Out of the Box: How to Rebalance U.S. Somalia Policy

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Principal Findings

What's new? For sixteen-plus years, the U.S. has helped wage war on Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. While President Joe Biden has wound down U.S. participation in some post-9/11 conflicts, he has approached Somalia differently – reversing his predecessor's decision to withdraw U.S. forces. U.S. troops are now supporting Mogadishu's offensive against Al-Shabaab.

Why does it matter? Washington's Somalia policy focuses on containing the perceived Al-Shabaab threat to U.S. interests militarily, with too little focus on reconciliation and conflict resolution. A major mishap involving U.S. forces or changing U.S. politics could lead Washington to withdraw.

What should be done? The U.S. should rebalance its policy by increasing stabilisation assistance and better helping Somalia address political rifts impeding conflict resolution. The offensive creates governance and reconciliation opportunities the U.S. should encourage. Washington should also prepare for the possibility of negotiations between Mogadishu and Al-Shabaab.

Executive Summary

In May 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden reversed the eleventh-hour decision of his predecessor, Donald Trump, to pull U.S. troops out of Somalia. Biden wanted U.S. soldiers on the ground to help the Danab, an elite Somali special operations unit fighting the Al-Shabaab Islamist insurgency. But the seemingly straightforward decision masked a tangle of contradictions and questions. On one hand, Biden had run for president promising to end U.S. engagement in "forever wars" launched after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. On the other hand, his administration had proven willing to continue certain post-9/11 missions. But to what ultimate end was, in Somalia, unclear. Even with recent gains, a decisive victory for Somali forces over Al-Shabaab seems out of reach. Meanwhile, U.S. politics are fickle, and a change of administration could mean an abrupt end to the mission. If the U.S. wants its engagement in Somalia to have lasting benefits for regional peace and security, it should rebalance its approach. It should develop a peacebuilding strategy focused on stabilisation and political reconciliation to complement its military operations to contain Al-Shabaab.

For years, the U.S. agenda in Somalia has been centred around counter-terrorism. Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. embarked on a series of military campaigns – colloquially known as the "global war on terror" – to destroy al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Seeing Somalia as a largely ungoverned space where jihadist militants could thrive, Washington soon made the country a front in its wide-ranging war. Its targets were Islamist militants it deemed linked to al-Qaeda, a category that eventually widened to include Al-Shabaab. It mostly went after the insurgents from the air while an African Union (AU) force battled them on the ground, but in 2013, President Barack Obama also sent a small contingent of U.S. troops into Somalia to train a special operations unit, the Danab, to fight Al-Shabaab. U.S. military operations reached their peak under Obama's successor, President Donald Trump, whose "gloves off" approach failed to bring the group to heel.

Then, shortly after losing his bid for re-election in November 2020, the mercurial Trump shifted gears, signing a one-page directive ordering the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia. The Pentagon followed the letter of Trump's order, repositioning units to neighbouring Djibouti and Kenya, but the troops continued to cycle in and out of Somalia, supporting the Danab as though little had changed. The general in charge, Stephen Townsend, described the new force posture as "commuting to work". It might have been less efficient than the prior arrangement, and the troops might have been exposed to greater risk, but it kept the mission alive.

This situation presented President Biden with an awkward choice when he took the reins of government in January 2021. As the U.S. approached the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks still fighting a sprawling war on terror, he had promised on the campaign trail to wind down what he described as "forever wars". But the commitment was less than tightly framed, and included nothing specific with respect to Somalia. The question of how to translate the stump speeches into policy was left to be worked out through a series of policy reviews to be conducted during his first months in office.

After the deliberations over U.S. engagement in Somalia were concluded, Biden made his choice: the troops would return. There were several factors at play. First, there was an argument that U.S. troops had never really left but were shuttling in and out of the country, a half-in-half-out posture that at some level defied common sense. Secondly, Townsend mounted a vigorous advocacy campaign contending that Al-Shabaab posed a threat to U.S. interests abroad and even the United States itself – persuading the Defense Department to advocate for sending the troops back in. Thirdly, the State Department and National Security Council staff sided with the Pentagon, believing U.S. engagement still offered more benefits than costs to U.S. interests in Somalia and the surrounding region.

It was at least as important, however, that no one was really pushing back at the Defense Department's position. While the Biden team took a major strategic decision (at some political cost) to remove U.S. forces from Afghanistan, once the central front of the war on terror, it did not make a wholesale commitment to rolling up all the post-9/11 conflicts, at least not right away. In places where it judged U.S. troops to serve an interest at low cost and low risk, Biden and his team were content to let operations continue. Somalia emerged as one such place.

The question is what happens now. Somalia has had pieces of good news of late. The AU reconfigured, renamed and extended its mission – albeit only until 2024 – with UN and European Union support. After lengthy delays, federal elections wrapped up with the selection, in May 2022, of a new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Mohamud is both more fiercely committed to fighting Al-Shabaab and less divisive in his political style than his predecessor. U.S. troops are now working with Somali forces to press an offensive against the insurgents; a first phase focused in central Somalia made good progress, largely because of local clan collaboration; phase two (which will focus on the south) will be much more difficult.

But Somalia still faces enormous challenges. Most experts believe that Al-Shabaab cannot be defeated militarily. Rifts between the central government in Mogadishu and the federal member states are both deep and potentially dangerous, as are fault lines among different factions in the states themselves. In the meantime, the U.S. strategy appears to be to keep Somalia "in a box" in the words of one official. That is, the primary U.S. focus is on containing the perceived threat posed by Al-Shabaab militarily. These efforts are not, however, joined up with a long-term political or other approach that could help end the conflict.

The current approach might make sense if Washington intended to remain in Somalia forever, but Mogadishu cannot bank on that, and neither should U.S. policymakers. There are simply too many contingencies that could bring about a quick exit. A change of administration or an incident that results in U.S. casualties could easily reset cost-benefit calculations in the U.S., and lead Washington to complete the disengagement that Trump set out to accomplish but failed to make happen. Rather, U.S. and Somali leaders should look at how to optimise Washington's engagement so that its actions on the battlefield are better balanced by efforts to achieve durable change though non-military means.

The U.S. should reallocate resources, and the attention of its senior officials, so that more effort goes into stabilisation – which can include a range of activities that help bring about conditions for peace – and political reconciliation. While Washington is

appropriately cautious about what it can achieve in these realms, that may have led it to undersell what it has to contribute. It could usefully do more by (for example) funding quick-reaction projects in areas freed from Al-Shabaab's grip, helping Mogadishu launch a constitutionally required reconciliation mechanism and pushing other donors to finance this work. The U.S. should also quietly prepare for the possibility that the conflict could end through negotiations with the insurgents, which it should not impede.

After more than fifteen years fighting in Somalia, Washington must know that at some point it will need to pull back. In order to leave a legacy commensurate with its investment, it should broaden its approach, and do more to help Somalia build the cohesive political culture that can best serve as a platform for peace.

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I. Introduction

The recent history of U.S. Somalia policy is one of active if apprehensive military involvement. After the collapse of Siad Barré's military dictatorship in 1991, Somalia in effect became a failed state, lacking viable central authority for more than a decade. In late 1992, Washington sent troops to the country, but after eighteen U.S. servicemembers were killed the following autumn (an event memorialised in the 2001 film *Black Hawk Down*), it retreated and became more gun-shy about overseas military missions generally. Yet, in the years after the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, Somalia once again became a theatre of U.S. military operations, this time as a front in the campaign often referred to as the "global war on terrorism" (which insiders sometimes abbreviate as "GWOT").[1]

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) worried that Somalia was a vast, ungoverned space al-Qaeda could use as a safe haven. In 2006, after a group of Islamist clerics called the Islamic Courts Union dislodged the reigning warlords, gaining control of Mogadishu, the Bush administration supported an Ethiopian invasion to overthrow them. Al-Shabaab, which had originated as that clerical group's enforcement wing, began resisting the Ethiopian forces. But while Islamist militants occasionally found their way into U.S. sights because of suspected links to al-Qaeda, the Bush administration never appeared to contemplate larger-scale military action in Somalia than the occasional airstrike.

Bush's successor, President Barack Obama, applied much the same counter-terrorism lens to Somalia as his predecessor but over time significantly expanded operations. While his administration pumped aid into the country, supported elections and sought to increase the U.S. diplomatic presence, the preponderant focus of its efforts was to counter Al-Shabaab militarily – which it did with increasing intensity through Obama's two terms in office.[2] At first, the administration did not consider sending U.S. troops into the country. But as Al-Shabaab recruited more fighters and came to control larger chunks of Somali territory, Obama's approach changed as well. The U.S. struck senior Al-Shabaab leaders, deeming them to be al-Qaeda members and targetable on that basis.[3] It also provided bilateral support, including weapons and training, to countries contributing troops to the UN-authorised African Union (AU) multilateral force, AMISOM, working to degrade the insurgents.

During Obama's second term, the U.S. deepened its military engagement. In 2013, the administration decided to send in U.S. special forces to advise and train Somali

[1] A more detailed accounting of U.S. Somalia policy during the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies is in Appendices A, B and C.

[2] Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. officials, February 2022-June 2023.

[3] Crisis Group United States Report N°5, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, 17 September 2021.

soldiers.[4] The administration also increased the tempo of U.S. airstrikes and reinterpreted its legal authority to give itself flexibility in targeting others besides Al-Shabaab leaders.[5] In 2016, it revealed that it had deemed Al-Shabaab an "associated force" of al-Qaeda by the terms of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF) – the statute that authorised military operations responding to the 9/11 attacks.[6] This step meant that the U.S. could strike any and all of Al-Shabaab's thousands of fighters on the basis of their membership in the group.

If the Obama administration steadily ramped up military pressure on Al-Shabaab, the successor administration of President Donald Trump whipsawed between intensity and disengagement. At first, the U.S. picked up the pace of airstrikes under Trump, who took the "gloves off", as a U.S. military officer put it.[7] The administration hoped to deal the insurgents a big enough blow that Washington could wrap up its Somalia operations, but it could not do so, and eventually the erratic Trump shifted course. In December 2020, he pulled the plug on the military deployment that Obama had ordered.[8] He directed the repositioning of approximately 800 U.S. personnel out of Somalia by mid-January 2021.[9] The majority relocated to Djibouti or Kenya.[10]

But even then, the U.S. did not forswear operations in Somalia. General Stephen Townsend, head of the U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, seized on an ambiguity in the Trump administration's position to keep the mission going.[11] The president's order had been to reposition forces, but there was no requirement that AFRICOM cease military activities in Somalia. Seeing an opening, Townsend complied with the president's directive to relocate troops but began sending them back into Somalia on a rotational basis.[12] President Joe Biden inherited this situation when he entered office

[4] Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, September-December 2021.
[5] Crisis Group Report, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, op. cit.
[6] The 2001 AUMF afforded the president authority to use force "against those nations, organisations or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 [or] any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons". AUMF, Public Law 107-40, 18 September 2001.
[7] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021. When the new guidance was issued in 2017, a journalist said, "it became the AFRICOM show without the interagency coordination that was present during the Obama years". Crisis Group interview, September 2021. The Trump administration also carried out airstrikes on Islamic State members in Somalia.
[8] The president had promised on the 2016 campaign trail to bring U.S. forces home from post-9/11 wars. A former U.S. official said Trump was reminded that U.S. forces were in Somalia by seeing a critic on television news. He then made an impulsive decision to change the military's posture. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. officials, September 2021. See also Helene Cooper, "Trump orders all American troops out of Somalia", *The New York Times*, 4 December 2020.
[9] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021. In a press interview, General Stephen Townsend, commander of AFRICOM, confirmed that "800 to 850 troops in Somalia at that time were directed by the president to reposition out of the country". Carla Babb, "U.S. AFRICOM commander says Russian mercenaries in Mali", Voice of America, 20 January 2022.
[10] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021.
[11] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021; U.S. officials, December 2022-June 2023.
[12] This move technically complied with the direction Townsend had received to make the U.S. footprint in Somalia smaller, but several officials in Washington viewed it as an end run around Trump's decision to withdraw. Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, September 2021-December 2022.

in January 2023 and ordered his team to undertake sweeping reviews of U.S. foreign policy, including in Somalia.

Against this backdrop, this report describes how the Biden administration arrived at the decision to send U.S. troops back into Somalia. It also considers the policy framework within which the administration is operating, discusses why the latter ought to be revisited and offers a broad outline for what a rebalanced U.S. approach to Somalia might look like. In so doing, it demonstrates the extent to which a counter-terrorism rationale – perhaps bolstered by an element of threat inflation – can continue to shape U.S. military policy even as the national security establishment seeks to wind down post-9/11 conflicts and focus on great-power competition.

The report draws primarily upon interviews – more than 200 of them – with current and former U.S. officials, current and former Somali officials, employees of UN and other international bodies, representatives of non-governmental organisations, researchers, journalists and academics. In general, women were well represented in all these cohorts. Within the Somali government, men from institutions where they make up the great majority were better represented among interviewees; in institutions where the gender breakdown is more equal, representation followed suit. The interviews were conducted from August 2021 through June 2023, in Washington, New York, Nairobi, Mogadishu, London and Brussels, as well as by electronic means. The report also builds on years of Crisis Group work intended to help find pathways to peace in Somalia.[13]

[13] Crisis Group has written extensively on the conflict in Somalia since 2002. See, for example, Crisis Group Africa Reports N°45, *Somalia: Countering Terrorism in a Failed State*, 23 May 2002; N°79, *Biting the Somali Bullet*, 4 May 2004; N°147, *Somalia: To Move Beyond the Failed State,* 23 December 2008; N°184, *The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia*, 15 February 2012; N°265, *Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, 21 September 2018; and N°309, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 21 June 2022.

