

SOMALIA SITUATION COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

SECURITY

Analysis of Armed Conflict, Terrorism, and Internal Security Challenges (2020-2025)

Al-Shabaab • ISIS-Somalia • Internal Security Forces Dynamics

Based on 8,000+ recorded security incidents

January 2020 – September 2025

February 2026

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive assessment of Somalia's security situation from January 2020 through September 2025. The analysis covers three interconnected dimensions: the Al-Shabaab insurgency and its tactical evolution following the May 2022 government offensive; the emergence of ISIS-Somalia as a distinct threat requiring Puntland's renewed military campaign; and internal security challenges including security force misconduct and clan violence that undermine counter-terrorism effectiveness. The aim of the report is three-fold: to analyse the effectiveness of Mogadishu's counter Al-Shabaab operations relative to past operations against the group; to understand the group's response and trend of attacks; and an understanding of emerging security threats across the country.

Key Findings

The primary security threat facing Somalia remains Al-Shabaab. The data shows that Al-Shabaab increased its monthly attacks after President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud assumed office on 23 May 2022, from an average of 68 attacks a month to 116, a 70% increase in the rate of attacks. Tactically, it shifted its focus from urban terrorism to rural insurgency, which suggests that the primary strategy of the government to keep Al-Shabaab away from urban centres had succeeded. Compared to the 30 months before the start of the offensive, conventional Al-Shabaab attacks on military targets have increased by 52%.

While Person-Borne IEDs (suicide bombings) collapsed by 59% after the offensive, targeting of civilians surged by 306%. Reflecting Al-Shabaab's new focus, its attacks against the SNA's Special Force units (both Danab and Gorgor) surged by 1,764%, as these forces were deployed to the front lines.

While southern Somalia faced these security challenges, there was also an uptick in internal security challenges. There were 602 recorded incidents of infighting involving clan militias and security forces fighting along clan lines. This parallel crisis of internal violence threatens to undermine the gains made in the counter-terrorism campaign by diverting resources, eroding public trust in state institutions, and creating grievances that armed groups readily exploit for recruitment.

Meanwhile, Puntland launched the Hilaac "Lightning" Operation against ISIS in the Al-Miskad Mountains starting in December 2024. ISIS has claimed to have initiated 74 engagements with Puntland forces, with the Puntland Defence Forces conducting 364 operations against ISIS from 31 December 2024 to September 2025. Coalition airstrikes by the UAE and the US peaked in July-September 2025, when the fighting was heaviest in the most remote areas. This campaign, conducted independently of the Federal Government of Somalia, represents a distinct theatre of operations that demonstrates the fragmented nature of Somalia's security architecture while also showcasing Puntland's capacity for autonomous military action against terrorist threats within its territory.

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Methodology

Data Sources and Collection

This report draws upon incident-level data collected by the Hiraal Institute from January 2020 through September 2025. The dataset comprises over 8,000 discrete security incidents recorded across Somalia, including Al-Shabaab attacks, ISIS activities, allied counter-terrorism operations, clan violence, and security force misconduct. Each incident was coded for date, location, attack type, target category, and perpetrator, enabling systematic quantitative analysis of security trends. The data collection methodology prioritized primary source verification through field researchers, local media monitoring, official statements, and cross-referencing with international monitoring organizations.

Analytical Framework

The central analytical framework of this report divides the study period into two distinct phases, demarcated by the inauguration of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud on 23 May 2022 and the subsequent launch of military operations against Al-Shabaab. The Pre-Offensive Period spans January 2020 through May 2022, encompassing 29 months of baseline security conditions prior to the current administration's counter-terrorism campaign. The Post-Offensive Period covers June 2022 through September 2025, representing 40 months following the initiation of intensified military operations. This temporal division allows for rigorous comparison of attack frequencies, tactical patterns, and targeting behaviour before and after the government's strategic shift. Monthly averages are calculated for each period to account for the differing durations, enabling valid rate-based comparisons that reveal the true magnitude of changes in Al-Shabaab's operational patterns.

Categorization of Incidents

Security incidents were categorized into several analytical groupings to enable meaningful comparison. By attack type, incidents were classified as raids, IEDs, assassinations, grenades, ambushes, shelling, and suicide attacks (including PBIED, SVBIED, and VBIED variants). By target, incidents were attributed to SNA Regular forces, SNA Special Forces, ATMIS/AMISOM, FMS Forces, civilians, SPF (Police), NISA, civil servants, elders, and Macaawisley. By perpetrator, incidents were categorized under Al-Shabaab, ISIS-Somalia, clan militias, and security forces for brutality incidents. This multi-dimensional coding scheme allows for cross-tabulation analysis that reveals not only how frequently Al-Shabaab attacks, but whom it targets and with what methods—critical intelligence for understanding the group's strategic priorities and operational constraints.

Scope and Limitations

The Puntland anti-ISIS campaign, spanning December 2024 through September 2025, is analysed separately from the Federal Government's counter-Al-Shabaab operations. This distinction is critical: Puntland conducts its security operations independently of Mogadishu, and the ISIS threat is geographically and organizationally distinct from Al-Shabaab. Combining these would obscure the differing dynamics of each conflict and misrepresent the nature of Somalia's fragmented security architecture. The data represents documented incidents and may undercount events in remote or inaccessible areas where verification is challenging. Casualty figures, where available, are included but are not the primary analytical focus given verification challenges inherent in conflict zones. The emphasis

throughout is on incident frequency, tactical patterns, and trend analysis—metrics that can be more reliably tracked and compared across time periods.

1. Somalia's Security Landscape

Somalia faces a complex, multi-layered security environment that defies simple characterization. The country contends simultaneously with an entrenched Al-Shabaab insurgency that has proven remarkably adaptive to government pressure, an emerging ISIS affiliate that has carved out territory in the northeastern mountains, pervasive clan-based violence that destabilizes communities across multiple regions, and internal security force challenges that undermine the very institutions meant to provide protection. Understanding how these threats interact and occasionally reinforce one another is essential for assessing Somalia's overall security trajectory and the prospects for meaningful improvement.

1.1 The Political Context

The security situation in Somalia cannot be understood in isolation from the political dynamics that have shaped and, in many ways, undermined the counter-terrorism campaign. The period from May 2022 to September 2025 has been marked not only by military operations against Al-Shabaab but by an increasingly acrimonious breakdown in relations between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and key Federal Member States—most notably Puntland and Jubaland. This political fragmentation has had direct and measurable consequences for the counter-terrorism mission, diverting military resources, fracturing coordination, and creating opportunities that Al-Shabaab has ruthlessly exploited.

The constitutional crisis that erupted in March 2024 fundamentally altered federal-state relations. On 30 March 2024, the Federal Parliament in Mogadishu, without the participation of Puntland, passed sweeping constitutional amendments that included a transition from the clan-based 4.5 electoral formula to universal suffrage and granted the president authority to appoint the prime minister without parliamentary approval. Critics across Somalia's political spectrum viewed these changes as a dangerous concentration of executive power. Puntland's response was immediate: on 31 March 2024, it formally withdrew its recognition of the Federal Government, declaring that it would govern independently until a new constitution could be negotiated through genuine consensus. Puntland openly declared what it had already been doing: operating as a de facto independent entity, conducting its own foreign relations and security operations entirely outside the federal framework.

The Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding of 1 January 2024 further destabilized the political environment. Under this agreement, Somaliland would lease 20 kilometres of its Gulf of Aden coastline to landlocked Ethiopia for 50 years, allowing the establishment of a naval base and commercial port, with Ethiopia reportedly agreeing to recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state in exchange. Mogadishu reacted with fury, declaring the agreement a violation of Somali sovereignty and territorial integrity. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud signed legislation nullifying the MoU and recalled Somalia's ambassador to Ethiopia. Mass protests were organized in Mogadishu, and the government declared blocking the accord a national priority. While the immediate crisis was eventually diffused through Turkish-mediated talks that produced the Ankara Declaration in December 2024, the episode consumed enormous political bandwidth during a critical period of the counter-terrorism campaign and fundamentally damaged the relationship between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa—the latter being a key provider of troops to ATMIS and a critical partner in regional counter-terrorism efforts.

1.2 The Stalled Offensive

The government's counter-Al-Shabaab offensive was launched with considerable optimism in August 2022. The initial phase achieved genuine territorial gains, with Somali forces—supported by Macaawisley clan militias, Turkish and American drone strikes, and ATMIS peacekeepers—recapturing significant territory in Hirshabelle and Galmudug. By

early 2023, the government had recovered more than 215 locations from Al-Shabaab, primarily in Hiraan east of the Shabelle River and strategic areas including Adan Yabaal, which had served as the group's regional operational hub. The momentum generated considerable international attention and raised hopes that this offensive might succeed where previous campaigns had stalled.

