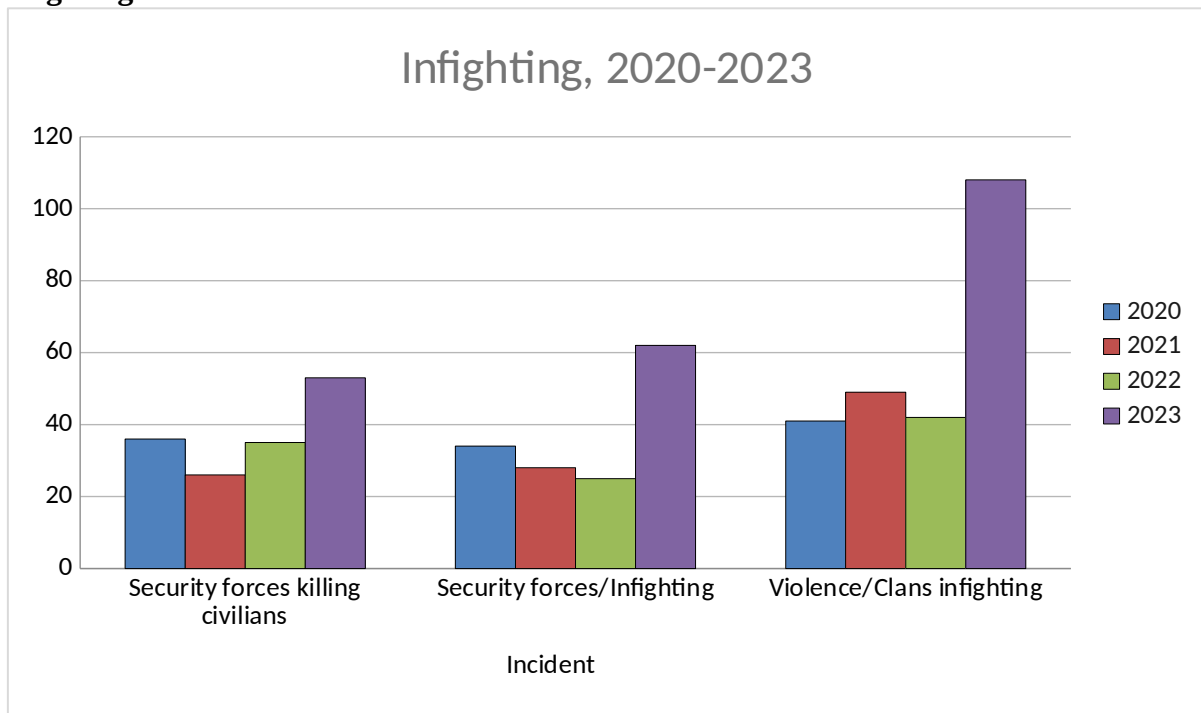
The increased reliance on U.S. airstrikes and SNA special forces raids, while demonstrating a more targeted approach to counter-insurgency, has not translated into a significant reduction in Al-Shabab's operational capacity. The group has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to these tactics, regenerate its leadership, and maintain its operational cohesion.

The integration of local clan militias, known as Macawisley, into the fight against Al-Shabab represents a strategic shift aimed at leveraging local knowledge and legitimacy to enhance the effectiveness of counter-insurgency efforts. However, the long-term impact of this approach remains uncertain, as it risks exacerbating existing clan rivalries and further fragmenting the security landscape.

