



# The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat

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**What's new?** The Islamic State in Somalia, a longstanding if low-profile security threat, has refashioned itself as an important part of the jihadist group's worldwide network. Its chief, Abdulqadir Mumin, has become a key figure in the Islamic State's global leadership.

**Why does it matter?** Based in Puntland in northern Somalia, the Islamic State affiliate has won breathing space by beating back the efforts of its main rival, Al-Shabaab, to crush it. Its importance as a logistical and financial hub for the Islamic State's African and worldwide networks could embolden the group in Somalia.

**What should be done?** The Somali government and authorities in semi-autonomous Puntland should set aside their mutual mistrust to share intelligence and staunch the group's funding, with support from Washington and other partners. Puntland should address grievances in the area where the group operates and keep a pathway open for its members to defect.

## I. Overview

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Global jihadism may have found a new bastion. On 31 May, U.S. forces conducted an airstrike near Dhaardhaar, a remote town in Puntland, a semi-autonomous state in north-eastern Somalia. U.S. attacks on militants in Somalia are not uncommon, though they are infrequent in the north. In the weeks after the strike, it emerged that the U.S. had set its sights on Abdulqadir Mumin, leader of the Islamic State in Somalia, who in a remarkable turn for this small branch of the jihadist group, may now be the Islamic State's global leader (or caliph). Mumin survived, and his emergence as a key figure in the movement is likely to shine new light on the Somali affiliate and the role it plays as a node for the group's many others. It should also spur the Somali government, Puntland's administration and foreign partners to make more concerted efforts to row back the militant group's activities, which requires that they do more to surmount divisions among Somali authorities.

The Islamic State in Somalia (IS-Somalia) packs a considerable punch despite its limited operational clout. Based in the north-eastern mountains of Puntland's Bari region, it poses little by way of a direct threat to security in Somalia, especially when

compared to its much bigger and better-established jihadist rival Al-Shabaab, which is an al-Qaeda affiliate. Over time, however, it has emerged as a key component of the Islamic State's network, in large part because it can raise substantial revenue, largely through extortion. Indeed, it has sent funds to branches throughout Africa and reportedly even as far away as Afghanistan. At home, its main challengers – Al-Shabaab and authorities in Puntland – have managed to limit its spread, but they have not succeeded in eliminating it. As the Islamic State's fortunes in Syria and Iraq have waned, the group has been building up its franchises in Africa. Mumin's potential emergence as global leader signals that IS-Somalia could play a role in the jihadist movement well beyond its homeland.

Efforts to tackle IS-Somalia are not helped by disputes between Mogadishu and authorities in Puntland, notably over power and resources in the region. Even while working to settle their differences, they should collaborate better in dealing with the jihadist threat. They should share intelligence and develop joint strategies for breaking up IS-Somalia's extortion rackets, while avoiding dependency on U.S. air-strikes, which have done little to dent the group's capacity. Puntland should also keep a pathway open for fighters who wish to quit the group, while seeking to address deep-seated local grievances that might manifest themselves in support for anti-government militancy.

## **II. A Small but Stubborn Threat**

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IS-Somalia emerged from the shadow of Al-Shabaab, Somalia's main jihadist organisation, which controls swathes of the country's south and centre. Amid the Islamic State's lightning rise in 2014, leaders of the newly declared caliphate contacted Al-Shabaab urging it to switch its allegiance from al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab said no. Angered, a small group of Al-Shabaab members broke away, swearing a *bayah* (or oath of allegiance) to the Islamic State in October 2015.<sup>1</sup> They were led by Mumin, who had been serving Al-Shabaab in its northern Puntland branch.<sup>2</sup>

IS-Somalia is a study in contrasts. At home, its impact is limited. It appears, however, to play an outsize, if still vague, role in the Islamic State's global operations. Almost a decade since Mumin's pledge, much about the group remains unknown. According to local sources, IS-Somalia today has around 500 men, scattered in the Cal Miskaat mountains in Puntland's Bari region.<sup>3</sup> Sustained recruitment in Somalia has proven a challenge, due both to Al-Shabaab's strength and IS-Somalia's narrow clan base. Over the years, a number of discontented Al-Shabaab members, including

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<sup>1</sup> Zakariya Yusuf and Abdul Khalif, "The Islamic State Threat in Somalia's Puntland State", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 November 2016. Other Al-Shabaab figures also expressed interest in joining the Islamic State, spurring the group to crack down brutally on internal dissent.

<sup>2</sup> While the Islamic State promoted Mumin's activities in its messaging thereafter, it was not until December 2017 that it published a video signalling its acceptance of a Somali affiliate under his leadership. In August 2018, the group for the first time publicly used the term *wilayat*, or province, to describe its Somali affiliate.