However, the anticipated "Phase Two" of the Operation codenamed "Black Lion", which was to shift the weight of operations southward into Al-Shabaab's core territories in Lower Shabelle and Jubaland, never materialized. The offensive remained stuck in Phase One throughout the entire period covered by this report. Multiple factors contributed to this stagnation: political infighting and clan disputes within Hirshabelle undermined coordination; the relationship between the FGS and Jubaland deteriorated to the point of armed conflict, precluding the joint operations that Phase Two would require; resource constraints and logistical challenges prevented the sustained tempo needed to maintain pressure; and the scheduled ATMIS drawdown created uncertainty about the availability of peacekeeping support. The failure to advance beyond Phase One allowed Al-Shabaab the operational space to reconsolidate, adapt, and eventually launch its devastating 2025 counteroffensive.

1.3 Al-Shabaab's 2025 Counteroffensive

Beginning in February 2025, Al-Shabaab launched a systematic counteroffensive that has effectively reversed the territorial gains achieved during the 2022-2023 government offensive. The group's strategic patience proved vindicated: it had absorbed the initial government pressure, maintained its organizational cohesion, and waited for the moment when political divisions and operational exhaustion created vulnerabilities it could exploit. That moment arrived in early 2025, coinciding with the completion of ATMIS's phased drawdown and the deepening crisis in federal-state relations.

The fall of Adan Yabaal in April 2025 marked a turning point. This town, approximately 220 kilometres north of Mogadishu, had been Al-Shabaab's regional operational hub before its capture by government forces in 2022. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who hails from the area, had personally visited the town in March 2025 to meet with military commanders. Within weeks, Al-Shabaab launched a coordinated assault featuring heavy explosives and ground forces, recapturing the town and forcing government troops and Macaawisley fighters to retreat. The psychological impact of losing a town the president himself had just visited underscored the fragility of government control.

The situation deteriorated further in July 2025. On 7 July, Al-Shabaab captured Moqokori in Hiraan region following coordinated suicide car bomb attacks on government positions. According to Al-Shabaab media, 47 soldiers and Macaawisley militiamen were killed in the assault, with 65 wounded, and the group seized substantial quantities of weapons and military equipment. Within days, Tardo fell without resistance as government forces and Macaawisley simply withdrew. By late July, Al-Shabaab had recaptured Mahas—a town that had remained under government control for over a decade, previously garrisoned by Ethiopian troops until their withdrawal under the ATMIS drawdown in late 2024. The fall of Mahas was particularly devastating to local confidence in the government's staying power: if a town held for more than ten years could fall so quickly once foreign forces departed, what guarantee existed for any government-held territory?

The pattern of Al-Shabaab's territorial recovery reveals both the group's strategic acumen and the government's structural weaknesses. Al-Shabaab deliberately timed its counteroffensive to coincide with the completion of ATMIS's drawdown, when the gap between departing peacekeepers and Somali forces meant to replace them was most acute. The group focused on towns where local populations had actively supported the government offensive through Macaawisley participation, extracting collective punishment that sent a clear message about the costs of cooperation with Mogadishu. And Al-Shabaab moved to

establish governance structures: setting up roadblocks, collecting taxes, and engaging with residents, demonstrating that its objectives extend beyond mere territorial control to the establishment of parallel administration.

1.4 Fighting the Wrong Enemy

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the FGS's strategic priorities during this period is the deployment of scarce military resources not against Al-Shabaab, but against a Federal Member State. In late November 2024, following Jubaland's presidential election which returned Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe" to power in a vote Mogadishu declared unconstitutional, the FGS deployed hundreds of Turkish-trained Gorgor special forces troops to Ras Kamboni in Lower Juba. The ostensible justification was to take over bases from withdrawing African Union forces, but Jubaland's leadership correctly perceived this as positioning for a military operation to forcibly remove President Madobe.

The confrontation that followed represented a catastrophic misallocation of military resources. On 11 December 2024, fighting erupted between SNA and Jubaland forces at Ras Kamboni. After six hours of intense combat, Jubaland's Dervish forces decisively defeated the federal troops. The scale of the defeat was humiliating: hundreds of SNA soldiers were captured, hundreds more fled across the border into Kenya where they surrendered their weapons to the Kenya Defence Forces, and some reportedly sought refuge in Al-Shabaab-controlled territory rather than face capture. Approximately 600 SNA soldiers had to be repatriated from Kenya—elite Gorgor troops trained and equipped at considerable expense, deployed not against the terrorist group threatening Somalia's survival but against a regional government over political disputes.

The timing of this debacle could not have been worse. Even as SNA forces were being routed at Ras Kamboni, Al-Shabaab attacked Jubaland positions at Bulo Haji, a town that regional forces had captured from the militants earlier in 2024 as part of what was supposed to be the expanded Phase Two offensive. Jubaland officials warned that Al-Shabaab was regrouping in the region and would exploit the political conflict between Mogadishu and Kismayo. That warning proved prescient. The very forces that should have been conducting joint operations against Al-Shabaab in Lower Juba were instead fighting each other, and the terrorist group capitalized on the disarray. The spectacle of SNA troops fleeing into Kenya or surrendering to a regional militia, while Al-Shabaab consolidated its positions encapsulated the dysfunction that has characterized Somalia's security landscape.

1.5 Arming Non-State Actors

The Federal Government's confrontation with Puntland has taken a different but equally corrosive form. Rather than direct military deployment, which would be logistically challenging given the distance and Puntland's military capabilities, Mogadishu has pursued a strategy of arming, funding, and politically supporting non-state actors within Puntland's territory, subsequently rebranding these groups as components of the Somali National Army to provide a veneer of legitimacy. This approach represents an attempt to destabilize a federal member state from within rather than confront it directly.

In mid-2025, deliveries of arms from Villa Somalia to FGS-aligned militias in Puntland compelled the state government to divert attention and resources away from its ongoing counter-terrorism operations against ISIS. The irony is stark: while Puntland was conducting Operation Hilaac, the most sustained and successful anti-ISIS campaign to date, entirely without FGS support, Mogadishu was simultaneously arming groups hostile to the Puntland administration. The FGS's recognition of SSC-Khatumo as an interim administration in October 2023, without consultation with Puntland which claims constitutional jurisdiction over parts of that territory, added another dimension to this conflict. The July 2025 clashes in

Dhahar between Puntland Defence Forces and militias aligned with SSC-Khatumo—the latter backed by the Federal Government—resulted in dozens of casualties and further fractured any prospect of coordinated counter-terrorism operations.

The strategic logic of the FGS approach, if it can be called that, appears to prioritize political control over federal member states above the counter-terrorism mission. International partners who have invested heavily in building Somali military capabilities for the fight against Al-Shabaab have watched with growing alarm as those capabilities are deployed against other Somalis. Some foreign governments have begun recalibrating their security partnerships, recognizing that military assistance intended to fight terrorists is instead being used to settle political scores. This represents a fundamental betrayal of the international community's investment in Somali security and, more importantly, a betrayal of the Somali people who bear the consequences of Al-Shabaab's resurgence while their government fights regional administrations.

1.6 The Multi-Threat Environment

Against this backdrop of political fragmentation and strategic dysfunction, Figure 1.1 illustrates the relative scale of different security threats across the 2023-2025 period. The logarithmic scale employed in this visualization is necessary because Al-Shabaab incidents so dramatically outnumber other categories that a linear scale would render the smaller threats invisible, obscuring their significance.

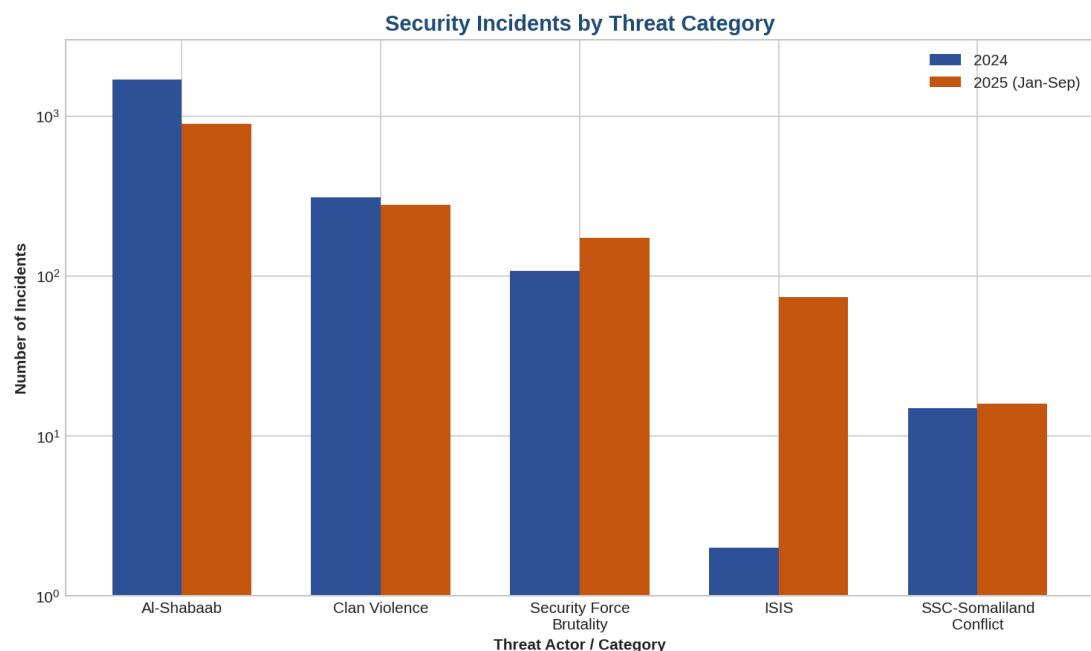


Figure 1.1: Security incidents by threat category (logarithmic scale)

