Research article

Dealing with non-state armed groups for regional stabilization: A focus on Al-Shabaab

Tadie Degie Yigzaw[1] and Tigabu Alamir Tegegne[1]

Department of Political Science and International Studies, Bahir Dar University[1],Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
Corresponding author's email: degietadie@gmail.com

Abstract: *Non-state armed groups, exemplified by Al-Shabaab in Somalia, continue to pose a profound threat to both regional and global security, with the group's resilience and adaptability undermining conventional military and counterterrorism responses. Despite ongoing efforts – including military operations, counterterrorism initiatives, and attempts to address underlying drivers – Al-Shabaab has maintained its operational capacity, exploiting governance vacuums and leveraging local grievances to sustain influence and territorial control. This article adopts a multifaceted theoretical lens, drawing on realism, institutionalism, and constructivism, to analyze the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that perpetuate Al-Shabaab's role as a destabilizing force. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, integrating empirical evidence with theoretical insights to provide a nuanced understanding of the group's persistence. Key findings indicate that strategies narrowly focused on military or security measures have yielded only limited and often temporary gains, while occasionally exacerbating local tensions and instability. For policymakers, the study underscores the critical importance of prioritizing dialogue, negotiation, and the development of inclusive, transparent governance structures in Somalia. Sustainable progress against Al-Shabaab, the findings suggest, requires a holistic and adaptable strategy that is deeply informed by local context and the root causes of conflict, offering actionable guidance for national and international actors seeking to promote lasting stability in the Horn of Africa.*

1. Introduction

Non-state armed groups have become significant actors in global security, often destabilizing local and regional environments by controlling territories, disrupting governance, and perpetuating violence (Krause & Milliken, 2009). Among these, Al-Shabaab in Somalia is notable for its sustained influence and destabilizing role in the Horn of Africa, posing challenges to both national governments and international peace initiatives. Effectively addressing the threats from such groups demands a detailed understanding of their historical development, organizational structure, recruitment methods, financial networks, and operational tactics (Podder, 2013). The difficulty in countering Al-Shabaab is heightened by the complex Somali

conflict, marked by fragmented clan politics, weak state institutions, and militia-led governance systems that resist both military and peaceful solutions (Mwangi, 2023).

Efforts to mitigate the impact of Al-Shabaab necessitate a multi-faceted approach that balances military interventions with socio-political solutions, regional cooperation, and engagement with local communities (Nielsen, 2019). The interplay between military operations, such as those undertaken by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and broader strategies that address governance deficits, economic grievances, and social fragmentation is critical for any sustainable resolution. Furthermore, the responses of various stakeholders – including national governments, international organizations, and humanitarian actors – play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of interventions, as these entities must navigate complex political and ethical dilemmas in their engagement with non-state armed groups (Mandel, 2013; Nielsen, 2019).

This study aims to dissect these challenges by analyzing Al-Shabaab's organizational structure, sources of support, and the broader context of state failure in Somalia. It also examines the responses of different actors and the outcomes of various counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts, with the ultimate goal of formulating evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, security practitioners, and humanitarian organizations. By integrating existing literature and original research, the study seeks to contribute to the development of effective strategies for managing the threats posed by non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab, thereby supporting efforts to foster peace and stability in conflict-affected regions (Podder, 2013; Mwangi, 2023; Mandel, 2013). Therefore, the central research questions of this article are: 1) how can engagement with non-state armed groups, specifically Al-Shabaab, contribute to regional stabilization in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa? 2) What are the limitations of prevailing military and counterterrorism approaches, and what alternative strategies can more effectively address the underlying drivers of Al-Shabaab's resilience and influence? By focusing on these questions, the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of current stabilization efforts and to identify pathways for more sustainable peace through dialogue, negotiation, and inclusive governance.

Following this introduction, the article is structured as follows: The next section reviews the existing literature on non-state armed groups and regional stabilization, with a particular focus on

Al-Shabaab. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical frameworks – realism, institutionalism, and constructivism – that inform the analysis. The methodology section then outlines the qualitative approach and sources of empirical evidence. The core of the article presents the findings, examining the interplay of political, social, and economic factors in Al-Shabaab's persistence and the outcomes of various intervention strategies. The conclusion synthesizes the main insights and offers policy recommendations for national and international actors seeking lasting stability in Somalia and the region.

1.1.Contexts, debates and conceptual clarifications

The article explores the intricate dynamics of engaging non-state armed groups, particularly focusing on Al-Shabaab in Somalia within the study's context. Its primary goal is to conduct a thorough examination of the approaches and obstacles involved in managing such groups to promote stability in the region. Non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab present significant security challenges, not only domestically in Somalia but also on a broader regional scale. It is essential to grasp the root causes that sustain these groups' presence and resilience to formulate effective countermeasures. Al-Shabaab, recognized for its extremist beliefs and violent methods, plays a significant role in Somalia's conflict environment, contributing to unrest and impeding peace-building endeavors (Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023).

There are different kinds of discourses on the role of non-state armed groups in peacebuilding and stabilization processes (Ahmed and Green, 1999). But, the article puts forth a strong case for initiating discussions and negotiations with non-state armed organizations such as Al-Shabaab. Emphasizing the importance of diplomatic approaches, the article underscores the advantages of tackling the underlying issues that fuel conflict and insecurity. Engaging in negotiations can provide a means to comprehend the grievances of these groups and identify shared interests for achieving peaceful outcomes (Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023). By fostering dialogue, opportunities for reducing tensions and ultimately fostering reconciliation can be pursued, paving the way for sustained stability in the region.

Proponents of military intervention contend that addressing non-state armed organizations such as Al-Shabaab necessitates a robust strategy. They argue that military action is essential for dismantling these groups' operational capacities, disrupting their connections, and averting additional violence. By emphasizing security measures and counterterrorism initiatives, it

becomes feasible to diminish the sway of such groups and foster a more secure setting for regional progress. Military involvement could be viewed as a crucial measure to safeguard the populace, particularly in light of extremist doctrines and aggressive methods utilized by entities like Al-Shabaab (Marques and Rognvik, 2020).

