

Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation

The case of al-Shabaab in Somalia

Karin Göldner-Ebenthal

Case Study Report

Abstract

Since 2006 Somalia is caught in a spiral of violence and suffering from continuing attacks by the Salafi jihadi Armed Group (SJAG) al-Shabaab. This case study report asks under which circumstances al-Shabaab has reduced its violent behaviour in the past and explores the experiences and options for third party dialogue engagement. Outlining al-Shabaab's development, the report analyses three strategic shifts of behavioural de-escalation identifying the organisational, ideological and external factors that contributed to the de-escalation. On the topic of dialogue engagement, the report maps past experiences, entry points and challenges for negotiations. Findings point to an opening in favour of negotiations as the military stalemate continues and highlights the important role of the Somali civil society for creating space for conflict transformation. Considering the lack of success of military approaches in defeating al-Shabaab and the very limited efforts of dialogue engagement with the SJAG, the report poses the question if al-Shabaab's de-escalation is even possible without dialogue engagement?

About this report

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About the author

Karin Göldner-Ebenthal is a Research Fellow at the Berghof Foundation, Berlin. Before joining the Berghof Foundation in 2015, she worked for the German Foreign Office, NATO, the Institute for European Politics and Search for Common Ground. Karin has a Bachelor's in European Studies from the University of Osnabrück and a Master of Letters in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of St Andrews. She has published on EU Multi-Track Diplomacy and has a special interest in non-state armed groups.

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www.berghof-foundation.org
order@berghof-foundation.org
Twitter: @BerghofFnd
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List of Abbreviations

AMISOM – African Union Mission to Somalia

ARS – Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia

CVE – Countering Violent Extremism

FGS – Federal Government of Somalia

ICU – Islamic Courts Union

NSAG – Non-state armed group

UN – United Nations

TFG – Transitional Government of Somalia

SJAG – Salafi jihadi armed group

1. Introduction

For more than 12 years now, al-Shabaab has been a violent and disruptive force in Somalia and one of the most violent groups in all of Africa. With the attention-catching attack on a hotel in Nairobi on January 15, 2019, it has proven once again that it is also a threat beyond Somali borders. Since 2012 al-Shabaab has been an official affiliate of Al Qaeda and its transnational network of Salafi jihadi armed actors. Attempts to defeat Salafi jihadi armed groups (SJAG), such as al-Shabaab, through military means have largely proven ineffective. Efforts to prevent violent extremism as a means to curb SJAG's recruitment so far have not managed to significantly weaken the groups either.

In the quest for additional or alternative means for conflict transformation, talking to Salafi jihadi armed groups seems no longer a taboo. The paradigm that there could be 'no talking to terrorists' has most publicly been broken by the ongoing talks with the Taliban. Similar calls to talk with al-Shabaab have been made by former government officials in Somalia (Sheikh-Ali 2018) and among UN, EU and US policy-makers there seems to be a nascent and corresponding interest to explore the role of dialogue and negotiation in dealing with Salafi jihadi armed groups. Yet, there still is a severe lack of SJAG-specific, comprehensive and in-depth research to inform policy approaches and decision-making in this area. This case study report is part of a research project that contributes to filling this gap by advancing knowledge on the patterns and factors contributing to conflict (de)escalation undergone by Salafi jihadi armed actors, and on the specific (actual or potential) role of third-party engagement through dialogue and negotiation. Thus, this case study seeks to answer three main questions: *What is the pathway of (de)escalation of al-Shabaab? What is the existing experience with (or possible entry points for) third party engagement with al-Shabaab? What is the (actual or potential) role of third party engagement in influencing al-Shabaab's de-escalation pathways?*

The study is a qualitative analysis based on empirical data collected in 26 semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion conducted in Mogadishu, Nairobi, New York and Geneva as well as per telephone between February and July 2018, complemented by a thorough review of the existing literature on al-Shabaab and the Somali conflict. Among the total of 30 interviewees were political analysts (6), international NGO representatives (4), UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) staff members (5), Somali civil society representatives (one focus group discussion and 4 interviews), humanitarian practitioners (2), international diplomats (2), a Somali politician and a former al-Shabaab member. Of the interviewees 19 were Somali nationals, and 11 were internationals. Besides the empirical data, an extensive literature research was conducted. The project was advised by a dedicated advisory board, which included two Somalia experts. The study was reviewed by one of the Somali experts before publishing.

The study begins in section 2 with a brief overview of the conflict and key players, Section 3 presents al-Shabaab's trajectory along its ideological, organisational and behavioural dynamics, and situates the group's features within the existing literature on non-state armed groups (NSAG) typologies. Section 4 focuses on instances of (potential) de-escalation, by identifying three strategic shifts undergone by the group and analysing factors and conditions contributing to such instances of behavioural change. In Section 5, past instances or attempts of (humanitarian or political) dialogue with al-Shabaab are outlined, highlighting the specificities, drivers, entry points and challenges encountered. Looking toward the future, Section 6 then presents some conditions and options for future dialogue engagement while outlining a range of possible future de-escalation scenarios.

2. Conflict setting and key players

The conflict in Somalia is complex. It is characterised by many overlapping and intertwined layers of societal and political relationships, which cannot be easily untangled and described in isolation from each other. This chapter aims to present the current situation and the key players of our case study setting, including the state, the clans, Islam and its role in the Somalia context, as well as the regional and international actors.

≡ The State of Somalia

Somalia has a lengthy history of civil war and constant conflict. Following the end of the autocratic rule of Siad Barre (1969-1991), civil war wrecked the country and a long list of attempts to re-establish a government followed, for example through organized reconciliation conferences in 1991, 1993, 1994, and 1997. Clans, militias and warlords ruled the country, fighting for supremacy and resources. Rudimentary state structures were established in several steps. In 2000, the Transitional National Government was the first Somali government since 1991 to secure a measure of international recognition. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG), established in 2004, was based on a complicated power-sharing concept, the '4.5 formula'.¹ This distributes political power between the Somali clans and has been the foundation of Somalia's government structures until today. In 2006 open battle between the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and the internationally supported TFG disrupted further development. The ICU was thwarted in the effort to topple the government in 2007. The 'Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia' (ARS) – a group of mostly Islamist opponents of the TFG – gathered after the failed attempt to topple the government. A peace process in 2008 between the TFG and the more moderate fraction of the ARS resulted in a cease-fire and changes in the political system – leading to one of the Islamists former opponents becoming Somalia's president in 2009.

The next step of Somalia's state-building process was in 2012, when a provisional constitution was accepted by a National Constitutional Assembly that ended the transition phase, changed Somalia from a Republic into a federal state and established the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). The FGS, however, still has not completed essential transitional tasks such as finalising and ratifying the constitution and establishing a democratic electoral system. Thus, Somalia and the many stakeholders are deeply stuck in structural state-building, which has hampered governance activities. Further, some of the federal member states, which are supposed to be key components of the newly established federal system, are themselves still in a formation process. The FGS is not accepted in all of Somalia as a legitimate centre of power² and can on its own barely control Mogadishu. It "must negotiate with federal member states and other armed sub-state actors to lay claim to indirect, nominal authority over other parts of the country" and relies heavily on the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) to maintain stability (Menkhaus 2017, 133). While the situation in the northern parts, in Somaliland and Puntland is relatively stable, south-central Somalia "has neither seen the rise of a modestly functional government with the ability to provide some level of security, nor has it had the benefit of a robust social compact between clan elders to keep the peace." (Menkhaus 2016, 21). Even where the government is in control, it is often functionally ineffective: paralysed by in-fighting and extremely high levels of corruption, it can often not even perform core functions of providing basic political and economic services. The rates of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment in Somalia all rank among the worst in the world and much of the country's brain trust

¹ This formula provides equal representation to each of the four major clans – Darod, Dir, Hawiye and Rahanweyn – while smaller clans were provided with the 0.5 representation.

² The most northern state, Somaliland, declared its independence from Somalia 1991 but is not recognized internationally by any state. It is the best functioning and most stable state in Somalia.

resides overseas in the millions-strong Somali diaspora. Besides this quite heavy legacy of negative factors, Somalia seems on a stabilisation path. A new government was elected in February 2017 in a complicated process of indirect election through nominated representatives (Menkhaus 2017). Although the process was characterised by corruption and fraud, the transfer of power was managed without significant flares of violence. The new President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmaajo’ has raised hopes for development. The state’s inability to implement a functioning tax system is perpetuating its dependence on international funding. Somalia has a population of about 15,2 million people of which 46% are younger than 15³ and the estimated unemployment rate among those under age 30 is at 67% (Kimani 2018). The state-building challenges for the FGS thus remain high, well beyond the conflict with al-Shabaab.

≡ The Clans

Being part of the ‘Somali nation’ depends on belonging to a particular clan (Hussein 2015). The clans provide the social and financial security net for the Somali people and clan loyalties dominate political life. Starting with the independence movement of the 1950, the clans were the platform for political mobilisation and became political entities. Clan loyalties are strong and the political class has been seeking to funnel resources and local economic opportunities through the mobilisation of clan affiliations, comparable to modern patronage systems (Solomon 2015). The big clans have sub-clans and, even though clan affiliation is of high importance, alliances within and between clans are handled pragmatically. Inter-clan conflicts are common and are most often cantered around resource conflicts, such as access to land and water. Clans often have their own militias and violence is used as a primary means of settling disputes, creating many layers of grief and unresolved conflict – beyond and beneath the conflict line between al-Shabaab and the FGS. In relation to other clans, or state and non-state armed actors *“Clans often support one group or support several groups simultaneously so as not to have all eggs in one basket. It is a permanent balancing act in a fluid political situation where everyone draws on all political strings such as nationalism, business or religion, as suits them best.”* (Interview with political analyst, May 2018). A traditional system for conflict mitigation exists in the form of the Xeer system, which is a form of clan justice that holds not only the individual perpetrator accountable but also his/her family and clan. The power of the clan then becomes a relevant factor in the access to justice. So while Somalis share a common ethnicity, culture, language, and religion, their homogeneity is divided by clan loyalties and has often undercut the efforts of state-building (Menkhaus 2017).

≡ Islam in Somalia

Religion represents a cross-cutting social bond which transcends the Somali clan system. About 98% of the country’s population is Muslim, traditionally a Shafi’i version of Sunni Islam dominated by moderate, apolitical Sufi orders. Islam thus is a common “horizontal identity” marker, albeit traditionally Islamic identity is complimentary to clan identity and does not challenge the primacy of clan (Gakuo Mwangi 2012). The transcendent role of religion was and is attractive for a fractured and unequal society, as a common ideology framework fostering alliances against shared enemies (Marchal 2009). Networks of Somali veterans of the Afghan-Soviet wars and early Islamist organisations such as the Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya were ideologically influenced and financially supported through the diaspora in the Gulf. These Islamist actors shaped the internal situation in Somalia but were not a strong military power during the civil war times. They established Islamic courts to compensate for the total lack of judicial institutions, the

³ United Nations Population Fund, Office Somalia; numbers from 2018.

most fruitful effort was in 2005-2006 when several courts allied to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Mogadishu. One dominant frame for addressing structural grievances in Somalia is the demand for a more Islamic state, which resonates with the religious-oriented parts of society. The global trend towards Wahabism has also influenced Somali society, which has become more conservative over the years with regard to its religious beliefs.