II. Going Back In

President Biden entered the White House having campaigned on the promise to end the "forever wars" – a term often used to refer to conflicts born of the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. response.[14] He was not fully clear about which conflicts he meant, but his comments raised expectations that the U.S. would reappraise wars and military engagements across the board, including through various reviews that his foreign policy team committed to undertake upon entering office. As a first step, on the day of his inauguration, Biden quietly instituted more stringent requirements for U.S. airstrikes, except in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.[15]

In the months that followed, as important developments in Somalia transpired, Biden's administration undertook several overlapping reviews that bore on U.S. Somalia policy. Among other things, these exercises reflected a desire to assess whether the post-9/11 missions were worth the money, risk and effort in light of what seemed to be the diminished threat of transnational terrorism and the growing priority of other matters.[16]

In the case of Somalia, three of these reviews were particularly relevant. The first was a posture review to determine whether to send forces back on a consistent basis, keep the status quo or pull out altogether. The second was a review of U.S. Somalia policy addressing issues beyond counter-terrorism efforts. The third was an even broader look at how the U.S. military would pursue military operations against al-Qaeda and associated groups outside "areas of active hostilities" (ie, outside Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan) – with a focus on prudential rules for the use of force in these places.

The new administration concluded that U.S. military operations in Somalia were still warranted, being of low cost and risk. It thus elected to continue much the same policy the U.S. had been pursuing for roughly fifteen years.

A. *Two Big Changes*

The reviews did not occur in a vacuum, of course. At about the same time the Biden administration was examining its posture in Somalia, important changes in the situation there were taking place.

The first was a reconfiguration of AMISOM, the longstanding AU mission in Somalia. While the mission had been largely successful in beating back Al-Shabaab until roughly 2015, it flagged after that, to the frustration of the European Union (EU), which provides it with significant financial support.[17] Although U.S. officials assumed the mission would continue in some form when its mandate came up for renewal in De-

[14] Bill Barrow, "Biden promises to end 'forever wars' as president", Associated Press, 11 July 2019.
[15] Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Biden secretly limits counterterrorism drone strikes away from war zones", *The New York Times*, 3 March 2021.
[16] Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, September 2021-December 2022.
[17] See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°163, *Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia*, 15 November 2021. Impatience with AMISOM dates back years and was reflected in the EU decision in 2016 to cap troop stipends, which resulted in a 20 per cent decrease. Crisis Group interviews, French official, May 2022; researcher, January 2023.

cember 2021 (not least because ending it could be perilous for stability in Somalia and East Africa), they were uncertain what shape that would be.[18]

In the end, after a short technical extension, the mission got a new lease on life. In March 2022, in order to galvanise the mission's efforts and enable its orderly departure from Somalia, the UN and AU reconfigured it under a new mandate. The mission is now called the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). With Somalia's blessing, ATMIS is mandated to reduce the threat from Al-Shabaab, help build the capacity of Somali security forces, conduct a phased handover of security responsibilities to those forces and support Somali political reconciliation.[19] The biggest change in the AU force's mandate is the emphasis on a phased transition, with a 33-month timeline.

Like AMISOM before it, ATMIS has been dealt a tough hand. In theory, it will have succeeded if it is able to reduce its presence and hand over its responsibilities to the Somali National Army without Al-Shabaab gaining ground. Yet the obstacles before it are much the same as AMISOM faced. While the force plays an important role holding territory that AMISOM previously captured, it is less effective than it might be because of its troops' overall risk aversion and corresponding reluctance to engage in combat with Al-Shabaab.[20] As for the Somali National Army, it remains a work in progress, and the challenge of helping it develop, professionalise, recruit and unify is considerable.[21] Without success in these endeavours, the transition away from ATMIS cannot safely happen. For this reason, many UN Security Council member states agree that the timeline established for ATMIS to complete its handover and leave Somalia – by 2024 – is too ambitious.[22]

Two months after the AU force was reconfigured, a second key change occurred: Somalia's much-delayed electoral process drew to a close. The country had been in political turmoil since early 2021, when the term of the incumbent president, Mohammed Abdullahi "Farmajo", expired without a path to a new election, in effect leaving him in office without a clear mandate.[23] The Farmajo administration's slowness in

[18] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, June 2023.

[19] UN Security Council Resolution 2628 (2022), 31 March 2022.

[20] Countries that contribute forces to ATMIS include Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda.

[21] Crisis Group interview, former Somali official, November 2021. For an analysis of the obstacles facing the army, see Paul D. Williams, "What went wrong with the Somali National Army?", *War on the Rocks*, 20 May 2019.

[22] UN Security Council Resolution 2628 envisages reductions in ATMIS forces in four phases, ending in December 2024, by which time the mission is to have no personnel left in Somalia. The resolution calls on the Somali government to train its own forces so that they can step into the mission's shoes, phase by phase. Security Council member state officials and independent experts alike doubt that Somali forces will be capable of assuming full security responsibility by 2024. Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2022. To ease the mission's tasks, and at the AU and Somali government's request, in December 2022 the Security Council decided to extend the deadline by six months for the first drawdown of 2,000 ATMIS troops, which would otherwise have come on 31 December 2022. UN Security Council Resolution 2670 (2022), 21 December 2022. Without more progress in transferring responsibility from ATMIS to the army, more extensions could follow. Crisis Group interview, researcher, January 2023.

[23] Elections in Somalia are indirect. Local elites, mainly clan elders, choose members of parliament, who then vote for a president. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°163, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, 10 November 2021.

organising polls raised concerns both inside and outside the country that it might try to cling to power.[24] As infighting increased, so did nervousness in the U.S. and other governments that political quarrels would turn violent – as they did at some points – hindering efforts to combat Al-Shabaab.[25] But the process wrapped up in May 2022 with the selection of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (who had been president before). U.S. officials had reason to hope for a better partner in Mogadishu.[26] They had seen Farmajo as distracted from fighting Al-Shabaab by his efforts to reallocate power from the federal member states and centralise it in Mogadishu, which also created instability.[27]

Neither the ATMIS reconfiguration nor the close of the electoral process was dispositive when it came to Biden's decision to redeploy U.S. troops – indeed, as discussed below, the decision slightly predated the actual election – but they cut in a positive direction. The continuation of ATMIS addressed an element of uncertainty in Washington (albeit one that had caused little disquiet), and could only contribute to the country's stability. Knowing that Somalia was on the cusp of concluding its presidential election meant that the U.S. would not be moving troops back into the country amid an acute governance crisis.[28]

B. *Commuting to Work and Collective Self-defence*

While these changes unfolded and the internal reviews proceeded, as detailed below, U.S. military engagement in Somalia continued – albeit at a lower operational tempo than in most of the Trump years and with modifications necessitated by the troop repositioning. U.S. special forces flew in on a rotating basis from Djibouti and Kenya to train, advise and assist the Danab, a Somali special forces unit the U.S. had helped set up in 2014. General Townsend described this arrangement as "commuting to work".[29] The Danab also continued to receive training from Bancroft, a State Department contractor.[30]

Meanwhile, though the "gloves off" era was over, the U.S. also kept hitting Al-Shabaab from the air. President Biden's interim policy placed a soft moratorium on strikes outside Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria by requiring White House approval, but permitted some pre-approved targeted operations to proceed, and also allowed U.S. forces to undertake strikes in "self-defence". The Pentagon interpreted this exception to the strike

[24] Farmajo had sought a two-year extension of his term and backed down only after violence erupted. A U.S. Senate staffer said at the time that the elections process "inspires no confidence". A State Department official said Farmajo "blew past agreements for elections", while another said the president had "prevented progress" on elections. Crisis Group interviews, September-December 2021. See Crisis Group Statement, "Somalia: Averting a Descent into Political Violence", 16 April 2021. See also Crisis Group Statement, "Somalia's Politicians Play with Fire – Again", 14 September 2021.

[25] Crisis Group interview, former Somali government official, November 2021.

[26] Crisis Group interview, researcher, Mogadishu, May 2022.

[27] Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, June 2023. Mohamud campaigned on a platform that emphasised fighting Al-Shabaab and reconciling Mogadishu with the federal member states, both positive messages from the U.S. perspective. Crisis Group interview, researcher, May 2023.

[28] Biden authorised the repositioning of forces days before Farmajo was voted out, even though it was not clear at that time who would take his place. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, June 2023.

[29] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command, 15 March 2022.

[30] Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, September-December 2021.

ban to include "collective self-defence" strikes in support of partner forces in Somalia. Under this interpretation, AFRICOM can call in airstrikes if a Somali unit it is helping finds itself embroiled in hostilities, even if it is not accompanied by U.S. forces – and whether it is defending a position or attempting to take new territory.[31] As Crisis Group has discussed elsewhere, there is a fine line, if any, between what AFRICOM describes as collective self-defence and what others might describe as close air support for Somali forces.[32]

C. *Biden's Choice*

While the Department of Defense conducted the global posture review to examine the "U.S. military's footprint, resources and strategies", the administration established a separate but parallel process to consider its next move in Somalia.[33] This offshoot of the global posture review was driven by the National Security Council's counter-terrorism small group (the interagency body that meets at the assistant secretary level to discuss issues of counter-terrorism policy). A U.S. official described having this group lead the process as akin to having "the foxes guarding the hen house".[34] Nevertheless, its deliberations became the most consequential of the reviews for U.S. Somalia policy.[35]

As they fed ideas into the review process, officials who covered the file at the Departments of State and Defense engaged in lengthy discussions about what the U.S. should be doing in Somalia and whether it was in the U.S. interest to be involved at all.[36] Three options eventually emerged for leadership consideration: leave Somalia for good, continue the status quo of periodic engagement, with forces rotating in and out of the country, or send forces back in on a fixed basis.[37] General Townsend cam-

[31] "U.S. Africa Command conducts strike against Al-Shabaab", press release, AFRICOM, 20 July 2021. In July 2021, when the first such strike occurred, a spokesperson said AFRICOM did not need White House approval for it because it was conducted in "collective self-defence". The spokesperson described the strike as a "remote advise-and-assist mission in support of designated Somali partner forces" and said no U.S. forces were on the ground with the partner force. The Biden administration had previously rejected requests from AFRICOM to conduct strikes in Somalia. Eric Schmitt and Declan Walsh, "U.S. military conducts a drone strike against Shabab fighters in Somalia", *The New York Times*, 20 July 2021. U.S. officials said this first collective self-defence strike caught the Pentagon off guard: the undersecretary of defense for policy had expected a warning. Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021. The U.S. military has carried out several such strikes since July 2021, typically followed by a press release from AFRICOM.

[32] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2021. See also Sarah Harrison, "What the White House use of force policy means for the war in Somalia", *Just Security*, 20 October 2022.

[33] See also Jim Garamone, "Global posture review will tie strategy, defense policy to basing", *Defense News*, 5 February 2021.

[34] The official said critical questions are rarely asked in this forum. In this instance, participants tended to assume AFRICOM's position was valid, limiting analysis of that stance. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, December 2022.

[35] New presidents often order this kind of National Security Council-driven review to allow for critical analysis of the military's involvement in a particular conflict (eg, Iraq and Afghanistan). The global posture review was, however, unusual. Indeed, Biden's was the first global posture review in almost two decades, though presidents generally have at least some sort of military posture review when their terms begin.

[36] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-December 2022.

