

History and terrorism analysis in Mudug region: Will Puntland and Galmudug joint counterterrorism operations in Mudug region lead to a sustainable peace and stability?

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Introduction

In 1991, Somalia central government collapsed, state disintegrated after armed clan-based opposition groups waged a decade long struggle against Barre's regime, which eventually ended 21 years of military dictatorship. Lack of common ground political agendas and compromise among contested factions widened the conflict spectrum, shifted conflict from symmetric to asymmetric conflict. Power struggle, intra-regional conflicts; over resources, emergence of Salafi/Wahabi groups aka AIAI - who wanted to impose a strict version of Islamic law on Somalia – regional and international interventions, have led Somalia into thirty years of civil war. Despite Mudug region geo-security importance for whole country, the region – both Puntland and Galmudug states – did not get emphasis that analyzes what are the driving causes of its epidemic conflicts that prolonged Somalia's political instabilities and insecurity. Thus, this article will discuss history of Mudug region, analyze the role of state and non-state actors contributions to insecurity and instability in the region such as; armed clan militias, al-Shabab Amniyat, the ineffectiveness of both state's law enforcement agencies, lack of capable intelligence and mistrust among clans and between Puntland and Galmudug. Puntland's poor handling of security matters and lack of strategic focus on counterterrorism (CVE) in the region are also some trajectories that this article going to shed light on. Similarly, the article will examine whether the joint counterterrorism missions between the states is a long term and comprehensive operation or it's temporary one.

Mudug region has been the epicenter of Somali clan-based conflict before and after the civil war, particularly Galkayo city was where devastating clan conflicts took place. The region shares the security problems and instability with the rest of the county. But, because of its equidistant point of the two major Somali tribes 'Darod and Hawiye' it's where the major clan conflicts happened in early 1990s. In late 1993, two of most notorious armed opposition leaders Gen. Mohamed Farah Aidid of USC and late Somalia president (2004-2008) Col. Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed of SSDF signed a peace treaty in Mogadishu after deadliest armed clan conflicts took place in the region. The peace pact allowed the residents of Mudug region (Darod and Hawiye) return to Galkayo – regional capital city, as well as other cities in subtle stability. The treaty enabled development projects and business to flourish across the region for two decades except small

scale pastoralist armed conflicts in the region over pasture and water.

Al-Shabab presence and operations in Mudug region

Al-Shabab is a Salafi Islamist militant organization operate in Somalia and horn of Africa, who were the youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union emerged in 2006. ICU founders were the remnants of al-Ittihad al-Islamia (AIAI) namely Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys. In 2007, al-Shabab fragmented from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) after the Ethiopian and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces ousted the ICU from power in December 2006. Al-Shabab, which is considered the most powerful Al-Qaeda affiliated group in Africa that imposed a strict version of Islamic Sharia in the areas under its control. The group has a history of publicly carrying out unlawful killings, beheadings, stoning to death for people unjustly convicted of adultery, execution by shooting, torture, floggings, amputation to people convicted of theft, and mutilation. these heartbreaking acts against humanity are carried out to enforce the group's wrong interpretation of Islamic sharia.

Why al-Shabab targeted Mudug region?

In Mudug region, people are deeply divided into clan affiliations, different state governments, and political divisions. As result of that, Galkayo (the capital) gave al-Shabab perfect ambiance to operate without having physical military presence, but through intimidation, imported fear, brutal and murderous terrorist attacks against people in Galkayo (mostly North Galkayo). There are number trajectories, which helped al-Shabab to operate in the region, including, political and clan divisions, violent clan conflicts, deep clan enmities, grievances resulted from political alienation, social and economic subjugations in Puntland. However, due to the bitter clan rivalries in Mudug, major clans in the region mobilized and armed clan militias in the pretext of providing security protection to their clansmen from other rival clan threats and domination of the region through militia forces. Meanwhile, other clans in the region who perceived to have been oppressed and marginalized have welcomed, hosted, collaborated, and provided sanctuary with al-Shabab elements in exchange for wealth, political influence and to revenge from other rival clans. As result, al-Shabab controls southern Mudug region including Harardhere district, villages under Hobyo district including Bacadweyne, Camaara, Qaycad and contesting others.