≡ Regional and international actors

Somalia is of geostrategic interest to many countries, including its neighbours Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya but also, Eritrea, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the US and the EU. International actors such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) have been active in Somalia, as has the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the regional organisation for east Africa, for multiple reasons including humanitarian assistance, conflict resolution, peace building and the proclaimed fight against terrorism. Ethiopia has historically been in conflict with Somalia, and several authors have attested Ethiopia interests in maintaining a level of control within Somalia, for political and economic reasons (Ingiriis 2018b; Williams 2017). Ethiopia and Kenya pursued unilateral military activity in Somalia but eventually integrated (most of) their forces into the AMISOM forces. AMISOM was deployed to Mogadishu in March 2007, with only 1,800 Ugandan troops at the beginning, even though the mandate was for 8,000 troops. AMISOM was designed in cooperation between AU and UN, with EU funding and bilateral aid from US and UK and African force-contributing countries (Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia). Its first mission was to support dialogue and reconciliation in Somalia but by 2009 it had become the principal force tasked with protecting the TFG from al-Shabaab. Along the way, AMISOM has experienced some mission-creep, becoming mandated to help protect political leaders, build the new Somali state's security forces, support various electoral processes, and facilitate humanitarian assistance (Williams 2018). By 2014, the force had increased to 22,100 troops. The withdrawal of troops has become a topic of discussion since 2017. 2020 is currently considered the earliest date possible for a withdrawal. Since the US War on Terror efforts in the wake of 9/11, the US have continuously been involved in Somalia, financially but also with targeted actions against al-Shabaab leaders or training grounds. Beyond that, US troops in Somalia are engaged in training the Somali National Forces. Under US President Trump, the US has dramatically increased its military engagement, especially via drone attacks (Olapodi 2019).

3. Defining al-Shabaab?

This section first presents al-Shabaab and how it developed, giving special attention to the ideological, organisational and behavioural dimensions of the group. The section will then situate al-Shabaab within existing typologies of NSAGs in general, and Islamist-based armed actors in particular.

3.1 Ideological features

Al-Shabaab (the full name is *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen*, literally 'Mujahideen Youth Movement'), is a Salafi jihadi group that strives to seize power in Somalia in order to establish a state and society based on a rigid interpretation of Sharia law. There is debate about the 'true' goals of al-Shabaab, in line with the different assessments of al-Shabaab as either a globalist, regional or nationalist actor. While the official language used by the group would suggest a global sphere of influence, al-Shabaab's actions paint the picture of a national or regional actor at most. As stated by the group, the long term goal is global jihad.

However, the goal in the medium-term and the targets of almost all of al-Shabaab's actions are centred on Somalia and only marginally on the Horn of Africa⁴. Its territorial claims are debated, but most often understood to encompass the concept of a 'wider Somalia'.⁵ Al-Shabaab's ideological origins had taken root in Somalia well before the appearance of the group itself. The founders had been radicalised before al-Shabaab's founding and the justification to use violence as a means to pursue their goal was embedded right from the start. Since then, this has not been seriously questioned. In the early phase, the purpose of al-Shabaab's struggle was rooted in the aim to alleviate the very real suffering of Somalis that were living in a failed state after a decade of civil war and under the rule of warlords. To achieve this, an Islamic reform was perceived to produce a new and more legitimate form of governance. This "reform jihadism" (Hansen 2013, 45) focused on the implementation of justice in Somalia based on a more radical form of Islam, including the accountability of the individual as opposed to the clan-based accountability of the traditional Xeer system (Life and Peace Institute 2014; Mueller 2016). A study conducted by the Life and Peace Institute in 2014, based on interviews with 35 al-Shabaab members and leaders, highlighted that "Justice was an important concept for al-Shabaab members. Almost every interviewee stressed that Somalis were in need of justice"(Life and Peace Institute 2014).

Al-Shabaab and the ICU, with their perception and messaging that Muslims are under threat, were seen to be proven right when Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006. The invasion contributed to ideological change as al-Shabaab adapted its narrative to fit a nationalist discourse while also linking itself to the global jihadist narrative of Muslim oppression. Building on historical narratives it claimed to fight invading 'crusaders' and an apostate Somali government which it considered to be no more than a foreign puppet (Solomon 2014). It was fighting a "defensive jihad" (Hansen 2013, 140) for the right of self-determination. Rather than expanding the global jihad, the focus was on "*the global jihad inside Somalia*" (Marchal 2011, 36). The merging of the national/regional/global agenda served well for recruitment purposes by engaging the narratives of 'occupation' and 'liberation' in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and making the case for a global insurrection in a history of Islamic rebellion against colonialism (Marchal 2009).

When Ethiopia withdrew in 2009 the nationalist-defence legitimisation narrative lost some of its credibility. With the primary target gone, the fight focussed on the new Somali government. By then al-Shabaab had expanded its territorial control setting up sharia courts and schools teaching the Salafi strand of Islam. Al-Shabaab displayed its Manichean, exclusionist and intolerant worldview, and implemented a harsh interpretation of Sharia law (HRW 2010). Their idea of an Islamic society and state became apparent in their governance activities: "*al-Shabaab aims to govern. In their areas a range of systems and structures are in place such as the schools, taxes, courts. Their ideology seeps through the governmental efforts in the form of rules, courts and laws that are implemented*" (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018).

A second challenge to al-Shabaab's religious arguments and legitimisation came in the form of the provisional constitution of the new established Government of the Federal Republic of Somalia, which declares Islam the state religion. No other religion can be propagated in the country and no law enacted that is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of Sharia law (Transitional Constitution Somalia 2012, Art. 2). Formally, Somalia thus became what al-Shabaab wanted it to be –challenging its claim that the government was un-Islamic and the fight against it justified. Intra-group dissent eventually brought about considerable organisational change in al-Shabaab when the more hardline ideologues and

⁴ Kenya and especially the border area with Somalia are regions where al-Shabaab is active. Larger terrorist attacks happened in Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, Uganda and Ethiopia. See also section on behavioural development and esp. FN 15.

⁵ The 'Somali nation' is spread over the Horn of Africa, extending today's borders, covering Somaliland in the north (former British Somalia), Somalia (former Italian colony), Djibouti, the Ogaden (which is now part of Ethiopia) and the northern province of Kenya. The idea of unifying these territories in a "Greater Somalia" has been the goal of successive Somali governments since independence in 1960, also represented in the 5-pointed white star on the Somali flag as a symbol for unification (Solomon, 2015). The idea of "Greater Somalia" also maintained a level of regional tension for Somali-state building efforts.

exclusionists came out on top of a power struggle in 2013 (see below in Section 4, strategic shift 2). As the hardliners prevailed, no lasting ideological change occurred as the elitist and exclusionary perceptions were re-enforced and internal dissent has since been forcefully suppressed.⁶

The multifaceted narrative of al-Shabaab persists until today, even though the hardline Salafi jihadi trend dominates. The goal of an Islamic state remains unchanged. What this precisely means with regard to state structures, processes and policies remains a contested issue between al-Shabaab and the Somali government. The FGS's poor record on service delivery and high level of corruption continuously offers al-Shabaab the opportunity to discredit the government.

3.2 Organisational features

On the organisational level, al-Shabaab developed out of a loose network of a small group of only 33 people, most of whom were Afghanistan war veterans, trained in Al Qaeda training camps in the late 1990s (Hansen 2013). First functioning as a militia for the ICU, it fought alongside the ICU when it began to take control of southern and central Somalia in 2006. Ethiopia intervened and invaded Somalia to enforce protection of the TFG and defeated al-Shabaab and ICU decisively. Al-Shabaab managed to regroup and resumed an asymmetric guerrilla style warfare in Mogadishu. Outside of Mogadishu al-Shabaab managed to advance territorial control and set up training camps, while recruitment for the group surged.

In spring 2008, the ARS⁷ commenced negotiations with the TFG in the Djibouti Process, which led to a ceasefire agreement between them, an agreement of withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces and political agreements by the fall of the same year (Preston McGhie 2010). In 2009, the former head of the ICU, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (Sheik Sharif), was elected president of Somalia and the Ethiopian troops withdrew, leaving a power void that al-Shabaab exploited. Territorial control increased and al-Shabaab formalised and professionalised to cope with the growing governance demands. The group developed an extensive and effective bureaucracy (Marchal 2011). Al-Shabaab's rule led to a higher level of stability and order in the territories it controlled, showcasing its governance capabilities. It has also created at least the appearance to remain above the clan-based difficulties which have been making the state-building effort in Somalia an ever-lasting power struggle.⁸ Nonetheless, as a product of Somalia, it cannot be understood outside of the clan system. High numbers of members and supporters come from weaker clans, as al-Shabaab exploits grievances that arise out of the inequality and structural violence inherent in the clan system (Solomon 2015). As experts highlight, al-Shabaab's actions can at times be better understood through the dynamics of Somali clan politics rather than Islamist ideology (Hansen 2014). Al-Shabaab has still managed to raise above the clan system to some extent by indoctrinating fighters in their Salafi jihadi ideology, which is supposed to surpass clan allegiance. Furthermore, by rotating fighters and commanders regularly and using men from other clans to supervise districts, it avoided fraternisation and individual leaders building up too much regional power.

Starting in 2009, internal dissent began to increase and organisational cohesion suffered due to the high level of civilian deaths, the banning of foreign aid agencies from al-Shabaab territory and the rejection of dialogue with former leader of the ICU and new president of the TFG Sheik Sharif (Maruf and Joseph 2018). Further supporting this trend was the Ramadan offensive of 2010, when al-Shabaab attacked the TFG in an open and concentrated effort but failed to oust the TFG. Instead al-Shabaab had to

⁶ For example, when members discussed shifting allegiance from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State in 2014, al-Shabaab killed internal dissenters, purging itself, and attacked more coordinated efforts to establish a branch of IS in Somalia, clearly not willing to tolerate a rival (Joscelyn 2015).

⁷ The ARS was an alliance that combined the forces of the ICU, former warlords and secular forces and was located in Asmara, Eritrea, after the Ethiopian invasion had pushed them out of Somalia in 2007.

⁸ For a current assessment see also (Marchal 2018).

bear high costs in money and lives (Hansen 2013). In 2011, AMISOM forces started an offensive against al-Shabaab, and military pressure increased by Kenya pushing into al-Shabaab-held territory from the south in fall 2011. The concentrated offensive against al-Shabaab showed success and al-Shabaab withdrew first from Mogadishu followed by other cities in the south.

In 2012, al-Shabaab officially merged with Al Qaeda. Internal dissent continued and in 2013 a group of leaders publicly criticized its leader, Emir Ahmed Abdi Godane, whose answer was prompt and brutal. On his behalf, the Amniyat – al-Shabaab’s ‘special operations’ and intelligence unit⁹ – purged al-Shabaab of all dissenters and challengers to his power. This re-established Godane as a central power (Hansen 2014).¹⁰ In September 2014, Godane was killed by a US drone strike but expectations that this would cause a power struggle among the remaining power holders were not met: the chosen successor Ahmed Diriye¹¹ (also called Abu Ubaidah) was a close follower of Godane (Hiraal Institute 2018).

Ever since, the organisational status of al-Shabaab has remained fairly stable, even though the continuing military pressure on al-Shabaab has made it officially retreat from the main cities and decentralise. This has granted the regional leaders more freedom from the central command and the group has lost some coherence. Interviewees agreed that how the group interacts and behaves now largely varies by region. Nevertheless, the Amniyat has managed to keep overall internal coherence, including through the brutal use of force against internal dissenters. Assessments of the situation in interviews for this study show the continuing strength of al-Shabaab. *“It has lost physical territory but that does not mean it is not in control of these territories still. I’ll give you an example: al-Shabaab is operating in Mogadishu. It is not in physical control of Mogadishu. But any businessman, anyone who operates in Mogadishu and does not pay taxes to al-Shabaab does not survive in Mogadishu.”* (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018). Similarly, an interviewee from a large humanitarian organisation stated that he *“does not agree with the narrative of AMISOM having liberated up to 65% of south central Somalia that is often heard in Mogadishu. Instead, they are only in the towns and cities. Al-Shabaab controls all areas in between. If you leave a city you cannot go 10 km without an al-Shabaab check point. And if you ask people who is providing government services, taxing them and providing security they will respond that it is al-Shabaab.”* (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, June 2018) This situation has continued until today and has led to a form of stalemate where neither one side nor the other can win or maintain any significant gains. While many observers perceive this loss of territory and cities to be sign of a weakening al-Shabaab, the often strategic withdrawals have not affected its capacity to act. Rather it has freed them of some of the administrative work, even though al-Shabaab still maintains these functions in areas under its control – and at times in those that are officially liberated of their control: *“Even if al-Shabaab is not physically in control – it is. You can almost have two governments at the same time”* (Interview with political analyst, May 2018). Overall, al-Shabaab has not reduced its efforts to provide governance activities and a minimum of services. One of the core services al-Shabaab has been providing in the areas under their control was and is a harsh but functioning justice system. It is sought after by the population to the point where Somalis even today travel out of Mogadishu to a close-by al-Shabaab court to have their conflicts settled (Interviews with political analysts and INGO representatives, May 2018). Despite this, al-Shabaab’s relationship to society has been deteriorating, due to harsh actions including to prevent people fleeing their territory in search for aid during a famine in 2017. Resentment amongst communities increased as al-Shabaab stepped up forced recruitment of children (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018; Warner and Chapin 2018). It deteriorated even further with the massive suicide bombing attack on October 2017 in Mogadishu.¹²

⁹ The Amniyat is responsible for suicide bombings, assassinations and intelligence gathering externally but also within al-Shabaab. Amniyat members tend to be the most hard-core militants and committed to jihad (Maruf and Joseph 2018).