However, the literature review on non-state armed groups highlights the complexities and strategies involved in handling these groups to achieve stability in the region (Ahmed and Green, 1999). Various scholarly works stress the importance of comprehending the motivations, ideologies, and structures of non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab to effectively counter their impact and actions. Moreover, the literature emphasizes the significance of adopting a multifaceted approach that integrates military, political, and socio-economic measures to combat the threat posed by groups such as Al-Shabaab (Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023). Research suggests that solely relying on military means may not be adequate and could potentially worsen the situation by alienating local populations or inadvertently strengthening the group's narrative of resistance against external forces (Marques and Rognvik, 2020). Furthermore, the literature review underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that tackle the root causes of conflict, including governance failures, marginalization, and lack of economic opportunities. Scholars argue that sustainable peace and stability can only be achieved through inclusive governance, community involvement, and efforts to address grievances that drive the recruitment and support for non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab (Marques and Rognvik, 2020).

A blend of negotiation and military action can provide a comprehensive and effective solution to the challenges posed by groups like Al-Shabaab. By combining diplomatic initiatives with precise military interventions, a nuanced strategy can be crafted to tackle the intricate issues in Somalia (Marques and Rognvik, 2020). This approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the conflict, emphasizing the importance of addressing underlying causes while also dealing with immediate security risks. Balancing negotiation and military measures enables progress towards stabilizing the region, protecting civilian interests, and fostering lasting peace and security.

Non-state armed groups are organized entities that operate independently from official state military or security forces, using violence to pursue political, ideological, or economic objectives (Ahmed and Green, 1999). They exist outside government control, vary in size and structure, and may range from small militias to large transnational organizations. Motivated by factors such as

political exclusion or social injustice, these groups often challenge established power structures and can engage in activities like insurgency, terrorism, and organized crime. Schneckener defines non-state armed groups as organizations willing and able to use violence to achieve their aims, without integration into formal state institutions (Nielsen, 2019). Understanding these groups is crucial for conflict resolution and security, requiring comprehensive strategies that address underlying causes and promote political inclusivity and dialogue (Nielsen, 2019; Mandel, 2013).

1.2. Theoretical framework

To construct a robust theoretical framework for the article, it is imperative to incorporate key concepts related to non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and their impact on regional stability. The framework should begin by examining the complexities of NSAGs, including their motives, organizational structures, and tactics, as these factors critically influence regional dynamics (Krause and Milliken, 2009; Hofmann and Schneckener, 2011). It must also address conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes, emphasizing dialogue, negotiation, and disarmament initiatives with these groups. Additionally, the role of external actors such as international organizations and neighboring states in mediating conflicts and supporting stabilization efforts is essential to consider (Schneckener, 2009; Krause and Milliken, 2009). Addressing the root causes of conflict – political grievances, economic inequalities, and social injustices – is vital for sustainable peace (Robinson, 2021; Krause and Milliken, 2009; Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023). Contextual factors specific to Somalia, including local cultural norms and historical background, are crucial for crafting effective strategies against groups like Al-Shabaab. A comprehensive approach combining military, political, and socio-economic measures is necessary to manage NSAGs effectively (Robinson, 2021; Krause and Milliken, 2009; Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023). Integrating these elements provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges posed by NSAGs and informs strategies to enhance regional stability (Mamiya, 2022; Swed and Stubblefield, 2020).

The literature underscores the need for multifaceted strategies that address governance deficits, socioeconomic marginalization, and systemic inequalities through a theoretical lens blending realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Sustainable stability demands immediate security actions alongside inclusive governance and community-driven reconciliation to counter

grievances exploited by groups like Al-Shabaab (Marques & Rognvik, 2020). Institutionalism highlights the importance of accountable governance structures, while constructivism focuses on identity narratives and local legitimacy (Menkhaus, 2022; Bøås, 2023). Realist perspectives caution against relying solely on negotiations without coercive measures to weaken militant capacities (Williams, 2021). A hybrid strategy merging targeted military interventions with grassroots political engagement ensures security efforts are complemented by dismantling ideological and institutional drivers of radicalization. This integrated approach aligns with emerging research advocating context-specific solutions that balance state-building with localized peacebuilding, addressing both structural and agent-level factors perpetuating instability in Somalia (Hirblinger & von Billerbeck, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

2. Research Methods

The research methodology adopted for this study was grounded entirely in qualitative approaches, designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the role of non-state armed groups in regional stabilization, with a particular focus on Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The process began with purposive sampling, which enabled the targeted selection of participants who possessed direct and relevant experience or knowledge concerning Al-Shabaab and stabilization efforts in the region. The sample was composed of seven individuals, including civil society representatives, regional security experts, Somali specialists, and former members of AMISOM. Selection criteria emphasized the inclusion of those with firsthand experience of the conflict dynamics and those actively engaged in peacebuilding or governance processes within Somalia, with special attention given to ensuring Somali voices were represented – addressing a noted gap in prior research that often marginalized local perspectives.