Al-Shabaab's attack volume remained relatively stable between 2024, when 1,702 incidents were recorded, and the annualized 2025 rate of approximately 1,192 projected incidents. This stability suggests the group has established a sustainable operational tempo that it can maintain despite government pressure. Meanwhile, clan violence incidents exploded from just 12 documented cases in 2023 to 312 in 2024 and 278 in the first nine months of 2025. While some of this increase likely reflects improved reporting and data collection, the sustained high rate of over 30 incidents per month in 2025 indicates a genuine crisis that, if continued, threatens to rival Al-Shabaab as a source of instability in certain regions of the country.

1.7 Security Incidents Summary

Table 1.1 provides a comprehensive breakdown of security incidents by category across the 2023-2025 period, offering a quantitative foundation for the analysis that follows in subsequent sections.

Threat Category	2023	2024	2025*	Total
Al-Shabaab Attacks	1,522	1,702	894	4,118
Anti-ISIS Operations (Puntland)	1	2	364	367
ISIS Attacks	1	2	74	77
Clan Violence	12	312	278	602
Security Force Brutality	12	108	174	294
Allied Counter-AS Operations	450	550	380	1,380

**2025 data through September. Table 1.1: Security incidents by category*

Several trends in this data warrant particular attention. The dramatic surge in anti-ISIS operations in 2025, from virtually none in prior years to 364 documented operations, reflects Puntland's independent "Hilaac" (Lightning) offensive launched in December 2024. This campaign represents a distinct theatre of operations, geographically separated from the Federal Government's counter-Al-Shabaab efforts in south-central Somalia, and is analysed separately in Section 4 of this report to preserve analytical clarity about the different conflicts unfolding across Somalia's territory. Notably, Puntland conducted this campaign while simultaneously defending itself against FGS-backed destabilization efforts.

Equally concerning is the escalation in security force brutality incidents, which rose from 12 cases in 2023 to 174 in the first nine months of 2025 alone—a fourteen-fold increase that cannot be dismissed as mere statistical noise. This trend, analysed in detail in Section 5, threatens to undermine the legitimacy of counter-terrorism operations by alienating the very populations whose cooperation is essential for intelligence gathering and sustained military success. Every documented abuse provides propaganda material for Al-Shabaab's recruitment efforts and erodes the trust that communities must have in state institutions if they are to resist armed group influence. The correlation between intensified military operations and rising brutality incidents suggests that the government is failing to maintain discipline among forces it has mobilized.

2. Al-Shabaab's Tactical Evolution

The inauguration of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud on 23 May 2022 marked a strategic inflection point in Somalia's counter-terrorism efforts. The new administration launched an aggressive military offensive that mobilized regular Somali National Army forces, elite units including Danab and Gorgor special forces, and, for the first time at significant scale, clan militias known as Macaawisley who brought local knowledge and territorial familiarity to the fight. This section analyses how Al-Shabaab has responded to and adapted under this unprecedented military pressure, examining whether the offensive has achieved its strategic objectives of degrading the group's capabilities.

2.1 Assessing Offensive Effectiveness

The fundamental question facing analysts and policymakers is whether the government's offensive has meaningfully degraded Al-Shabaab's operational capacity. The answer that emerges from the data is nuanced and resists simple characterization: the offensive has demonstrably altered Al-Shabaab's tactical behaviour and geographic focus, pushing the group out of urban centres and disrupting its assassination networks, but it has not reduced the group's overall attack tempo. If anything, the opposite has occurred: Al-Shabaab has responded to military pressure by increasing rather than decreasing its operational activity.



Figure 2.1: Monthly Al-Shabaab incidents with pre and post offensive averages

Figure 2.1 presents the monthly incident trend across the entire study period, with the red vertical line marking the May 2022 offensive launch. Two patterns are immediately apparent from this visualization. First, the post-offensive average of 116.2 incidents per month significantly exceeds the pre-offensive average of 68.5 incidents per month—representing a 70% increase in attack frequency that confounds expectations of a degraded enemy. Second, the post-offensive period exhibits greater volatility, with monthly totals ranging from 41 to 172 incidents compared to the more stable pre-offensive range, suggesting a more dynamic operational environment in which both sides are actively maneuvering.

The increase in incidents does not necessarily indicate that Al-Shabaab has grown stronger in absolute terms; rather, it reflects the group's strategic response to intensified military pressure. When confronted with a determined offensive that threatened its territorial control, Al-Shabaab chose to increase operational tempo rather than conserve resources, a choice that reveals both the group's strategic calculation that sustained high-volume attacks would exhaust government forces, erode public confidence in the campaign, and demonstrate that the group cannot be defeated through military means alone.

2.2 The Tactical Transformation

While aggregate attack numbers increased, the composition of Al-Shabaab's operations underwent a fundamental transformation that revealed both the successes and limitations of the government offensive. Figure 2.2 illustrates annual incident totals by attack type, revealing the dramatic shift in tactical emphasis that has occurred since 2022.

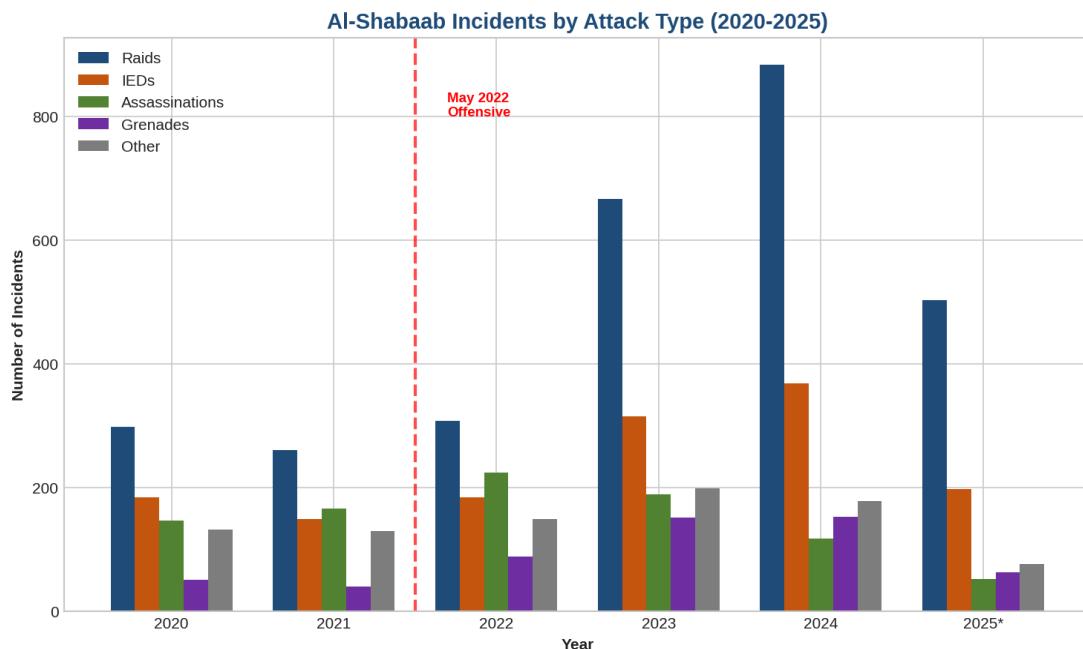


Figure 2.2: Annual Al-Shabaab incidents by attack type (2020-2025)

Raids have grown from a relatively modest component of Al-Shabaab's arsenal in 2020, when 299 incidents were recorded, to the dominant attack type by 2024, when 883 raid incidents occurred. This tripling of raid activity represents a fundamental shift toward conventional military engagement that has profound implications for how the conflict should be understood. Raids require territorial access, operational coordination among multiple fighters, and a willingness to directly engage security forces in sustained combat rather than hit-and-run attacks. The fact that Al-Shabaab can sustain this level of raid activity indicates that the group retains substantial military capability and territorial presence despite government claims of progress in liberating areas from militant control.