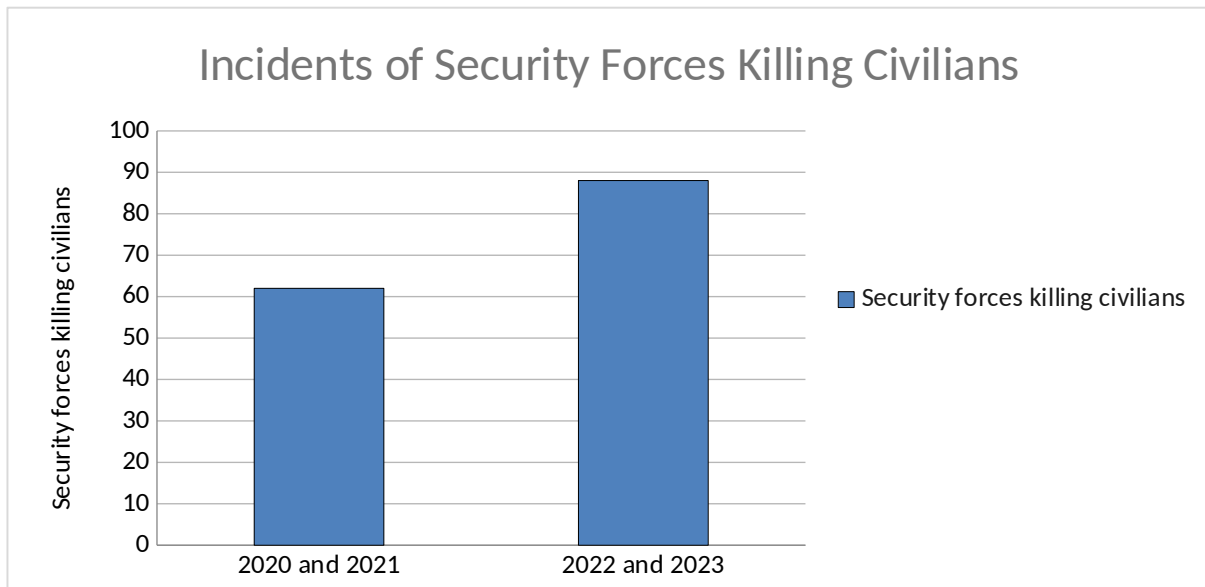
Moreover, the effectiveness of allied operations has been hampered by the limited coordination and cooperation between the federal government and the regional states. While the data shows an increase in FMS forces raids, the impact of these operations on Al-Shabab's overall strength and influence remains limited, as the group continues to exploit the vulnerabilities in the security apparatus across the different regions.

The modest involvement of law enforcement and intelligence agencies, such as the SPF and NISA, in counter-insurgency efforts highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond military means. However, the effectiveness of these agencies in significantly reducing Al-Shabab's operational capacity remains questionable, given the group's ability to adapt and maintain its presence in many parts of the country.

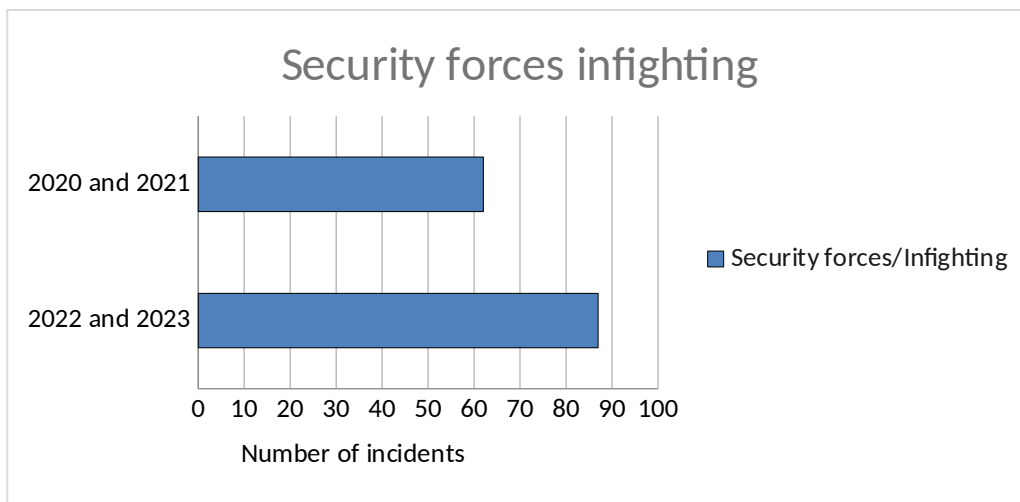
4. Infighting



The data reveals a worrying trend of increased infighting and civilian casualties during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure. The two years preceding his presidency (2020-2021) saw relatively lower levels of violence in these categories compared to the 2022-2023 period.