Data collection relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method that allowed participants to articulate their perceptions, motivations, and experiences in detail. The qualitative data obtained from these interviews were analyzed thematically, using coding techniques to identify recurring patterns and significant themes within the transcripts and notes. This rigorous analytical process facilitated a nuanced exploration of Al-Shabaab's organizational structure, recruitment methods, and the broader socio-political factors influencing regional stability. Complementing the interviews, document analysis was also conducted, involving a systematic review of relevant reports, media articles, and official statements related to Al-Shabaab and

stabilization initiatives. By triangulating data from interviews and documentary sources, the study enhanced the validity of its findings and achieved a comprehensive perspective on the complex interplay between non-state armed groups and regional stabilization strategies. The methodology also recognized inherent limitations, particularly the challenges of accessing key Somali actors due to prevailing security constraints and related obstacles, which are common issues in research on non-state armed groups.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 The current condition of Somalia

Somalia in 2025 faces a severe humanitarian crisis driven by prolonged conflict, recurrent climate shocks, and widespread need, with approximately 5.98 million people requiring assistance after years of devastating droughts and floods that have destroyed livelihoods and displaced millions (OCHA, 2025). The fragile health system, weakened by over three decades of armed conflict, struggles with disease outbreaks, low immunization rates, and one of the highest maternal mortality rates globally, while ongoing violence from non-state armed groups and fragmented governance undermine stability and public services (WHO, 2025). Food insecurity has sharply worsened, with 4.4 million people expected to face crisis-level hunger between April and June 2025 due to erratic rainfall, crop failures, livestock losses, and rising food prices, disproportionately impacting internally displaced persons and rural communities (Global Issues, 2025). Security remains volatile amid persistent inter-clan violence and attacks by groups like al-Shabaab, especially as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) scales down, leaving much of the countryside under insurgent control while the federal government controls mainly urban centers (BTI, 2024). Despite slight improvements in some humanitarian indicators, Somalia's outlook is precarious, threatened by an anticipated La Niña-induced drought, ongoing governance challenges, and the compounded effects of poverty, displacement, and climate change, all of which risk further deterioration in food security, health, and social stability (OCHA, 2025; WHO, 2025; Global Issues, 2025).

3.2. Interests, structures, tactics, and operational capacity of Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab, a militant Islamist group in Somalia, emerged in the mid-2000s during a power vacuum in the country. It originated as a youth militia within the Islamic Courts Union and gained prominence as an independent actor after the Ethiopian invasion in 2006, presenting itself

as a vehicle for armed resistance against foreign forces (Williams, 2018). Al-Shabaab seeks to establish an Islamic state in Somalia and has been involved in the ongoing civil war, gaining popular support and controlling large parts of south and central Somalia[1]. The group has also been responsible for high-fatality attacks, such as the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack and the October 2017 Mogadishu bombings (Serrano, 2019). Al-Shabaab's ideology combines Somali nationalism with Islamism, and it has maintained ties with al-Qaeda since 2012. The group has also forged ties with other al-Qaeda affiliates and has been involved in smuggling networks. Despite military setbacks and internal conflicts, Al-Shabaab has remained a significant security challenge in Somalia, with an estimated combat strength of between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters in 2022 (Assidiq, 2023).

Therefore, grasping the intricacies of this group is essential for policymakers, analysts, and security personnel. This overview seeks to explore the fundamental facets of Al-Shabaab, illuminating its motivations, structure, strategic tactics, and capacity to maintain and grow its presence in the area. Through examining these critical components, we can acquire valuable understanding of the factors propelling Al-Shabaab's activities and its implications for regional security (Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023).

i.   Interests of Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab's core motivation is its steadfast goal to establish an Islamic state in Somalia, driving all aspects of its operations and ideology. Central to its agenda is the expulsion of foreign, often Christian, forces and the strict enforcement of Sharia law as the sole legal and moral authority, which underpins its legitimacy and justifies its violent and non-violent actions to reshape Somalia's political, social, and religious order (Mwangi, 2023). The group's origins are closely linked to Somalia's religious traditions and historical respect for religious authority, positioning itself as the sole legitimate defender of Somali honor against foreign intervention and government corruption, thereby gaining grassroots support despite ideological disagreements. Al-Shabaab's ideology blends nationalist and Salafi-Jihadist principles, advocating a literalist interpretation of Islam that rejects secular nationalism and modernist views, legitimizing violence to conquer territories and suppress dissent in pursuit of a universal Islamic community governed by Sharia (Assidiq, 2023). Emerging from the collapse of the Islamic Courts Union,

---

[1] Interview with a researcher on peace and security in the Horn of Africa, Addis Ababa, February 25, 2023.

Al-Shabaab evolved into a quasi-state entity controlling territory through governance and harsh Sharia enforcement, targeting rival Islamic traditions and labeling existing governments apostate. Its rhetoric has shifted from nationalist resistance to a global jihadist call for a caliphate, enforcing strict social codes and engaging in military and terrorist operations to destabilize the region and resist foreign intervention. Despite setbacks from international military pressure, Al-Shabaab remains resilient and adaptive, aligning with transnational Islamist movements while maintaining its primary ambition of establishing an Islamic state in Somalia (Williams, 2018; Serrano, 2019).

ii. Structures of Al-Shabaab

The organizational structure of Al-Shabaab is characterized by a strict hierarchical system with Ahmed Diriye, also known as Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah, at its apex. Diriye assumed leadership in 2014 after the death of his predecessor, Ahmed Abdi Godane, marking a pivotal transition that did not disrupt the group's operational effectiveness, as it maintained its foundational structure and activities with renewed vigor (CFR, 2022; US Department of State, 2020, as cited in ecoi.net, 2023). His leadership is marked by a high degree of secrecy, deliberately obscuring top leaders' identities to protect them and preserve internal cohesion (Assidiq, 2023; Serrano, 2019). Central to Al-Shabaab's governance is the executive council, or shura, typically comprising around twelve members, which serves as the primary decision-making body responsible for strategic objectives, operational oversight, and maintaining ideological unity (CFR, 2022, as cited in ecoi.net, 2023). This council institutionalizes leadership processes modeled after other jihadist groups, notably Al-Qaeda, with which Al-Shabaab has maintained close ties since its inception (Shuriye, 2012). The shura appoints key regional and district officials – walis and shadow administrators – tasked with implementing directives locally (Senior Analyst, 2023, as cited in ecoi.net, 2023). Despite projecting unity, Al-Shabaab experiences internal divisions and factionalism, with occasional dissent over power distribution and regional management; appointing regional leaders without local ties aims to prevent rival power bases but sometimes challenges local legitimacy due to traditional clan structures (Bacon, 2022; Crisis Group, 2022; Senior Analyst, 2023, as cited in ecoi.net, 2023). The group operates through a flexible network of semi-autonomous cells capable of independent action yet subordinate to central leadership, enhancing adaptability and resilience under military pressure (Shuriye, 2012). Al-Qaeda's influence is evident in Al-Shabaab's consultative governance model, with the shura functioning