[37] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-December 2022.

paigned for the third option, making his case before Congress, in the press and, more energetically, behind closed doors within the executive branch.[38] He argued that the "in-and-out" approach, which U.S. forces had adopted under his command as a way to carry out the mission despite Trump's redeployment order, was unsafe, costly and inefficient.[39]

The picture Townsend painted was a dire one. Al-Shabaab, the largest al-Qaeda affiliate in the world, was growing stronger, he said, in the absence of more vigorous counter-terrorism measures. In his telling, the group posed a threat not only to U.S. interests in East Africa, but also – and here he expressed a minority view among U.S. officials – to the U.S. homeland itself.[40] Townsend said he was concerned that, without increased military pressure on Al-Shabaab, the group would stage a "significant attack".[41] In his 2022 annual posture hearing statement, he said: "In East Africa, al-Qaeda's Al-Shabaab remains the greatest threat to U.S. persons and interests in the region as well as the homeland, while undermining peace, security and political progress in Somalia". He went on to say that "if left unchecked, Al-Shabaab will soon expand beyond Somalia's borders and become an even greater threat to regional stability and American interests".[42]

Other officials close to the matter assessed the threat less expansively. They suggested that despite Al-Shabaab's ties to al-Qaeda and its calls for targeting the West, the group did not pose a direct threat to the United States, but more to U.S. "interests in the region". The U.S. government does not define what this term means, but officials use it often to describe U.S. embassies, U.S. persons and partner countries.[43] Al-Shabaab's most prominent anti-Western actions in recent years have been an unsuccessful hijacking plot in 2019 and a 2020 assault on U.S. and Kenyan troops at a Kenyan base at Manda Bay – who were stationed there to train to fight the insurgents.[44] Officials who disagreed with Townsend considered it circular reasoning to use the Manda Bay incident as an example underscoring the threat, given that Al-Shabaab was attacking troops who were drilling to attack it.[45]

Yet despite the sense among some U.S. officials that Townsend may have been inflating the threat, especially to the U.S. homeland, his position faced little if any dis-

[38] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, researcher, September 2021-December 2022. See also Babb, "Exclusive: U.S. AFRICOM commander says Russian mercenaries in Mali", op. cit.
[39] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-June 2023.
[40] Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command, before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, 20 April 2021.
[41] Babb, "Exclusive: U.S. AFRICOM commander says Russian mercenaries in Mali", op. cit.
[42] Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 15 March 2022.
[43] Ten years ago, for instance, Al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate mall, a shopping center in Nairobi frequented by expatriates, killing 67 people. Several U.S. citizens were injured. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Ominous signs then a cruel attack", *The New York Times*, 27 September 2013. A former U.S. official said there is no indication that Al-Shabaab intended to hurt U.S. citizens at Westgate, however. Crisis Group interview, June 2023.
[44] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-December 2022.
[45] "Kenyan national indicted for conspiring to hijack aircraft on behalf of the al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organization Al Shabaab", press release, U.S. Department of Justice, 7 January 2021. Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, researcher, September 2021-June 2022.

sent at the Defense Department. Not even political appointees who otherwise supported scaling back the war on terror vigorously challenged his proposal.[46] Explanations are partly process-related. Senior Pentagon officials (some of whom started months after the inauguration and were juggling competing priorities) had little time to second-guess Townsend's recommendations. Meanwhile, the White House homeland security advisor, Liz Sherwood-Randall, perhaps conscious of the need to wrap up the administration's decision on what was viewed as a force protection issue, was asking for the department's position.[47] Offering advice contrary to Townsend's would have introduced delays.[48]

But officials saw little reason to object in any case. The proposal fit into what commentators have referred to as the "GWOT-light" pattern that the administration was adopting elsewhere – for example in renewing troop deployments in north-eastern Syria.[49] That is, it involved small numbers of personnel, it required (in the administration's view) no further congressional authorisation than what it already had under the 2001 AUMF, and it appeared to be low-cost and low-risk.[50] While sending U.S. forces back into a country they had exited made Somalia distinct among the situations where the administration elected to continue post-9/11 operations, the fact that troops were already rotating in and out of the country made the repositioning easier to contemplate. With Townsend advocating passionately for the troops to return, and no strong voices arguing otherwise, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin endorsed Townsend's recommendation.[51]

The Pentagon was not alone in this position. At the State Department, officials also saw a non-rotational U.S. military presence in Somalia as a good idea. They agreed with General Townsend that the rotational engagements under way were bad for force protection, relationship building and operational tempo.[52] One official said steadier support from U.S. special forces would raise the Danab's morale, a crucial condition for fighting Al-Shabaab effectively.[53] The State Department also said U.S. forces should return to ensure more consistent monitoring and evaluation of Washington's investment in the Danab, which would be easier with U.S. troops on the ground.[54] Most of the State Department officials who spoke with Crisis Group agreed that the Somali government cannot defeat the insurgency militarily – a point Assistant Secretary of

[46] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-June 2023.
[47] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, December 2022-June 2023.
[48] Ibid.
[49] For more on the Biden administration's "GWOT-light" approach, see Stephen Pomper et al., "Top experts raise questions regarding legal basis of Zawahiri strike", *Just Security,* 4 August 2022; Brian Finucane, "Assessing Biden's new policy framework for counterterrorism direct action", *Just Security*, 11 October 2022; Brian Finucane and Luke Hartig, "Permanently winding down the war on terror requires greater transparency", *Just Security*, 30 January 2023.
[50] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, November-December 2022.
[51] After swinging behind the third option, Secretary Austin kept raising the issue, inquiring several times with the president when a decision would be made. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, December 2022.
[52] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October 2021-December 2022.
[53] U.S. forces provide post-training mentoring, which is a unique approach among the states that train forces in Somalia. Such mentoring is cited as critical to the Danab's success. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, December 2022.
[54] Ibid.

State for African Affairs Molly Phee called "trite but true" – but they nonetheless felt it needed the help of U.S. military force to degrade Al-Shabaab before it could move down alternative tracks, such as support for eventual talks.[55]

Key figures on the National Security Council (NSC) staff viewed the choice similarly to the Defense and State Departments. Overall, the staff perceived sending troops back in as the least bad option.[56] They did not think the rotational system made sense, and they shared the view that restoring a light military presence in Somalia would be low-cost and low-risk.[57] At least some White House officials were sceptical that the war in Somalia was Washington's to wage, but none chose to stand in the way of the Defense and State Department recommendations.[58]

There were doubtless several reasons for the diffidence. One was likely that the threat of a terrorist attack weighs heavily on senior leaders, who never want one to happen on their watch. This disposition has often militated in favour of the use of force, frequently in the form of small deployments in an effort to mitigate even the slightest risk. (As a U.S. official pointed out, U.S. military action may actually increase the risk of an attack, but this consideration sometimes seems lost on senior U.S. leaders.[59]) A second may have been that, following the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and the Afghan government's collapse, the administration was reluctant to take any step that might prove destabilising elsewhere (though, in this case, an ATMIS pullout would be more consequential). Some officials may simply not have felt strongly enough to try countering the Pentagon. Whatever the reason, in January 2022, an NSC memo recommending that Biden authorise a persistent force presence in Somalia reached the Oval Office with the support of key departments and agencies, as well as Sherwood-Randall. There it sat for months.

Separate from this posture review, the NSC's Africa directorate ran a broader country policy review, which was also completed toward the end of 2021. This exercise proved less consequential: the new Somalia policy framework that emerged seemed to change little in the U.S. approach to the country.[60] Several U.S. officials described it as broad and lacking detail as to new actions the administration would take.[61] The

[55] Phee made this comment on Crisis Group's *The Horn* podcast on 7 December 2022. While the White House considered the U.S. policy a containment strategy, the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) tend to take more nuanced positions. With that in mind, a White House official said it would be more honest to say the U.S. deployment in Somalia is simply an effort to keep the situation from worsening. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, December 2022.
[56] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, November-December 2022.
[57] Ibid.
[58] A former U.S. official said some thought the 2021 unravelling in Afghanistan would lead to searching conversations about Somalia policy at top levels of the administraton. For the most part that discussion "has not happened", the official went on, largely because "there is not enough pain associated with continuing to tread water on this issue to give anyone enough courage to change". Crisis Group interview, July 2022. A current U.S. official said some at the NSC see tension between Biden's pledges to wind down "forever wars" and the increased operational tempo in Somalia. Crisis Group interview, November 2022.
[59] Crisis Group interview, December 2022.
[60] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October-November 2021.
[61] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October-November 2021. One official said the last country plan for Somalia had spoken of "security, development, governance. In this one, it'll be security, development, governance".

officials said it put forth several "lines of effort", but listed counter-terrorism efforts aimed at degrading Al-Shabaab as the top priority driving all the others. One described the framework as including "not really eight lines of effort, but one plus seven", to emphasise its heavy focus on counter-terrorism.[62] Some officials worried that Washington was again doubling down on an old approach that had yet to yield enduring success.[63] But White House officials tended to see little room for the U.S. to drive political change in Somalia. They were comfortable recommending a military deployment even in the absence of a robust political strategy for conflict resolution.[64]

Still, it was not until the first part of 2022, shortly after AMISOM's reconfiguration and when Somalia's electoral process looked like it was finally getting on track, that Biden decided to reverse Trump's order to withdraw forces.[65] Officials said the president and his closest advisers gave the matter serious thought for months, recognising the need for consistency in policy and the weight such a choice carried.[66] After the president signed off on the decision, the administration did not reveal it right away, partly out of concern that doing so prior to the Somali election might be seen as an attempt to influence the outcome. Instead, less than twelve hours after Mohamud had been declared the contest's winner, the U.S. embassy informed him of Biden's decision.[67] Even though it would have conveyed the same decision had Farmajo won (despite its misgivings about his presidency), the timing of the U.S. announcement benefited Mohamud in making it look like Washington was giving the new Somali leader a shot in the arm.[68]

As for the specifics of what Biden directed, he authorised no more than 450 troops to go back into Somalia to support the national army, with the Danab special forces unit as the priority, and AFRICOM to target a handful of Al-Shabaab leaders with airstrikes.[69] (In practice, however, they had greater flexibility with strikes because – as discussed below – the review of standards for the use of force outside Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq preserved the "collective self-defence" loophole.) Mohamud quickly welcomed the renewed U.S. military support.[70]

[62] Crisis Group interview, November 2021.
[63] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October-December 2021.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021. Officials described Biden's choice as a national security decision, one not contingent on the outcome of the Somali election. They said the White House put off announcing it so as not to appear to be bolstering Farmajo amid his efforts to consolidate power. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, December 2022-June 2023.
[66] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, December 2022-June 2023.
[67] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, June 2023.
[68] AFRICOM was eager to get troops back on the ground on a persistent basis soon after Biden's decision, but the State Department prevailed on the Pentagon to wait for Somalia's political process to unfold to avoid any appearance of a U.S. thumb on the scale. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, June 2023.
[69] Savage and Schmitt, "Biden approves plan to redeploy several hundred ground forces into Somalia", op. cit. Letter to the Speaker of the House and President tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report, 8 June 2022. Since the Biden administration's decision went public, AFRICOM has targeted only one Al-Shabaab leader. It has described all other strikes as "collective self-defence", namely support of the federal government's forces.
[70] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, June 2022. Tweet by Villa Somalia, @TheVillaSomalia, 7:54am, 17 May 2022.

D. *A New Framework for the Use of Force*

In October 2022, President Biden closed out the remaining policy review his administration had undertaken relevant to Somalia. This review concerned the administration's policy for counter-terrorism operations outside "areas of active hostilities" where the U.S. is fighting al-Qaeda or similar groups.[71] It culminated in Biden signing a Presidential Policy Memorandum that laid out safeguards relating to the use of force in all theatres other than Iraq and Syria. (Iraq and Syria were excepted from the review because the administration considers them areas of active hostilities.[72]) In theory, the policy tightened up Trump-era parameters on uses of force, as well as the circumstances under which field commanders must seek permission from Washington for airstrikes and raids.

But in practice the new policy changed very little about the U.S. military's operational latitude in Somalia.[73] The approved policy afforded AFRICOM room for manoeuvre in several key respects. Perhaps most important, it allowed AFRICOM to continue carrying out – without approval from the White House or anyone up the chain of command at the Pentagon – strikes in "collective self-defence" of partner forces, as the U.S. military has described the bulk of its strikes in Somalia to date under the Biden administration.[74] As noted above, the concept of "collective self-defence" is difficult to distinguish from close air support when the U.S. is assisting Somali forces engaged in offensive operations, leading some analysts to suggest that, in effect, it makes AFRICOM Somalia's air force (although the Turkish government is credited with some recent airstrikes).[75]

The new policy does require presidential approval for strikes aiming to kill a specific person, but Biden had already approved around a dozen such targets in Somalia when he authorised the repositioning of U.S. forces.[76] Thus, the immediate impact of this requirement was minimal in Somalia.

The Biden administration did not in its use of force (or any other) review call into question the domestic legal basis for U.S. military action in Somalia, as articulated

[71] In legal terms, Somalia is of course an "area of active hostilities", but in policy terms the Biden administration limited its definition of that phrase to active battlefields where the U.S. is fighting.
[72] White House officials had intended to complete the direct action review in the autumn of 2021, but the tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan slowed the effort, due partly to its reverberations in U.S. domestic politics and the U.S. airstrike that killed Afghan civilians. Crisis Group interviews, September 2021-December 2022.
[73] Sarah Harrison, "What the White House use of force policy means for the war in Somalia", *Just Security*, 20 October 2022.
[74] Charlie Savage, "White House tightens rules on counterterrorism drone strikes", *The New York Times*, 7 October 2022.
[75] U.S. and Somali officials have told Crisis Group that Türkiye is conducting airstrikes in Somalia. Crisis Group interviews, January 2023-June 2023. One official said some strikes categorised as collective self-defence have actually been pre-emptive, taken in preparation for Somali army operations. Another official said the standards for collective self-defence appear subjective, leaving AFRICOM considerable discretion in interpreting them. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, November 2022-January 2023. A former U.S. official explained: "Collective self-defence is really close air support without authorisation". Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2021.
[76] Savage and Schmitt, "Biden approves plan to redeploy several hundred ground forces into Somalia", op. cit.

during the Obama administration's second term. Under the Obama-era justification, authority to wage war on Al-Shabaab is conferred on the executive branch by the 2001 AUMF. Although the 2001 AUMF was enacted to enable the use of force against individuals and groups involved in perpetrating the 9/11 attacks (ie, al-Qaeda), or harbouring the attackers (ie, the Taliban), successive administrations have read it to apply to "associated forces" that the executive branch deems to be fighting the U.S. alongside al-Qaeda.