¹⁰ See also the second strategic shift in Section 4 for more details on the purge (p.19).

¹¹ According to Maruf and Joseph (2018), Diriye was part of Al Ittihad al Islam (AIAI) since 1991 and never trained with AQ outside of Somalia; for a character description see Ibid. p. 244.

¹² See third strategic shift on page 21 for more information.

3.3 Behavioural features

On a behavioural dimension, judging from the targets, frequency and means of violence by al-Shabaab, it is clear that the group's trajectory is not an overall de-escalatory one. It has been in violent conflict with the state and the international actors ever since its origins and has never entered any formal ceasefires. There have been no efforts towards peace negotiations with al-Shabaab, not least because the group has categorically ruled out any possibility of negotiating as it does not recognise the legitimacy of the government and rejects talks with internationals and/or apostates. Al-Shabaab has been therefore termed "rejectionist". Al-Shabaab is one of the deadliest terror groups in all of Africa. It has drawn on the Umma – the global Muslim community – to recruit foreign fighters and has launched international attacks, including in Kenya and Uganda, and it has issued threats against other countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. It is listed as a terror organisation by the US, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, UN as well as indirectly by the EU.¹³

The frequency of violent activities involving al-Shabaab has increased dramatically and consistently over time, with noticeable reduction in frequency during 2009; 2015-2016, and in 2018.

Al-Shabaab first began fighting the Ethiopian "Christian invaders" and the TFG, and diversified its targets in 2009 to include religious leaders who dared speak up against its doctrine and justifications (Maruf and Joseph 2018).¹⁴ It also began targeting more civilians, as an attack on a graduation ceremony of medical students in fall 2009 made more than clear. Another change came in July 2010: al-Shabaab had warned the AMISOM contributing countries that it would carry the fight to them if they would not withdraw from Somalia. In July 2010 it followed up on that threat with a suicide attack in Kampala, Uganda, which killed 85 people (ICG 2012).¹⁵ Starting in 2011, under pressure by the increased military efforts by Kenyan entering south Somalia, it shifted from a territorial actor with a quasi-conventional warfare strategy towards increasing its insurgency strategy. "Rather than fight in the open, it has melted into the background, allowing Kenyan mechanised infantry to move deeper into its heartland. Its fighters blend into the civilian population and distribute weapons. This is a result of lessons learned during the December 2006 Ethiopian intervention, when the Union of Islamic Courts deployed many of its combatants, including al-Shabaab, conventionally in the vast arid plains of south-western Somalia, and they were decimated by ground and air fire" (ICG 2012). The new guerrilla strategy with hit and run tactics led to an increased frequency of attacks, spiking up in 2012 (Africa Confidential 2018; Warner and Chapin 2018). This shift in strategy was also made explicit by al-Shabaab in an early 2012 press release, declaring: "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; he retreats, we pursue" (UN Security Council 2013, 54). The organisational purge of 2013 consolidated the power under the ideological hardliner Godane and the remaining operatives were likely more willing to engage in terrorist tactics such as suicide bombings (Warner and Chapin 2018). Al-Shabaab has been targeting personnel and symbols of the Somali state (Somali government and security sector officials as well as Somali government buildings and institutions), personnel and symbols of the international community (officials and personnel of the AMISOM mission, the African Union, or the United Nations) and spaces where personnel in the two demographics tend to congregate (hotels and restaurants). Between September 2006 and October 2017 there have been a total of 155 suicide bombing attacks, killing at least 595 and injuring up to 2,218 people (Warner and Chapin 2018). In 2013 al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, a success story for al-Shabaab by promoting their 'brand' in the world of Salafi jihadists. During

¹³ Although al-Shabaab still is not on the official EU terror list, directive EC 356/2010 supports the definition of al-Shabaab as an organisation that uses terrorist means.

¹⁴ But not only the religious actors who openly speak up against them are targeted but those who don't follow their religious interpretation. For example in December 2018, al-Shabaab killed religious leaders for using music in their ceremonies (Al Jazeera 2018).

¹⁵ The study of Warner and Chapin (2018) lists suicide attacks per country: Uganda 3, Kenya 9, Ethiopia 2, Djibouti 2, Somalia 155.

this attack, al-Shabaab killed non-Muslims while letting Muslims live. This targeting of non-Muslims is typical for the distinction between actions within Somalia and outside. As one interview from a large Somali civil society organisation pointed out: *“If we are outside Somalia, we are good Muslims and don’t get killed. If we are in Somalia we are not the right Muslims and are killed.”* (Focus group interview with Somali civil society representatives, May 2018) Another attention-catching attack was the attack on Garissa University in Kenya in 2015, where four al-Shabaab fighters killed 145 students and marked al-Shabaab’s return to world-stage when in 2014 al-Shabaab had been at its nadir (Maruf and Joseph 2018).

Overall, the combined forces of the Somali Federal Government and African Union (AMISOM) troops have not managed to contain al-Shabaab. As the Hiraal Institute (Hiraal Institute 2018) notes: *“As has been described by defectors, the group uses minimal manpower to hold towns and villages; it moves and focuses its firepower on problem areas and besieging liberated areas. This makes it very easy to wrest control of population centres from the group, but extremely difficult to ensure that liberated areas are normalised.”* It is also an indication for the military stalemate in which neither side has been able to make progress or defeat the other. Furthermore, as one peacebuilding-analyst highlighted, the behaviour of al-Shabaab depends on the region: *“The violence also differs between Mogadishu and the rural areas: in Mogadishu it is terror and political violence, in the rural areas it is mostly when people break al-Shabaab rules and get “punished”. So it’s often not necessarily the number of deaths that is important but rather how people die. The psychological effects are strong.”* (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018) *“As of April 2018, the group controls territory in 11 of 18 Somali regions and parts of Kenya’s Coast and North Eastern provinces - total territory that is almost half the landmass of Somalia. (...) It is only the occasional disruption operations by Somali and allied Special Operations forces and allied airstrikes that are keeping Al-Shabab from gaining even more territory than it already does”* (Hiraal Institute 2018). In 2017, al-Shabaab tried hard to disrupt the elections in Kenya and the political (s)election in Somalia¹⁶, which it sought to impede with targeted assassinations of members voting on the parliament system. Despite al-Shabaab’s best efforts, the election of a new parliament was accomplished as well as the election of a new president, ‘Farmaajo’. When he proposed a dialogue with al-Shabaab to solve the conflict, the group was quick to reject the offer, as it had done before (Mahmood 2017).

Overall, al-Shabaab has developed significantly in its 12 years of existence but it has also displayed strong resilience. The least change was observed in the ideological dimension, while external factors such as a change in the power asymmetry between al-Shabaab and the state and its international backers have caused evolutions in the organisational (e.g. formalisation and (de-)centralisation) and behavioural dimension (e.g. strategy and targeting).

3.4 An (a)typical Salafi jihadi armed group?

Considering al-Shabaab’s developments, what kind of NSAG is al-Shabaab? In the literature on NSAGs, an organizational features of Salafi jihadi armed groups (especially those affiliated to Al Qaeda) is that they are based on networks, structured along fragmented self-governing cells (as opposed to hierarchical command-and-control structures), and have no connection to the local people (in contrast to groups which have a clearly defined socio-ethno-political constituency). As was described above and contrary to this often assumed organisational structure, al-Shabaab is very much aligned and intertwined with the local population, not least through the clan structures crossing the divide between al-Shabaab and ‘the rest’ – this dichotomy is in fact an illusion. All Somalis are perceived by al-Shabaab as its constituency as it fights for a Somali Islamic state. Furthermore all Muslims are its constituency as it fights the oppression of

¹⁶ Mary Harper (2016) describes the difficulties of finding the right terminology for the elections of 2017: *“Those involved have given it a variety of names, including ‘indirect election’, ‘selection process’, ‘limited franchise election’, ‘semi-electoral process’ and ‘a political process with important electoral dimensions’.”*

Muslims by apostates and crusaders. While decentralised, it has a clear and strong command and control structure, and has not only displayed the will to gain and hold territory but the capacity to exert extensive governance functions. Organisationally then, al-Shabaab is not that different from other NSAGs. This contradicts typologies that separate Salafi jihadi armed groups i.a. based on organisational features (Bellamy 2016; Schneckener 2009).

Other typologies categorise according to goals and/or ideology. Within the specific spectrum of Islamist actors Maher (2016, 10) characterises the groups according to their attitude towards the state or international system. He proposes three categories: rejection (violence), challenge (violence/activism), or advice (quietism). Violent challengers to the state accept the state structure per se, violent rejectionists regard them as heretical and artificial units that usurps God's sovereignty (Maher 2016). As was outlined above, the 'true' goals of al-Shabaab are unclear. Al-Shabaab might have at its beginning been closer to a violent challenger as it was stylising itself to be the sole national defender against the Ethiopian invasion, and most likely this is still the mid-term goal. However, even though most of its activities remain focused on Somalia, it chose to become an affiliate of Al Qaeda, calls for global jihad, and seeks to support the spread of jihad in the Horn of Africa, thus could also be placed under the category of violent rejectionists. A more complex typology is offered for instance by Hegghammer (2014), who clusters Islamist armed actors based on their mid-term goals and dominant rationale: state-oriented, nation-oriented, Umma-oriented, morality-oriented and sectarian. Al-Shabaab fits with the category of state-orientation, setting itself up as an alternative to the state and displaying significant aspirations to be a governance actor. Beyond that, al-Shabaab also displays aspects of morality-orientation, characterised by a desire to change Muslims' social conduct in a more conservative and literalist direction. This is displayed when al-Shabaab governs territory and its extremely strict application of sharia law. Umma-orientation, which Hegghammer (2014) defines to be distinguished by a desire to protect the Islamic nation as a whole from external (non-Muslim) threats, is a narrative that al-Shabaab drew on especially in the early phases to increase recruitment, but it is not a dominant aspect. Thus, al-Shabaab cuts across typologies based on their goals within the spectrum of Islamist actors but also typologies on the entire spectrum of NSAGs: Zohar's typology (2016) classifies NSAG into four categories according to a group's main political agenda: secessionist, social-revolutionary, sectarian-revolutionary and global-revolutionary. Here as well al-Shabaab can be placed under 'global-revolutionary' and sectarian-revolutionary, depending on the weighing of its stated goals.

The behaviour of al-Shabaab also does not allow a clear categorisation. In comprehensive typologies like Schneckener's (2009)¹⁷, al-Shabaab's territorial behaviour and use of mostly direct physical violence don't match the category of "terrorists" (terrorist activities are part of its repertoire but not the majority). It also shows some aspects of criminal or organised violence employing illegal trade, kidnapping, blackmailing and extortion, targeted killing and seeking to infiltrate public authorities. The overall best fit is within the category of rebels/guerrillas.

Categories of course represent ideal-types, but overall it seems that both within the Islamist based groups and the entire NSAGs spectrum, al-Shabaab doesn't clearly fit into one category. Furthermore, there is no clear category of Salafi jihadi armed groups, and the distinction between them and other NSAG might not be as simple as it is sometimes presented (e.g. Bellamy 2016).

¹⁷ Schneckener (2009) distinguishes eight main analytical categories: Rebels/Guerrillas, Militias, Clan Chiefs/Big Men, Warlords, Terrorists, Criminals/Mafia/Gangs, Mercenaries and private security/military companies; and Marauders.