Conversely, assassinations peaked in 2022 at 224 incidents and have since declined sharply to just 52 incidents in the first nine months of 2025. This 77% decline from peak levels represents one of the clearest indicators of government success. Assassinations are precision attacks that require urban intelligence networks capable of identifying targets, surveillance capabilities to track their movements, and covert access to populated areas where the attacks occur. The dramatic decline in assassinations suggests that the government's urban security measures have successfully disrupted Al-Shabaab's intelligence infrastructure and freedom of movement within cities. For residents of Mogadishu and other urban centres, this represents a tangible improvement in personal security.

2.3 Quantifying the Pre/Post Offensive Shift

Table 2.1 provides the definitive quantitative comparison of attack patterns before and after the May 2022 offensive. Monthly averages are calculated to account for the differing period lengths—29 months pre-offensive versus 40 months post-offensive—enabling valid rate-based comparisons that reveal the true magnitude of tactical changes.

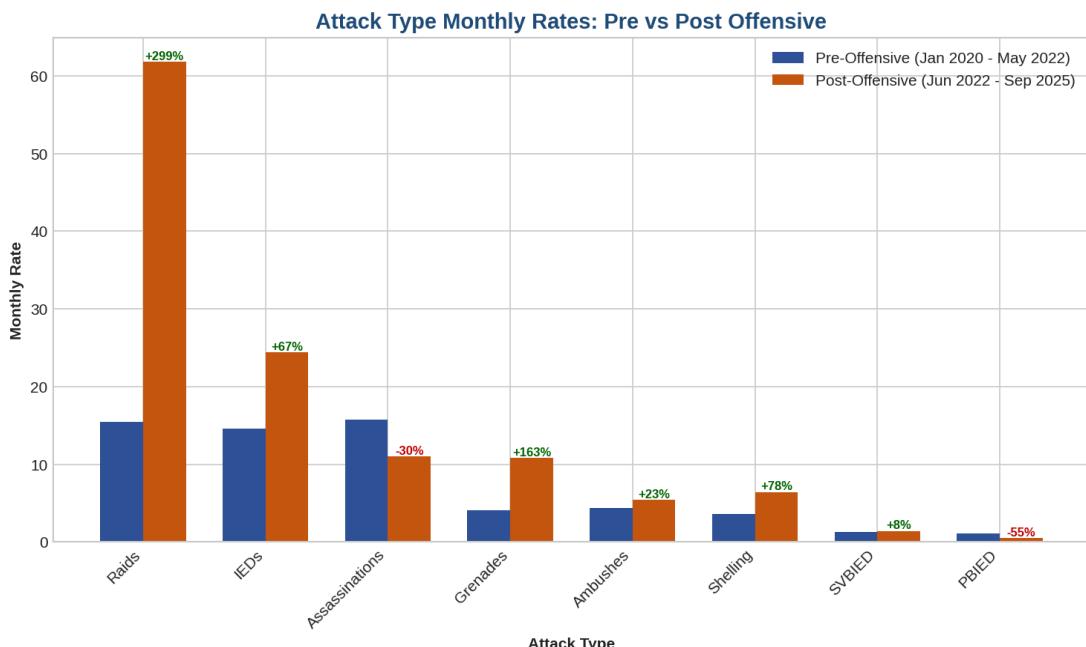


Figure 2.3: Monthly attack rates by type - pre vs post offensive

Attack Type	Pre Total	Post Total	Pre/mo	Post/mo	Change
Raids	450	2,471	15.5	61.8	+298%
IEDs	422	977	14.6	24.4	+67%
Assassinations	459	438	15.8	11.0	-31%
Grenades	119	430	4.1	10.8	+162%
Ambushes	127	216	4.4	5.4	+23%
Shelling	104	255	3.6	6.4	+78%
PBIED (Suicide)	32	18	1.1	0.5	-59%

Table 2.1: Attack type comparison - Pre-offensive (Jan 2020 - May 2022) vs Post-offensive (Jun 2022 - Sep 2025)

The data reveals a clear and consistent pattern: attack types requiring urban access and covert infiltration have declined, while those associated with rural military engagement have surged. The 298% increase in raids and 78% increase in shelling are particularly significant because these are not terrorist attacks in the traditional sense but conventional military operations. Al-Shabaab is no longer primarily conducting terrorism but rather fighting an insurgent war against government forces in contested rural areas. This transformation has implications for both the nature of the threat and the appropriate response.

The 59% collapse in person-borne IEDs (PBIED) is perhaps the most strategically significant finding in this analysis. Suicide attacks have historically been Al-Shabaab's most devastating weapon, capable of inflicting mass casualties, penetrating security cordons that would stop conventional attacks, and generating international media coverage that amplifies the group's reach. Their dramatic decline suggests one or more of several possibilities: the exhaustion of trained suicide operatives who require ideological indoctrination and specialized preparation; enhanced security screening at checkpoints that makes delivery of suicide bombers more

difficult; or a strategic decision by Al-Shabaab leadership to conserve this high-value capability for specific high-profile targets rather than routine operations. Regardless of the precise cause, the reduction in suicide bombings represents a genuine and meaningful improvement in the security environment for urban populations.

2.4 Who Bears the Cost of the Offensive?

Beyond analysing how Al-Shabaab attacks, understanding whom the group targets reveals its strategic priorities and the constraints under which it operates. Figure 2.4 compares target attack rates before and after the offensive, illustrating the dramatic shifts in Al-Shabaab's victim profile that have accompanied its tactical transformation.

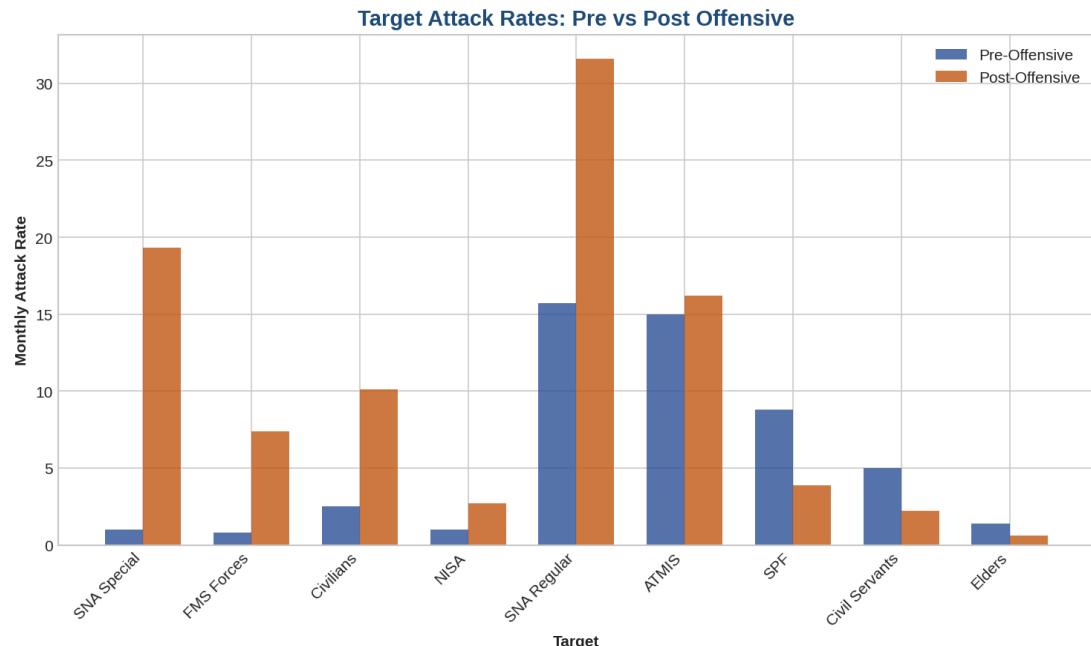


Figure 2.4: Target attack rates pre vs post offensive

The targeting data reveals clear patterns of strategic retaliation and tactical adaptation that illuminate Al-Shabaab's decision-making calculus. The 1,764% increase in attacks on SNA Special Forces was not random violence but deliberate strategic signaling. Danab and Gorgor units have been the tip of the spear in offensive operations, conducting the most aggressive and effective operations against Al-Shabaab strongholds. The group has responded by making these elite units its primary targets, sending a clear message: forces that lead the offensive will pay the heaviest price. This targeting pattern suggests that Al-Shabaab's intelligence networks are tracking unit deployments and prioritizing attacks against the most capable government forces.

The 306% surge in civilian targeting represents a deliberate campaign of collective punishment against communities perceived as supporting the government. Villages that have provided Macaawisley recruits, shared intelligence with security forces, or simply welcomed government presence have faced retribution attacks designed to terrorize populations into withdrawing their cooperation. The humanitarian implications are severe, but the strategic logic from Al-Shabaab's perspective is clear.

The decline in attacks on urban targets, including police, civil servants, and traditional elders, represents the flip side of Al-Shabaab's rural shift. These targets operate primarily in urban environments where the government's security presence is strongest. As Al-Shabaab's urban infiltration capability has degraded under offensive pressure, its ability to reach these high-value soft targets has declined proportionally. For residents of Mogadishu and other cities, government officials working in urban centres, and traditional leaders who facilitate governance, this represents tangible improvement in personal security even as rural populations face escalating violence.