<sup>3</sup> The group appears to be composed largely of men. Evidence of accompanying family members is scant. Crisis Group interviews, security officials, local researchers and Bari residents, Puntland, 2023-2024.

fighters from outside Somalia, whether elsewhere in East Africa or beyond, have joined or attempted to join Mumin in Puntland. Reportedly, some are still doing so, though the flow has slowed to a trickle.<sup>4</sup> While IS-Somalia's members include Somalis from both Puntland and other areas, as well as foreign fighters, its leadership remains firmly in the hands of members of Puntland clans, especially those from Bari.<sup>5</sup>

About half the group's members are estimated to be foreign.<sup>6</sup> Most of these come from East Africa – with Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania cited most frequently – or Arab countries like Yemen. Recruitment continues through these pipelines, with foreigners wishing to join the Islamic State arriving with some regularity in northern Somalia.<sup>7</sup> In one case in November 2023, the Puntland government arrested four Moroccan nationals in the Cal Miskaat mountains on suspicion of being members of the group.<sup>8</sup> Authorities have also captured a handful of other foreigners in Puntland over the past year. Some local sources, however, suggest that many of those arrested have in fact been fleeing the group and attempting to leave Somalia.<sup>9</sup> Among the men who may be trying to slip the group's clutches are Ethiopians made refugees by the insurgency in Oromia, Ethiopia's largest region, who have allegedly been enlisted or even forcibly recruited by IS-Somalia.<sup>10</sup> Many Ethiopians escaping conflict and destitution at home cross Puntland by foot on their way to Yemen.<sup>11</sup>

The group's operations in Somalia are not far-reaching. IS-Somalia has failed to expand – at least to any significant degree – its range outside the Cal Miskaat mountains, aside from episodic attempts to infiltrate Mogadishu (see Section V). It holds little populated territory. Locals report that most of the group's fighters reside in camps in caves or on mountainsides, rather than in villages.<sup>12</sup> It has on occasion undertaken community projects to win support, including drilling boreholes and distributing foodstuffs in small villages.<sup>13</sup> But these efforts have been few and far between. An ambitious attempt to seize the coastal village of Qandala in 2016 fizzled after Puntland forces pushed the militants back.<sup>14</sup>

Nor has IS-Somalia perpetrated many attacks of late. A database of the group's operations maintained by Crisis Group, which amalgamates various sources, reveals

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Mogadishu, 2023-2024.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials and Bari residents, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, local researchers and Bari residents, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>8</sup> "Four Moroccan ISIS suspects arrested by Somali forces in Puntland", *Hiraan Online*, 21 November 2023. In what may be a related incident, Somaliland's intelligence service arrested ten individuals travelling on Moroccan passports weeks earlier, also on suspicion of links to militant groups. "Somaliland's intelligence agency detains 10 foreign nationals suspected of ties to terrorism", *Somaliland Chronicle*, 31 October 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland security and justice officials, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>11</sup> Other foreigners who have escaped IS-Somalia cite inhospitable conditions and what they describe as broken promises to pay them for joining. Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024. See also "Six IS foreign fighters surrender to Puntland state", *Halbeeg*, 2 July 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>14</sup> The group controlled Qandala for approximately six weeks, until Puntland forces recovered the area. Yusuf and Khalif, "The Islamic State Threat in Somalia's Puntland State", op. cit.

that it has claimed responsibility for fewer than a dozen small raids since 2023, with only three in the first half of 2024, despite the Islamic State's calls upon its affiliates worldwide to step up attacks in response to the war in Gaza.<sup>15</sup> These figures are down sharply from around 60 in each of 2018 and 2019.<sup>16</sup> One indication of IS-Somalia's limited capabilities is that it rarely mounts the large-scale spectacular attacks that have become Al-Shabaab's hallmark. Over the course of its existence, IS-Somalia has claimed only two suicide attacks; most of its other strikes have involved small explosions or killings of individuals.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, the group seems to have wider ambitions. Sources maintain that IS-Somalia seeks eventually to conquer territory beyond the Bari region, Puntland and even Somalia where it can extend its system of sharia governance. They also say Mumin has long desired a bigger role within the Islamic State network in Africa.<sup>18</sup> The global heads of the Islamic State have recognised for several years the role as coordinators and regional leaders that Somali branch members could play, to the extent that they asked affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique to report to IS-Somalia in 2020.<sup>19</sup> The group may stand to make an imprint well beyond Somalia.