As discussed above, during the Obama administration's first term, the U.S. government deemed only senior Al-Shabaab leaders to be targetable based on their membership in al-Qaeda. But in 2016, it disclosed that it had subsequently designated the entire group as an associated force, meaning that all its members can be attacked based on their membership status.[77] (The announcement followed approximately a year of AFRICOM carrying out regular collective self-defence airstrikes under unclear authority.[78])

Against this backdrop, AFRICOM has continued to conduct strikes in Somalia throughout the Biden administration's tenure, though as noted the total number of strikes has yet to close in on the number under Trump, and it is not on pace to do so. As of June 2023, or in a little over two years, the Biden administration had carried out 32 airstrikes; by comparison, the Trump administration conducted 219 such strikes during its four years in office.[79]

E. *Back on Offence*

With its force posture in Somalia decided, the Biden administration began to coordinate military action with Mohamud's administration, which was eager to go on the offensive. Starting in August 2022, the Somali army stepped up its counter-insurgency campaign in central Somalia, leveraging clans' discontent with Al-Shabaab's onerous demands and repressive tactics to forge alliances with clan militias. As it had done in the past, Al-Shabaab responded by ramping up its own attacks both in Mogadishu and elsewhere. The same month, after the group laid siege to a hotel in the capital for 35 hours, killing twenty people, President Mohamud called for "total war" on the insurgency.[80]

In the following months, Somali forces – with U.S.-trained Danab troops taking a leading role – made progress in rolling back Al-Shabaab in central Somalia. Along

[77] As Crisis Group has described elsewhere, there is reason to believe the Obama administration backed into the associated forces determination after lawyers in Washington discovered that AFRICOM had been conducting "collective self-defence" strikes that, if not covered by the 2001 AUMF, would have been required to be reported to Congress under the 1973 War Powers Resolution. Crisis Group Report, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, op. cit.

[78] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, June 2023.

[79] The 219 strikes under Trump are the majority of the 311 carried out under the four administrations to serve since 2001. Data collected by New America Foundation in "America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Somalia", undated. New America is a think-tank in Washington that provides on its website analysis of data collected on U.S. strikes and ground operations in Somalia over more than twenty years, spanning the Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden administrations.

[80] Mohamed Dhaysane, "Somalia's president vows 'total war' against Al-Shabaab", Voice of America, 24 August 2022.

with clan militias, they pushed Al-Shabaab out of large swathes of territory in the federal member states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug, particularly in the Hiraan, Middle Shabelle, Galgaduud and Mudug regions.[81] The U.S. supported this offensive through AFRICOM's collective self-defence strikes. In January, the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu announced $9 million in new assistance, including weapons, vehicles and medical supplies, which it said would boost the army's "lethality and mobility" in the campaign against Al-Shabaab.[82] Less than a month later, the U.S. flew 61 tonnes of weapons and ammunition into Mogadishu for the same effort.[83] Unlike in the past, the AU mission was not at the forefront of these operations, with ATMIS instead mostly providing artillery support and logistical aid.[84]

President Mohamud announced phase two of his administration's war effort in March but has so far struggled to get it off the ground. This stage is to focus on the southern regions of Somalia, Al-Shabaab strongholds where clan anger at the insurgents has not flared as in the country's centre and where federal member state politics is more likely to hamper cooperation on the offensive. Moreover, "front-line states" that have pledged support for the offensive's second phase – Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti – have not yet followed through.[85]

Meanwhile, the Somali government also faces the challenge of stabilising recovered territory in central Somalia, where people are in great need but the government has little capacity to deliver.

[81] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°187, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, 21 March 2023.

[82] Press statement, U.S. Embassy in Somalia, 8 January 2023. The assistance included weapons, vehicles, medical supplies and other equipment (including support and construction vehicles, explosive ordnance disposal kits, and tools for maintenance of vehicles and weapons) to the Somali army. The embassy said much of the assistance was headed to Hirshabelle and Galmudug states.

[83] "U.S. donates weapons and ammunition to Somalia's fight against terrorism", press release, U.S. Embassy in Somalia, 1 March 2023.

[84] Crisis Group interview, researcher, May 2023.

[85] Crisis Group interview, local official, Nairobi, April 2023. Kenya and Ethiopia already have troops deployed in Somalia, both bilaterally and as part of ATMIS, while units from Djibouti are there as part of ATMIS.

III. "Somalia in a Box": The Limits of U.S. Policy

While there is a policy and a political logic to President Biden's decision to send troops back into Somalia, that logic has helped shape a U.S. policy that is more about providing stopgap assistance – including both military support and a considerable amount of humanitarian aid – than developing a genuine solution to security challenges.[86] Whatever U.S. officials formally call it, their Somalia policy is focused on containing Al-Shabaab and relies on tactics that even some U.S. officials liken to "mowing the grass". This approach is almost by design unlikely to produce enduring results, however, and may also be unsustainable if there is a major mishap involving U.S. troops or U.S. politics shift.[87]

A. *The Logic of Containment*

The U.S. decision to return troops to Somalia followed a familiar, understandable rationale from the perspective of both regional peace and security and U.S. domestic politics. Rotating troops in and out of neighbouring countries was, as General Townsend argued, dangerous and inefficient, and pulling them out altogether could weaken efforts to counter the perceived threat posed by Al-Shabaab – even if ATMIS stayed in place to stop the group from overrunning the country.[88]

Instead, the U.S. approved a plan that matched its "GWOT light" approach elsewhere. It authorised a small deployment operating under the 2001 AUMF that allowed it to manage perceived threats without creating major exposure for the U.S., but that was unlikely to move the needle significantly in the conflict. A congressional aide described the plan as an effort to "put Somalia in a box".[89] At one level, this phrase captures the way in which Biden's decision, by helping stave off an escalating crisis in Somalia, allowed the administration to move the conflict further down the agenda so that it could focus on what it has deemed its top foreign policy priorities. But at another level, it alludes to what was in effect a containment strategy, whether or not the administration formally called it that. U.S. policy aimed to hem in whatever threat Al-Shabaab posed to U.S. interests through the use of force, but these efforts were not joined to any serious political or military strategy for moving the conflict toward resolution.

At least some officials saw the strategy for what it was. One former official described a large map of Africa in a Pentagon policy office with large circles drawn in dry-erase marker around the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. The word "CONTAIN"

[86] The total U.S. government humanitarian funding for Somalia in fiscal year 2023, as of June 2023, is $792 million. USAID Fact Sheet #8, Horn of Africa-Complex Emergency, 26 May 2023. For fiscal years 2021 and 2022, USAID provided nearly $1.2 billion for emergency assistance in Somalia. Somalia Assistance Overview, USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, September 2022.

[87] A former U.S. official said even the current USAID strategy is too focused on counter-terrorism, for instance building programs that are aimed more at eroding popular support for Al-Shabaab than developing governance or physical infrastructure. Crisis Group interview, June 2023.

[88] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-June 2023.

[89] The U.S. has "developed a policy to fossilise the conflict [in Somalia] and take it off their plates to focus on other issues", the congressional official continued. Crisis Group interview, November 2022.

appeared inside each circle.[90] State Department officials and other observers suggested to Crisis Group that they believed the U.S. was content to stay on a counter-terrorism hamster wheel – ie, cutting the Al-Shabaab threat down to size with bursts of military effort – even without a long-term political strategy for ending the war.[91]

B. *The Limits of "Mowing the Grass"*

Military support – now primarily in the form of airstrikes and support for the elite Danab unit – has played an important, sometimes critical role in helping federal forces counter Al-Shabaab and limiting the extent of its destabilising actions, including sometimes through reclamation of territory. But there are limits to what this support can be expected to achieve on its own.

1. Airstrikes

One pillar of U.S. operations in Somalia is airstrikes on Al-Shabaab targets. As noted, these have been a component of U.S. military efforts in Somalia since the Bush administration was in office, and a significant cadre of U.S. officials and analysts deem them still critical for fighting Al-Shabaab.[92] Generally, the U.S. has used such strikes to provide cover for Somali ground forces, specifically the Danab (sometimes under the questionable rubric of collective self-defence), and to kill senior insurgent leaders, whom the Pentagon calls "high-value targets".[93]

The air capacity is a great help to the Danab, which appears to have the special privilege of requesting U.S. airstrikes during operations.[94] Researchers have shown that such attacks instil fear in Al-Shabaab's ranks and disrupt its ability to mass fighters.[95] For this reason, and because Somalia lacks a fully functional air force, Somali elites are consistently supportive and indeed solicitous of Washington's use of airpower.[96] President Mohamud has requested, both privately and publicly, that the U.S. loosen its restrictions on airstrikes, so as to conduct more.[97]

That said, U.S. airstrikes have had, and will almost surely continue to have, both operational limits and reputational costs in Somalia.[98] As an operational matter, strikes can only do so much without accompanying ground operations to take and hold the territory that they help to clear. Historically, Somali and multilateral forces have shown

[90] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-January 2023.
[91] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October 2021-December 2022.
[92] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-December 2021.
[93] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, August-November 2021.
[94] Crisis Group interview, researcher, May 2023.
[95] Crisis Group interview, September 2021.
[96] A researcher said Somali officials tend to view strikes as effective in curbing Al-Shabaab's freedom of movement. Crisis Group interview, October 2021.
[97] Crisis Group interview, U.S. officials, October 2022-December 2022. Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Abdi Latif Dahir, "Somalia asks U.S. to step up drone strikes against Qaeda-linked fighters", *The New York Times*, 27 October 2022. Somali officials have asked for more strikes because they think they are close to defeating Al-Shabaab, said a U.S. official. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, November 2022.
[98] A former U.S. official said airstrikes have "been shown to have a coin flip of impact at best". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.

limited capacity to pull off such operations. For this reason, airstrikes have been likened to a game of whack-a-mole, with Al-Shabaab leaving an area briefly only to pop up there again.[99]

Moreover, while the strikes have certainly hurt Al-Shabaab, the group has shown the ability to adapt its tactics to minimise the damage.[100] During the "gloves off" period of U.S. operations under President Trump, Al-Shabaab conducted numerous asymmetric attacks, including on an AMISOM base in Somalia and on U.S. and Kenyan forces at Manda Bay air base.[101] Those two major attacks followed a year when the U.S. carried out more airstrikes in Somalia than ever before.[102] The more consistent ground operations of mid-2022 onward may help airstrikes to be more effective, but only if they last and are followed by successful stabilisation and governance efforts to secure and hold recaptured territory.

As for the reputational dimension, whatever protections AFRICOM puts in place relating to its military activities, and it has indeed instituted procedural reforms in response to criticism, there is always a risk that U.S. airstrikes will harm civilians and their property. This risk in turn undermines support for U.S. engagement in both Somalia and the U.S. Modern weaponry has helped make the U.S. military capable of high precision in its targeting, but research indicates that, as elsewhere, strikes have nonetheless caused non-combatant casualties in Somalia; it also suggests that the U.S. has not always been fully transparent about (or even fully aware of) the extent of the civilian harm it causes.[103] Such missteps have produced criticism of the U.S. and scepticism about the efficacy of strikes among human rights advocates.[104] A major mishap could generate stronger pressure to disengage.

[99] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, UN official, September 2021-December 2021.

[100] While airpower hurts Al-Shabaab's "ability to conduct conventional attacks and amass forces, it did not degrade their ability to conduct asymmetric attacks and was not degrading popular support for Al-Shabaab". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, September 2021.

[101] Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. official and academic, September 2021.

[102] New America Foundation's reporting shows that 2019 had the highest number of U.S. airstrikes on record. "America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Somalia", op. cit. In September of that year, Al-Shabaab attacked the Baledogle base where U.S. forces train the Danab. On 5 January 2020, 30-40 Al-Shabaab fighters attacked a base in Manda Bay, Kenya, killing a U.S. soldier and two U.S. contractors. Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "'Inadequate' security led to the deaths of 3 Americans in Kenya attack", *The New York Times*, 10 March 2022.

[103] Townsend introduced quarterly civilian casualty assessments and established a team within AFRICOM to track civilian casualties and regularly engage with civil society, which seem like helpful steps. Crisis Group interview, advocate, November 2021. On the other hand, AFRICOM communiqués remain terse. The Pentagon also has a track record of being less than forthcoming about civilian casualties in many theatres. These factors suggest that it may be some time before observers can judge how trustworthy AFRICOM's new procedures are. Crisis Group interviews, civilian protection advocates, October-November 2021.

[104] When discussing civilian casualties, a UN official said "the killings [have] bred more hatred" in Somalia. Crisis Group interview, October 2021. A former State Department official told Crisis Group that "collective trauma inflicted on people in an unstable place is never calculated into the risk analysis". Crisis Group interview, September 2021. Rights organisations have criticised AFRICOM's failure to investigate civilian harm on the ground, its preference being to review pre-strike intelligence and post-strike surveillance footage. Crisis Group interviews, advocates, October-November 2021.