2.5 Attack Methods by Target

Al-Shabaab matches tactics to targets based on vulnerability assessment, desired psychological and physical effects, and operational constraints imposed by the security environment. The heatmap in Figure 2.5 visualizes the relationship between targets and attack methods using incident data from 2023-2025, revealing patterns that illuminate Al-Shabaab's tactical sophistication.

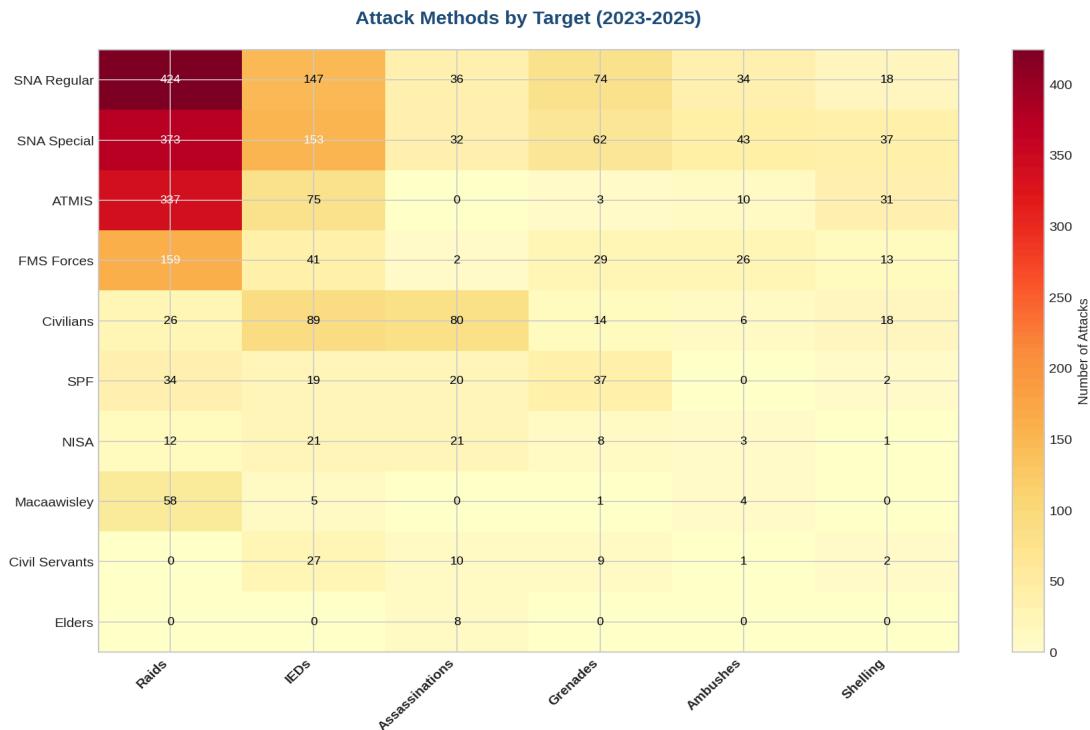


Figure 2.5: Attack methods by target heatmap - darker colors indicate higher frequency

Target	Raids	IEDs	Assas sn	Gren	Amb ush	Shell	Total
SNA Regular	424	147	36	74	34	18	736
SNA Special	373	153	32	62	43	37	705
ATMIS/AMIS OM	337	75	0	3	10	31	459
Civilians	26	89	80	14	6	18	237
SPF (Police)	34	19	20	37	0	2	112
NISA	12	21	21	8	3	1	67
Elders	0	0	8	0	0	0	8

Table 2.2: Attack types by target (orange = primary method). Data from 2,731 incidents, Jan 2023 - Sep 2025.

Military targets, including SNA Regular, SNA Special Forces, and ATMIS forces, are attacked primarily through raids, which account for 53-73% of incidents against these forces. This dominance of raids against military targets indicates Al-Shabaab's willingness and capability to engage in direct combat with armed opponents, a form of warfare that requires trained fighters, coordinated tactics, and confidence in the ability to inflict casualties while managing losses. The group is actively contesting military control of territory.

Civilians face a fundamentally different threat profile. Seventy-one percent of civilian attacks employ either IEDs (37.5%) or assassinations (33.8%); weapons designed to terrorize populations and eliminate individuals perceived as government collaborators rather than to defeat armed opponents. This pattern is consistent with Al-Shabaab's stated strategy of

collective punishment and intelligence network maintenance. Police are targeted primarily with grenades, accounting for 33% of SPF attacks, reflecting urban hit-and-run tactics where quick escape following the attack is essential for operative survival. Intelligence personnel from NISA face a split between IEDs and assassinations in equal proportion, reflecting the high-value nature of these targets and the need for precision methods. Most strikingly, all eight documented attacks on traditional elders were assassinations.

3. Allied Counter-Terrorism Operations

The government's post-May 2022 offensive represented a fundamental shift in counter-terrorism strategy that distinguished the current campaign from all previous efforts. Rather than relying primarily on AMISOM (then ATMIS and AUSSOM) peacekeepers supplemented by occasional SNA operations, the new approach mobilized all available Somali forces: regular army units, elite special forces, federal member state forces, and critically, clan militias known as Macaawisley who had previously been uninvolved in or even sympathetic to Al-Shabaab. This section analyses the scale, composition, and implications of allied operations against Al-Shabaab.

3.1 The Scale of Operational Intensification

Figure 3.1 compares monthly operational rates before and after the offensive launch, revealing a dramatic intensification that reflects the government's strategic commitment to sustained pressure on Al-Shabaab.

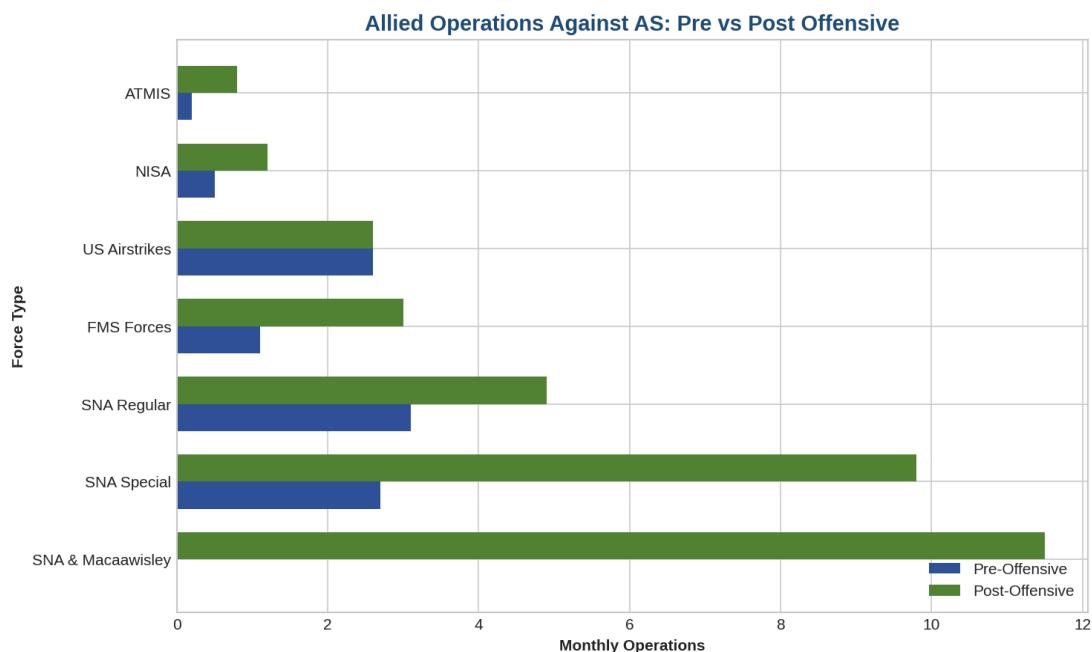


Figure 3.1: Allied operations against Al-Shabaab by force type

Force Type	Pre-Off	Post-Off	Pre/mo	Post/mo	Change
SNA & Macaawisley	0	460	0.0	11.5	NEW
SNA Special Forces	77	390	2.7	9.8	+267%
SNA Regular Forces	89	197	3.1	4.9	+60%
FMS Forces	33	119	1.1	3.0	+161%
US Airstrikes	76	105	2.6	2.6	0%
TOTAL	314	1,314	10.8	32.9	+203%

Table 3.1: Allied operations against Al-Shabaab by force type

The contrast between pre- and post-offensive operational tempo is stark: allied operations tripled from 10.8 per month to 32.9 per month, a 203% increase that represents the most sustained counter-terrorism campaign in Somalia's recent history. This intensification was driven primarily by the mobilization of new force categories, particularly the SNA-Macaawisley joint operations that account for 460 documented operations and did not exist before May 2022, and the dramatically increased tempo of SNA Special Forces operations, which rose 267% from 2.7 to 9.8 operations per month.