### **III. Leading beyond Somalia**

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While IS-Somalia may have limited territorial reach and conduct operations only intermittently, it plays a critical role in the Islamic State's wider African network. In large part due to its fundraising skill, the branch has developed outsize influence.<sup>20</sup>

The Islamic State restructured its African operations in the first half of 2020, placing affiliates in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and the eastern DRC under the watch of its Al Karrar office, based in Puntland, which has become its headquarters for East Africa. IS-Somalia is also technically under Al Karrar's command, though the group retains the main responsibility for local activities while Al Karrar focuses on coordinating operations in areas outside Somalia. Al Karrar also falls under Mumin's leadership and serves as a financial hub for the various African branches.<sup>21</sup> An internal communication recovered by the Rwandan military in northern Mozam-

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<sup>15</sup> The figures should be taken as indicators of the Islamic State's overall activity in Somalia, rather than a full accounting, given that some attacks go unclaimed and that Islamic State propaganda is sometimes inconsistent in reporting local activity.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group data. See also "Islamic State (ISIS) spokesman instructs Muslims to renew lone wolf attacks in U.S., Europe, in support of Gaza; discredits Palestinian factions for their alliance with Iran, calls on Arabs to rebel against their rulers", Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 January 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group data. The smaller scale of attacks does not mean that IS-Somalia is less violent than Al-Shabaab, but simply that it has lesser capacity. People who have suffered extortion at the hands of both groups remarked that IS-Somalia tends to issue more aggressive demands than Al-Shabaab and is harsher in enforcing them. Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu and Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>19</sup> "S/2022/547", UN Security Council, 15 July 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>21</sup> "Treasury Designates Senior ISIS-Somalia Financier", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 27 July 2023. There may be another person who reports to Mumin in charge of day-to-day local affairs for IS-Somalia. Crisis Group interview, Puntland security official, 2024.

bique and seen by Crisis Group seemingly attests to this relationship. The former head of the IS affiliate in Mozambique, who goes by the alias Abu Qasim, described his operations to Mumin in an April 2020 letter, appearing to confirm the chain of command and Mumin's high rank within it.<sup>22</sup>

As with most such groups, IS-Somalia's financial dealings are opaque. In Puntland, it generates funds by extorting businesses in the seaport city of Bosasso, as well as by helping export small quantities of gold mined in Bari.<sup>23</sup> The U.S. government claims that IS-Somalia has piled up \$6 million since 2022.<sup>24</sup> The group also handles the transfer of funds among a range of IS-linked offices and cells. UN reporting suggests that the organisation has funnelled money from the Islamic State's traditional territorial core, in Iraq and Syria, to affiliates in Africa, as well as from its own coffers to other branches.<sup>25</sup> Several sources have told Crisis Group that the group has sent money to groups as far afield as IS-Khorasan Province in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

These transactions prodded the U.S. government to pay greater attention to IS-Somalia's financial network. In January 2023, the U.S. military conducted a raid in Puntland that killed the presumed key facilitator for the Al Karrar office, Bilal al-Sudani. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin released a statement saying al-Sudani "was responsible for fostering the growing presence of ISIS in Africa and for funding the group's operations worldwide, including in Afghanistan".<sup>27</sup> It is unclear to what extent the operation disrupted the network's financial dealings, but it seems that IS-Somalia managed to rebuild.<sup>28</sup> Somali and foreign security officials note that IS-Somalia is still making transfers: although the group works on a smaller scale than Al-Shabaab, the latter is not thought to be sending funds to jihadists abroad in the same way.<sup>29</sup> In May, the U.S. struck IS-Somalia once again, killing three militants but missing Mumin, the primary target.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Internal Islamic State communication seen by Crisis Group, 2022. Abu Qasim is also referred to as Abu Yassir Hassan. He used the alias Abu Qasim in this communication.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>24</sup> "Treasury Designates Senior ISIS-Somalia Financier", op. cit.; and "Fact Sheet: Countering ISIS Financing", U.S. Treasury Department, 27 February 2024. Some local sources said those estimates appeared high. Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024. A July UN report on the Islamic State and Al Qaeda estimated that IS-Somalia generates \$360,000 per month in extortion, which would amount to over \$4 million per year. "S/2024/556", UN Security Council, 22 July 2024. See also Caleb Weiss et al., "Fatal Transaction: The Funding behind the Islamic State's Central Africa Province", George Washington University Program on Extremism, June 2023.

<sup>25</sup> The Islamic State's territorial caliphate collapsed in 2019, following sustained military pressure from the U.S. and a coalition of partners, including local militias.

<sup>26</sup> "S/2023/95", UN Security Council, 13 February 2023. Crisis Group interviews, European security officials, September 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "Senior ISIS leader in Somalia killed in U.S. special operations raid", *The New York Times*, 26 January 2023.

<sup>28</sup> "Fact Sheet: Countering ISIS Financing", U.S. Treasury Department, 27 February 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Somali and Western security officials, 2023-2024.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, 2024. See also Courtney Kube, "Global leader of ISIS targeted and possibly killed in U.S. airstrike", NBC News, 15 June 2024.