4. Strategic shifts and mechanisms of change

Considering al-Shabaab's 12 year history, this section places special focus on instances of behavioural de-escalation to answer the question of what contributed to al-Shabaab's pathway of (de)escalation? In this research project we have labelled these instances as 'strategic shifts' as they presuppose a strategic choice by the group's leadership to shift priorities from violent activities against the perceived enemy towards the pursuit of other dimensions of the struggle, such as conducting governance activities, dealing with internal issues or pursuing a political or non-violent strategy. Behavioural de-escalation is thus understood either as a reduction in the frequency of violent activities or the engagement in dialogue towards ceasefire negotiations or peace talks. As al-Shabaab's overall trajectory has not been a de-escalatory one, it was difficult to find instances of decisive de-escalation. Instead of clear de-escalation, the three strategic shifts discussed below describe a shift towards governance and consolidation, a missed window of opportunity for de-escalation and third the effects of popular outrage.

Focusing on the factors and conditions contributing to these strategic shifts, this section will draw on Soifer's (2012) understanding of critical junctures. Soifer defines critical junctures not by the significance of the outcome but by focusing on the factors allowing and/or producing change: the loosening of structural constraints to allow agency (permissive condition) and contingency to shape divergence from the past (productive condition). Accordingly, for a critical juncture to occur, permissive and productive conditions, individually necessary but insufficient, must come together in a loosening of constraints and heightened agency. The differentiation of conditions between those that drive change in a certain direction but also those conditions that are necessary to allow change to occur is an interesting approach. In order to distinguish between different types of permissive and productive conditions that might lead to strategic shifts towards de-escalation, this section also references the specialized literature on the de-escalation of NSAG. A study from 2015 on armed groups' transformation into nonviolent social movements was particularly helpful to disentangle intra-group, societal, relational (inter-actor) and contextual factors of change is by Dudouet (2015, see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Mechanisms of Change (Dudouet 2015, 9)

Levels of analysis	Mechanisms of change
Intra-group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Shifts in the identity, belief systems and strategic choices of the leadership ≡ Horizontal dynamics and power shifts ≡ Vertical dynamics across the hierarchy (top-down/bottom-up)
Group-society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Pressure from (existing) allies within a broader movement ≡ Coalition-building with other socio-political forces ≡ Mirroring a strategy that has been proved effective by other groups ≡ 'Reversed outbidding' to emphasise one's distinction with competitors
Group-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Persistence or increase in power asymmetry in favour of the state ≡ Level and nature of state repression to dissent ≡ Selective state inducement and political opportunities
Group-international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Loss of foreign support and search for new allies ≡ Emulation of successful regional/international models ≡ Cross-border transmission of techniques and skills

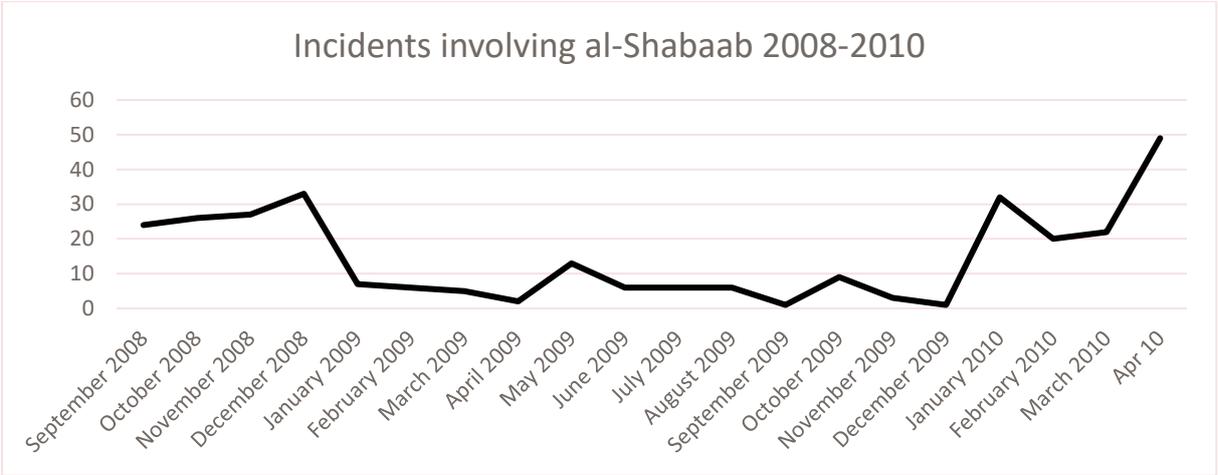
In the original conceptualisation of the research project, the idea was to examine whether behavioural change is influenced and conditioned by ideological and organizational change – for example, whether SJAGs have to de-radicalise their worldview in order to moderate their behaviour. Alas, it was extremely difficult to find (reliable) information on the internal dynamics of the group. Moreover, the dynamics between al-Shabaab and society, the state and international forces seemed to be the most relevant aspects

for influencing al-Shabaab’s strategic choices. Thus this section moves away from the three internal dimensions to identify other drivers of change.

4.1 Shift 1: Consolidation and governance (2009)

In 2009 there was an observable drop of violent incidents involving al-Shabaab (see Graph 2, and described below), which fits the definition of de-escalatory behaviour. Although the fighting in Mogadishu did not stop completely and in late spring 2009 al-Shabaab came close to defeating the transitional government, the data shows a significant overall reduction of violent activities during 2009.

Graph 2: Incidents involving al-Shabaab (2008-2010)



Source: The Graph is based on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). It includes all incidents (battles, violence against civilians, remote violence) involving al-Shabaab from September 1, 2008 to April 31, 2010.

This period could be described as an instance of de-escalation, since it led to an extended phase of reduced violent incidents in which al-Shabaab was extending its territorial control. However, the overall result of this phase was not a weakened or less violent organisation but rather a strengthened one.

Ethiopian forces withdrew from Somalia from December 2008 to February 2009 in the course of the Djibouti peace process between the ARS and the TFG. The intention was to replace the Ethiopian forces by the international forces of AMISOM, ideally with troops from countries with less self-interest in Somalia. AMISOM had been deployed in March 2007, with a defensive mandate to secure the TFG’s national headquarters at Villa Somalia and Mogadishu Airport.

Al-Shabaab had refused to be part of the Djibouti negotiations, but profited from them nonetheless. Ethiopia’s withdrawal caused a power void, which al-Shabaab could exploit: a change in the power asymmetry in favour of al-Shabaab was the permissive condition for the behavioural change as it granted al-Shabaab relative military dominance. The main factors contributing to the drop of violent behaviour thus were changes in the context, through external events that affected the power distribution between al-Shabaab and the TFG. Another external event was the election of President Sheik Sharif in January 2009, an Islamist with ties to the ICU. His government set out to codify and implement sharia law and set out to start a dialogue with al-Shabaab figures (ICG 2010). Al-Shabaab was forced to react fast to these significant developments and the leaders were “expected to articulate what they stood for, and more importantly, in what way their project to Islamise the country was better or different from that of the new TFG” (ibid.).

This external challenge to the ideological foundations of al-Shabaab could have led to an internal debate about the aims and appropriate behaviour towards that new government, but the leadership was dominated by ideological hardliners. Their exclusionary Salafi-jihadi worldview did not feature reconciliation with actors they considered illegitimate ‘apostates’. Instead al-Shabaab leaders re-stated their goal to implement their vision of an Islamic state and create an Islamic society, a productive condition that contributed to the behavioural change by focusing on strengthening al-Shabaab’s governance activities. Al-Shabaab thus experienced a formalisation and professionalization of the organisation under a strong central leadership (ibid.) to address governance demands that arose out of its increasing territorial control: it had enlarged its territorial control significantly since mid-2008, until at its largest it controlled an area as large as Denmark in south and central Somalia (Hansen 2013)¹⁸. This territory needed to be governed and guarded, stretching al-Shabaab thin and demanding a professionalization of the structure. Thus, al-Shabaab developed an extensive bureaucracy with a separation of work in branches or, as Marchal (2011) puts it, “ministries”. This included ministries of defence, finances, religious affairs and orientation, interior and information. Beyond that, a religious police was in charge of implementing and maintaining appropriate conduct, which it pursued with brutality (HRW 2010). It also set up a functioning and extensive taxation system to create more revenue. As al-Shabaab increased its territory and governance activities, regional governors oversaw all civil services conducted by the regional offices of the ministries (Maruf and Joseph 2018). As Marchal (2011, 23) pointed out: “The bureaucratic structure of al-Shabaab has to be taken more seriously than the TFG state apparatus.”

Initially, the external events shifted the context of the conflict dynamic which allowed al-Shabaab to re-focus on its internal organisational developments. The leaderships’ choice to re-allocate resources to governance and consolidation activities thus contributed to maintaining the phase of behavioural de-escalation. These developments would set the stage for al-Shabaab’s “golden age” described earlier in Section 3.

4.2 Shift 2: The Purge (2013)

What has become known as ‘The Purge’ does not qualify as a case of behavioural de-escalation, but was a significant moment of behavioural change, as – for a short time period – the target of action turned inwards, within the group. As will be outlined, the dynamics before the behavioural shift had the potential to set al-Shabaab on a de-escalation trajectory. These dynamics are highlighted here as a missed window of opportunity. The strategic choice by al-Shabaab’s leader Godane was to stop these potential de-escalatory dynamics – which closed this window of opportunity.

For al-Shabaab, targeting inside opponents was not entirely new as the Amniyat under Godane had enforced cohesion and punished “spies” or traitors lethally before. Nonetheless, these were silent, single incidents and concerned mostly lower ranks. In a concerted effort the purge of summer 2013 targeted high ranking and influential figures of the organisation such as Omar al-Afghani (killed), Hammami (killed), Robow (retreated to safety of his clan territory) and Hassan Dahir Aweys (fled and was captured by FGS).

The dynamics that led to Godane’s decision to turn against these high ranking figures and purge al-Shabaab started as early as 2009 and can be traced to a changing relationship with the society and people under al-Shabaab control. The public opinion is primarily an external factor, even though cases like al-Shabaab have no clearly defined constituency (unlike in ethnic or session conflicts) and the internal-external distinction is somewhat blurry. The group had been growing progressively out of touch with the population, and social discontent became obvious. Pressure on the group-society level as an external permissive condition fostered what could have been a productive condition for real de-escalation, i.e. the

¹⁸ Maruf and Joseph (Maruf and Joseph 2018) put it at 80% south of Puntland.

shifting of power relations within the group (horizontal dynamics). This turned out to be a missed window of opportunity.

One of the differences between the emir Godane and other leading sub-commanders lay in the relationships they maintained to the broader society. In al-Shabaab's doctrine, only one correct understanding of Islam exists, combined with an elitist approach that declares all who do not share in its belief as unbelievers/apostates. This takfiri-practice is common for Salafi-actors in the style of AQ and offers the justification for the killing of Muslims. The debate about the rightness and religious acceptability of al-Shabaab's actions started to emerge in 2009 when the Ethiopians had withdrawn and more of al-Shabaab's focus of action shifted from AMISOM to the Somali government. Al-Shabaab had considered the FGS illegitimate and un-Islamic from the start – as well as anyone affiliated with it. Social support started to drop as the nationalist-narrative of defending Somalia from Christian invaders began to wane and the outrage for killing civilians and innocent bystanders grew. The 2009 bombing during a graduation ceremony of medical students that was primarily aimed at government officials who attended the event, but caused many civilian deaths, provoked one of the first instances of public outrage (Ingiriis 2018a). The ICG's assessment of al-Shabaab activity at the time was that it "is finding the challenge of governance much more complicated than the guerrilla struggle. Its short governance record has been disastrous, fuelling public disillusion and intensifying the pace of ideological and policy infighting within the leadership." (ICG 2010, 9) Support dropped further during and after the drought and famine of 2010-2011, which cost up to 250,000 lives and during which al-Shabaab's obstructionist actions hindered aid organisations' access to al-Shabaab territory (Bajoria 2011). Another interview with a Somali representative of an INGO confirmed the worsening relations between the society and al-Shabaab, due to increasing civilian casualties. This reduced support for al-Shabaab's actions, even though its aims were still endorsed (Interview May 2018).