The emergence of SNA-Macaawisley joint operations as the largest single category of allied activity represents the most significant strategic development of the campaign. Before May 2022, clan militias were either uninvolved in counter-terrorism operations or, in some cases, maintained tacit non-aggression arrangements with Al-Shabaab to avoid becoming targets. The government's success in mobilizing these forces through a combination of clan outreach, political negotiation, and financial incentives brought substantial advantages: local knowledge of terrain and population, pre-existing community relationships that facilitated intelligence gathering, and additional manpower that expanded the geographic reach of operations. However, this reliance on clan militias also carries risks that must be managed. Macaawisley forces lack professional military training, operate under clan rather than military command structures, and may pursue clan-specific interests that diverge from national security objectives. The 306% surge in Al-Shabaab civilian targeting may partly represent retaliation against communities that provided Macaawisley fighters, creating cycles of violence that could undermine long-term stability.

4. Puntland's Independent Campaign Against ISIS-Somalia

While the Federal Government's counter-Al-Shabaab offensive dominates analysis of Somalia's security situation, a separate and largely independent military campaign has been unfolding in the northeast. Puntland State, operating autonomously from Mogadishu, launched "Operation Hilaac" (Lightning) against ISIS-Somalia strongholds in December 2024. This section analyses this distinct theatre of operations, which must be understood on its own terms rather than conflated with the Al-Shabaab conflict in southern Somalia.

4.1 The Distinct Nature of the Puntland Campaign

It is essential to understand that Puntland's anti-ISIS operations are conducted independently of the Federal Government of Somalia. Puntland maintains its own security forces: the Puntland Defence Forces (PDF), which encompasses the Darawish, the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF), and the Puntland Police, and conducts security operations within its territory without operational coordination with or direction from Mogadishu. The Federal Government has no command authority over these forces and plays no operational role in the Al-Miskad campaign.

This analytical separation has important implications. The Puntland-ISIS conflict represents a distinct front in Somalia's overall security landscape, with different geographic focus, different armed actors, different force compositions, and different dynamics than the Al-Shabaab conflict in the south. Combining these two conflicts in aggregate statistics would obscure these distinctions and produce misleading conclusions about the overall security trajectory. A raid by PDF forces against ISIS positions in the Bari mountains is a fundamentally different event than a raid by SNA-Macaawisley forces against Al-Shabaab in Hirshabelle, even though both might be coded as "government offensive operations" in a less careful analysis.

4.2 Operation Hilaac: The 2025 Offensive Against ISIS

ISIS-Somalia has maintained a presence in Puntland's Bari region since approximately 2015, concentrated in the rugged Cal Miskad (Al Miskad) mountains. The terrain has provided the group with defensible positions that conventional forces struggle to access, along with easy infiltration routes from Yemen and Ethiopia. In December 2024, Puntland authorities launched Operation Hilaac to dislodge ISIS from these strongholds and establish government control over the Al-Miskad area.

At the start of the operation, Puntland sources say the ISIS fighters numbered 1200 mostly foreign fighters. Almost 100 foreign fighters have been captured, and 700-900 have been killed during the operation. The third highest ranking member of ISIS Somalia was captured in a Puntland-US operation in July 2025, dealing the group a major setback.

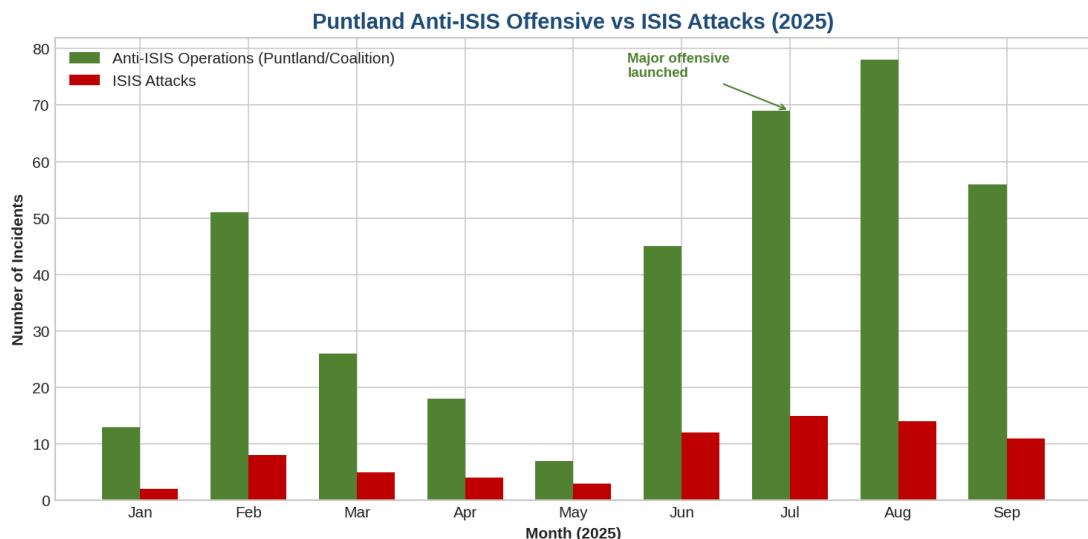


Figure 4.1: Anti-ISIS operations vs ISIS attacks by month (2025)

Figure 4.1 illustrates the tempo of operations throughout 2025, revealing the rhythm of the campaign as it unfolded. The offensive began modestly in January with 13 documented operations as PDF forces positioned themselves and conducted initial probing attacks. Operations increased substantially in February to 51 as the campaign gathered momentum, then fluctuated through the spring months as forces maneuvered through difficult terrain. The campaign reached peak intensity during the summer, with 69 operations in July and 78 in August, reflecting major clearing operations in the most contested areas of the Al-Miskad mountains during favorable weather conditions. Operations remained elevated at 56 in September as PDF forces worked to consolidate gains and prevent ISIS from reconstituting.

ISIS has not been a passive target in this campaign. The group claims to have conducted 74 attacks in 2025, with activity peaking during the July-August period when fighting was heaviest.

4.3 Geographic Focus and Force Employment

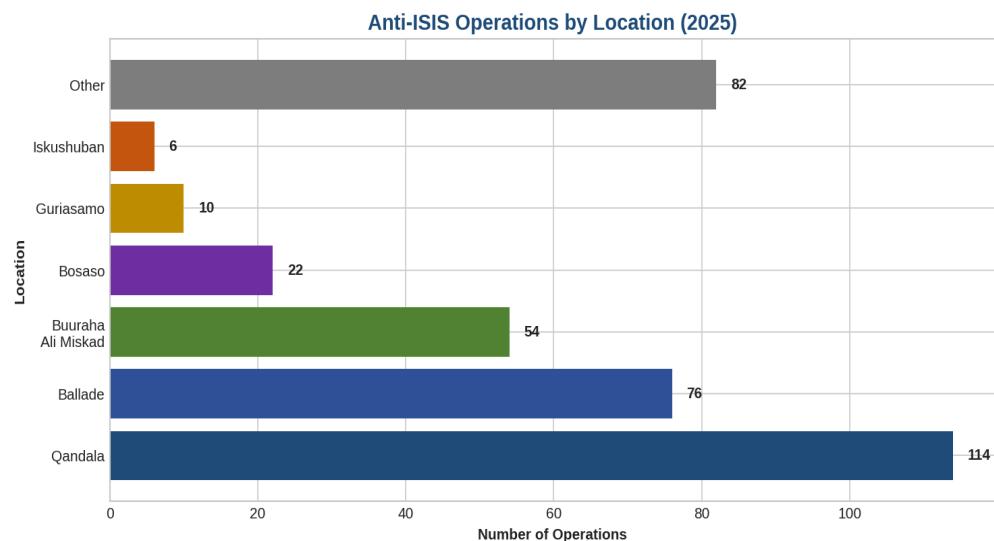


Figure 4.2: Anti-ISIS operations by location (2025)

Operations concentrated on three key areas that together define the ISIS presence in Bari region. Qandala district coastal areas saw 114 operations, reflecting efforts to secure access routes and prevent ISIS from using the coastline for resupply or escape. The Ballade area experienced 76 operations as forces worked to clear approaches to the main ISIS stronghold. The Cal Miskad mountains saw 54 operations as PDF forces pushed into the most difficult terrain. In the dataset, these are areas that don't properly fit to any of the districts or no exact position was given.