#### **IV. The Islamic State in Somalia's Footholds**

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Despite IS-Somalia's evident limitations, a number of factors have contributed to its resilience. First is geography. The mountains to the east of Bosasso where IS-Somalia is based are rugged, isolated and sparsely populated. Government presence is patchy, given the area's remoteness, meaning the group has leeway to operate. Puntland's location at the tip of the Horn of Africa also means that IS-Somalia is near coastlines that have long afforded a safe haven to smugglers, giving the group opportunities both to connect with the wider Islamic State network and to resupply itself via contraband routes crossing the Gulf of Aden.

Secondly, clan connections help the group operate in the area. Its leadership is dominated by the Ali Salebaan, a small sub-clan of the Darod/Majerteen.<sup>31</sup> This sub-clan's members harbour grievances about the governing arrangements in Puntland, in which its rivals, particularly the Mohamud Salebaan, are most prominent. Tensions have repeatedly flared between the Ali Salebaan and Mohamud Salebaan. One dispute in 2016 morphed into a campaign of armed resistance from the Ali Salebaan, which ended only when the Puntland authorities promised to allocate its members additional government positions.<sup>32</sup>

It would nevertheless be an exaggeration to say IS-Somalia is an Ali Salebaan insurgency, since the group has also alienated residents belonging to the sub-clan at times and cannot count on their undivided support. To the locals' dismay, IS-Somalia has even executed Ali Salebaan members for various alleged transgressions. For example, it accused a number of sub-clan members of working with the government after it was routed from Qandala, the village it briefly seized in 2016.<sup>33</sup> Just like Al-Shabaab, IS-Somalia relies on force and the threat thereof to ensure that residents have little choice but to obey its dictates.

That said, the sub-clan's continued grievances mean that its relations with the Puntland government remain frosty, providing IS-Somalia with opportunities to win over the disgruntled.<sup>34</sup> Some Ali Salebaan members have cooperated with Al-Shabaab, but Mumin's own position as a member of the Ali Salebaan (more precisely, its Bicid-yahan branch) has enabled him to establish a foothold for his organisation in areas dominated by the sub-clan, as well as to secure supplies of arms and other goods through its smuggling networks. These ties explain why IS-Somalia operates almost exclusively in the Ali Salebaan's areas and struggles in attempts to sink roots elsewhere. Though relations with locals can be tense, the kinship bonds provide the group

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<sup>31</sup> The Darod are one of Somalia's four main clan families, while the Majerteen are the dominant clan in Puntland. For more on the Somali clan system, see Joakim Gundel, "Clans in Somalia", African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, December 2009.

<sup>32</sup> The Puntland government followed through on most of its pledges. Crisis Group interviews, Ali Salebaan members, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024. For more on the group's seizure of Qandala, see Yusuf and Khalif, "The Islamic State Threat in Somalia's Puntland State", op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> While politically marginal in Puntland, the Ali Salebaan have nonetheless thrived economically. Historically, as it was based along Somalia's north-eastern coast, the sub-clan traded with merchants in Yemen. When Siad Barre's military regime (1969-1991) tried to impose regulations, this commerce gave way to smuggling, including a foray into arms dealing following the Somali government's collapse in the early 1990s. Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

with a social base that its opponents, both Al-Shabaab and the Puntland government, do not have.

Thirdly, IS-Somalia persists because its adversaries have repeatedly failed to subdue it militarily. Al-Shabaab sees IS-Somalia as a nuisance whose competition serves only to divide allegiances among the jihadists in Somalia. The group also poses a threat to Al-Shabaab's internal cohesion, offering an alternative to fighters who are unhappy with its policies. Al-Shabaab's leadership regards IS-Somalia's emergence as a source of *fitna*, or disorder, in the jihadist ranks, an offence that is punishable by death, according to their interpretation of Islamic law. Even so, and despite its massive numerical advantage in Somalia, Al-Shabaab has so far been unable to crush IS-Somalia. The main reason is probably that Al-Shabaab's attention has been consumed by its war with the Somali government and allies.

Similarly, IS-Somalia's other major opponent, the Puntland government, has fallen short in its efforts to eliminate the group. Puntland officials complain that they lack the resources they need to take on IS-Somalia, pointing to insufficient funding for operations.<sup>35</sup> Clan ties likely complicate the situation: locals could read a large contingent of troops sent by the Puntland authorities to the Islamic State's bastion as a bid by the Mohamud Salebaan to overpower the Ali Salebaan. Puntland leader Said Deni, who is from the Mohamud Salebaan, has appointed an Ali Salebaan figure as his security minister during both his terms in power, likely to dispel such perceptions.