Sub-commanders such as Robow or Aweys, who were more closely connected to their clans and/or perceived to be more ideologically moderate, seemed more responsive to the needs of al-Shabaab's constituency. Robow for example advocated for granting access for international aid organisations (Maruf and Joseph 2018). This enforced a pre-existing division between the leadership; internally the horizontal power distribution within the leadership began to fragment. The topics of contention concerned the strategic choices but also concrete governance issues such as the question of who had the right to mete out justice and implement sharia – the local Shura councils or the al-Shabaab militias. Aweys, in a critique of Godane, described al-Shabaab's actions as "far removed from the teachings of Islam, accusing them of spilling the blood of Muslims and killing innocent civilians." (Mohammed 2012). In June 2012, rumours spread that a group of al-Shabaab leaders, including Aweys and Robow met to discuss prospects for political negotiations with the Somali government (Mohammed 2012; Maruf and Joseph 2018). A further point of critique arose from the foreign fighters which felt marginalised. This added more internal bottom-up pressure on the leadership. Criticisms of Godane burst into the open when the American jihadist Omar Hammami broke ranks and launched a video openly criticising Godane (Hansen 2014). When Hammami survived an assassination attempt by Amniyat fighters, he used Twitter to spread his message and critique. A group of dissenting leaders declared a "fatwa (religious ruling), removing the requirement that al-Shabab fighters be loyal to the emir if he was violating the Qur'an, which they alleged Godane guilty of by targeting dissenters within al-Shabab." (Hansen 2014; Anzalone 2014). The leaders supporting this fatwa included high-ranking figures such as Ibrahim al-Afghani¹⁹, second-in-command of al-Shabaab, Robow, Shongole and Hassan Dahir Aweys²⁰, some of whom had been part of al-Shabaab since its beginning. By

¹⁹ Al- Afghani was one of the founding fathers of jihad in Somalia, a central figure in the AIAI and well connected in AQ.

²⁰ Although no longer formally a member of al-Shabaab after Hizbul Islam split from it in December 2012, Aweys still remained a central and respected figure of Somali Islamism of which he had been a driving force since the 1990s.

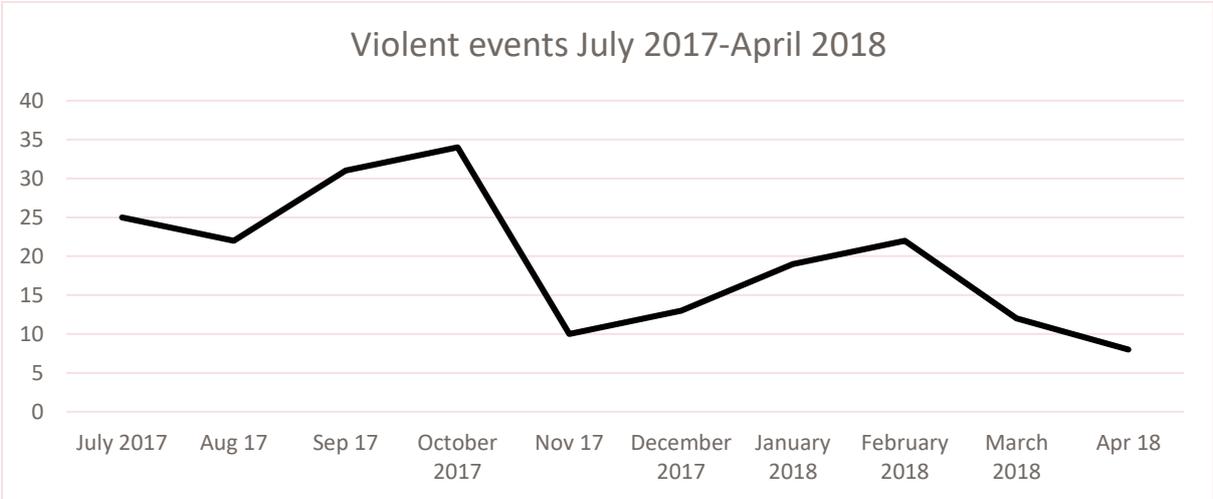
2013, the internal conditions seemed ripe for change, with a window of opportunity for a horizontal power shift within the leadership and the potential for re-orientation and de-escalation.

The internal dissenters had become strong enough to pose a threat to Godane’s grip on power. The productive condition for the change in strategy was Godane’s decision to consolidate his power rather than to face a splintering of the group or a loss of power. His answer to the critique was prompt and brutal, using the Amniyat in a purge to rid al-Shabaab of the dissenters and challengers to his power. The organisational set up of the Amniyat, under direct command of the emir Godane and led by loyal leaders, functioned as a permissive condition, by providing the resources and power needed for Godane to implement the purge. A second permissive condition was a religious ruling to legitimise such action, which was provided by a Somali-Kenyan scholar who declared dissenters to be unbelievers (Maruf and Joseph 2018). This strategic shift, even though only of short duration, had long lasting effects on the organisational dimension because it concentrated power with the emir Godane and weakened the Shura (Hansen 2014). The change brought a centralisation of leadership along with a streamlining of the command and control structure, strengthening discipline in al-Shabaab’s fighters by increasing fear of the Amniyat. The resulting organisation was less fragmented and critique of the leadership became an even more risky business. The enforced internal coherence has lasted since 2013, as the Amniyat continues to be a powerful factor that prevents internal challenges to the central leadership figures, priorities and narratives.

4.3 Shift 3: Reacting to popular backlash (2017)

November 2017 and the following month saw a sharp decline in incidents involving al-Shabaab. This moment of behavioural de-escalation followed a behavioural escalation in October, when al-Shabaab’s most horrendous bombing attack with two vehicle-borne explosives hit central Mogadishu. The explosion happened at a checkpoint at a busy intersection, killing at least 587 people and injuring more than 300 (Sheikh 2017). Especially for the two month after that, the ACLED data show a reduction of violent behaviour, but it continued to remain relatively low for the first half of 2018. As the number of attacks had been higher before the October attack and rose again in 2018, it seems most likely that the driving factor for the temporary reduction in violent behaviour lies in the public reactions to the attack.

Graph 3: Violent events from July 2017 to April 2018



Source: ACLED

The reaction was strong: tens of thousands of Somalis protested against the violence on the street (Leithead 2017). The level of public outcry, where fear of al-Shabaab turned into anger, was unprecedented. In the wake of the attack, the president called for a unified society with a renewed effort to fight al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab kept quiet about the attack, neither confirming or denying it. Yet, there is little doubt in Somalia as to who was the perpetrator. A common strategy for armed actors to limit the public relations fiasco in cases of high civilian loss and public outrage is to deny their responsibility for the attack (Abrahms 2018), a strategy that al-Shabaab followed: al-Shabaab “didn’t dare to claim responsibility and admit its murderous conduct even to its own members and sympathizers” (Sanbalooshe 2017). As in the purge of 2013, the second strategic shift, the mechanism of change best suited to explain the behavioural change is the pressure on the group-society level, again blurring the external/internal factor distinction. The permissive condition for the behavioural change to de-escalation, which created a new dynamic in the setting, was the sharp public reaction of rejection. Al-Shabaab’s need to weather the public backlash then was the productive condition. In any case, it was a transformative event that reshaped the relationship between al-Shabaab and the population that has made the public dare to speak out more loudly against the violence. The effect of the bomb on the internal dynamics is harder to assess. There are no recorded numbers, but according to several interviews, defections rose after the attack as even al-Shabaab members were not willing to tolerate such levels of violence (Interviews with political analysts and INGO representatives, May 2018).

4.4 What contributed to al-Shabaab’s de-escalation?

In the three strategic shifts outlined above, the factors identified as contributing to the (potential of) behavioural de-escalation were primarily external ones, such as the changing of the conflict setting and power distribution in 2009 when Ethiopia withdrew its forces. The behavioural de-escalation at that point though was superficial at best, as the overall trajectory of the group was not geared towards ending the conflict, but rather a consolidation of power and organisational structure and capabilities. Instead the sudden military dominance allowed al-Shabaab to pursue its governance aims more broadly. Implementing its ideology-based vision of society exposed its strength (establishing a level of order and stability) but also its weaknesses (brutality, highly restrictive and draconic). This contributed to public disillusion and challenges to al-Shabaab’s religious and political arguments.

In turn, these dynamics had an effect on the organisational dimension of the group: for both the second and third strategic shift, the external pressure from society contributed to behavioural change by affecting the internal power-balance. As explained before, almost the complete Somali society is potentially the constituency of al-Shabaab as the group is based on a shared religious foundation and has drawn from nationalist sentiments in the past. One observation drawn from this is that the relationship between individual leaders and the wider society varies and can impact the internal organisational dimension horizontally. Potentially, and a topic for future research, the impact of the society-group relations might be stronger in Somalia compared to other countries, as clan structures and allegiances are intertwined or supersede loyalty to al-Shabaab. The potential power of the group-society relationship as factor for de-escalation centrally depends on the character of individual leaders, and their willingness to adapt their strategies to the preferences of the group’s constituencies. According to Hermann and Gerard (2009), de-escalation is more likely to be driven by strategist or pragmatic leaders, who are ready to adapt either their tactics or their goals according to the evolving environment, than by ideologues, whose original set of goals and strategies remain firmly unchanged regardless of public preferences and contextual evolutions. Especially after the purge of 2013, the leadership of al-Shabaab seems to have been dominated by ideologues. As an international NGO representative pointed out in an interview (May 2018), the ideologues at the top are the reason why there is a feeling of hopelessness among society in Somalia,

feeding doubts that negotiations with al-Shabaab are at all possible. On this note, the remaining sections will outline the past experience with (and the difficulty of) engaging al-Shabaab in dialogue, and the consequences for future de-escalation prospects.

5. Dialogue engagement with al-Shabaab

Turning from the development and strategic shifts for de-escalation to the role of dialogue engagement, this section focuses on the types and purposes of past dialogue attempts with al-Shabaab. Mapping political dialogue efforts, humanitarian and those focused on the individual disengagement of group members, this section also pays attention to the challenges that accompanied dialogue efforts. –the section closes with observations on the overall dialogue and communication structure with al-Shabaab.

5.1 Mapping past dialogue attempts and challenges encountered

= Political dialogue

Very few instances of engagement that aimed at **talking about possible (political) talks** have been found during the research. Talking with al-Shabaab seems to be at the same time highly dangerous yet commonplace – depending on who you are and what you want. The best known attempts for political dialogue were the efforts to negotiate a solution in 2007/8 through the formation of the Alliance for Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) in Asmara, Eritrea, which combined the forces of the ICU, former warlords and secular forces, and the subsequent Djibouti Process. In 2009, under the new president Sheik Sharif, al-Shabaab again turned down overtures for political dialogue. Both cases could be depicted as missed windows of opportunity, which Soifer (2012) describes in his conceptualisation of critical junctures as situations where the permissive condition is not met with sufficient productive condition to create change. In both instances, permissive conditions for change existed because a negotiated solution became a distinct possibility as willingness to negotiate existed at least on one side.

Al-Shabaab's first emir Ismail Arale was arrested in May 2007 in Djibouti for passport fraud²¹ while travelling to a meeting with ICU figures in Eritrea, for the purpose of discussing the formation of an exile government (Maruf and Joseph 2018, 60). This indicates that al-Shabaab's leaders at the time were at the very least considering the options for participating in dialogue. His successor Godane refused to participate in the ARS and the subsequent negotiations of the Djibouti process. He did not change his position in 2009 when the new TFG President repeatedly called on al-Shabaab to engage in negotiations. Maruf and Joseph (2018, 107) report a meeting between al-Shabaab and the Ulema Council of Somalia, a council formed by leading Islamic scholars in 2009. The Ulema Council was mandated to function as a mediator between al-Shabaab and TFG President Sheikh Sharif, who proposed a ceasefire and the withdrawal of AMISOM troops. Godane refused this offer, influenced by calls by Al Qaeda to keep fighting and warning against negotiations.