The group also controls large parts of the neighboring Galgadud region, including, El-bur, El-dher districts and contesting areas around Dhuso-Mareb.

This malevolent group primarily worked hard to create enmity and conflicts among the hostile and rival clans in the region through killing, revenge, and counter-revenge assassinations of elites from clans, and to also instigated conflict between Puntland and Galmudug authorities or between clans in order to prevent any security cooperation built between the two authorities. Therefore, conflicts between clans or between clans and the government rose to an unprecedented level, in contrast, prevalence of the conflict in the region has paved the way for al-Shabab to operate in Mudug region comfortably. For example, Puntland security forces conducted a security operation targeting known al-Shabab operatives hiding and operating in Garsoor neighborhoods in North Galkayo. Consequently, one of the clans has militarily defended the terrorist elements and engaged armed conflict with Puntland forces which let prominent al-Shabab leaders escaped from the scene, after local tribes harbored. At that time, Puntland strongly accused Galmudug of supporting the combined armed clan militias and al-Shabab militants, by providing them ammunition, equipment, and medical supplies¹.

Al-Shabab has demonstrated its presence in Mudug in 2008, first, al-Shabab conquered the southern part of Mudug by replacing Islamic Court Union, which they were part, initially. From 2008 -2019, al-Shabab conducted varies terrorist attacks in the region through covert operations by its operatives the ‘Amniyat’ (al-Shabab’s intelligence wing), particularly in the northern part (Puntland), which halted al-Shabab to extend its agenda across. The group has conducted countless number of assassinations targeted at Puntland government officials, women advocates, clan elders, police and military commanders, Puntland MPs, journalists, business people, politicians, youth, and other community members in north Galkayo. Besides that, the terror group has conducted multiple high-profile and mass casualty attacks using suicide bombers, Person-born improvised explosive device (PBIED) attacks, vehicle-born improvised explosive device attacks (VBIED) and complex attacks. Galkayo is the city where worst terrorist attacks took place in Somalia after Mogadishu.

¹Refworld (2011) Was the Battle for Galkayo a Clan Dispute or a Victory for Puntland Over Al-Shabaab?, retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e78656d2.html>

For example, Goobjooge news media reported that Al-Shabab carried out the most brutal and worst terrorist attack in Galkayo (North), where two suicide bombers in two cars loaded with huge amount of explosives (IEDs) targeted Galkayo municipality office (Puntland division) and Dayax market where tens of civilians, security forces, and government officials were killed, similarly many people were injured, and massive property destruction took place². VOA Somali service confirmed that Al-Shabab targeted a Sufi religious center in south Galkayo (Barahley), where the group killed fourteen people. Including a prominent Sufi cleric Abdiweli A. Elmi Yare, members of his family and many of his followers through car bombings followed by armed assault. Al-shabab has admitted the responsibility shortly after the news outlets released the terror operations³. Al Jazeera News reported that Mudug governor (Puntland side) Mr. Ahmed Muse Nur and three of his bodyguards were killed in a suicide car bombing attack, in front of governor's office. Al-Shabab claimed the atrocity⁴. Al-Shabab suicide bomber blew himself up in Abdullahi Isse football stadium in Barahley (South of Galkayo), shortly before Prime Minister Mr. Mohamed Hussein Roble visit there. This terrorist attack claimed the lives of three senior Somalia military commanders including an elite special forces (Danab) commander and other officials knowingly Gen. Abdiaziz (Qooje-Dagaari), former Galkayo (Puntland) mayor Mr. Mohamed Yasin Tumey and tens of civilians⁵. After long years of targeted assassinations of specific clan members, al-Shabab forced these clan's elders to sign a peace and non-aggression pact and discontinue collaboration with Puntland authorities in Mudug region.

Ineffective and Weak Government Institutions in Mudug Region.