Since early 2023, the Puntland government has been even more distracted. It has stopped cooperating with the Somali national government, arguing that Mogadishu seeks to concentrate power in its own hands at the expense of Somalia's federal states.<sup>36</sup> A divisive electoral campaign for Puntland's parliament and presidency in late 2023 also fractured the state's security apparatus, with different parts of it competing with one another rather than maintaining pressure on threats like IS-Somalia.<sup>37</sup> In 2023, most of the security personnel in Puntland also found themselves drawn into supporting a rebellion led by their clan brethren in the Sool region of breakaway Somaliland.<sup>38</sup> The January conclusion of elections and a slowdown of fighting in Sool offer Puntland an opportunity to bring Bari back under control, but lingering political divisions still need to be addressed.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>36</sup> Puntland, upset about constitutional changes pushed by the government in Mogadishu, has in effect suspended its participation in the Somali federation since early 2023. "Lessons from the Missed Opportunity in Puntland's Polls", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 March 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Security units in Puntland are aligned with rival political groupings, which in turn undermines coordination. For example, the Diyano family, which underpins the opposition Mideeye political party, has long controlled the Puntland Security Force, based in Bosasso. This body has a frequently competitive relationship with the Puntland Maritime Police Force, the main unit that President Deni relies upon. Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023. Though the election in Puntland took place without major hiccups, tensions persist among politicians – and thus between Puntland's various security forces. "Lessons from the Missed Opportunity in Puntland's Polls", op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Sool is claimed by both Somaliland and Puntland, while the main clan based there, the Dhulbahante, has since 2023 sought to set up its own administration distinct from both. Crisis Group Statement, "Time for Somaliland and the Dhulbahante to Talk", 19 May 2023.

<sup>39</sup> "Lessons from the Missed Opportunity in Puntland's Polls", op. cit.

## V. The Contest with Al-Shabaab

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The most prominent obstacle to IS-Somalia's ambitions for growth is its continued rivalry with the larger, better-armed Al-Shabaab. The enmity between the two partly reflects the global competition between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.<sup>40</sup> But beyond the ideological differences, the two groups are at odds for both personal and economic reasons. Most key Somali members of IS-Somalia were formerly part of Al-Shabaab, and IS-Somalia taps into the same extortion rackets in Bosaso, and occasionally in Mogadishu, that Al-Shabaab regards as its own.

Jockeying for power between the two groups has occasionally led to battles over territory. While Al-Shabaab once managed to intrude on IS-Somalia turf to the point where it nearly eliminated the group, it now finds itself on the back foot in Bari. Fighting began in 2015, when IS-Somalia first emerged. In March 2016, Al-Shabaab launched a seaborne invasion of IS-Somalia positions that ended with Al-Shabaab routed.<sup>41</sup> During further clashes in 2018, IS-Somalia withstood an Al-Shabaab advance, only for the latter to regroup and drive deep into Ali Salebaan territory.<sup>42</sup>

In 2023, Al-Shabaab made another push on IS-Somalia. Its initial onslaught was successful to the point that some predicted the end of IS-Somalia.<sup>43</sup> Yet by year's end, IS-Somalia had managed to reverse the tide, recovering all the areas into which Al-Shabaab had advanced following the 2018 clashes.<sup>44</sup> IS-Somalia's momentum continued into early 2024, with Al-Shabaab in effect retreating to the Cal Madow mountains west of Bosaso and IS-Somalia hanging on to the Cal Miskaat mountains to the east – restoring the spheres of influence established when Mumin left to form IS-Somalia. The port city of Bosaso is in the middle, and both groups maintain a presence there.<sup>45</sup> The changing balance on the battlefield has provided IS-Somalia with a degree of breathing space in the Bari region that it has not enjoyed since 2018.

The shift in fortune has most likely been caused by Al-Shabaab's desire to preserve its position in central Somalia, causing it to bolster its defences there amid government plans to restart a stalled offensive against the group. IS-Somalia's cadre of seasoned foreign fighters, primarily those who have come to Somalia specifically to join the organisation, have also given the group an edge on the battlefield.<sup>46</sup> An Al-Shabaab counterattack in January pushed past IS-Somalia positions for a time, inflicting seri-

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<sup>40</sup> The Islamic State seeks to establish a caliphate immediately, while al-Qaeda prefers to wait until conditions are ripe while attacking the West in the interim. For more background on the struggle between these two groups, see Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

<sup>41</sup> In March 2016, Al-Shabaab sent 400 fighters by sea to Puntland in an attempt to eliminate Mumin's nascent group. The mission was a spectacular failure, however, as they disembarked prematurely along the Puntland coast. The militants were then spotted by residents who informed the Puntland authorities, who in turn quickly attacked them. Neighbouring Galmudug state also prevented fleeing Al-Shabaab fighters from retreating south across its territory. Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024. See also Islamic State messaging in *al-Naba* newsletter, April 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.



ous casualties, but failed to capture territory. A subsequent attempt in February was also unsuccessful.<sup>47</sup>

These episodes highlight a characteristic of the fight between the two: while Al-Shabaab has been unable to quash IS-Somalia, it has been able to check the other group's expansion outside Bari. Al-Shabaab has warded off its rival's challenges to its dominance in urban areas, including in Mogadishu. Sources say IS-Somalia has attempted to recruit from clans in the city and to poach Al-Shabaab members.<sup>48</sup> IS-Somalia has also launched small-scale attacks in Mogadishu, often targeting security personnel with improvised explosive devices, though these operations have tapered off, falling from around twenty per year in the period 2018-2020 to six in 2023.<sup>49</sup> But for the most part, Al-Shabaab has thwarted its adversary's attempts to exert influence in the city.