2. The Danab

The other pillar of U.S. military involvement in Somalia is training and assistance for the Danab, a Somali special forces unit about 1,500 strong.[105] A small number of U.S. special forces troops have led efforts to train, advise and assist the Danab; developing this unit has been one of the Defense and State Departments' Somalia priorities.[106] The Danab, though recruited from among several clans living in Somalia's federal member states, has largely remained clear of political manoeuvring from the federal government due to close control by and consistent salaries from the U.S.[107] It is a cross-clan unit that the U.S. hopes will someday be able to deploy brigades composed of local recruits in each federal member state.[108]

The Danab has important strengths. The U.S. has invested significant time and energy in training the unit thoroughly, and it appears to have paid off. Many consider the Danab more professional than other army elements and less susceptible to manipulation by political leaders.[109] The Danab also appears to have a clean human rights record and is not supposed to become involved in political feuds (U.S. assistance is conditioned on it staying clear) although on at least one occasion former President Farmajo pulled it over that line.[110]

But interviews with current and former U.S. officials, researchers and former Somali government officials also suggest some widely perceived weaknesses. Perhaps chief among them is that the Danab is too reliant on U.S. airpower, training and other assistance. Without continued U.S. backing, former and current U.S. officials agree, the Danab would cease functioning as a unit.[111] In the meantime, it is not at all clear

[105] The U.S. government was providing assistance to the Somali National Army until 2017, when the Trump administration suspended it based on issues related to possible corruption. The U.S. has since given limited assistance to units outside the Danab. Crisis Group, former U.S. official, September 2021.
[106] Bancroft, a private contractor employed by the State Department, conducts intake and basic training for the Danab, while U.S. special forces units handle the advanced training. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. official and former U.S. official, August-September 2021. While the Danab is a component of the Somali National Army, there is no strong command relationship between the two. Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-November 2021.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, November 2021. Many Somalis, however, see the Danab as in effect a U.S. body because of its close ties to the U.S. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, June 2023.
[110] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials; researcher; UN official, September-December 2021. In October 2021, President Farmajo deployed the Danab against another Islamist armed group in what appeared to be an attempt to smash a political rival. This group, Ahlu Sunna Waljama, is a Sufi-based organisation that grew in resistance to Al-Shabaab, but also comes into conflict with the government on occasion. It is smaller than Al-Shabaab and controls much less territory. It was formerly a U.S partner in fighting Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, researcher, January 2023. See also Max Bearak, "As U.S. forces leave, Somalia's elite fighting unit fears becoming a political pawn", *The Washington Post*, 29 December 2020. A U.S. official told Crisis Group that the U.S. briefly withheld support for the Danab after this incident and then reinstated it. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, November-December 2021.
[111] Crisis Group interview, former Somali official, November 2021. One U.S. official said "the Danab probably wouldn't leave anything enduring if there was a full U.S. withdrawal". Crisis Group interview, August 2021. This problem is not unique to Somalia. The U.S. has spent decades since the 9/11 attacks trying to build the capacity of other countries' forces to fight terrorist groups, with mixed results at best. Most notably, the Afghan forces trained by the U.S. collapsed shortly after the U.S. withdrawal

that expertise poured into the Danab will permeate the rest of the Somali military. The unit does not have good communications or command relationships with the rest of the army because army leaders view it as a U.S. responsibility and the Danab thinks other army units are politicised.[112] Nor are U.S. efforts to train the Danab coordinated with other training programs.[113] The U.S., Türkiye, the UK and the EU all provide training to other army components without ensuring that the various forces will work together well.[114]

3. Not enough

Against this backdrop, neither U.S. airstrikes nor U.S. support for the Danab will give Somalia's government the means to durably hold territory it retakes from Al-Shabaab, including in the offensive it is pursuing at present.[115] Nor is it clear how else the government will develop this capability.

Right now, clan militias are working with the army to provide security in recaptured areas, but that almost surely will not be enough. Somalia needs professional forces viewed as legitimate by the population – like state-level Darwish (local police) or local law enforcement agencies – that can perform this function. While ATMIS continues to hold territory it previously retook when it was undertaking offensive operations, it is not holding territory retaken in recent offensives. Nor is it in a position to do so. U.S. officials say no one is devoting enough effort to establishing such holding forces, though both Washington and Mogadishu recognise the need for one.[116] Since mid-2022, the successful offensives with clan militias have further highlighted this problem, challenging the government and its outside partners to come up with a solution soon.[117]

C. *The Crux of the Problem*

Perhaps the biggest problem for U.S. policy in Somalia is that pursuing military objectives while donating billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance will not produce stable results so long as the county's factious internal politics persist. As Crisis Group has previously discussed, the country is riven by power struggles.[118] The federal government in Mogadishu and the federal member states constantly jockey for advantage, and within the member states clans and other factions do the same. The unsettled

in August 2021, easing the Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan. On the U.S.-trained Afghan forces' shortcomings, see Laurel Miller and Andrew Watkins, "Are the Taliban on a Path to Victory?", Crisis Group Commentary, 14 August 2021. See also Mark Landler, "20 years on, the war on terror grinds along, with no end in sight", *The New York Times*, 10 September 2021.

[112] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021; U.S. official, October 2021.

[113] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-November 2021.

[114] Crisis Group interview, current and former U.S. officials, September 2021-May 2022.

[115] Neither the Danab nor the Turkish-trained forces are trained to hold territory for long periods of time. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. military official, September 2021. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit.

[116] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, UN official and Somali official, September 2021-June 2023.

[117] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit.

[118] See Crisis Group Statements, "Somalia: Averting a Descent into Political Violence" and "Somalia's Politicians Play with Fire – Again", both op. cit.

relationship between Mogadishu and other power centres at times can erupt into fighting, distracting all involved from counter-insurgency tasks. The government's relative lack of coherence has hindered its efforts to rein in the more unified and purposive Al-Shabaab.

For years, many of Somalia's international partners have tried to help make its federal system of government come together.[119] The hope has been to provide more responsive local governance for the country and develop in Mogadishu a more solid partner in countering Al-Shabaab. But these efforts have struggled on several levels. Even if the state-building project received the same political and financial backing as counter-terrorism and humanitarian aid (and it has not), the challenges before it are enormous and require a much longer time horizon than the other two jobs at hand.

The Farmajo presidency (2017-2022) made the state-building effort that much more difficult. As noted, rather than working to reconcile with the federal member states, Farmajo set his sights on centralising power.[120] A series of political crises flared up that the U.S. and others often struggled to address, tending to default to a reactive and ineffective posture. For example, the U.S. did little when federal forces faced off with troops in the federal member state of Jubaland over Mogadishu's refusal to recognise the August 2019 re-election of its local leader, Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe".[121] A Somali researcher said officials in both the U.S. government and the UN were afraid of being declared personae non grata by Farmajo. But the U.S. could have done more to de-escalate tensions, including pressing its partners in Kenya and Ethiopia, which had leverage over the warring parties, and insisting on a formal compromise between Farmajo and Madobe.[122]

As Farmajo bore down in his centralisation project, the country slipped further into turmoil.[123] Friction grew between the distracted central government and the states, and Al-Shabaab pressed its advantage – expanding its reach in parts of south-central Somalia that had witnessed the sharpest quarrels between Mogadishu and federal member state leadership. Tensions only increased toward the end of Farmajo's term, amid serial election delays. As Crisis Group reflected just after the Farmajo presidency ended, a more unified approach among the political class might not have guaranteed victory over Al-Shabaab, but the political dysfunction of the late Farmajo period – especially during the protracted 2021-2022 electoral cycle – was certainly a boon to the insurgents.[124]

[119] Omar Mahmood, "A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia", Crisis Group Commentary, 31 May 2022.

[120] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, researcher, UN officials, former Somali officials, September-December 2021. One U.S. official said Farmajo did not have a coherent strategy for fighting Al-Shabaab because his top priority was to centralise power.

[121] Crisis Group interview, researcher, April 2022. See also Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, 14 July 2020.

[122] Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, January 2023.

[123] Crisis Group interviews, researcher and U.S. official, October-November 2021. A former U.S. official said "relations between the federal member states and [Mogadishu] and clans have always been fractious, but they [reached] a new low under Farmajo. There was a failure under the Trump administration to understand this dynamic and what was happening in Somalia and rein in Farmajo". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.

[124] See Mahmood, "A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia", op. cit.

By contrast, the May 2022 election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud through the country's indirect process offered new hope that Mogadishu would at least begin trying to bring together the country's political elites – both in the capital and in the federal member states – to more effectively meet the challenge posed by Al-Shabaab. After his election, Mohamud began to make good on his commitments to do precisely that, with initial visits to reset relations with federal member state leaders who had sided with Farmajo during the long election season. He also held regular meetings of the National Consultative Council, a convening for leaders of the federal member states and federal government of Somalia to discuss challenges and coordinate responses.[125]

It is of course too early to know how far he will go in this effort and how he will fare. As discussed, the Mohamud government's offensive has scored impressive military gains in central Somalia, not least because of an unprecedented level of coordination with local clans that had become aggrieved by Al-Shabaab's burdensome demands.[126] But these successes do not in and of themselves augur better relations with the federal member states. Indeed, observers note that in forging relations with the clans, Mohamud in some ways cut out the federal member state governments in central Somalia – a move that could cause friction.[127] The importance of centre-periphery relations has become increasingly pronounced as a consequence of the offensive. As the government has regained territories, a key question has been whether or not the government will be able to hold them. As Crisis Group has noted elsewhere, the answer could depend on whether Mogadishu provides the communities in question with needed assistance and demonstrates the benefits of its governance.[128]

[125] Crisis Group interview, researcher, May 2023.
[126] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit.
[127] Crisis Group interview, researcher, May 2023.
[128] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit.

IV. Toward a Better Balanced Policy

A. *Rebalancing*

The U.S. is walking a difficult line in Somalia. Even as it pursues the shift away from counter-terrorism toward great-power competition begun under President Obama, it sees enough benefit in supporting Somalia's armed forces to keep a modest contingent of troops in the country and to continue certain air operations there. On balance, these efforts are helping Somalia make progress in its offensive against Al-Shabaab, even as they provide Washington a measure of comfort that the threat it perceives to emanate from the group is being contained. But the U.S. military efforts are not yet paired with a similarly well-resourced and well-developed political strategy that identifies a path to ending the war. Biden administration officials are blunt about the reason for this lacuna, as are career officials. A State Department official close to the Somalia file told Crisis Group that the department "does not do nation building" or "fix broken countries", emphasising that domestic political will is the real engine of change in any country.[129]

U.S. scepticism about embarking on an ambitious state-building effort in Somalia is to some degree warranted. Washington's record of difficulty in this realm is long – its expensive, decades-long and disastrous effort in Afghanistan being a case in point. It also would include tasks for which the executive branch lacks funding.

Yet a policy that focuses disproportionately on military engagement (as well as humanitarian aid) is likely to encounter its own problems. Absent greater partner will and capacity, the tools that the U.S. is using to pursue its military strategy in Somalia are fit for purpose only if the plan is indeed to remain deployed indefinitely, battling the insurgency for territory and position, while recognising that the investments it is making are unlikely to effect enduring change.

This scenario evokes the sort of "forever war" that seems vulnerable to shifts in U.S. domestic politics. Should Trump return to the White House in 2024, it is very possible that he would seek to finish what he started by pulling all the troops out of the theatre and ending the mission for good. If Biden wins a second term (or a non-Trump Republican succeeds him), the president may ask searching questions about whether the U.S. investment in counter-terrorism and associated military missions is paying off from the perspective of advancing national interests. Should a mishap occur involving the loss of U.S. servicemembers, the mission could face more immediate peril.

Against this backdrop, the question is whether the U.S. has a better option than its current approach – one that offers greater hope for moving Somalia toward enduring stability, even as it recognises the very real limits of U.S. state-building capacity. The answer is a qualified yes. Leery though it may be of investing more in non-military activities, the balance of U.S. efforts in Somalia right now is lopsidedly militaristic. In applying hard-won lessons from Afghanistan and elsewhere, Washington risks short-selling its capacity to support Mogadishu in its non-military efforts to stabilise the country. Although it is just one of many quite active players in the country, the U.S. remains the most influential external actor in Somalia when it chooses to be, with

[129] Crisis Group interview, December 2021. A former Somali official agreed, saying "it is up to the Somali people – they need to sort out this complex thing". Crisis Group interview, November 2021.

other governments often taking cues from its words and deeds.[130] Washington can and should seek to take more advantage of this privileged position to marshal resources toward a goal that goes further than momentary containment.

That goal probably also needs to be something other than complete victory over Al-Shabaab, however desirable that might be. The group is too diffuse and too resilient, and Somalia is too divided and too far from cohering as a fully functioning state, for Al-Shabaab's full defeat to be a likely prospect.[131] But there are perhaps more attainable objectives that could also serve both U.S. and regional security purposes.[132] One might be to weaken the group sufficiently to improve Somalia's position in settlement discussions, should those ever come together. This goal would hardly be easy to reach, as Crisis Group has laid out elsewhere, but it is likely more realistic than total victory.[133] Another option would be to help Somalia get to the point where the U.S. feels comfortable exiting and relying on Somalia and its neighbours to manage the security situation. Whichever Washington prefers, a more balanced U.S. effort is more likely to produce these options than a protracted "mowing the grass" strategy.