similarly to a cabinet, and Al-Shabaab often taking strategic direction from Al-Qaeda on ideology and external operations (Shuriye, 2012). In territories under its control, Al-Shabaab enforces a strict interpretation of Sharia law, imposing severe punishments such as amputations and stoning to assert authority and reshape society according to its ideology, regulating social and economic life extensively (Assidiq, 2023; Serrano, 2019; CFR, 2022). This enforcement underpins Al-Shabaab's legitimacy by positioning itself as a defender of Islamic values against corrupt regimes, rallying support from disillusioned Somali populations through a Salafi jihadist ideological narrative that frames their struggle as resistance against injustice and foreign domination (Bacon, 2022). The hierarchical structure, anchored by a central commander and executive council, has been crucial for maintaining internal coherence and operational discipline, with the shura mediating disputes and coordinating regional activities to mitigate factional risks and preserve unity of purpose (Shuriye, 2012; Bacon, 2022, 2023). However, the group's reliance on secrecy and leadership obfuscation reveals vulnerabilities, as the loss of key leaders or significant internal dissent could threaten its stability (Senior Analyst, 2023, as cited in ecoi.net, 2023).

iii.   Tactics employed by Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab, an al-Qa`ida affiliate, has emerged as one of East Africa's most formidable and adaptable insurgent groups, employing a wide array of tactics to advance its goals. Its operational history includes high-profile attacks such as the 2010 twin suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda, and the 2013 Westgate Mall assault in Nairobi, Kenya, demonstrating its capability to execute complex, cross-border operations and underscoring its regional ambitions (Assidiq, 2023). Initially controlling territory, Al-Shabaab has shifted towards asymmetrical warfare, adapting to military setbacks by exploiting local grievances and vulnerabilities (Assidiq, 2023; Mwangi, 2023). Despite losing key urban centers like Mogadishu, the group has sustained itself by retreating to rural areas and leveraging local networks, reflecting its organizational resilience and strategic flexibility (Assidiq, 2023). Its tactics range from indiscriminate urban violence to targeted attacks on specific communities, such as Christians in Muslim-majority regions of Kenya, aimed at deepening societal divisions and weakening state authority (Mwangi, 2023).

Financially, Al-Shabaab operates sophisticated and diverse funding mechanisms, including terrorism, piracy, abductions, and systematic extortion, notably through an extensive taxation

system imposed on businesses, farmers, and humanitarian aid in controlled areas, enabling it to function as a de facto governing authority (Assidiq, 2023). Its governance model combines coercion with the provision of basic services like security and dispute resolution, filling the vacuum left by weak Somali government presence and fostering local acquiescence or support (Assidiq, 2023). The group's operational capabilities are further enhanced by alliances with clan militias and external support, including technological assets such as drones, which bolster its surveillance and strike capacity (Mwangi, 2023).

Al-Shabaab also maintains a sophisticated communications and propaganda apparatus, using disciplined social media strategies to spread its ideology, recruit members, and coordinate operations, thus sustaining its influence despite territorial losses and leadership decapitations (Assidiq, 2023). Its evolution from a Somali insurgency to a transnational threat reflects a complex organization driven by both ideological imperatives and pragmatic considerations, with operations extending beyond Somalia to neighboring states, targeting regional and international interests (Assidiq, 2023; Mwangi, 2023). Effective countermeasures require a comprehensive approach addressing not only the immediate security threat but also the underlying drivers of extremism, including political marginalization, economic deprivation, and weak state institutions (Assidiq, 2023; Mwangi, 2023).

iv.   Al-Shabaab's operational capacity

Al-Shabaab, an Islamist militant group originating from Somalia in the mid-2000s as a youth militia offshoot of the Islamic Courts Union, remains a persistent and formidable threat to peace and security in the Horn of Africa. It has evolved into one of al-Qaeda's most resilient and lethal affiliates, capable of sophisticated asymmetric attacks within Somalia and across East Africa (Mwangi, 2023; CFR, 2022). Despite ongoing military efforts by Somali forces, the African Union, and international partners, Al-Shabaab demonstrates remarkable operational endurance by adapting to changing security conditions and maintaining control over significant areas in southern and central Somalia (Mwangi, 2023; CFR, 2022; Serrano, 2019).

The group's resilience is largely due to its exploitation of Somalia's entrenched political divisions and clan-based social structures, embedding itself in local communities where the federal government's presence is weak and often acting as an alternative provider of order and justice (CFR, 2022; Serrano, 2019). Its adept manipulation of clan dynamics has allowed it to

sustain operations in Mogadishu and various federal member states despite repeated military attempts to dislodge it (Mwangi, 2023).

Financially, Al-Shabaab sustains itself through sophisticated and adaptable revenue strategies, primarily by imposing illicit levies at checkpoints within its territories, effectively governing local economies in the absence of state authority (Serrano, 2019). International efforts to disrupt its funding, such as bans on Somali charcoal exports, have had limited impact, as the group swiftly pivots to alternative income sources, including clandestine taxation of charcoal and other goods (Assidiq, 2023; Serrano, 2019). This financial flexibility undermines counterterrorism initiatives aimed at crippling its operational capacity (Assidiq, 2023; Serrano, 2019).

Operationally, Al-Shabaab employs adaptable tactics including guerrilla warfare, targeted attacks, and territorial interception to expand and maintain influence, particularly in areas where direct control is challenging (Williams, 2018). Its shift toward high-impact urban attacks alongside rural presence highlights its strategic recalibration in response to military and political pressures (Mwangi, 2023). The group also enforces strict sharia law in controlled areas, providing rudimentary services such as dispute resolution and security, which bolsters its legitimacy and facilitates resource extraction, reinforcing its role as a de facto authority (CFR, 2022; Serrano, 2019). Despite territorial losses, Al-Shabaab's ability to regroup, rearm, and reassert control, recruit fighters including foreigners, and orchestrate complex attacks underscores its enduring threat to Somalia and the wider region's security (Serrano, 2019; CFR, 2022; Mwangi, 2023).