Several interviewees mentioned or hinted at past attempts by international actors to establish contact with central al-Shabaab figures, but none of these efforts were successful, allegedly due to the lack of

²¹ Arale was then handed over to the US and transferred to the US prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, until he returned to Somalia in 2009. According to Maruf and Joseph (Maruf and Joseph 2018), Arale stayed away from militant activities after his return.

interest on al-Shabaab's side. These efforts included attempts to engage the group on an ideological level, to start a discussion and possibly deconstruct its religious arguments. The attempts were supported by Islamic clerics and challenged al-Shabaab around themes such as: what is a believer, al-Shabaab's interpretation of the Quran, what form of government does al-Shabaab seek, and comparison between the Western form of governance and the Islamic Ottoman structure of governance (Interview with international Diplomat, May 2018). This attempts to engage al-Shabaab in a discussion remained unsuccessful. As interview partners pointed out, al-Shabaab's rather low level of religious literacy and knowledge made in-depth discussions on religious issues generally difficult (Interviews with political analysts and international diplomat, May 2018). Further, high tensions within al-Shabaab at the time made the hardliners very hostile. Fragmentation made it difficult to speak to a group that represented the whole movement. However, the very fact that such efforts were made confirms the point that the prospect of negotiations had been taken seriously for some time, both internationally and nationally. Several Somali presidents have also made public overtures in this direction. For example, the current President 'Farmaajo' addressed al-Shabaab soon after his election in 2017 and offered negotiations. But not only the president but several former ministers and the former National Security Advisor Hussein Sheikh-Ali (and head of the High Level Defectors Programme) all called publicly for negotiations (Sheikh-Ali 2018). However, these public approaches did not elicit any reaction from al-Shabaab's side.

Nonetheless, during most of al-Shabaab's 12-year existence, there has been only limited political will to drive a negotiation agenda forward and the military option has remained the primary focus by all successive governments. For the first decade the imperative of 'no talking to terrorists' was also a hurdle. This imperative has become somewhat fissured as the hard power military approach has proven largely ineffective at solving the conflict. Still, the group's indiscriminate use of violence, terrorist tactics, internationalist language and spread of violence to neighbouring countries continue to limit the willingness of national and international actors to promote negotiations. Whoever was willing to advocate for negotiations, they would have to face the potential backlash created by a perception of 'conceding to terrorists' by legitimising their demands.

≡ Humanitarian dialogue

While there are no recorded instances of political dialogue with al-Shabaab, humanitarian negotiation have occurred on several occasions. The purpose of these negotiations are either to decrease or prevent violence, and/or to address humanitarian access needs. With regards to ceasefire negotiations, Maruf and Joseph (2018) mention a **ceasefire agreement** for Mogadishu that was mediated in spring 2007 by elders between al-Shabaab and the Ethiopian and TFG forces. Fighting in April that year was fierce, and the ceasefire was agreed to allow the bodies to be removed, while tens of thousands of civilians took the chance to flee the city. It is the only ceasefire agreement recorded so far with al-Shabaab.

Dialogue with humanitarian actors, both local and international, exists in a limited form. Only a few international agencies are active directly in al-Shabaab controlled territory. Those who had or still have activities on the ground, encounter difficulties negotiating access to people in al-Shabaab controlled territories.²² Although large aid agencies like the UN World Food Programme were banned as early as 2009, until 2011 other aid agencies retained some degree of access as they were seen as sources of income through taxation by the group. Additionally, aid agencies were used for strengthening al-Shabaab's legitimacy on the ground because they were seen as either providing services (or be credited with the provision of aid) or controlling aid distribution. When the fortune of al-Shabaab changed in 2011 under the increased military pressure, mistrust towards possible infiltration or spying made it more restrictive in

²² See esp. the Humanitarian Policy Group Briefings on the topic (Jackson 2014; Jackson and Aynte 2013b), but also Belliveau (2015) on MSF's need for defining red lines and Harmonie Toros and Stephen Harely (2018).

its interactions with humanitarians (Jackson and Aynte 2013a). Al-Shabaab's security concerns have at times outweighed its considerations of severe need among the population. A case in point was the famine in 2011 when al-Shabaab refused access to large areas, and once more in 2017, when an estimated 6.2 million people were in dire need, faced with death due to hunger and disease (ICG 2017). The epicentre of the famine was south and central Somalia, areas largely under al-Shabaab control. By refusing aid organisations access and blocking drought victims' exodus towards areas with aid access, it kept the local population hostage, as International Crisis Group (2017, 4) reported, "arguably because of its heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability – a realisation that mass depopulation might expose it to aerial and ground attacks." By setting up its own relief efforts al-Shabaab tried to relieve suffering, but arrested local aid organisations found with Western-donated food and supplies, burning the food and releasing an "edict warning against accepting handouts from 'crusaders and apostates' (a reference to foreigners and the Somali government)" (ICG 2017). The bomb attack on the WFP in Mogadishu in April 2017 shows that it actively sought to disrupt aid. In this regard, al-Shabaab is no less hostile to international Muslim relief organisations, considering Turkish and United Arab Emirates (UAE) personnel and facilities legitimate targets (Malek 2017; Chonghaile 2012). This has severely limited any interaction with al-Shabaab's top leadership to the point where high-level diplomatic action to facilitate humanitarian access is all but non-existent. Instead the majority of humanitarian access negotiations occur with the local level al-Shabaab actors whereas general policy and decision-making on key issues, such as expulsions, are taken by the senior leadership (Jackson and Aynte 2013b). International actors work with local partners who arrange access to al-Shabaab held territory, most often through regional commanders, who tend to allow it only if there is high need (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, July 2018). Other strategies of humanitarian agencies in these negotiations include efforts to enhance the local nature of the aid organisation, appeals to the commanders' responsibility towards the suffering people, and efforts to appeal to al-Shabaab's objective to be a better governance actor than the FGS. Furthermore, a careful selection of negotiators is important (Jackson and Aynte 2013b). Typically, the chances of success rise if the organisation has an established track record of presence in the country and is respected by the people for its service delivery (Belliveau 2015). One interviewee from a big international aid organisation pointed out that it can be risky for regional commanders to allow access, risking disapproval from the central leadership. The same organisation managed to build up a level of dialogue in a bottom-up fashion through slow and sustained efforts, starting from the local level to mid-range commanders (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, June 2018). One challenge in building up relationships is the continuing rotation of al-Shabaab leaders (Toros and Harely 2018).

Interlocutors for negotiations often are local clan elders or individuals with clan connections to the commander. Informal connections to certain people within al-Shabaab through family, clan or business links are used regularly also in cases such as **hostage release-negotiations** (Botha and Abdile 2019; The Indian Ocean Newsletter 2017). Outreach to al-Shabaab is carried out through these informal links. At times of urgent need these links have been provided even by Somali staff in international organisations, which can be high risk as al-Shabaab is known to react harshly to the suspicion of espionage (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, July 2018).

≡ **Dialogue to elicit individual disengagement**

By contrast to political or humanitarian dialogue with non-state armed groups, another approach to engagement promoted by programmes to counter violent extremism (CVE) aims to target single individuals, perceived as moderates, to encourage their disengagement from the group. In Somalia, successive governments have initiated **defector's programmes** targeting individual members of al-

Shabaab. There are two distinct defector's programmes, one for high level al-Shabaab members and one for the rank and file. These defector programmes are criticised for several reasons.

Senior al-Shabaab defectors often negotiate a full amnesty in ad-hoc political deals. Lower ranking al-Shabaab members have to stand trial and are assessed by Somali intelligence (Felbab-Brown 2018b). The different programmes are unjust as the rank and file thus get punished for being an al-Shabaab member, while the higher ranks who take decisions are not punished. Beyond this inequality and disrespect for accountability, the government is unable to protect low-level defectors from al-Shabaab's revenge whereas high level defectors can either negotiate safety or have stronger (clan) ties to rely on for their safety. Furthermore, the defector's programmes lack job opportunities and reintegration options to entice fighters to defect from al-Shabaab by offering alternative ways to earn a living. The prospect of being punished but not supported reduces the defector's programmes potential (Interview political analyst, May 2018). Nonetheless, most defectors are rank and file fighters – reports estimate several thousand – but also mid ranking and even a few leaders from the higher echelons have also defected though such efforts (Felbab-Brown 2018a). The former member and well known and respected Islamist Aweys has been under house-arrest since escaping Godane's purge of 2013. In 2012, he was assessed as “a very ambitious politician who's more hell-bent on becoming the president of Somalia than blowing himself up in a suicide mission” (Aynte 2012). The most prominent of all defectors is founding member Mukhtar Robow who defected in August 2017. He displayed political ambitions but has been arrested in fall 2018.²³ The strength of the defections, as Harmonie Toros points out, is that it “demonstrates to a certain degree that there are senior members of al-Shabaab who are not crazy radicals, that we can talk to.” But “[t]he risk is if you pull all the moderates out, you only leave the ideologues” (cited in: Houreld 2018). Several amnesty offers have been part of this individual defection encouragement package, for example in 2014 after the death of Godane, or in 2017 after the election of 'Farmaajo'. The individual approach towards al-Shabaab has increased scepticism among its leadership towards any kind of talks, rendering approaches to engage in dialogue through the formal hierarchy supremely suspicious for al-Shabaab.

5.2 Levels of engagement: a pyramidal structure

When it comes to dialogue engagement with al-Shabaab, the unequal degrees of access along the group's hierarchy could be described as a pyramid. On the top leadership level, there is and was no (known) direct dialogue engagement. More indirect forms of dialogue take place through **public statements** exchanged between the group, the government and other actors. Through these statements, al-Shabaab for example promotes its agenda or responds to current events and accusations, indicating that the leadership cares about public opinion. One example is the letter in response to a Human Rights Watch Report in 2017, which reported instances where al-Shabaab had forcefully abducted or recruited children. Al-Shabaab's response letter rejected the accusation and stated its policy of accepting fighters only at an age of 16 and above, even though several accounts have pointed to al-Shabaab's use of child soldiers. (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018).

The middle level leadership of al-Shabaab is somewhat more approachable, as **technical dialogues** such as negotiations on humanitarian access are mostly conducted on this level. It is also at this level that INGOs such as Life and Peace Institute and Finn Church Aid have engaged with members to gather information about al-Shabaab's aims, goals and attitudes (Life and Peace Institute 2014; Botha and Abdile 2019). One Somali respondent from the peacebuilding community highlighted the role of engagement between elders and al-Shabaab on the regional or community level: *“If it is not about de-legitimising it [al-Shabaab] but if it is about service delivery or individual cases, usually clan elders do that kind of work. Also*

²³ For more information on his arrest see page 33.

because al-Shabaab needs the support of the communities, especially those of the clan elders. It needs the soldiers, the support, and it can only get that level of support if it has respect for the clan elders. And there are cases where al-Shabaab has been given their blessing just to say that it is working with the communities and they are respecting the leaders and elders. So in [such cases] yes, but if it is about de-legitimising it or renouncing their ideology, I think nobody in the clans dares that.” (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018) Several respondents mentioned in interviews another form of subtle and tacit engagement to de-escalate violence: *“In areas of mixed authority there is limited contact with al-Shabaab in form of **silent understandings**. The administration [of the FGS] for example is aware that during the night the al-Shabaab fighters go home to their families who live in their village but al-Shabaab also leaves them alone.”* (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018). Similar tacit pacts of non-aggression were mentioned with regard some AMISOM troops on the ground (Interview with international diplomat, May 2018).

At the bottom of the pyramid, various **informal interactions take place on the individual level** between family, clan members and friends, simplified by cell phones and the internet. Indeed in many of the interviews, especially with native Somalis, the high interconnection between al-Shabaab and the larger society – and even the state itself – was mentioned. As Somalis accept and even specifically seek out al-Shabaab’s Sharia Courts, the group’s governance services offer a platform of interaction between individuals and al-Shabaab. Furthermore, one interviewee highlighted that al-Shabaab was nothing distant, as *“Many Somalis have a person in their family who is an AS member or sympathizer.”* (Interview with Somali civil society representative, February 2018) Another questioned what exactly we mean by al-Shabaab as he argued: *“It is wrong to believe al-Shabaab is only 5,000 people strong, its ideological affiliates are rather the larger part of the population, they have been indoctrinated for 12 years. Al-Shabaab really is more like millions of people and it is everywhere, at universities, government, military, diaspora...”* (Interview with Somali civil society representative, May 2018). Another interviewee noted the challenge of drafting an anti-terrorism law in Somalia because it would require declaring all connections to a terrorist group illegal. In the case of Somalia this would not really be possible because *“who doesn’t have some sort of link to al-Shabaab? Many authorities, especially in the communities, have double-hats and switch to whatever is more suitable at that point in time. The government does not offer enough protection to make them jump the fence and decide on one side.”* (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018).