One motive driving IS-Somalia's attempts to establish itself in Mogadishu is to expand its revenue base by tapping into Al-Shabaab's extortion schemes in the city. The effort has not panned out, however. Indeed, traders in Bakara, Mogadishu's largest open-air market, told Crisis Group that when Islamic State operatives began threatening them in early 2022, they turned to Al-Shabaab to handle the problem.<sup>50</sup> That they sought help from the rival Islamist group, rather than the government, demonstrates the extent of Al-Shabaab's influence in Somalia's capital city.

Yet IS-Somalia still derives strategic advantage in its contest with Al-Shabaab from its affiliation with the global jihadist network. Under military pressure for years, the Islamic State's core in Syria and Iraq is in disarray.<sup>51</sup> Local sources nevertheless report that the battle-hardened foreign fighters sent by the Islamic State to Somalia offer advice to Mumin and sometimes play a restraining role. An example they cite is Mumin's repeatedly expressed desire to attempt a takeover of Bosasso. Experienced foreign fighters urged caution in moving ahead with such an ambitious plan until it is clear the group would be able to hold any ground it might take.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the foreign cadre has reportedly played an essential role in averting Al-Shabaab advances. While Somalia's conflict is primarily driven by local dynamics, the foreign influences on IS-Somalia would appear to have moulded the group's approach and assisted its upward trajectory.

Even in Mogadishu, the group might be on the rise. Businessmen operating in the capital have informed Crisis Group they are receiving fresh calls from individuals claiming to be part of the Islamic State and demanding large sums of money – though they caution it is impossible to confirm the callers' identities.<sup>53</sup> Security sources also connect a recent uptick of violence to the Islamic State. A series of attacks in early 2024 hit the telecommunications firm Hormuud, while on 6 February four blasts went off in Bakara market. No group claimed the Bakara explosions, which killed at

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<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, 2023-2024.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group data.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bakara market traders, Mogadishu, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°236, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, 18 July 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews, businessmen, Mogadishu, 2024.

least ten civilians, but the daytime attacks on traders contrasted with what has to date been Al-Shabaab's less overtly violent approach to businesses in Mogadishu.<sup>54</sup>

Bosasso, meanwhile, remains the main area of IS-Somalia urban infiltration. As Puntland's major port and economic hub, the city has been the chief target of IS-Somalia's extortion rackets since at least mid-2018.<sup>55</sup> Local authorities chalk up a series of attacks on midsize businesses in Bosasso in the middle of 2023 to attempts by the group to intimidate merchants into compliance.<sup>56</sup> Bosasso-based traders interviewed by Crisis Group remarked that IS-Somalia is more aggressive than Al-Shabaab in its extortion, demanding higher payments and threatening violence more readily. Mogadishu-based business operators say their experiences have been similar.<sup>57</sup> Some note they have had to hire additional security after such threats.<sup>58</sup>

## VI. Future Risks

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The Islamic State is highly secretive and its leadership structure hard to decipher, in large part due to the group's efforts to prevent its senior figures from being targeted. Before the 31 May U.S. drone strike in Bari, European security officials had told Crisis Group that the Islamic State's new emir is in Somalia, though they did not identify Mumin by name.<sup>59</sup> After the strike, U.S. security officials stated that they believe Mumin to be the group's leader.<sup>60</sup> Some Islamic State insiders have echoed that assessment, saying their new caliph is Mumin.<sup>61</sup> Other analysts, however, have expressed doubt about Mumin's reported ascent. While it is difficult to judge the veracity of the contending claims, there is little question that Mumin holds a senior position in the Islamic State's global network alongside his role as Somali branch leader.<sup>62</sup>

The Islamic State has not made a formal announcement, but the selection of a caliph from Africa, if confirmed, would be a pivotal development for the group. As its foothold in Syria and Iraq has loosened, the Islamic State has increasingly devolved authority to its affiliates in Africa. IS-Somalia's role as a regional financial hub has been key in enabling the group to widen its operations to the continent.

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<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, 2023-2024.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, business operators, Puntland and Mogadishu, 2023-2024.