3.3.Al-Shabaab's statistical data on violence and socio-economic impact in Somalia
  1. **Statistical data on violence and conflict activity**

Al-Shabaab, a militant group operating in Somalia, has been extensively engaged in violent activities. According to ACLED data, Al-Shabaab has carried out over 14,000 attacks against the Somali government and the African Union Mission, resulting in more than 35,000 fatalities, with the majority (over 95%) of these incidents occurring in Somalia. The group has conducted more than 13,000 operations since August 2006, averaging 2.7 operations per day, with a consistent rate of about 0.8 operations daily after December 2007 (Deepen and Kurtenbach, 2023). From 2006 to March 2020, Al-Shabaab has been linked to 13,295 operations and nearly 33,000 casualties. There have been notable abrupt changes and stepwise intensity in Al-Shabaab's

operations, with significant fluctuations observed in their daily event rate at various points in time, such as December 2007, March 2010, February 2012, January 2017, and June 2018 (Prieto-Curiel, Walther, and Davies, 2023).

In 2022, Al-Shabaab remained highly active, with over 1,200 violent incidents and 3,850 reported fatalities recorded between August and December, particularly following government offensives against the group in several regions of Somalia. The group's violence escalated in 2022, with involvement in more than 2,400 politically motivated violent incidents, including battles and violence targeting civilians, representing a significant increase compared to the previous year. Additionally, clan militias played a crucial role in supporting government forces against Al-Shabaab, with a notable rise in clan militia involvement in political violence in 2022 (Prieto-Curiel, Walther, and Davies, 2023; ACLED, 2024).

The statistical data on Al-Shabaab's violence and conflicts highlight the group's substantial impact on the region, characterized by a high frequency of events, casualties, and significant fluctuations in their daily rates of engagement over the years (ACLED, 2024; Williams, 2018).

3.4. Al-Shabaab's impact on peace talks and conflict resolution efforts

The presence and operations of Al-Shabaab have profoundly influenced Somalia's peace talks and conflict resolution efforts. As a militant group committed to establishing governance based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law, Al-Shabaab has entrenched itself as a dominant force in Somalia's enduring conflict, frequently using violence and intimidation to maintain control (Toros & Harley, 2018). Initially, the group gained some local support by providing order and justice in areas where state authority had collapsed; however, its increasingly harsh and arbitrary enforcement has severely undermined its legitimacy among Somalis (Williams, 2018; Jimale, 2020). Its coercive tactics, including the manipulation of Sharia courts and punitive measures without due process, have fostered widespread fear and resentment, complicating peacebuilding efforts (Toros & Harley, 2018).

Al-Shabaab's impact on peace negotiations is complex and multifaceted. The group's ideological rigidity and uncompromising demands-such as the withdrawal of foreign troops and the establishment of an Islamic state-have consistently obstructed inclusive dialogue and reconciliation, resulting in persistent stalemates that undermine both domestic and international

peace initiatives (Jimale, 2020). Furthermore, its affiliation with transnational jihadist networks like Al Qaeda adds layers of complexity by providing external resources and ideological reinforcement, bolstering its resistance to compromise (Jimale, 2020).

Beyond politics and security, Al-Shabaab's control over significant territories has disrupted socio-economic development, hindering humanitarian aid delivery and infrastructure reconstruction. Its attacks on markets, transport routes, and government facilities have contributed to economic stagnation, exacerbating poverty and unemployment (Somalia Country Report, 2024). The insecurity generated by the group deters investment, further limiting Somalia's economic recovery prospects. Statistical data on violence and attacks against development projects underscore the severe challenges facing Somalia's stabilization and reconstruction (Somalia Country Report, 2024).

Addressing Al-Shabaab's socio-economic impact is vital for effective conflict resolution. A holistic approach that integrates security measures with inclusive development and social cohesion initiatives is necessary to tackle root causes such as poverty and social exclusion (Vanda Felbab-Brown, 2023). Recognizing the interdependence of security and development enables policymakers to design responses that confront both the immediate threat and the structural conditions sustaining Al-Shabaab's influence (Vanda Felbab-Brown, 2023).

Engaging Al-Shabaab in peace talks demands a nuanced understanding of its structure, legitimacy, and goals. Successful dialogue requires credible mediators, confidence-building, and readiness for compromise from all parties. Regional and international actors play a crucial role by providing leverage and resources to support constructive engagement and implementation of agreements (Jimale, 2020). However, Somalia's complex stakeholder landscape necessitates coordinated international involvement to achieve a unified peace strategy (Jimale, 2020).

Utilizing empirical data on Al-Shabaab's violence trends, peace negotiation outcomes, and socio-economic effects empowers stakeholders to develop evidence-based policies. Data-driven analysis helps identify patterns, assess intervention effectiveness, and optimize resource allocation. Through such informed collaboration among Somali authorities, international partners, and civil society, sustainable peace, enhanced security, and long-term development can be pursued, ultimately improving Somali livelihoods and establishing a foundation for lasting stability.

3.5. Drawing lessons from effective peace processes with non-state armed groups in other countries

The successful peace processes with non-state armed groups can provide valuable lessons in dealing with Al-Shabaab in Somalia. One such example is the Northern Ireland peace process, which saw the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British government reach a power-sharing agreement after years of violent conflict. This process was mediated by neutral third parties, such as the United States, and involved a series of negotiations and compromises on both sides (United States Institute of Peace, 2006; Ali, 2017).