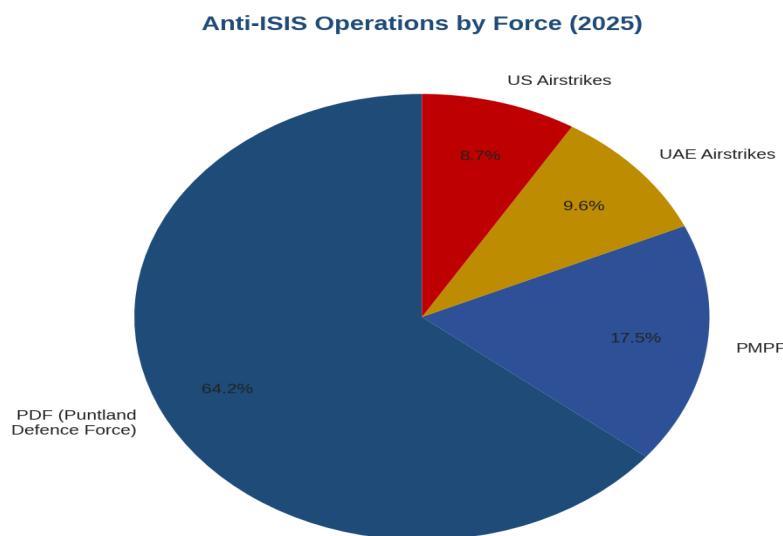


Figure 4.3: Anti-ISIS operations by force type (2025)

Force Component	Operations	% of Total	Primary Role
PDF (Ground Forces)	228	62.6%	Ground assault operations
PMPF	62	17.0%	Ground/Coastal/maritime security
UAE Airstrikes	34	9.3%	Air support and precision strikes

Force Component	Operations	% of Total	Primary Role
US Airstrikes	31	8.5%	Air support and precision strikes
TOTAL	364	100%	

Table 4.1: Anti-ISIS operations by force component (December 2024 - September 2025)

International support has been critical to Operation Hilaac's execution. UAE airstrikes (34 documented) and US airstrikes (31 documented) together comprise 17.8% of all operations. These are publicly available strikes and may amount to a small number of the overall support strikes. These strikes peaked during July-September when PDF ground forces were engaging ISIS in the most remote and challenging terrain of the Al-Miskad mountains, where close air support proved essential for dislodging entrenched positions. The presence of both UAE and US air support reflects international concern about ISIS-Somalia's potential as a regional and global threat vector. Unlike Al-Shabaab, which remains focused on Somalia and the immediate region, ISIS represents a franchise of a global network with demonstrated willingness to direct or inspire attacks in distant theatres. This distinction likely explains the willingness of international partners to provide direct combat support to Puntland's campaign.

4.4 ISIS Tactical Profile and Resilience

Despite the sustained offensive pressure, ISIS conducted 74 documented attacks in 2025, demonstrating operational resilience that mirrors the Al-Shabaab pattern observed in the south. The group's tactical profile differs somewhat from Al-Shabaab, reflecting its smaller size, different geographic context, and distinct operational capabilities. IEDs accounted for 31.1% of ISIS attacks, representing the primary attack method of a group conserving fighters while seeking to inflict casualties on advancing forces. Raids comprised 18.9% and ambushes 17.6% of attacks, indicating that ISIS retains capability for offensive operations rather than merely defending positions. The group is actively contesting Puntland control rather than passively waiting to be overrun.

Perhaps most concerning is the emergence of drone-delivered IEDs, accounting for 8.1% of ISIS attacks with 6 documented incidents. This technological adaptation represents a significant development that warrants close monitoring. If this capability matures and proliferates to Al-Shabaab, it could significantly complicate counter-terrorism operations throughout Somalia. The relatively low number of drone attacks suggests the capability remains limited, but its emergence indicates ISIS's willingness to innovate tactically.

5. Internal Security Challenges

Somalia's security challenges extend well beyond the external threats posed by Al-Shabaab and ISIS. Internal dynamics, including security force misconduct, pervasive clan violence, and institutional fragmentation, undermine the very foundation upon which effective counter-terrorism must be built. A population that fears government forces as much as it fears terrorists will not provide the intelligence and cooperation essential for sustained success.

5.1 The Scope of Internal Challenges

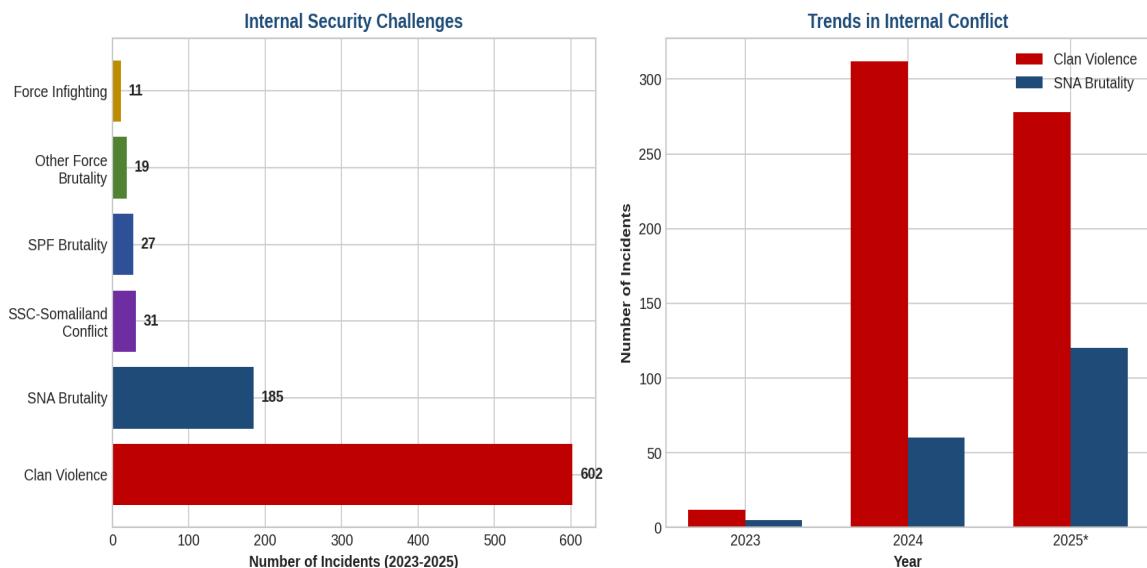


Figure 5.1: Internal security challenges breakdown (2023-2025)

Figure 5.1 visualizes the scale of internal security challenges documented between 2023 and September 2025. Clan violence dominates with 602 recorded incidents, followed by SNA brutality with 185 incidents, and other categories of security force misconduct. Collectively, internal security challenges represent nearly a quarter of all documented security incidents during this period.

5.2 Security Force Brutality

A total of 294 security force brutality incidents were documented between 2023 and September 2025, ranging from extrajudicial killings to unlawful detention and physical assault. The trajectory of this problem is alarming: incidents escalated from 12 cases in 2023 to 108 in 2024 to 174 in just the first nine months of 2025. This fourteen-fold increase over the study period cannot be explained by improved reporting alone; it reflects a genuine deterioration in force discipline that has accompanied the intensification of military operations.

Perpetrator	2023	2024	2025*	Total
SNA (Somali National Army)	5	60	120	185
SPF/Police	2	12	13	27
FMS Forces	1	5	4	10
ATMIS/AU Forces	1	2	2	5
NISA	0	2	2	4
Other/Unknown	3	27	33	63
TOTAL	12	108	174	294

Table 5.1: Security force brutality by perpetrator

The SNA accounts for 63% of all documented brutality cases; a deeply troubling concentration given that these are the forces leading the counter-terrorism offensive. The consequences of this pattern extend far beyond individual victims. Communities that experience or witness abuse by government forces become reluctant to share intelligence, denying security forces the information they need to conduct effective operations. And within the military itself, tolerance of brutality damages unit discipline, undermines professional standards, and degrades the operational effectiveness that the offensive requires.

5.3 Clan Violence

Clan violence represents a pervasive security challenge that exists parallel to the counter-terrorism mission. With 602 recorded incidents between 2023 and September 2025, clan-based conflict has reached levels that demand attention even as resources are focused on the Al-Shabaab threat.

Metric	2023	2024	2025 (Jan-Sep)
Clan Violence Incidents	12	312	278
Monthly Average	1.0	26.0	30.9
Year-over-Year Change	—	+2,500%	+19%

Table 5.2: Clan violence trends (2023-2025)

The explosion from 12 incidents in 2023 to 312 in 2024—a 2,500% increase likely reflects improved reporting and data collection rather than an actual twenty-five-fold increase in violence. Nevertheless, the sustained high rate of over 30 incidents per month in 2025 indicates a genuine crisis that diverts security forces from counter-terrorism operations, creates ungoverned spaces where armed groups can operate, and generates grievances that fuel recruitment. Clan conflicts require security force intervention to prevent escalation, pulling units away from offensive operations and imposing opportunity costs on the counter-terrorism campaign. Moreover, when security forces intervene in clan disputes, they risk being perceived as partisan actors taking sides, further eroding community trust.

5.4 Security Forces Infighting

Perhaps the most damaging internal challenge is documented infighting between security forces themselves. Eleven formal infighting incidents were recorded during the study period—SNA units clashing with each other, NISA personnel in conflict with SNA soldiers, and FMS forces fighting federal units. While numerically small compared to other categories, these incidents carry outsized significance because they signal fundamental failures in command and control, competing political loyalties that override professional obligations, and resource disputes that security institutions cannot resolve through legitimate means.