So, what would a better balanced U.S. Somalia policy look like? Perhaps most important, it would place much higher priority on supporting Somalia's non-military stabilisation efforts and, in that vein, efforts to achieve reconciliation at all levels of the Somali state and society. With the second phase of the offensive getting started, stabilisation activities in Somalia need to scale up. The U.S. should seize the opportunity by investing more money in such operations that are now carried out with limited capacity. It could, for example, immediately increase food and water distribution where needed, expand on quick-impact projects, such as repairing boreholes and facilitating service delivery, and support local peace dialogues. The U.S. should also press Mogadishu to do as much as it can as soon as it can, including identifying for international partners the exact needs of liberated areas, to clearly illustrate the palpable benefits of government control to communities it frees from Al-Shabaab.[134] As necessary, the U.S. might even urge Mogadishu to slow military operations to ensure a greater focus

[130] For example, a U.S. official in Mogadishu said the U.S. took the lead in convincing other donor countries of the need to channel aid to areas liberated by the offensive. Crisis Group interview, March 2023.
[131] Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit. See also Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.
[132] For a fuller discussion of U.S. policy and possible outcomes, see Paul D. Williams, "Understanding U.S. Policy in Somalia: Current Challenges and Future Options", Chatam House, July 2020.
[133] Crisis Group has recommended that weakening Al-Shabaab not be a prerequisite for eventual talks. The groundwork for a political settlement should be laid before the group is greatly degraded, as waiting would prolong the war and, in any case, the insurgents might later bounce back. Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab*, op. cit.
[134] Several current and former U.S. officials told Crisis Group that U.S. operations in Somalia need to have a greater emphasis on stabilisation. They pointed to the wide gap in funding for the varying U.S. government priorities in Somalia. While funding for humanitarian aid in Somalia from October 2021 to January 2023 totalled $1.3 billion, USAID stabilisation money since September 2022 for liberated areas has amounted only to a little over $20 million (including $5 million from USAID's $60 million Complex Crisis Fund, which it uses for emergencies). U.S. officials say the costs of military operations – including surveillance, airstrikes, training the Danab and basing – also far exceed stabilisation funding, but the Department of Defense has never made the amounts public. Crisis Group interviews, January-June 2023.

on stabilisation in areas already recovered more than taking new territory. The U.S. might thus help the Somali government demonstrate that it can administer these areas well before it tries to take on more.

In placing a higher priority on stabilisation, the U.S. should afford particular attention to reconciliation at both the societal and federal member state levels. As noted, deep divisions between Mogadishu and member states, as well as among various social groups, have consistently undermined the government's efforts to mount a sustained campaign against Al-Shabaab, while also sowing resentments that have created inroads for the insurgents with aggrieved communities.

The divisions reflect among other things unresolved grievances born of civil conflict at the local level, as well as dissension over Somalia's federal model among Somali elites. Every federal decision is heavily contested, undermining the state's capacity to rule. Unless they find ways to overcome these divisions, Somali elites will remain at odds, hamstringing governance and widening rifts for Al-Shabaab to exploit.[135]

Among reconciliation's many dimensions, Washington should encourage Mogadishu, as its top priority, to focus on social reconciliation. Perhaps the most important move that Somali authorities could take in this area would be implementing at least some elements of the constitutional requirement to establish a truth and reconciliation commission – ideally ensuring that it has a presence in each of the federal member states and the power to independently investigate and map out fault lines. Beyond pressing Somalia harder to move in this direction, the U.S. might offer both financial and technical support to the effort.

Also as part of its reconciliation focus, Washington should ramp up pressure on both Mogadishu and federal member states to work through their differences on a common vision of federalism and to come to a comprehensive agreement on resource sharing. Progress in these areas could lead to work on other unfinished business, like completing the constitution, establishing fairer elections and determining a way ahead for Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991, but which Mogadishu still regards as a federal member state on the same footing as the others.[136]

Another contribution the U.S. may be able to make is bringing other actors along in support of a more robust stabilisation agenda. While the issue of the Danab's relationship with the army remains a challenge, the U.S. is filling an important role in coordinating the other nations helping Somalia fight Al-Shabaab. It has been a key participant in meetings of the so-called quintet of Somalia's influential security partners – held regularly in one of the five capitals.[137] It should now do the same in helping Somalia find the funding to pursue its stabilisation priorities; it might, for example, make a concerted effort to rally Western partners (including the UK as well as the EU and its member states) and others (like Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar) to step up their support.

[135] For more on these internal rifts, see Crisis Group Commentary, "Stabilising Somalia for Elections and What Comes After", 29 January 2021.
[136] Crisis Group interview, researcher, June 2023.
[137] The quintet comprises the U.S., the UK, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Türkiye. They held their first meeting in London in the autumn of 2022. The second meeting was held the following February in Washington and the third in Doha in June. "Joint statement on Somalia", press release, U.S. Department of State, 28 February 2023.

In this work, the U.S. is right to question its ability to succeed at political engineering in another country. But although Washington cannot by itself heal social rifts in Somalia, it can through its counsel and resources help the Somalis doing this work seize opportunities to ease centre-periphery tensions.[138]

B. *Eventual Negotiations*

A corollary to the broadly accepted analysis that Al-Shabaab cannot be defeated militarily is that, at some point, a settlement with the group may offer the best hope of stabilising the country. Although many officials in Washington recognise that dialogue could be in the cards, they tend to brush off the need for long-term planning toward this end.[139]

At some level, the U.S. government's reluctance to consider its role in this scenario is understandable. From Washington's perspective, the prospect of a deal between Mogadishu and Al-Shabaab raises numerous, thorny legal and policy issues.[140] Yet if the U.S. wants to see an end to the war, there may be no alternative. Absent realistic prospects for an outright victory, if the government wants to get the full benefit of its battlefield successes, then at some point it will likely need to press its advantage at the negotiating table.

Washington need not take the lead, nor indeed play an active role, should the time for talks between Somali leaders and Al-Shabaab arrive. Indeed, its engagement could likely delegitimise the process from the insurgents' perspective. But what the U.S. can do is acclimate itself to the possibility of negotiations. It can also quietly signal to Somali authorities that when the time is right, it will not stand in the way but rather will help establish the necessary confidence-building measures, including, if appropriate, a pause in airstrikes – and that it will use its political capital to convince countries in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf to be similarly supportive.

C. *Congressional Oversight*

One partial explanation for why the focus of U.S. Somalia policy has stayed fairly constant for decades is that Congress has paid little attention and exerted no meaningful pressure on the executive branch to shift course. As Crisis Group has argued elsewhere, this lack of oversight is not particular to Somalia policy, but part of lawmakers' general preference for dodging hard questions (and corresponding accountability) relating to matters of war and peace.[141] The executive branch thus has less motivation than it might to engage in the kind of long-term thinking that might lead it to rebalance its approach.

Recently, however, there have been signs of greater engagement by lawmakers from both major parties. In the summer of 2022, the U.S. ambassador to Somalia and

[138] A former Somali official told Crisis Group that "the United States has tremendous influence on the Somali government" and also has the power to get the country's partners on the same page. Crisis Group interview, November 2021.
[139] Crisis Group interviews, October 2021-May 2023.
[140] Ibid.
[141] For background, see Crisis Group United States Report N°6, *Stop Fighting Blind: Better Use-of-Force Oversight in the U.S. Congress*, 26 October 2022.

deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs testified in a closed briefing for the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on Somalia policy.[142] Congress also included a provision in Section 1210 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 a requirement for the secretary of defense to provide a one-time, independent assessment of the U.S. military's efforts to train, advise, assist and equip the Somali military.[143] In April, House members proposed a concurrent resolution, which would have required the president to withdraw U.S. forces from Somalia within 365 days, but failed to pass. (The draft resolution would not have prohibited airstrikes by the U.S. military.[144])

But none of these measures really constitute steady, meaningful oversight. Ideally, the most consequential decisions about what the U.S. is doing in Somalia would be more equally shared between the executive and legislative branches. Particularly the weighty question of whether U.S. soldiers ought to be fighting a war there should be affirmatively voted on by the U.S. Congress rather than deemed authorised under a much-questioned interpretation of the 2001 AUMF. Not only would having a vote be good legal practice but it would make the decisions more democratically legitimate and thus more resilient. Congress should also require reauthorisations every two or three years, which could help ensure that the executive branch stays on top of policies that may not be working. Such a requirement would create a framework for interrogating those policies (with input from scholars, experts and civil society) when the two- or three-year mark is reached.

While a change to the legal framework is unlikely – both Congress and the executive branch seem satisfied with the status quo – there is still more that members of Congress could do to help steer U.S. policy in Somalia. At the very least, to create better-informed public debate and buy-in to U.S. policies, relevant committees should schedule further hearings about U.S. policy and objectives, inviting both administration officials and outside experts to testify. Congress can also help shape a more balanced U.S. policy by appropriating more for non-military lines of effort – eg, additional funds the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) can use to support stabilisation and reconciliation in Somalia. Congress should also require the secretary of state to report annually in good faith on Somalia's tangible progress in bridging its internal divides.

[142] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, July 2022.

[143] This provision was prompted by House Foreign Affairs Committee staff. Crisis Group interview, congressional staff, July 2022.

[144] Representative Matt Gaetz, a Republican from Florida, introduced House Concurrent Resolution 30 on 28 March 2023, which would have directed the president to remove all U.S. forces from Somalia, other than those assigned to protect the U.S. embassy, within 365 days of the adoption of the concurrent resolution. The effort failed. Notably, however, Gaetz's measure would not necessarily have required the termination of U.S. airstrikes in Somalia if they were launched from outside the country. Moreover, as a concurrent rather than a joint resolution, it likely would not have been legally binding. Another measure, House Joint Resolution 52 introduced by Representative Gregory Meeks, a Democrat from New York, would in effect terminate authority for U.S. operations in Somalia by repealing the 2001 AUMF and making no separate provision for using force against Al-Shabaab.

V. Conclusion

The U.S. faces big challenges in its Somalia policy. The country's instability, weak governance, internal rifts and general lack of security create fertile ground for Al-Shabaab. Tactical successes in fighting the insurgency have not translated into durable gains, leading to near unanimity among observers that Al-Shabaab will not be defeated by force of arms. The U.S. emphasis on containing Al-Shabaab by military means plays in some ways to U.S. strengths, but is almost certainly doomed to disappoint, as it offers no way to secure Somalia's enduring stability.

To have at least a chance at that, the U.S. will need to rebalance its policy. While Somalis are primarily responsible for building their own state, the U.S. and other donors can help with technical and financial capacity to pursue stabilisation and reconciliation. The U.S. is already offering some, but it could do more. In the short term, it should look for ways to advance centre-periphery comity as the offensive proceeds. Over the long term, a commitment to national reconciliation and openness to negotiations between Mogadishu and Al-Shabaab insurgents may well be key to the progress the region needs and the exit that Washington and other donors desire.

Mogadishu/Nairobi/New York/Washington/Brussels, 27 June 2023

Appendix A: Bush, 2001-2009: Origins of U.S. Counter-terrorism in Somalia

U.S. counter-terrorism operations in Somalia escalated gradually as part of the war with al-Qaeda after the 11 September 2001 attacks.[145] In response to the attacks, President George W. Bush pursued a militarised counter-terrorism strategy – relying on the 2001 AUMF and possibly other statutes and constitutional powers as authorisation for waging war on al-Qaeda and affiliates with no territorial limits; as noted above, this campaign is widely referred to as the "global war on terrorism". From the start, there was a significant possibility that Somalia would be caught up in this campaign: in late 2001, when the war began, the country was an ideal place for al-Qaeda and related groups to operate, as it lacked central governance. Al-Qaeda commanders were trying to liaise with the Islamist militants who had been mobilising in Somalia since the early 1990s.[146]

At first, the U.S. kept its Somalia intervention quiet. As alluded to above, memories of the ill-fated 1993 U.S. military operation in Mogadishu, commonly referred to as the "Black Hawk down" incident, in reference to a helicopter downed by insurgent rocket fire, were still fresh and the Bush administration did not wish to stir them up.[147] In 2002, alarmed by the potential for terrorist attacks emanating from the Horn of Africa, the administration established a combined joint task force to carry out Operation Enduring Freedom – as the "global war on terror" was formally known – in the region, though no forces were deployed at the time.[148] Because much of the U.S. government was consumed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) filled the policy space and put together a plan to track down al-Qaeda

[145] Crisis Group Report N°5, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, op. cit. See also John Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen, "Getting it wrong in Somalia, again", *Boston Globe*, 29 November 2006.

[146] Crisis Group interview, former Department of Defense official, February 2022. Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, 2018), pp. 7-26. A prominent al-Qaeda commander in East Africa, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, mentioned the importance of Somalia for his organisation, which sent military trainers there in 1993, believing that Somalia could become the new Afghanistan. See Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, *Al-Harb ala al-Islam* (2010), p. 140. Mohammed, who was accused of involvement in the 1998 al-Qaeda bombing of the U.S. embassies in Dar al-Salam and Nairobi, was killed in a shootout with Somali government forces in 2011.

[147] A Somali researcher described the U.S. decision to keep Somalia at arm's length after the Black Hawk incident as its most significant policy mistake vis-à-vis the country in recent decades. The researcher said the second biggest was to support Ethiopia's 2006 invasion. Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. official, January 2022 and Somali researcher, January 2023.