Another example is the peace process in Colombia, where the government negotiated a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) after more than 50 years of conflict (United States Institute of Peace, 2016). This process involved a comprehensive approach that included not only military and security measures but also political, economic, and social measures to address the root causes of the conflict (Ali, 2017; Dersso, 2009). The peace process with Al-Shabaab in Somalia has been challenging due to the group's radical ideology and opposition to the federal government. However, there have been successful peace processes with non-state armed groups in Somalia, such as the peace agreement between the federal government and the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a militia in 2010, which involved negotiations and compromises on both sides and resulted in the integration of the militia into the Somali security forces (Ali, 2017). The Somali conflict has been influenced by various factors, including inequalities in access to political power and resources, Barre's authoritarian and patrimonial rule, and the loss of the 1977 War with Ethiopia. The multiplicity of actors and their fragmentation has made it difficult for the international community to pursue initiatives that are satisfying to all. The conflict has crippled every aspect of Somali society and fueled the proliferation of weapons, posing a serious challenge to implementing DDR and security sector reform, as well as other peacebuilding efforts (Dersso, 2009; Ali, 2017).

IGAD's effort towards peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa is in line with the international consensus of adopting the use of regional integration bodies as a strategy of conflict management and resolution. IGAD's peacebuilding initiatives in the Somali conflict have had an impact and have contributed to the ongoing discussion on conflict and conflict resolution in Somalia[2].

---

[2] An interview with the Director for Neighboring Countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, December 9, 2023.

However, there are obstacles to peacebuilding in Somalia, including disputes in power sharing, resource allocation, land and property disputes, and the manipulation of existing inter-clan divisions by political elites for their own selfish interests (Ali, 2017).

IGAD's policies, strategies, and implementation practices have supported peace processes in Somalia, but there are challenges that need to be addressed, such as rivalry among states, lack of enough resources, member states' national interests, and a weak secretariat of IGAD. The primary responsibility for peace building in Somalia lies with the Somali people, and approaches that nurture inclusion and participation among Somali identities should be the guiding factor in finding a lasting solution to the conflict (Ali, 2017).

3.6. Challenges and Strategies for Dealing with Al-Shabaab in Somalia

Al-Shabaab's resilience, adaptability, and territorial control in Somalia make it a formidable adversary. Despite military efforts, the group has demonstrated its ability to regroup, engage in guerrilla warfare, and attack government forces. Al-Shabaab's strict governance, conscription, and taxation in rural areas hinder humanitarian aid and worsen the crisis. Dialogue with Al-Shabaab is challenging due to their rejection of formal negotiations and restrictions on humanitarian access, which have severe consequences for vulnerable groups (Williams, 2018). The group's connections to al-Qaeda and cross-border attacks pose regional security concerns and necessitate international cooperation to counter their activities[3]. A holistic approach addressing security, governance, humanitarian aid, and regional cooperation is required to effectively address Al-Shabaab's influence and activities in the region (Vanda Felbab-Brown. 2023). Al-Shabaab, a militant organization originating in Somalia, presents significant regional and global challenges due to its extremist beliefs and violent actions. Diverse tactics have been utilized to confront Al-Shabaab, including military interventions, counterterrorism measures, and endeavors to tackle the fundamental factors contributing to the group's emergence and resilience.

3.6.1. Understanding the threat: Al-Shabaab in Somalia

Al-Shabaab, a militant organization originating in Somalia, represents a longstanding and substantial menace not only to regional stability but also to global security. Initially established as the youth faction of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Al-Shabaab grew into a powerful force

---

[3] Interview with a researcher on peace and security in the Horn of Africa, Addis Ababa, February 25, 2023.

after the ICU's defeat in 2006, driven by a rigid interpretation of Sharia law that underpins its extremist objectives and ruthless methods (Vanda Felbab-Brown, 2023). The group is not monolithic; its membership spans diverse clans, which subjects it to internal clan-based politics, rifts, and shifting allegiances, complicating efforts to engage with it effectively (Menkhaus, 2013). Al-Shabaab's resilience and strategic adaptability have allowed it to exploit Somalia's weak governance, corruption, and clan divisions to entrench itself in various regions, controlling key territories such as ports and trade routes that finance its operations (Jimale, 2020; Nielsen, 2019).

The organization employs tactics including suicide bombings, targeted assassinations, and guerrilla warfare, causing significant casualties and spreading fear among civilians and security forces. Its sophisticated propaganda, leveraging social media and local grievances, has expanded recruitment and influence beyond Somalia, further enhanced by its affiliation with Al-Qaeda, which has increased its global reach and capabilities (Nielsen, 2019). Countermeasures against Al-Shabaab have involved military interventions, intelligence cooperation, and strengthening Somali security forces, with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) playing a crucial role. Despite these efforts, Al-Shabaab remains a formidable adversary, underscoring the need for sustained international involvement and comprehensive strategies addressing the root causes of extremism in Somalia. Understanding Al-Shabaab's threat requires a nuanced analysis of its history, ideology, tactics, and external alliances, as the group continues to pose a significant security challenge regionally and globally (Jimale, 2020).

3.6.2. Military response and counterterrorism measures

The military's response to the threat presented by Al-Shabaab, a militant organization primarily active in East Africa, has been a crucial element of counterterrorism endeavors in the area. Al-Shabaab, recognized for its ruthless methods and extremist beliefs, has posed a persistent challenge to regional stability and safety (Williams, 2018). Military campaigns focused on dismantling Al-Shabaab's infrastructure and disrupting its operations have been pivotal in diminishing the group's capabilities. By employing coordinated strategies involving intelligence collection, precise airstrikes, and ground missions, substantial headway has been achieved in weakening Al-Shabaab's operational strength and diminishing its influence (Nielsen, 2019). Furthermore, international collaboration and assistance have played a key role in bolstering the

efficacy of these military actions. Through collaborative efforts with neighboring nations and the utilization of advanced technologies like drone surveillance and targeted strikes, military units have successfully disrupted Al-Shabaab's networks and thwarted potential assaults (Jimale, 2020). Although the battle against Al-Shabaab continues, the unwavering commitment and effort of military forces, combined with strategic counterterrorism approaches, have been pivotal in reducing the threat posed by this extremist group and upholding regional security (Williams, 2018).