<sup>58</sup> Bosasso-based residents noted to Crisis Group a trend whereby IS-Somalia operatives have begun kidnapping businessmen in the city for ransom, a sign that the group is emboldened. Crisis Group interviews, Bosasso residents, 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, European security officials, March 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Kube, "Global leader of ISIS targeted and possibly killed in U.S. airstrike", op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> The insiders claimed that the person known as Abu Hafs, who was named caliph in August 2023 and about whom very little is known, is in fact Mumin, implying that Abu Hafs is a *nom de guerre* to guard the caliph's identity. Tweet by @NihadJariri, journalist, 5:08pm, 3 July 2024. The UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which relies on information provided by states, mentions in its July report that Mumin is one of two people most likely to be caliph. "S/2024/556", UNSC, 22 July 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Even if not the caliph, Mumin could still occupy a leading role in the Islamic State, perhaps as the coordinator of all its provinces worldwide, one of the most important positions in the group. Aaron Y. Zelin, "A globally integrated Islamic State", *War on the Rocks*, 15 July 2024.

That said, the threat that IS-Somalia poses to Somalia and the region derives more from its future ambition than its current capacity. Its low profile and limited ability to carry out attacks could in fact correspond to a tactical decision by the wider group to avoid attracting attention, including from Washington. By remaining discreet, IS-Somalia could in theory be able to continue receiving foreign fighters sent by other branches and managing money transfers among them. Internal Islamic State documents suggest that the group generally wants its affiliates to give money to one another, in order to strengthen ties but also to compensate for the loss of revenue suffered by the core Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, where the group no longer holds territory.<sup>63</sup>

Local sources report to Crisis Group that the group still aspires to assert territorial dominion in Puntland, as a stepping stone to becoming stronger in all Somalia.<sup>64</sup> This goal seems far-fetched given the constraints mentioned above, including the group's narrow clan base, Al-Shabaab's opposition to its growth and efforts by the Puntland government to limit its expansion. Regardless, sources assert the group aspires to grow, including by moving into small towns in Bari like Bali Dhiddin or Qandala (where its members have operated in the past, and where the state security presence is intermittent) and spreading out from there toward Bosasso.<sup>65</sup>

It is conceivable that, in the future, IS-Somalia may pose a threat extending beyond Somalia to much of East Africa. The group's focus on recruiting from among the Oromo population seeking refuge in Puntland and its occasional Amharic-language publications may point to a desire to spread into Ethiopia. Furthermore, a security source told Crisis Group that an IS-Somalia operative detained in early 2024 in southern Somalia had been tasked by the group's leadership with planning a sally into Kenya.<sup>66</sup>

Even so, there is no hiding the tension between maintaining a low profile to avoid the attention of government forces, on one hand, and building up the group's territorial sway or capacity for violence, on the other, all the more so if the group strikes outside Somalia. Local security officials suggest that within IS-Somalia, that debate may play out in deliberations over strategy, in which patience is weighed against the thirst for expansion.<sup>67</sup> A lesson of both the Islamic State's reign in Syria and Iraq and Mumin's short-lived seizure of Qandala is that it is difficult to hold territory, especially urban areas, as state forces are likely to mount a robust response. IS-Somalia has seemingly chosen a different tack, biding its time while it accumulates revenue and builds military muscle.

At the same time, IS-Somalia's main opponents face constraints of their own, which impair their ability to subdue the group. Al-Shabaab is fighting on other fronts and has suffered repeated setbacks even when devoting a large share of its resources to countering IS-Somalia. Puntland authorities must tread carefully among the region's

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<sup>63</sup> IS-Somalia maintains ties with the small Islamic State branch in Yemen, although the degree of collaboration is difficult to judge. Crisis Group interview, security analyst, 2024.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Puntland, 2023-2024.

<sup>66</sup> The plan, very much in its infancy, appeared to be to establish a presence somewhere in Jubaland, along the Somalia-Kenya border, to serve as a gateway to Kenya. Crisis Group interview, security official, Mogadishu, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, security official, Puntland, 2023.

socio-political fault lines, continue to focus on the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and deal with other challenges, including frosty relations with Mogadishu, which impede nationwide security and intelligence cooperation.<sup>68</sup> The U.S. monitors IS-Somalia and occasionally takes punitive action against it, but that generally takes the form of airstrikes or financial sanctions, which thus far have done little to root out the group. Despite occasional collaboration with Puntland security units, Washington also appears more concerned with tackling the global financial arm of IS-Somalia than with driving it out of Puntland.