The consequences of force-on-force incidents are severe and far-reaching. Units in conflict cannot coordinate operations against common enemies, creating seams that Al-Shabaab can exploit. Ammunition, equipment, and personnel expended in fratricidal engagements are wasted resources unavailable for the counter-terrorism mission. Al-Shabaab propaganda readily exploits divisions within security forces, portraying the government as incapable of controlling its own soldiers, let alone protecting the population. When security forces fight each other, Al-Shabaab wins without firing a shot.

5.5 The SSC-Somaliland Conflict

The conflict between SSC-Khatumo forces and Somaliland in the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn regions represents a distinct northern security challenge that, while geographically removed from the Al-Shabaab theatre, affects the overall security environment. With 31 recorded incidents including major clashes around Laascaanood, this conflict demonstrates that Somalia's security challenges extend beyond terrorism to encompass contested governance and territorial disputes that predate and will outlast the current counter-terrorism campaign. The SSC-Somaliland conflict diverts attention and resources, creates humanitarian concerns that attract international criticism, and complicates efforts to present a unified Somali position on security matters.

6. Assessing the Security Trajectory

6.1 Evaluating the Offensive: Success, Failure, or Transformation?

The central question motivating this analysis of whether the government's offensive has succeeded in degrading Al-Shabaab requires a nuanced answer that resists simple characterization. By some important metrics, the offensive achieved genuine successes during its initial phase. The 31% decline in assassinations, 59% collapse in suicide bombings, and 56-57% reduction in attacks on urban targets (police, civil servants, elders) represented meaningful improvements in security for residents of Mogadishu and other cities. The disruption of Al-Shabaab's urban intelligence networks and the enhanced screening measures that made suicide bombing delivery more difficult were real accomplishments that saved lives.

However, the offensive never progressed beyond its initial phase, and the gains it achieved have proven ephemeral. The start of the much-anticipated Phase Two of the operations "Operation Black Lion", which was to shift operations into Al-Shabaab's core territories in Lower Shabelle and Jubaland, never materialized. Political disputes between the Federal Government and regional states, the diversion of military resources to fight Jubaland rather than Al-Shabaab, and the ATMIS drawdown combined to stall momentum and create openings that the militant group exploited. Al-Shabaab's 2025 counteroffensive has now reversed virtually all territorial gains from 2022-2023, recapturing Adan Yabaal, Moqokori, and Mahas—the latter having been under government control for over a decade. The towns liberated with such fanfare are once again under Al-Shabaab administration, and the communities that supported the government offensive are now paying the price for that support.

6.2 The Pre/Post Transformation: A Summary Assessment

PRE-OFFENSIVE (Jan 2020 - May 2022)	POST-OFFENSIVE (Jun 2022 - Sep 2025)
Urban terrorism focus	Rural insurgency focus
68.5 incidents/month	116.2 incidents/month (+70%)
Suicide bombing capability intact (1.1/month)	Suicide bombing collapsed (0.5/month, -59%)
Assassinations active (15.8/month)	Assassinations declining (11.0/month, -31%)
Raids moderate (15.5/month)	Raids dominant (61.8/month, +298%)

Table 6.1: Summary of tactical transformation pre vs post offensive

6.3 Strategic Findings and Implications

Six strategic findings emerge from this analysis with implications for policy and operations. First, Al-Shabaab adapted rather than collapsed under offensive pressure, demonstrating organizational resilience that should temper expectations of rapid victory. The group absorbed the government's best effort and transformed its operations rather than degrading. Second, urban security improved during the initial phase through the disruption of assassination networks and suicide bombing capability, representing a meaningful accomplishment that benefited millions of urban residents, though these gains are now at risk as the offensive has stalled. Third, rural populations have borne the cost of the tactical transformation, with Al-Shabaab's 306% surge in civilian targeting extracting punishment from communities perceived as supporting the government. Fourth, elite forces bear a disproportionate burden with the 1,764% increase in attacks on SNA Special Forces representing targeted retaliation that degrades the most capable units. Fifth, Puntland's independent anti-ISIS campaign demonstrates that effective counter-terrorism is possible when political will exists and resources are focused on the actual threat rather than political disputes. Sixth, the Federal Government's decision to deploy military resources against

Jubaland rather than Al-Shabaab, and to arm non-state actors in Puntland to settle political scores, represents a fundamental betrayal of the counter-terrorism mission that has directly contributed to Al-Shabaab's resurgence.

7. Future Outlook

7.1 Al-Shabaab Trajectory

The critical variable determining Al-Shabaab's trajectory is whether the political conflicts that have crippled the counter-terrorism campaign can be resolved sufficiently to allow coordinated military operations. As of January 2026, the prospects appear bleak. Puntland operates as a de facto independent state, refusing to recognize the Federal Government until constitutional disputes are resolved. Jubaland remains in open conflict with Mogadishu, with federal forces deployed against the regional administration rather than against Al-Shabaab. The anticipated Operation Black Lion appears indefinitely postponed. Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab continues its methodical reconquest of territory, demonstrating that it can wait out political crises and exploit the resulting security gaps.

Three scenarios merit consideration. In the first scenario, political reconciliation between the FGS and the federal member states enables resumed coordinated operations, allowing government forces to recover lost territory and maintain pressure on Al-Shabaab. This scenario requires fundamental changes in the Federal Government's approach: abandoning constitutional power grabs, ending military operations against regional administrations, and rebuilding the trust that has been destroyed. In the second scenario, political fragmentation continues and deepens, with each side prioritizing its dispute with the other over the common threat. Al-Shabaab exploits the disarray to consolidate territorial gains, rebuild networks, and potentially threaten Mogadishu itself. In the third and perhaps most likely scenario, a messy stalemate persists in which no decisive outcome emerges—the government controls major population centres but cannot project power into the countryside, while Al-Shabaab controls rural areas but cannot capture cities. This scenario implies indefinite conflict with no end in sight.

7.2 ISIS-Somalia Evolution

Puntland's Operation Hilaac has achieved tactical success in pressuring ISIS positions but has not eliminated the group's presence in Bari region. President Deni announced in June 2025 that Puntland forces had recaptured 98% of the Cal Miskad mountain range, reportedly killing over 700 militants including many foreign fighters. However, several hundred ISIS fighters remain at large, and the group has demonstrated capacity to adapt and survive previous offensives. The question facing Puntland authorities is whether current pressure can be sustained until ISIS is permanently denied its mountain sanctuary, or whether the group will reconstitute once operational tempo inevitably decreases. The emergence of drone IED capability, while currently limited, represents a concerning technological adaptation that requires monitoring. Continued UAE and US air support remains critical for Puntland's campaign; any reduction in international enabler support would severely constrain PDF operations in the difficult Al-Miskad terrain.

7.3 The Internal Security Reform Imperative

The escalation in security force brutality from 12 incidents in 2023 to 174 in just nine months of 2025 represents an unsustainable trajectory that threatens to undermine military gains against armed groups. Without accountability mechanisms that demonstrate consequences for abuse, this pattern will continue, alienating populations whose cooperation is essential, providing recruitment material to Al-Shabaab, and risking the international support that provides critical resources for Somali forces. Military justice reform, professionalization training with human rights emphasis, and clear command responsibility for unit conduct must become priorities rather than afterthoughts.

Clan violence averaging over 30 incidents per month represents a parallel crisis that diverts resources from counter-terrorism while creating conditions that armed groups exploit. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, community reconciliation initiatives, and governance reforms that address underlying grievances over land and resources must complement military operations if stability is to prove durable. Security forces seen as neutral arbiters rather than clan partisans would be far more effective than forces perceived as taking sides in local disputes.

7.4 Concluding Assessment

Somalia's security trajectory in late 2025 is deteriorating. The promising gains of the 2022-2023 offensive have been reversed, with Al-Shabaab recapturing towns that had been liberated with considerable sacrifice. The Federal Government has prioritized political conflicts with regional states over the counter-terrorism mission, deploying scarce military resources against Jubaland and arming destabilizing actors in Puntland while Al-Shabaab advances. The anticipated Phase Two, Operation Black Lion, never launched, and the offensive has effectively collapsed. International partners who invested heavily in building Somali military capability are reconsidering their commitments as they watch those capabilities deployed against other Somalis rather than terrorists.

The path forward requires recognizing that Somalia's security challenges cannot be addressed through military means alone, and certainly not while the country's political class wages war against itself. Al-Shabaab feeds on dysfunction, exploits divisions, and benefits every time federal and regional forces fight each other instead of the common enemy. Until Somalia's leaders prioritize the survival of the state over their political ambitions, the militant group will continue to demonstrate that it possesses the patience and resilience to outlast any offensive and that communities who bet on the government's staying power do so at their peril.