Counterterrorism efforts targeting Al-Shabaab have been a central focus in the battle against terrorism in East Africa. The strategies employed to confront this extremist group have been diverse, encompassing military offensives, intelligence collection, and global partnerships (Williams, 2018). The Somali government, with backing from the African Union, the United States, and other Western allies, has conducted military campaigns aimed at diminishing Al-Shabaab's power and reach. These operations have achieved some success in reclaiming territories and disrupting the group's activities (Jimale, 2020). Furthermore, the utilization of drone assistance, local militias, and initiatives to disrupt Al-Shabaab's financial resources have played pivotal roles in combating this terrorist entity. Despite these gains, Al-Shabaab's resilience and ability to adapt present persistent challenges, underscoring the need for a holistic and enduring approach that transcends purely military interventions to tackle the underlying causes of radicalization and prevent the group from regaining strength. International cooperation, intelligence sharing, and a concerted effort to undermine Al-Shabaab's governance and financial capabilities are essential components of sustained endeavors to counter the menace posed by this militant organization (Mamiya, 2022; Williams, 2018).

3.6.3. Addressing root causes

Addressing the underlying reasons for Al-Shabaab's emergence is vital for long-term stability in the region. Resolving issues such as poverty, marginalization, governance deficiencies, and political instability can diminish the appeal of extremist ideologies and recruitment by groups like Al-Shabaab (Williams, 2018). Social and economic development programs, effective governance practices, and community involvement efforts are essential in addressing the grievances that fuel extremism and radicalization (Jimale, 2020). The comprehensive approach to addressing Al-Shabaab involves a blend of military action, counterterrorism strategies, and

efforts to tackle the root causes of the group's existence. By implementing a holistic strategy that integrates security measures with initiatives to foster stability, governance, and development, it is feasible to mitigate the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and progress towards enduring peace and security in the region (Williams, 2018). Overall, the root causes of conflict can be solved through political engagement and conflict resolution, socio-economic development and community empowerment, and international cooperation and multilateral efforts.

Socio-economic progress and empowering communities are crucial in deterring the recruitment and radicalization of vulnerable groups like Al-Shabaab. By tackling the underlying factors of vulnerability such as poverty, limited education, and restricted opportunities, societies can enhance their resistance to extremist ideologies[4]. Supporting education, vocational training, and economic prospects not only empowers individuals but also bolsters community cohesion (Gardiner, 2017). Access to resources and strong support systems reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives that offer false assurances of purpose and belonging. Moreover, encouraging community involvement and ownership in decision-making fosters a sense of belonging and inclusivity, countering the isolation exploited by radical groups (Nielsen, 2019). Through promoting socio-economic advancement and community empowerment, we can cultivate a more resilient society capable of resisting radicalization and extremism, thereby fostering enduring peace and stability. International collaboration and collective actions are pivotal in tackling the challenges presented by non-state armed organizations such as Al-Shabaab. These groups, often operating beyond conventional state frameworks, pose intricate security risks that necessitate a unified and cooperative strategy on a global level (Nielsen, 2019; Mamiya, 2022; Gardiner, 2017).

Engagement with non-state armed entities like Al-Shabaab has underscored the significance of positive communication, mediation, and negotiation processes. Key international bodies like the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU) have played vital roles in facilitating discussions and initiatives aimed at fostering peace (Mamiya, 2022). Additionally, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been instrumental in encouraging compliance with international humanitarian laws among armed groups (Gardiner, 2017; Nielsen, 2019).

---

[4] Interview with a researcher on peace and security in the Horn of Africa, Addis Ababa, February 25, 2023.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have actively participated in interacting with non-state armed groups, concentrating on humanitarian goals and advocating for adherence to international regulations, particularly in humanitarian law. NGOs, with their impartial stance and community roots, have effectively communicated with armed entities on specific issues, emphasizing the value of peaceful resolutions over violence (Nielsen, 2019; Gardiner, 2017). The complexity of conflicts involving non-state armed groups emphasizes the necessity of a comprehensive approach that considers various perspectives from international relations theories, including realist, institutionalist, and constructivist viewpoints. Strategies for engaging with armed organizations should be customized to individual actors and circumstances, considering the diverse motivations and objectives of these groups.

In regions like Somalia, where entities like Al-Shabaab are active, international cooperation has been vital in addressing security issues (Mamiya, 2022; Gardiner, 2017). Efforts by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and other global partners have been essential in combating the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and reinstating stability in the area. The involvement of regional players such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya has further bolstered the joint response to terrorism and insurgency (Nielsen, 2019). In conclusion, international cooperation and multilateral endeavors are indispensable in managing non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab. By promoting dialogue, encouraging compliance with international standards, and supporting peace-building initiatives, the global community can work towards reducing the impact of these groups and advancing sustainable peace and security in conflict-affected regions (Mamiya, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Countering non-state armed groups like Al-Shabaab effectively requires an integrated approach combining military, governance, and socio-economic measures. While security operations remain critical to disrupt immediate threats, Al-Shabaab's resilience – demonstrated through its decentralized structure, exploitation of weak institutions, and transnational operations in Kenya and Ethiopia – demands broader solutions. Addressing root causes like governance gaps, poverty, and marginalization is essential, as the group capitalizes on state fragility to provide alternative governance and services, garnering local acquiescence. Socio-economic initiatives, including job creation and infrastructure development, can undermine recruitment by alleviating

grievances, although humanitarian efforts face challenges due to counterterrorism restrictions on engaging with Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. Regional cooperation through mechanisms like AMISOM and cross-border intelligence-sharing is vital to counter the group's fluid operations, yet persistent issues like porous borders and refugee flows complicate these efforts. International support must sustain diplomatic pressure, funding, and adaptive responses to prevent Al-Shabaab's resurgence amid shifting global priorities. While cautious dialogue with factions could reduce violence, it must parallel robust security measures to avoid legitimizing the group. Ultimately, lasting stability hinges on building inclusive institutions, addressing conflict drivers, and maintaining coordinated regional-international engagement tailored to Somalia's complex realities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

ACLED. 2019. *Armed conflict location & event data project* (ACLED) Codebook. Available at: https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2019/04/ACLED_Codebook_201 9FINAL_pbl.pdf

Ahmed, I.A. and Green, H.R. 1999. The heritage of war and state collapse in Somalia and Somaliland: local level effects, external interventions and reconstruction. *Third World Quarterly 20: 113–127.*

Ali, N., 2017. *Evaluating peace making processes, the case of IGAD in Somalia conflict* Dissertation, University of Nairobi.