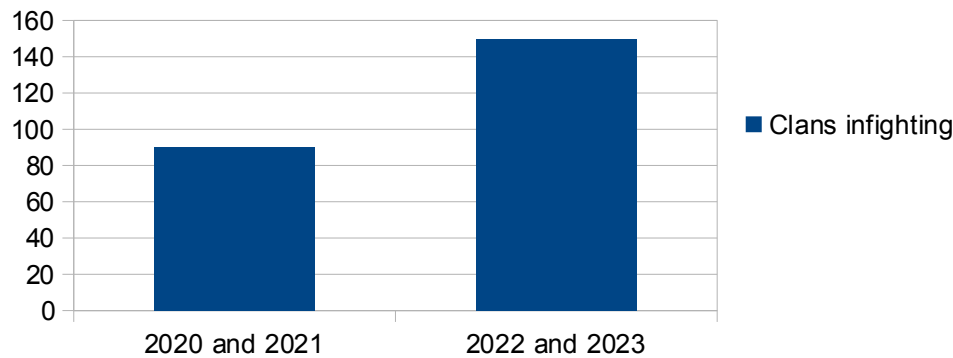


Security forces killing civilians has shown a steady increase over the past four years, rising from 36 incidents in 2020 to 53 in 2023, representing a 47% growth. This alarming trend suggests a deterioration in the relationship between security forces and the civilian population, as well as a lack of accountability and oversight in the conduct of military operations.



Similarly, infighting among security forces has witnessed a significant surge, particularly during the 2022-2023 period. The number of incidents rose from 34 in 2020 to 62 in 2023, an 82% increase. This growth in internal conflict within the security apparatus highlights the challenges faced by the Somali government in maintaining cohesion and discipline among its forces, as well as the potential impact of clan loyalties and political divisions on the stability of the military.

Clans Infighting, 2020/2021 Compared to 2022/2023



Clan infighting has also seen a dramatic escalation during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure. The number of incidents increased from 41 in 2020 to 108 in 2023, representing a staggering 163% growth. This surge in clan violence can be attributed to the government's policy of arming clan militias, known as Macawisley, in a bid to counter the threat posed by Al-Shabab. However, this strategy has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating existing clan rivalries and fueling further conflict.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's policies, particularly the decision to arm clan militias in the fight against Al-Shabab, have had a significant impact on internal security and civilian protection in Somalia.

While the integration of clan militias, known as Macawisley, into counter-insurgency efforts was intended to leverage local knowledge and legitimacy in the fight against Al-Shabab, it has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating existing clan rivalries and fueling further conflict. The dramatic increase in clan infighting during the 2022-2023 period, as evidenced by the data, underscores the risks associated with this strategy.

The arming of clan militias has not only intensified inter-clan violence but has also contributed to a proliferation of weapons and a weakening of the central government's monopoly on the use of force. This fragmentation of the security landscape has made it more difficult for the government to maintain control and ensure the protection of civilians, as evidenced by the increase in incidents of security forces killing civilians during the same period.

Moreover, the lack of accountability and oversight in the conduct of military operations, as well as the absence of effective mechanisms to hold perpetrators of civilian harm accountable, has further undermined the legitimacy of the security forces and eroded public trust in the government's ability to provide security and protect its citizens.

The increase in infighting among security forces also highlights the challenges faced by the government in maintaining cohesion and discipline within the military. The impact of clan loyalties and political divisions on the stability of the security apparatus, coupled with the lack of effective command and control structures, has contributed to a deterioration in the professionalism and effectiveness of the armed forces.

5. Political and Leadership Issues

One of the most significant political failures of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure has been his mishandling of the constitutional amendment process. The President's attempt to push through controversial amendments without adequate consultation or consensus-building with opposition groups and regional stakeholders has deepened political divisions within the country and undermined the legitimacy of the process.

The proposed amendments, which aim to strengthen the central government's power at the expense of the federal member states, have been met with strong resistance, particularly from Puntland, a semi-autonomous region in northeastern Somalia. Puntland has rejected the amendments, arguing that they undermine the country's federal structure and the rights of regional states.