[148] Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. officials, September-October 2021. See also "Special Study: Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa: From Crisis Action to Campaigning", Center for Army Lessons Learned, 16 July 2016. At the time, the Bush administration worried about Somalia because of its lack of state capacity and its potential to serve as a haven for terrorists planning future attacks. The name Operation Enduring Freedom was primarily used to describe U.S. operations in Afghanistan but also other military counter-terrorism campaigns. The combined joint task force in the Horn reported to U.S. Central Command, whose area of operations then stretched from the Red Sea to Central Asia, until it came under AFRICOM in 2008.

members in Somalia, who were suspected of hiding out there to plan operations.[149] The CIA approached this mission by paying predatory Somali warlords tens of thousands of dollars to capture al-Qaeda members or individuals linked to the group.[150]

Meanwhile, Somalis were living through the civil war that had followed the government's collapse in 1991.[151] The country was deeply divided and without a central authority. The weak Transitional Federal Government – a provisional government established in 2004 and backed by Ethiopia – did not control territory since most of it was under the thumb of warlords.[152] The Islamic Courts Union, a coalition of Sharia courts with an enforcement arm, backed by clan leaders and businesses, arose in 2006 to fight the warlords.[153] The enforcement arm was a nascent Al-Shabaab.

The Union grew in popularity, partly because it drew its members from several of the country's major clans, especially those in Mogadishu, who sought an alternative to the ruthless warlords.[154] By mid-year, it had taken over the capital, establishing a semblance of law and order.[155] It was the first time the city had been under unitary control since the civil war began.[156] The Transitional Federal Government took refuge in Baidoa to the north west while the Union presented itself as a group that could overcome Somalia's internal conflict.

The U.S. and Ethiopia set out to dislodge the Union, fearing extremists in its ranks.[157] Some in the Union's Al-Shabaab wing (whose name means "the youth" in Arabic), had ties to al-Qaeda.[158] After failed attempts at talks, the Union's forces advanced upon the Transitional Federal Government, prompting Ethiopia to invade Somalia to quash the organisation in December 2006.[159] Addis Ababa justified its action as rescuing

[149] Mark Mazzetti, "Efforts by CIA fail in Somalia, officials charge", *The New York Times*, 8 June 2006. There was no U.S. embassy in Somalia at the time. A few officials at the embassy in Nairobi covered Somalia policy from afar. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, June 2023.

[150] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, pp. 27-45. At the time, Michael Zorick was a political officer at the embassy. He wrote what is now a well-known dissent cable arguing the CIA policy was futile and predicting the rise of Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, June 2023.

[151] Crisis Group interview, Somali academic, October 2021. See also Mahmood, "A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia", op. cit. A Somali researcher said many argue that the civil war started in the late 1980s with militias fighting the Siad Barre dictatorship. Crisis Group interview, January 2023.

[152] Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. used base in Ethiopia to hunt al-Qaeda", *The New York Times*, 23 February 2007.

[153] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°45, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, 26 January 2007.

[154] Crisis Group interview, researcher, January 2023. A former U.S. official close to the file at the time said that the Union's quick rise to power was directly related to CIA funding of the warlords. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, June 2023.

[155] Crisis Group interviews, researcher and Somali academic, October 2021.

[156] Crisis Group interview, researcher, October 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

[157] A former U.S. official said this concern was overblown and reflected a superficial understanding of what was happening on the ground. In this official's view, the Union was focused on security and was succeeding at making people feel safe. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, June 2023.

[158] Crisis Group interviews, researcher, October 2021; former U.S. defence official, February 2022. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, op. cit.

[159] Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, November 2022. There were several attempts to reconcile the two sides, but all failed. Neither was willing to compromise. Crisis Group interview, Somali academic, October 2021. In a 2006 op-ed, Crisis Group recommended that outside powers help negotiate a settlement. Prendergast and Thomas-Jensen, "Getting it wrong in Somalia, again", op. cit.

the Transitional Federal Government in Baidoa, which it backed rhetorically and materially.[160] Ethiopian forces quickly ousted the Union with backing from the U.S.[161]

Yet the intervention wound up strengthening Islamist militancy in Somalia. After the Union's ouster, the more moderate civilian leadership fled and Al-Shabaab vowed to resist the invaders.[162] Al-Shabaab emerged as the dominant insurgent force – forging stronger links to al-Qaeda, which in turn began to more openly support the group, and mounting a campaign, replete with terror tactics, to oust the Transitional Federal Government and establish an Islamic state.[163] It soon grabbed control of territory in south-central Somalia. The group was aided by ordinary Somalis' visceral rejection of Ethiopian occupation, fuelled by memories of past conflicts with Ethiopia and fresh abuses by Ethiopian forces.[164] The occupation also drew members of the Somali diaspora home to fight alongside Al-Shabaab.[165]

Just weeks after the Union of Islamic Courts fell, in February 2007, the UN authorised the AU to establish a multinational peacekeeping force in Somalia.[166] The first AU peacekeepers arrived that March.[167] Designated the African Union Mission in Somalia, or AMISOM, the force was initially sent for six months to provide a security umbrella for Somali national reconciliation efforts. It was made up largely of Ugandan soldiers.[168] In the following years, the force expanded to include troops from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sierra Leone.[169]

The U.S., for its part, was continuing its efforts to eradicate elements in Somalia that it deemed to be affiliated with al-Qaeda. It had actively, though quietly, aided Ethiopia in removing the Union of Islamic Courts, providing intelligence to the Ethiopian

[160] Crisis Group interview, researcher, October 2021. See also Gordon and Mazzetti, "U.S. used base in Ethiopia to hunt al-Qaeda", op. cit.

[161] A former U.S. official said there was no daylight between Ethiopian and U.S. policy toward Somalia. The U.S. relied heavily on Ethiopia for analysis partly because its own officials did not have good information on the situation. As a result, the U.S. went down the wrong path, helping back an illegitimate government through military intervention and pushing the population into the arms of what would become a much more hostile insurgency. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, June 2023.

[162] Crisis Group interviews, researcher and Somali academic, October 2021.

[163] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-December 2021. Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, op. cit.

[164] A Somali researcher described the U.S. support for Ethiopia's invasion as a policy failure. The Somali public saw the invasion as an effort to conquer Somalia. Crisis Group interview, January 2023. A Somali government official told Crisis Group that a significant reason Somalis rejected Ethiopia's invasion had to do with Ethiopia's brutal campaign in and around Mogadishu against clan militias. The attendant destruction helped push many Somalis closer to Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, June 2023.

[165] David Johnston, "Militants drew recruits in the U.S., F.B.I. says", *The New York Times,* 23 February 2009. One person who returned to Somalia, Shirwa Ahmed, was the first documented suicide bomber with U.S. citizenship in the post-9/11 era. On 29 October 2008, Ahmed drove an explosive-laden vehicle into a government compound, killing himself and approximately 30 others.

[166] UN Security Council Resolution 1744 (2007), 21 February 2007.

[167] Crisis Group interview, researcher, October 2021. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, op. cit.

[168] UN Security Council Resolution 1744, op. cit. See also Paul D. Williams, "Lessons for 'Partnership Peacekeeping' from the African Union Mission in Somalia", International Peace Institute, October 2019.

[169] Ibid.

army during the invasion.[170] In January 2007, at the Transitional Federal Government's request, U.S. warplanes originating in Ethiopia carried out strikes on Al-Shabaab militants whom the U.S. considered al-Qaeda members, bringing U.S. involvement out into the open.[171]

The Bush White House's primary concern with respect to Somalia remained Al-Shabaab's links to al-Qaeda.[172] Before leaving office, in March 2008, the administration listed Al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, a designation that remains in place today.[173] Two months later, the U.S. killed Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, an Al-Shabaab commander and al-Qaeda member who had been trained in Afghanistan.[174] Approval for the airstrike was cause for deliberation among Bush administration officials, who differed over whether it would weaken Al-Shabaab or spread resentment and encourage more fighting.[175] This debate about the effect of airstrikes in general would continue in the next administration.

[170] Gordon and Mazzetti, "U.S. used base in Ethiopia to hunt al-Qaeda", op. cit.
[171] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, op. cit.
[172] The U.S. saw significant links between Al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda, in terms of ideology, personnel and finances. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, February 2022. U.S. citizen Omar Shafik Hammami (also referred to as Abu Mansour Al-Amriki) joined Al-Shabaab in 2006 and quickly rose to the top of the organisation. He was indicted in 2007 on material support for terrorism charges and placed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most wanted terrorists list in 2012. "Omar Shafik Hammami Added to the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists List", press release, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 14 November 2012.
[173] Such a designation threatens serious legal ramifications, including criminal prosecution, for those who are considered under the law to have supported the designated entity. See the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations at the U.S. State Department website.
[174] Eric Schmitt and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Qaeda leader reported killed in Somalia", *The New York Times*, 2 May 2008.
[175] Ibid.

Appendix B: Obama, 2009-2017: Operational and Legal Expansion

In 2009, when the Barack Obama administration entered the White House, its senior officials agreed that U.S. Somalia policy required a comprehensive review.[176] They worried that if they were simply to press ahead with the Bush administration's approach, the U.S. military would be involved in Somalia in perpetuity.[177] This concern animated policymaking on Somalia throughout President Obama's first term. Officials developed a modest set of aspirations centred around support for the Transitional Federal Government – including military assistance – hoping that this aid would help thwart Al-Shabaab, contain al-Qaeda and provide the Somali people with improved governance.[178] They did not consider the assistance a full-fledged state-building effort by any means.[179]

This early policy faced several challenges. There was no U.S. embassy in Mogadishu at the time, and while Obama appeared eager to reestablish one, the task was difficult in the security vacuum prevailing in the Somali capital.[180] The U.S. was left trying to support and communicate with the weak Somali government from Nairobi, its nearest diplomatic outpost.[181]

Meanwhile, the war widened. In 2010, Al-Shabaab staged its first foreign attack, launched to coincide with the broadcast of a World Cup match, which was being hosted by South Africa. The attack killed 74 people and wounded dozens more in Uganda's capital Kampala, signalling that the group was intent on striking countries that had sent troops to Somalia.[182] Officials in Washington were alarmed by the strike and

[176] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2022.
[177] Ibid.
[178] The Obama administration carried out its first raid in Somalia in 2009, during which U.S. commandos in helicopters struck and killed an al-Qaeda member, Saleh Ali Nabhan, alleged to have been involved in the 1998 embassy bombings and the 2002 attack on a Mombasa hotel.
[179] Efforts to build stronger ties with the Transitional Federal Government got under way quickly. In August 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in Nairobi. Sharif had served as chairman of the Islamic Courts Union and left Somalia during the Ethiopian invasion. He subsequently organised the Alliance for Re-Liberation of Somalia, a new political party, and united it with the Transitional Federal Government. He was sworn in as president in January 2009. Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, May 2023. Testimony by EJ Hogendoorn, "Security and Governance in Somalia: Consolidating Gains, Confronting Challenges and Charting the Path Forward", U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 October 2013. At the time, Hogendoorn was Crisis Group's deputy program director for Africa. The Obama administration sent small arms and ammunition to Sharif's government to fight Al-Shabaab after the insurgency started carrying out more robust attacks in May 2009. U.S. special forces also conducted a helicopter assault that year targeting an individual responsible for the 1998 embassy bombings. Some had hoped, given Sharif's background, that he could broker a deal with the insurgents or other Islamist factions in Somalia, but Islamists saw the Transitional Federal Government as a foreign-backed entity not to be trusted. In March, al-Qaeda head Osama bin Laden released an audio recording describing Sharif as an enemy and encouraging his government's overthrow. "U.S. gives Somalia about 40 tons of arms, ammunition", Reuters, 26 June 2009.
[180] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2022.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Crisis Group, "Al-Shabaab Attacks in East Africa: A Timeline", 12 October 2018. At the time of the attack, Al-Shabaab's spokesman said: "We are sending a message to every country that is willing to send troops to Somalia that they will face attacks on their territory". Claire Klobucista, Jonathan Masters and Mohammed Aly Sergie, "Al-Shabaab", Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2021.

its implications for the future. In an interview, Obama expressed concern that if Al-Shabaab continued to gain territory in Somalia it could export more violence abroad.[183] He underscored the need for a multilateral approach – via military and development means – in Somalia.[184] Famine also broke out in the country, lasting into 2011. Decisions in Washington to send aid were delayed due to worries that it would be diverted to Al-Shabaab, reflecting a growing emphasis on counter-terrorism as a focal point for the administration's foreign policy.[185]

In 2011, the Obama administration picked up the pace of airstrikes and Somali and African forces made notable gains against Al-Shabaab. With support from Somali fighters, Burundian and Ugandan forces under AMISOM's aegis pushed Al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu.[186] A month after the U.S. killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in a raid in Pakistan, Somali forces stationed at a checkpoint in Mogadishu shot Fazul Mohamad, a well-known member of both al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab who had helped orchestrate the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.[187] Toward the end of 2011, Kenya invaded southern Somalia, forcing the insurgents from the city of Kismayo and creating a buffer zone along the border.[188] The Kenyan forces were formally integrated into AMISOM in 2012.[189]

At the end of Obama's first term, U.S. policy shifted further in a military-first direction. A former White House official said the Obama administration perceived a real threat from Al-Shabaab since factions within the organisation wanted to affiliate with al-Qaeda, possibly in order to participate in attacks abroad.[190] Officials worried about militants having a foothold next to a key partner, Kenya, and near global shipping lanes. They were also concerned that members of the Somali diaspora might carry out attacks. Those concerns convinced policymakers to do more in Somalia, but for a long time the Obama administration baulked at deploying troops, even in an advisory capacity, in part due to the events of 1993.[191]

Officials also worried that Al-Shabaab in its entirety would formally affiliate with al-Qaeda, which in turn might prompt it to carry out more terrorist attacks outside Somalia.[192] Al-Shabaab did indeed formally proclaim its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012.[193] Such a move made symbolic sense at the time. Al-Shabaab's leader was looking for allies after the group's embarrassing withdrawal from Mogadishu and Kismayo.