However, this high level of interaction with al-Shabaab in society is not necessarily a voluntary choice. Al-Shabaab has a reputation for omnipresence. Especially the Amniyat is feared widely (and justly) for its informants. One interviewee went so far as stating that: *“There are no civilians in Mogadishu. There are only al-Shabaab members, al-Shabaab supporters or al-Shabaab targets. If you are not a supporter, you’re a target.”* (Interview with former al-Shabaab member, June 2018). In interviews for this study as well as recent publications, experts have observed a shift towards stronger criticism of al-Shabaab by the population (Crouch and Abdi 2018; Toros and Harely 2018). These critiques are directed at the violent activities of al-Shabaab, for example after the suicide attack of October 2017, which also affected its claim to represent true Islam. A recent study on community perspectives of al-Shabaab highlights the broad and complex range of Somali attitudes towards al-Shabaab, but pointed out that all respondents disagreed with al-Shabaab’s religious ideology and/or questioned their claim of religiousness since it breaks central aspects of Islamic teachings, especially by killing people (Crouch and Abdi 2018). Criticisms from communities further include the level of taxation and enforced “zakat”²⁴, but also from the business community about the insecurity and destruction of infrastructure as result of the ongoing conflict, which decreases investments and profit. In spite of this criticism, the fear of al-Shabaab still mostly prevents people from speaking up publicly against the group, especially in the media but also in mosques. Overall,

²⁴ Zakat is a form of religious obligation tax for charity.

the increasing critique and resentment towards al-Shabaab seems focused mostly on its behaviour while the group's broader political-ideological objectives are not fundamentally questioned.

6. Future prospects for de-escalation through dialogue

6.1 Impact of (non-)engagement on (de-)escalation

Considering this pyramid structure of dialogue engagement, how does it link with developments and change within al-Shabaab? There are almost no political dialogue or technical negotiations such as on ceasefires, and only limited or indirect negotiations with international humanitarian actors. Thus, one might conclude that dialogue has not played a role in al-Shabaab's development. However, just because there was no change based on dialogue, does not mean there was no change resulting out of the *absence* of dialogue. The rejection of political negotiations by leaders in 2009 raised internal discussion and dissent, contributing to a process of fragmentation that was stopped only with the purge of the dissenters. The rejection of humanitarian access negotiations in 2011 and 2017 had considerable political costs and affected the relationship between al-Shabaab and society. The rejection of negotiations has been costly for al-Shabaab. Nonetheless, the costs of no talks have not been heavy enough to incentivise change towards top-level dialogue. Instead, the experiences of dialogue so far could have increased the resistance to them at top leadership level because the individual approach of dialogue for defection purposes has increased the fear of spies and traitors, deepening al-Shabaab's already existing lack of trust of the FGS, AMISOM and other international actors. Thus formal or informal outreach is not only difficult but also dangerous for the (local) interlocutor. By rejecting and subduing (potential) dialogue with the FGS – but also within the group, al-Shabaab has maintained coherence: for example, on the ideological level, by killing or frightening into silence the Somali Islamic scholars who could have successfully challenged its religious narrative and legitimisation (Interview with civil society representative, May 2018). Since the purge in 2013, there have been no reports about similar internal debates about strategy or religious legitimacy.

6.2 Plausible future de-escalation scenarios

When asking interviewees how they saw the future of the conflict, a clear trend emerged. A small minority of respondents saw only military defeat as a possible and desirable future, but this would require significant political will and the enhancement of military capacities on the government side. Only two interviewees felt that al-Shabaab is slowly being defeated but dragging its heels and this slow defeat could go on for another 10 years. As noted by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (2018, 9), targeted hard power efforts such as the decapitation of the leadership has historically had little effect on the group's ability to carry out both asymmetric and conventional attacks within Somalia and it seems unlikely that this will change in the future. The option of a military victory by the state was assumed to remain a slow and painful prospect only to be achieved at all if military capacity was increased. In light of the ongoing debates about AMISOM withdrawal plans, this was not considered a likely scenario.

Instead, the majority responded that a military solution would not succeed, asking “*How do you defeat something like this that is so set into the society?*” (Interview with civil society representative, February 2018). And even if one could defeat al-Shabaab as an organisation, this would not solve the conflict drivers: “*The underlying conflict is elite competition which doesn't change no matter what label is put on it - clans, religion, nationalism. The conflicts are driven by issues of land, resources or access to infrastructure*

and the regional interests of international actors are put on top.” (Interview with political analyst, May 2018). Accordingly, to defeat al-Shabaab it is necessary at the very least to step up state-building, peacebuilding and development efforts to reduce al-Shabaab’s impact and attractiveness. Discrediting the religious claims of al-Shabaab and investing in youth education were especially highlighted as important measures, as well as improving the defectors programmes to ensure the safety of former fighters. As one Somali interviewee described it: *“The real challenge to Somalia is of leadership and how to establish good governance. Al-Shabaab is the easiest thing to solve in Somalia”* (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018). The most realistic scenario for the majority of respondents was a dragging on of the current situation with slow progress on resolving the conflict but creating some form of political and economic stability – essentially a scenario where al-Shabaab is outmanoeuvred by growing state capacities and service provision.

One somewhat deviant opinion was that in reality al-Shabaab had won already, as it is blatantly governing (e.g. through taxation systems) most of south and central Somalia while the FGS is fundamentally weak. From that perspective, any future planning by the FGS and the international community should first acknowledge this reality. Noteworthy was that while all interviewees saw significant challenges for negotiations, the general idea of peace talks was not taboo. Indeed, respondents pointed out that there has been a de-tabooisation of the topic (Interviews with political analyst and INGO representatives, May 2018), which is also echoed by increasing number of publications and statements to that effect (Ahmed Ali, 2017; Kelley, 2017; Ingiriis 2018a; Sheikh-Ali 2018; Crouch and Mackenzie 2019, Olojo, 2019).

6.3 Conditions for future negotiations

While most respondents agreed that negotiations would be a good option and could solve the conflict, all considered them unlikely at this point in time, due to a number of obstacles and preconditions faced by both sides.

≡ Lack of ripeness of conflict actors

One challenge regularly mentioned concerned the **government** and questioned its coherence, legitimacy and capacity to see negotiations through – as well as its essential lack of leadership. *“For negotiations, not al-Shabaab but the opposite actor is the problem. Who would speak for what reason in whose name?”* (Interviews with political analyst, May 2018). Also there seems to be no FSG strategy on how to deal with al-Shabaab, nor a plan to map the necessary capacities to develop one. Overall, al-Shabaab remains only one among a multitude of problems the FSG is struggling with. On top of that, not all forces within the political sphere of Somalia are interested in solving the conflict as its continuation grants a level of benefits: As one analyst from a humanitarian organisation pointed out, so far: *“We frame al-Shabaab so clearly that talking to them becomes impossible, which adds another layer of complications. In terms of ideology or political aims al-Shabaab is not very different from other actors. (...) It is a political move to make al-Shabaab so different. Doing so provides political capital to international but also local actors”* (Interview, May 2018). Nationally and internationally, it would be necessary to change the existing framing of al-Shabaab. Yet it was repeatedly voiced in interviews that too many actors have nothing to gain from losing the political capital of that existing frame. The political system in Somalia, that largely depends on the elite bargain between the most powerful clans benefits from the threat al-Shabaab poses. As Menkhaus (Menkhaus 2018) points out, this threat “has provided the glue that has helped keep the Somali elite bargain intact since 2007. Were al-Shabaab to be considerably weakened or defeated, or were the FGS and

al-Shabaab to reach a negotiated end to the insurgency, the elite compact might come undone, and even lead to renewed level of elite manipulated clan war.” Fear of a political break-down of the existing system – and the potential costs of that – could inhibit the elites from becoming ‘ripe’ for a negotiated solution.

In responses of interviewees with regards to the challenges that **al-Shabaab** poses, respondents primarily pointed to the group’s ideology, which by its own definition forbade negotiations, especially if it involved “infidels” or “traitors”. Al-Shabaab’s anti-democratic ideology would not leave space for any acceptable negotiating results. Other challenges named were that al-Shabaab was too strong and had nothing to gain from negotiations, as there were no attractive incentives that could be offered to it. Al-Shabaab’s revenue generation through its effective and efficient taxation and extortion system makes it financially independent. Meanwhile, efforts to curb its finances have not been effective. “Financially, the group is still able to collect taxes in most parts of the country, including in the areas outside its control. Efforts to counter its financial machinery have been disjointed and ineffective. While the federal government has created the Financial Integrity Unit and passed the anti-money laundering bill in 2016, the group continues to enjoy financial freedom and has been unfazed by government efforts.” (Hiraal Institute 2018). Moreover, the loss of Kismayo and its port, through which al-Shabaab had been making profit through illicit charcoal trade, did not have the expected effects. “*Diaspora funding also is still a source of income, although this has been cut with a tighter control on the financial flow. But charcoal and sugar trade are still two sources of income besides taxation and clever business investments such as in gold or 'jihad contributions' from other countries.*” (Interview with political analyst, May 2018) There are no silent state-sponsors that could exert pressure on the group and the leadership is dominated by ideological hardliners. Any challenge to the self-imposed ideological impediment would certainly lead to internal divisions, disagreements and spoilers.

Another challenge mentioned was the inability to access the top leadership. For example, rumours about the impending death of al-Shabaab’s emir Ubaidah and an internal competition on the succession have been circulating since spring 2018. Yet the information remains vague and the dynamics at al-Shabaab’s top level essentially a black box. This led one respondent to highlight that internal as well as external distrust would be difficult to manage as one individual leader could not negotiate on behalf of the other Shura members, it would need collective action, which would require a lot of consultations within the leadership (Interview with INGO representative, May 2018). Yet, as another Somali interviewee pointed out, it is hard to imagine how collective action of the leadership could be achieved if even raising the topic of negotiations within the circle of al-Shabaab’s leadership is considered extremely dangerous to the person doing so (Interview with civil society actor, April 2018).

One attempt to test the perception that al-Shabaab members have little to no interest in, or incentives for, engaging in dialogue was a study conducted by the Life and Peace Institute in 2014. Through interviews with al-Shabaab mid-ranking members, it found that most rejected the option of negotiations completely, only few considered it as an option but only in the event of a situation of extreme weakness (Maruf and Joseph 2018). A more recent study from 2018 by Finn Church Aid (Botha and Abdile 2019) on the attitudes of al-Shabaab towards negotiations presents different findings. Based on 17 interviews with mid-ranking al-Shabaab leaders, the study shows that there is willingness on al-Shabaab’s side to pursue conditional political dialogue – under certain conditions. These include a withdrawal of foreign forces from Somalia, a general amnesty, the formation of Somali security forces that consist of all parties, the full implementation of sharia law and the establishment of a new government as well as securing employment for al-Shabaab members. This does not necessarily represent the top leadership’s opinion, which in the case of al-Shabaab has proven to be the stumbling block to any dialogue attempt. Still, these conditions display a focus on the national level and are well within the range of negotiable goals. Many respondents answered that if al-Shabaab would be weakened militarily, negotiations would become more likely as

negotiations should only be started with the FGS in a position of power – or at least not weaker than al-Shabaab.