The President's failure to engage in genuine dialogue and build consensus around the constitutional reform process has not only strained relations with key regional actors but has also diverted attention and resources away from pressing security and economic challenges facing the country.

Another significant political failure of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's administration has been the deterioration of Somalia's relationships with key regional allies, particularly Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The diplomatic fallout with Ethiopia, following the signing of a controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland, has had far-reaching consequences for regional security cooperation. The MoU, which entails Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland in exchange for sea access, has strained relations between Somalia and Ethiopia and raised doubts about the feasibility of collaborative military efforts against Al-Shabab.

Similarly, the President's mishandling of relations with the UAE has led to a significant reduction in financial and military support for Somalia. The UAE's decision to halt funding for the Somali National Army (SNA) and withdraw its support for counter-insurgency efforts has had a detrimental impact on Somalia's ability to effectively combat Al-Shabab and maintain security.

The President's failure to navigate complex regional dynamics and maintain productive relationships with key allies has undermined Somalia's strategic interests and made it more difficult to address the multifaceted challenges facing the country.

Despite President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's promises to prioritize security and economic reforms, his administration has made little tangible progress in these critical areas. The nearly two-year offensive against Al-Shabab has yielded limited results, with the group continuing to maintain a strong presence in many parts of the country and carry out frequent attacks. The President's decision to arm clan militias in the fight against Al-Shabab has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating clan rivalries and fueling further conflict, undermining efforts to establish a cohesive and effective security apparatus.

Moreover, the President's failure to address widespread corruption and mismanagement within the security forces, as evidenced by the high number of "ghost soldiers" and the diversion of resources, has further undermined the effectiveness of counter-insurgency efforts and eroded public trust in the government's ability to provide security.

On the economic front, the President has made little progress in implementing much-needed reforms to stimulate growth, create jobs, and attract foreign investment. The lack of a clear economic vision and the persistence of corruption and weak governance have hindered efforts to promote sustainable development and improve the lives of ordinary Somalis.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's political rhetoric and leadership style have also contributed to a heightened sense of division and polarization within Somali society. The President's confrontational approach to dealing with opposition groups and regional stakeholders, coupled with his tendency to prioritize the interests of his own clan and political allies, has undermined efforts to build a more inclusive and representative political system.

The President's failure to engage in genuine dialogue and reconciliation with marginalized communities and political opponents has further entrenched divisions along clan and regional lines, making it more difficult to achieve the unity and cohesion necessary for long-term stability and development.

Moreover, the President's lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making processes, as well as his government's crackdown on dissent and media freedom, has eroded public trust in state institutions and undermined the foundations of democratic governance.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of security trends in Somalia during President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's tenure from May 2022 to May 2024 reveals a significant escalation in Al-Shabab's offensive operations. The data indicates that the group has not only increased the frequency of its attacks but has also strategically shifted towards more aggressive and high-impact tactics, such as direct raids and the extensive use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This shift underscores Al-Shabab's growing confidence and operational capacity, posing substantial challenges to the Somali government's efforts to restore stability.

While allied operations, including airstrikes and special forces raids, have increased during this period, their effectiveness in degrading Al-Shabab's capabilities and reducing its territorial control remains questionable. The militant group's ability to adapt to these counter-insurgency measures and maintain its operational cohesion highlights the need for a more comprehensive and adaptive approach to security.

Internal security issues, such as increased infighting among security forces and rising incidents of security forces targeting civilians, have further complicated the security landscape. The government's policy of arming clan militias to counter Al-Shabab has inadvertently exacerbated clan rivalries and fueled additional conflict, undermining efforts to establish a cohesive and effective security apparatus.

Political challenges, including the mishandling of constitutional amendments and deteriorating relationships with key regional allies, have strained the government's capacity to address both security and economic challenges effectively. These issues, combined with widespread corruption and mismanagement within the security forces, have eroded public trust and hindered the effectiveness of counter-insurgency efforts.



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Cover photo: President Hassan Sheikh meeting members of FMS, 14 May 2024