[183] President Barack Obama, interview with the South African Broadcasting Corporation, 13 July 2010.
[184] Ibid.
[185] The delays, along with fears among humanitarian agencies of facing U.S. prosecution should they distribute aid, exacerbated the hunger crisis in Somalia. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2022.
[186] Crisis Group interview, researcher, October 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, op. cit.
[187] "Somalia", Crisis Watch, June 2011.
[188] Crisis Group, "Al-Shabaab Attacks in East Africa: A Timeline", op. cit.
[189] UN Security Council Resolution 2036 (2012), 22 February 2012.
[190] Crisis Group interview, former White House official, January 2022.
[191] A Somali researcher told Crisis Group that Finland sponsored talks with a faction of Al-Shabaab in 2012. At the time, the U.S. opposed the effort because its regional partners – Ethiopia and Kenya – did as well. Crisis Group interview, January 2023.
[192] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-November 2021.
[193] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, August 2022. Some Al-Shabaab members had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda prior to the formal declaration in 2012.

Many within Al-Shabaab, and even within al-Qaeda, did not support the decision, but the declaration buoyed those U.S. officials who had been advocating for a more aggressive counter-terrorism policy in Somalia.[194] Alarmed that Al-Shabaab was strengthening ties with al-Qaeda, the administration increasingly turned to the Pentagon to lead its efforts there.[195]

Consequential changes followed the shift in policy orientation. First, to allow for more offensive action, and with U.S. encouragement, the UN expanded AMISOM's mandate in 2012 to include reducing the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and other armed groups.[196] As a result, by 2015, AMISOM, with help from U.S. airpower, had diminished Al-Shabaab's capacity to hold territory in urban areas.[197] But these gains came at a high cost to AMISOM forces, and the mission's commanders chose not to keep launching regular offensives against Al-Shabaab.[198] From 2015 to 2022, the AU force mostly limited itself to holding territory, staying put on its bases in south-central Somalia.[199]

Secondly, consistent with its approach to counter-terrorism worldwide, the U.S. started focusing on training partner forces to combat Al-Shabaab.[200] In late 2013, the same year the U.S. formally recognised the Federal Government of Somalia, the U.S. took the momentous step of deploying a small force to Somalia to assist AMISOM. The same year, it began recruiting and training the Danab, which was to have a distinct mission clearing territory of Al-Shabaab fighters and holding it for short durations.[201] The U.S. also continued to give bilateral support to the Somali army and AMISOM troop-contributing countries, as well as to help fund (through assessed con-

[194] Half the Al-Shabaab leadership and many foot soldiers did not want to be a branch of al-Qaeda, confounding U.S. policymakers considering policy and legal questions about targeting. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, February 2022. Al-Qaeda leaders themselves were wary of absorbing Al-Shabaab. The letters found in bin Laden's compound after his death suggests that he wanted Al-Shabaab's allegiance to remain secret and even opposed establishing Al-Shabaab rule in Somalia. Al-Qaeda leaders also had qualms about several armed attacks perpetrated by Al-Shabaab, including one on football supporters in Mogadishu in June 2010. See Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers* (New Haven, 2022), pp. 192-194.

[195] Crisis Group interview, former White House official, February 2022.

[196] "The Security Council, *Acting* under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, *Decides* that … AMISOM shall include establishing a presence in the four sectors set out in the AMISOM strategic Concept of 5 January, and AMISOM shall be authorised to take all necessary measures as appropriate in those sectors in coordination with the Somali security forces to reduce the threat posed by Al Shabaab and other armed opposition groups in order to establish conditions for effective and legitimate governance across Somalia". UN Security Council Resolution 2036 (2012), op. cit.

[197] Crisis Group interview, researcher, October 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, op. cit.

[198] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, academic and researcher, September-December 2021.

[199] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. military official, September 2021. AU forces have nonetheless stayed in Somalia because the national army is not ready to take over security responsibilities. Views differ regarding expectations of the army, but most agree the country's security would suffer badly if AU forces were to pull out today. Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, researcher, delegation staff of UN Security Council member states and former Somali official, September 2021-June 2022.

[200] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021.

[201] Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, September-December 2021.

tributions) the UN Support Office in Somalia, which provides logistical assistance to what is now ATMIS.[202]

Thirdly, although officials understood that force alone would not prove decisive in bringing greater stability, airstrikes increased dramatically in the last two years of Obama's second term.[203] The increase was enabled in part by an evolution over the administration's eight years in office in its theory with respect to its legal authority to use force. At first, it believed the 2001 AUMF gave it the legal green light for airstrikes on Al-Shabaab militants who were also considered al-Qaeda members.[204] Accordingly, the administration authorised only strikes on "high-value targets" whom it considered al-Qaeda members.[205] In September 2014, for example, the U.S. killed Al-Shabaab leader and al-Qaeda member Ahmed Abdi Godane.[206] But by 2015, what one former U.S. official described as "significant mission creep" had taken place – notwithstanding prudential restrictions on the use of force in some theatres that the White House had announced in 2013.[207] U.S. forces increasingly engaged in ground combat when advising and assisting Somali forces.[208] These operations resulted in U.S. forces on the ground calling in more airstrikes in support of partner forces, referred to as "collective self-defence" strikes.[209]

In 2016, the Obama administration made public that it deemed Al-Shabaab an associated force of al-Qaeda under the 2001 AUMF.[210] Henceforth, as a legal matter, the U.S. could target any member of Al-Shabaab, regardless of whether that person was individually affiliated with al-Qaeda.[211] This interpretation opened the door for Obama – and future presidents – to prosecute a far-reaching war in Somalia.[212] In Obama's final year as commander-in-chief, he appointed the first U.S. ambassador to Somalia in 25 years and the U.S. military conducted sixteen airstrikes in the country, which at the time was the highest number in a calendar year.[213] The next administration quickly surpassed it.

[202] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. military official, September 2021.
[203] Crisis Group interview, researcher, November 2021. "America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Somalia", op. cit.
[204] AUMF, Public Law 107-40, 18 September 2001.
[205] "Early in Obama's first term, the United States limited its use of military force in Somalia to regimented strikes against members of Al-Shabaab whom the administration had determined also belonged to al-Qaeda's core". Crisis Group interview, researcher, November 2021.
[206] Crisis Group Report, *Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, op. cit.
[207] Crisis Group Report, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, op. cit. In 2013, the administration imposed constraints on itself, requiring approval by the president before a commander in the field could use force under the AUMF outside "areas of active hostilities" (ie, outside Afghanistan and Iraq). These were not sufficient to prevent the growth of the air war in Somalia.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid. See also "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations", The White House, December 2016.
[212] A congressional aide said "most members [of Congress] did not think they were authorising strikes in Somalia when authorising the original 2001 Authorisation to Use Military Force". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.
[213] See the New America Foundation database.

Appendix C: Trump, 2017-2021: Winding Up to Wind Down

President Donald Trump largely delegated Somalia policy to the working level, letting the military deal with Al-Shabaab and the U.S. embassy – reopened in 2019 – conduct diplomacy.[214]

With fewer constraints from Washington, the U.S. military prosecuted the war in Somalia more vigorously. Early in his tenure, President Trump rescinded Obama's 2013 policy requiring presidential approval of strikes on "high-value targets" outside areas of active hostilities.[215] Toward the end of 2017, AFRICOM proposed and received special rules for Somalia.[216] Shortly thereafter, the tempo of U.S. airstrikes and ground operations in Somalia accelerated.[217] Perhaps not surprisingly, U.S. military operations in Somalia reached a peak in the 2017-2020 period.[218] Military commanders had previously complained that the extensive approval process cost them opportunities to hit Al-Shabaab targets.[219] They considered the Trump administration's new policy licence to "take the gloves off".[220] During these years, U.S. special forces routinely accompanied the Danab in operations against Al-Shabaab.[221] But assistance to the army as a whole was halted in 2017 for eighteen months due to concerns about corruption.[222]

The "gloves off" approach was a major escalation without decisive results. More strikes were conducted in the Trump administration's four years – 219 total strikes – than during the two previous administrations combined, when some 60 strikes had occurred over the span of twelve years.[223] Officials and researchers say the record-setting number of airstrikes dealt a major blow to Al-Shabaab, limiting its freedom of movement and its ability to mass fighters.[224] Still, the insurgency adapted, its resolve strengthened. It not only continued to act as a shadow government, taxing and controlling significant territory in central and southern Somalia, but it executed doz-

[214] Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. official, September 2021; current U.S. official, October 2021.
[215] Crisis Group Report, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Bases for the U.S. War on Terror*, op. cit. Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities, presidential policy guidance, 22 May 2013. Crisis Group interview, former White House official, February 2022.
[216] Crisis Group interview, former White House official, February 2022.
[217] For example, in October 2017, Al-Shabaab was blamed for an unprecedented attack in Mogadishu that killed more than 500 people. A month later, the U.S. killed more than 100 militants in an airstrike, one of dozens it conducted that year.
[218] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. defense official, September 2021.
[219] A former NSC official attested that the military made this complaint frequently. "All the time. It became a trope in the press about how Obama was tying the hands of the operators". Crisis Group interview, February 2022.
[220] Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, September 2021. When the new guidance was issued in 2017, a journalist said, "it became the AFRICOM show without the interagency coordination that was present during the Obama years". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.
[221] Crisis Group interviews, former U.S. military and civilian officials, September 2021.
[222] Katharine Houreld, "Limited U.S. military assistance to resume to some Somali troops", Reuters, 2 July 2019.
[223] See the New America Foundation database.
[224] Crisis Group interviews, researchers and current and former U.S. officials, September-November 2021.

ens of attacks during this period, including a bombing at the entrance of Baledogle airfield in September 2019 and a deadly assault on U.S. and Kenyan forces at a base in Manda Bay, Kenya on 5 January 2020. Meanwhile, concerns about civilian harm from airstrikes increased.[225]

The U.S. made some progress on the diplomatic front. First, in December 2018, after years of effort, the State Department established a permanent diplomatic mission in Somalia, and then in October 2019, announced the reestablishment of the embassy in Mogadishu, which had closed in 1991.[226] Secondly, the embassy, backed by the State Department and USAID, laid out a roadmap for debt relief for Somalia, identifying political choices related to transparency and the budget necessary to reform the economy.[227] Thirdly, USAID sent vital humanitarian aid to Somalia, an average of $400 million in each of the U.S. fiscal years between 2017 and 2020.[228] This aid was life-sustaining for the Somali people, whose humanitarian needs continue to increase.[229]

Despite its activity, the U.S. embassy and its partners were unable to nudge the Somali government toward progress on establishing security and building state capacity.[230] The president, Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo", instead dedicated much of his time in office to countering his political rivals in order to consolidate his power.[231] Grievances deepened among Somali politicians, undermining the U.S. and international military efforts to combat Al-Shabaab.[232] It was a time of great uncertainty for security, as AMISOM began to pull out some of its forces and the UN Security Council set a timeline for full withdrawal by 2021 (which was eventually extended as discussed above).[233]

Such was the situation when President Trump, as discussed in Section I, abruptly shifted gears, ordering that U.S. forces be repositioned out of Somalia.

[225] Crisis Group interviews, Somali civil society figures and former U.S. officials, September-December 2021.

[226] Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, October 2021. See also "U.S. Relations with Somalia: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet", U.S. State Department, 18 March 2022.

[227] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. official, October 2021; former Somali official, November 2021. A former U.S. official who worked on debt relief told Crisis Group that the right incentives were provided to get officials to act, but now, the U.S. has "effectively stepped away from that approach in diplomatic and aid engagement. It does not lead from the front, having tough, transactional conversations, bringing to bear carrots and sticks to institutionalise policies there in a more credible manner". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.

[228] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, October-September 2021.

[229] Ibid.

[230] Crisis Group interviews, current and former U.S. officials, September-December 2021.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Crisis Group interviews, former and current U.S. officials, UN official, academic, researcher, and U.S. congressional official, September-November 2021.

[233] In late 2017, AMISOM withdrew 1,000 troops from Somalia, beginning what was anticipated to be a steady drawdown. In May 2019, another 1,000 AMISOM personnel left the country. At the time, the UN Security Council had established a timeline for full withdrawal by 2021. It would later be extended.

Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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June 2023

Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on the United States since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

United States

The U.S. Presidential Election: Managing the Risks of Violence, United States Report N°4, 28 October 2020.

Nineteen Conflict Prevention Tips for the Biden Administration, United States Briefing N°2, 28 January 2021 (also available in Arabic).

Overkill: Reforming the Legal Basis for the U.S. War on Terror, United States Report N°5, 17 September 2021.

Stop Fighting Blind: Better Use-of-Force Oversight in the U.S. Congress, United States Report N°6, 26 October 2022.

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