This responds to the classic concept of conflict resolution: the **ripeness** theory, where a negotiated settlement becomes more likely when the opposing actors are locked in a mutually hurting stalemate, which shifts the cost-benefit calculations in favour of negotiations. As was pointed out in the section outlining the group's development, al-Shabaab has been effectively in a stalemate with the FGS and AMISOM since 2015. The respondents arguing that al-Shabaab is too strong to agree to negotiations point out that it is not (yet) hurting enough to affect its cost-benefit calculations. This opinion is set on a few assumptions about what would be hurting al-Shabaab but also the FGS. One political analyst generally questioned if the stalemate was actually hurting the conflict parties at relevant levels. Considering the strength of the political economy, which is largely based on the billions of dollars of foreign military and development investments, and the deep patterns of corruption and alleged collusion between al-Shabaab and elements of the FGS, the **elites on both sides may be profiting too much** to feel the hurting. For al-Shabaab especially she pointed out that *“the leadership might just go forward as they have nothing to lose while middle and lower ranks might feel the hurting more”* (Interview in May 2018). As was pointed out above, on the side of the FGS, the clan and political elites might prefer the current situation of elite bargaining to the potential costs of an unknown future. Furthermore, business and security sector are also profiting from the continued insecurity and foreign money flowing into Somalia. The situation is similar for the FGS, where *“the politicians are rather immune to the effects of the conflict”* (Interview with political analyst, May 2018). Instead, it is the communities who have been bearing the brunt of the conflict, causing a rising sense of exhaustion in the country which could lead to raising pressure both on the Somali government and al-Shabaab to come to the negotiation table. One interviewee pointed out that people in Mogadishu, which is the center of al-Shabaab's violent activities, are more willing to speak up against al-Shabaab than in other parts of Somalia, where it still is a taboo topic (Interview civil society representative, April 2018). So far, the strategy to force the moment of ripeness by increasing military pressure on al-Shabaab has not functioned. It is therefore unclear if further military pressure would even affect the cost-benefit calculations of the right people.

The lack of ripeness by the FGS and al-Shabaab is accompanied by the perceived unwillingness of the **regional and international actors** with stakes in Somalia to support a negotiation process. Especially the US and Ethiopia were named by interviewees in this regard.

≡ Identifying credible interlocutors

The role of the Somali society was mentioned often with regard to who could function as an **interlocutor or entry point** for any future negotiations. Based on the strong role of clans, it is not surprising that clan elders were named quite frequently, also because they already have regular dealings with al-Shabaab, as was pointed out above. Others specified that the business community has become an important actor and that they would have a vested interest in seeing negotiations through if it was understood that everybody would profit from it. Others proposed a mix of both by including the business representatives of the clans. A third section of Somali society actors were the religious leaders. These were named less frequently. The role that was ascribed to them most often was in delegitimising al-Shabaab's religious claims, but fewer respondents considered them as possible interlocutors for dialogue with al-Shabaab. Another approach entirely was to establish a dialogue via one of the high level defectors such as Robow²⁵, Aweys or Ahmed Mohammed Islam 'Madobe'²⁶ as interlocutors as they are well connected on both sides.

²⁵ At the time of the interviews, Robow was not yet imprisoned.

²⁶ Ahmed Mohamed Islam, known as 'Madobe' is the current president of Juba State in Somalia. He was one of the founding members of al-Shabaab but has been fighting al-Shabaab in south Somalia with his own force the Ras Kambooni since 2012, in cooperation

Almost all respondents named one or more of these Somali actors, and they also mentioned that any dialogue effort had to be a genuinely Somali-driven process. Accordingly, none of the interviewees named the UN or African Union as possible interlocutor and very few mentioned foreign states. If mentioned at all, Turkey was named the most often, followed by Saudi Arabia or Qatar. With regard to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, other respondents argued that these states were no longer credible actors as the political tensions between them have also been affecting political dynamics in Somalia.

≡ Confidence-building steps

One point raised in interviews was how to manage the **process**, how to deal with the challenge of conducting negotiations in a setting where one side is generally held to have so deeply infiltrated the other that it would be difficult to divide the two actors. How can the government decide on red lines when al-Shabaab already is part of that discussion? As Ken Menkhaus (Menkhaus 2018) correctly points out, the more positive side effect of this – and the existing high level of cross-cutting individual relationships – might be a limited need for confidence building compared to other processes. One chance to build confidence and open the political sphere for al-Shabaab was missed in fall 2018. Robow had set out to become president of Southwest State, one of the 7 semi-autonomous Somali regions. It was assumed that he would win the election due to the strong clan loyalties in the region. However, as a power struggle between the FGS and the states was raging on, the FGS arrested Robow and a FGS-loyal candidate then won the election. Even if al-Shabaab had discredited Robow and viewed him as an enemy and traitor, his imprisonment set a prominent example that gaining power through politics doesn't work. Although this message most likely wasn't the intention of the FGS, Robow's imprisonment potentially further de-created al-Shabaab's confidence in political engagement with the FGS. The negative example of a failed transition from militant to politician might rather support al-Shabaab's hardline sceptics of political (dialogue) engagement.

≡ Developing a realistic negotiation agenda

Another challenge for potential negotiations mentioned by interviewees focussed on the **content of negotiations**. One of the many contradictory aspects of this conflict is that on the surface, Somalia is already constitutionally what al-Shabaab wants it to be – an Islamic state – and the past three governments were led by Islamists. However, for al-Shabaab, parliamentary democracy (with elected representatives deciding on the constitution) is un-Islamic as only the Quranic tradition is allowed to stand, which is above mankind to judge or change. Furthermore, al-Shabaab has repeatedly pointed to the discrediting levels of corruption, nepotism and ineffectiveness of the Somali government; it has also argued that two-thirds of the consultative constitution convention in May 2018 were from the diaspora and hence 'mercenaries', and that in reality the government is a puppet of the international forces and its representatives are apostates to Islam (Africa Confidential 2018). In fact, in some areas al-Shabaab's demands for 'true' Islamic rule are similar to the concept of "good governance": low levels of corruption, responsibility and accountability– values that find support with many Somalis. A recent article by Harmonie Toros and Stephen Harley highlighted that there is common ground between the FGS and al-Shabaab with regards to the final political objective of a Somali-owned government based on Islamic traditions and a commitment to the better future of the Somali nation (Toros and Harely 2018). One interviewee even saw that the FGS as well as the society were moving closer towards al-Shabaab positions and that "*the window*

with Kenyan and AMISOM forces. Madobe, essentially the strong man ruling Kismayo, remains linked with the group, not least to reportedly high levels of trade.

of opportunity for dialogue may not come from the de-radicalisation of the group but rather the radicalization of the government” (Interview with international diplomat, May 2018). But strikingly, this is not reflected in the political discussions. For example, the (s)election process for the new parliament in winter 2016/2017 was based on clan structure, clan allegiance and clan power, rather than on political issues. The clans’ power plays, at state as well as federal level, hinder progress on issues such as anti-corruption or the reform of the justice system, on which potentially a substantive dialogues could open space to include al-Shabaab positions.

The pyramid structure of dialogue engagement with al-Shabaab, which was outlined above, seems almost reflected by a pyramid structure of political discussions on common Somali interests, but also on the society’s core values on which to base policy-decisions. At the bottom of this pyramid, among the individuals and in society there is discussion on such policies, shared Somali interests and values. Yet, this level of the pyramid seems inhibited by fear and disillusionment which seem to prevent such private and public debates to be fed into a political system that does not function on a competition of ideas to gain majority and power. At the top of the pyramid on the other hand, general inability, a deflecting of responsibility and a lack of political will to open the space for such a substantial Somali-Somali dialogue create silence. Interestingly, the same pyramid structure might be true about intra-al-Shabaab dialogue on political issues. In the resulting silence, there seems no room for al-Shabaab positions to be heard, nor for public discussion and evaluation thereof. It is hence difficult to assess the level of congruence between al-Shabaab’s positions and public opinion.

Accordingly, the questions that need to be asked are: what would be the content and purpose of potential negotiations? What is the aim, an inclusion of al-Shabaab into the existing government structure or a new system? If there is general agreement that an Islamic state is the solution, what how does this formulate into a political system? What is of primary importance, the ‘Islamic’ *processes and structures* (e.g. for al-Shabaab this precludes parliamentary elections), and/or that the output of the new governance produces laws based on or supporting Islamic *values* (e.g. justice)? What are the options for formulating this into state structures and processes? Who would have the knowledge, capacity – and legitimacy – to support and provide input on possible options for an Islamic political system? A debate about these questions needs to be part of any pre-negotiation phase as the conflict parties and indeed Somali society at large must develop its strategic vision.

7. Conclusion

This case study sought to contribute to answering three questions on the pathway of al-Shabaab (de-)escalation, the existing experience with dialogue engagement and the future role of dialogue for de-escalation. As was outlined in section three and four al-Shabaab’s pathway saw development, mostly on the organisational dimension, but evolved also on the behavioural and even somewhat on the ideological dimension. Most of these changes were driven by external factors in response to the power balance of the conflict, with a continuing hard power approach maintaining significant pressure on al-Shabaab. None of these changes has led to lasting de-escalation. Instead, one moment of behavioural change consolidated al-Shabaab’s power by diverting the focus towards governance – setting the base for sustained conflict. Beyond military pressure and internal re-focussing on governance, the pressure raised by society seemed to be the most influential external factor able to affect the group’s strategic decision-making. One of this case study’s central findings is that Somali society might be the most effective actor in achieving al-Shabaab’s de-escalation and a more peaceful Somalia.

The experience of third party dialogue engagement with al-Shabaab is limited. Noticeably though, the non-military efforts of conflict settlement are no longer a taboo topic. There have been efforts to establish

preliminary dialogue with the intention of political dialogue engagement. This shows that the option has been considered seriously. The fact that nothing has come from these efforts displays a lack of (political) will and a lack of ripeness on both sides. The experiences of unsuccessful preliminary dialogue efforts, al-Shabaab's continued high level of violent activities, and the real danger of engaging al-Shabaab in dialogue under the current anti-terror laws have created an atmosphere that discourages sustained dialogue efforts. Nevertheless, the calls for alternative (or additional) routes for ending the conflict have become louder. Programmes for individual disengagement from al-Shabaab are ongoing and even though they have significant deficits, they have shown some success in supporting the defections of fighters and leaders. Yet, these efforts have not significantly weakened al-Shabaab so far and there is a danger that defection of moderate, politically-minded leaders will strengthen the hardline ideologues within al-Shabaab and reduce confidence in future outreach activities. Any strategy for peace in Somalia should consider the negative impact of de-legitimisation efforts on al-Shabaab's confidence towards third parties and plan the pre-negotiation phase accordingly.

In the majority of interviews conducted for this study, the need for dialogue attempts in Somalia was highlighted to solve the conflict. That such a process must be genuinely Somali driven and owned was also evident from the interviews, including a Somali interlocutor. Moreover, many challenges were identified. Among these are fairly usual challenges for peace negotiations with NSAG such as the ripeness of the actors, their capacity for conducting negotiations as coherent actors and a dependence on, and high influence of, international powers. Specific Somali aspects of these are the slow and conflict-fraught process of statebuilding that hampers especially the government side and the need to define the negotiation agenda and its content. To determine the space for negotiations, an inclusive discussion about the role of Islam and what kind of state Somalis want and need seems essential to confirm the boundaries of the seeming common ground between al-Shabaab, the FGS and Somali society. Any such public debate could help to unleash the potential of Somali society as a multi-voiced organ to engage in dialogue with al-Shabaab and raise the stakes for the FGS to show political will to do so. The overall level of societal interaction and individual communication with al-Shabaab is high and thus has power to affect al-Shabaab. Societal pressure through public discontent with al-Shabaab's activities has contributed to discussions emerging within al-Shabaab that questioned the chosen strategy, which is a necessary condition for a change thereof. The potential of society to drive this process inside al-Shabaab by carrying the debate into the organisation via public and individual communication should not be underestimated – especially considering the high level of al-Shabaab's social embeddedness. In light of the point made above, the most effective – and safer – topic might be to focus on the use of violence, not de-legitimising al-Shabaab's goals or justifications.

Thus, in a period where direct negotiations between the conflict parties are faced with too many challenges, such a public debate about the content of negotiations – and thus essential political topics – could set the stage for negotiations by further reducing the perception of taboo and pushing the conflict parties towards ripeness. A strong social push back on al-Shabaab's use of violence could increase the pressure for it to engage in such a national debate.

8. References

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