Assessment, A.E.G., 2023. *LASER PULSE*. Available at: file:///C:/Users/dell/Downloads/Pulte_LASERPULSE_EvidenceGapAssessment_Private Sector Engagement Democratic Processes_2023%20(3).pdf

Assidiq, A. 2023. *Terrorism: The activities of Al–Shabbab and state failure in Somalia: 2015–2020*.Terrorism.Availableat:https://www.cambridgenigeriapub.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CJLPHR_VOL27_NO6_MAR-2023-14.pdf

Dersso, S.A. 2009. *The Somalia conflict implications for peace making and peacekeeping efforts*. Institute for Security Studies Papers, (198):24.

Deepen, Y. and Kurtenbach, S., 2023. *Coping with complexity: Dealing with non-state armed actors* (No. 337). GIGA Working Papers.

Gardiner, R. 2017. *Al-Shabaab and the sources of its resilience and resurgence: Cold War legacies and Jihadism in Somalia.* Dissertation, Rhodes University.

Hofmann, C.; Schneckener, U. 2011. Engaging non-state armed actors in state-and peace-building: options and strategies. *International review of the Red Cross*, 93(883):603-621.

Jimale, F. 2020. *The possibility of an Al-Shabaab: Federal Government of Somalia negotiation as the only alternative to peace resolution in Somalia*. Available at: https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1515428/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Kothari, C.R. 2004. *Research methodology: Methods and techniques.* New Delhi: New Age International Publishers.

Krause, K.;Milliken, J.2009. Introduction: The challenge of non-state armed groups. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30(2):202-220.

Mamiya, R. 2022. *Engaging with non-state armed groups to protect civilians: A pragmatic approach for UN Peace operations*. International Peace Institute.

Mandel, R. 2013. *Global security upheaval: armed non-state groups usurping state stability functions.* Stanford University Press.

Marques, E.; Rognvik, S., 2020. Non-state *armed actors: lessons from peace processes and implications for stabilization. Stabilizing the contemporary Middle East and North Africa: regional actor*s and new approaches, pp.95-118.

Menkhaus, K. 2013. Stabilization in practice: The Somali case. In Stabilization Operations, Security and Development (pp. 120-142). Routledge.

Mwangi, O.G. 2023. *Al-Shabaab and the regional security dilemma. In the Palgrave handbook of contemporary Kenya* (pp. 381-390). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Nielsen, M.H.J. 2019. *Legitimacy from the bottom-up: Understanding perceived legitimacy of non-state armed actors from a civilian perspective-A case study of Somalia*. Available at: https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1324845&dswid=-3854

Podder, S. 2013.*Non-state armed groups and stability: Reconsidering legitimacy and inclusion. Contemporary Security Policy*, *34*(1):16-39.

Prieto-Curiel, R., Walther, O.; Davies, E. 2023. *Detecting trends and shocks in terrorist activities*. PLoS one, 18(9):e0291514.

Robinson, C.D. 2021. *Rebuilding armies in southern Somalia: What currently should donors realistically aim for*?. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21(3):313-336.

Rotich, H.K. 2020. *Al-shabaab Militia, a threat to security in the Horn of Africa: a case study of Kenya.* Dissertation, University of Nairobi.

Schneckener, U. 2009. *Spoilers or governance actors: Engaging armed non-state groups in areas of limited statehood*. Available at: https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/17886

Serrano, A. 2019. *Why the different levels of Intervention: Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's al-Shabaab*. *OSR Journal of Student Research*, 5(1):352.

Somalia Country Report 2024. Country Dashboard Somalia. Available at: https://bti-
        project.org/en/reports/country-report/SOM

Swed, O.; Stubblefield, S.F. 2020. *Resisting or appropriating: Two approaches in the study
        of aid, violent non-state actors, and governance*. In Limited Statehood and
        Informal Governance in the Middle East and Africa (pp. 166-185). Routledge.

Tar, U.A.; Mustapha, M. 2017. *Al-Shabaab: State collapse, warlords and Islamist
        insurgency in Somalia.* Violent non-state actors in Africa: Terrorists, rebels and warlords,
        pp.277-   299.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). 2024. *Heightened political
        Violence in Somali*a. Available at: https://acleddata.com/2023/03/03/context-
        assessment-heightened-political-   violence-in-somalia/

Toros, H. and Harley, S. 2018. *Negotiations with Al-Shabaab: Lessons learned and future
        prospects.* Available at: https://kar.kent.ac.uk/72213/

United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). *Northern Ireland: lessons for peace processes*.
        Retrieved from https://www.usip.org/publications/2009/06/northern-ireland-lessons-
        peace-processes.

United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). *Colombia: Peace p*rocess. Retrieved from
        https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/09/colombia-peace-process.

Vanda, F.B. 2023. *Somalia's challenges* . Available at:
        https://www.brookings.edu/articles/somalias-challenges-in-2023/

Williams, P.D. 2018. Subduing al-Shabaab: *The Somalia model of counterterrorism and its
        Limits. The Washington Quarterly,* 41(2), pp.95-111.

Young, J.K.; Dugan, L. 2014. *Survival of the fittest: Why terrorist groups endure. Perspectives
        on Terrorism*, 8(2), pp.2-23.