## **VII. What Can Be Done?**

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IS-Somalia began as a small offshoot of Al-Shabaab but has evolved in unexpected ways. Despite the group's modest size, its persistence in the face of difficult odds – and its growing importance to the global movement – means that local, national and regional security bodies would be well advised not to take their eyes off it. Al-Shabaab remains the larger danger in Somalia, and the fight to defeat it will most likely continue to absorb more resources. Yet if there is eventual confirmation that Mumin is the new caliph, his group may feel sufficiently emboldened to pose a bigger threat to Somalia, the Horn of Africa and beyond.

In part, IS-Somalia thrives because authorities cannot muster the cooperation needed to apply concerted military pressure on the group. Political fissures between Puntland and Somalia, as well as between Puntland and Somaliland, also get in the way of intelligence cooperation. The strains on Puntland's relations with Mogadishu are particularly harmful, since Puntland is unlikely on its own to be able to tackle the IS-Somalia threat. These rival political centres and their respective security forces should seek to put these disputes aside and find a way to cooperate. Having spearheaded the global anti-Islamic State coalition (of which Somalia is a member), the U.S. could coordinate information sharing, helping overcome mistrust among Somalia's various intelligence agencies. U.S. airstrikes could play a role as part of these efforts, but Somali authorities should not rely on them. Although airstrikes can maintain pressure on fighters and impede militant leaders' movements, experience shows that they will do little to eradicate the group unless combined with coordinated ground operations.

Greater intelligence cooperation should above all seek to weaken IS-Somalia by tackling its main source of power, revenue generation. Apart from the effects of IS-Somalia's largesse in backing affiliates abroad, a healthy balance sheet allows the group to take advantage of local smuggling networks for supplies and maintain a flow of new members. Mogadishu has already taken a number of steps to interrupt Al-Shabaab's revenue streams, which have had some impact in denting the group's financial strength.<sup>69</sup> For example, the Somali government has shut down bank and

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<sup>68</sup> The political standoff between Mogadishu and Puntland compounds divisions within Puntland's security apparatus that have continued after the 2024 elections. The lack of trust was evident in late April, when a U.S. security delegation planning to visit Bossaso cancelled the trip after different Puntland forces blocked each other from getting to the airport for the meeting. "Puntland president's mixed signals stall US counterterrorism efforts", *Horseed*, 29 April 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, businessmen and government officials, Mogadishu, 2022.

mobile money accounts suspected to be part of Al-Shabaab's extortion racket, engaged with Mogadishu businesses in a bid to build trust and gather information, and attempted to root out Al-Shabaab operatives from commercial hubs it had reportedly infiltrated, such as the capital's port.<sup>70</sup> Some of these measures could equally be applied to IS-Somalia in Puntland. The Counter Finance Group of the global anti-Islamic State coalition could help with this task, too, including by offering technical support and advice on rolling up IS-Somalia funding networks.

Not all responses need to be based on coercion, however. Maintaining a pathway for individuals in IS-Somalia to defect – including through appeals to their clan networks – could provide a peaceful off-ramp for its discontented members. A spike of foreign fighter defections over the past year indicates that others may be within reach. Ensuring they are treated well during their demobilisation could help spur additional outflows, while bolstering intelligence collection. Puntland lacks a formal defector program, however, and in one recent case foreign fighters thought to be quitting the group were sentenced to death for affiliation with IS-Somalia before later being scheduled for release.<sup>71</sup> Such confusion could dampen the prospect of future defections.

Puntland should also do far more to alleviate the grievances of communities in which IS-Somalia operates. These steps should include discussing with Ali Salebaan members the allocation of a fair share of government positions, while also boosting development projects and other support in this part of Bari region so as to allay perceptions of estrangement from the authorities. Authorities in Puntland should also make sure they work closely with community leaders in advance of military operations in the area in order to reduce mistrust. Prominent individuals among the Ali Salebaan should also be encouraged to support the Puntland government rather than cooperate with militants, despite their clan or business connections. Reducing political tensions and the Ali Salebaan's sense of marginalisation will in turn squeeze the space in which non-state groups like IS-Somalia can operate.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

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IS-Somalia has defied repeated efforts by Somali authorities, the Puntland administration and Al-Shabaab to crush it. Its importance to the wider Islamic State network, particularly its African affiliates, has grown in tandem with its ability to drum up revenue. It may soon be ready to take full advantage of the various Somali authorities' failure to exercise effective control of all the nation's territory or to cooperate with one another to that end.

Faced with mounting evidence that the Islamic State's global network is dropping anchor in the country, the Somali government and Puntland administration should set aside their differences in order to forge a united front against the group, while also encouraging defections and addressing the grievances of communities that host IS-Somalia. While they may not eliminate the group, they can at least ensure it does not evolve into a major threat to Somalia and the region.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 12 September 2024**

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Somali government official, Mogadishu, November 2022.

<sup>71</sup> "Puntland military court sentences six Moroccans to death for ISIS affiliations", *Hiraan Online*, 29 February 2024.

## Appendix A: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2021

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