Puntland law enforcement agencies in Mudug region had been ineffective since its inauguration. Dysfunctional law enforcement in the northern side of the region was drawn from inadequate leadership of the Darwish and police forces, resources, and lower salaries which not got paid regularly – the southern side of Mudug it is below Puntland in the context of effective law enforcement. Likewise, Puntland had weak criminal justice system in the region, which had

²Goobjooge (2016) Puntland: Explosive took place in galkayo retrieved from <https://goobjooge.net/faahfaahin-qaraxyo-waaweyn-oo-ka-dhacay-magaalada-gaalkacyo-ee-puntland/>

³VOA News (2018) Explosive caused casualties in Galkacyo, retrieved from <https://www.voasomali.com/a/4673847.html>

⁴Al Jazeera News (2020) Somalia: Governor killed in suicide bombing claimed by al-Shabab, retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/17/somalia-governor-killed-in-suicide-bombing-claimed-by-al-shabab>

⁵Walsh, D (2020) Suicide Bomber in Somalia Hits Prime Minister's Rally. *Reuters News*, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/world/africa/somalia-prime-minister-bombing.html>

similar problems with the police and Darwish forces. Weak prison systems that had a history of inmate escape, prison breaches, clans attack prisons to release their fellow detainees. Endemic corruption hindered justice system, taking or receiving bribery from criminals, nepotism, favoritism had been norm that renders al-Shabab criminals to groom commendable people to join. In contrast, law enforcement agencies and criminal justice systems were poorly cooperated. In addition, clans have heavily armed clan militias, thus, clan-elders strongly protect their clansmen's interests even defending suspected al-Shabab elements who the local authorities detain for having links with al-Shabab. Therefore, Mudug clans (Puntland division) had been the biggest challenge for Puntland government to combat al-Shabab genuinely in the region. However, al-Shabab is encouraged by the fragmentation of government institutions, clans, and the broader community. Despite these challenges, Puntland authorities had been striving to combat terrorism and organized crimes in the region, which achieved limited success. Puntland administrations never prioritize the importance of Galmudug's cooperation in countering al-Shabab in Mudug region. Puntland in the past fell short having a strong and effective police and military forces in region, that could implement a long term and comprehensive policy and strategy, but rather adopted to deploy police and military forces to the region from other parts Puntland. These dispatched forces carried out short term planned security operation and then leave after a while.

On the other hand, Galmudug administration was divided into three political administrations Himan-Heb, Ahlu-Sunna Wal-Jama, and Galmudug, which situated in south Galkayo - Barahley. However, there was no united Galmudug administration prior to February 2020, that could confront al-Shabab militants politically and militarily. Because of that, Galmudug had been a safe haven for al-Shabab to operate and breed until November 2018, where the first brutal al-Shabab terrorist attack took place in south Galkayo, which resulted south Galkayo people to mobilized militias to resist al-Shabab in Mudug. Notwithstanding, Galmudug law enforcement and criminal justice systems were ineffective or literally non-existed in tackling al-Shabab elements. The group's operatives settled in Galmudug without any disruptions, since the group didn't pose any security threat to Galmudug people and their government. Which showed that Galmudug reluctance on al-Shabab's terrorist activities carried in Puntland. For example, al-Shabab constructs its suicide bombers and improvised explosives devices (IEDs) in El-bur

district – Galgudud region - and deploys to north Galkayo and beyond to carry out terrorist attacks⁶.

Regional and International military partners help Somalia to stabilize

Before 2011, al-Shabab had controlled much of south-central Somalia, including south of Mudug region. AMISOM and other International partner forces along with Somali Federal forces played integral parts dwindling al-Shabab controlled territory in south central regions. Therefore, these forces liberated much of south-central Somalia including, major cities such as Mogadishu, Adado, Dhusomareb just to name a few. The International military partners including the U.S has filled many roles including air surveillance, provision of logistics, military equipment, training of SNA, intelligence sharing, and carried out airstrikes to eliminate major al-Shabab elements. US army has carried out strategic airstrikes, which eliminated senior al-Shabab leaders and military commanders, including the group’s military commander Mr. Aden Hashi Eyrow in 2008⁷ and the subsequent air attack that killed al-Shabab’s emir Ahmed Abdi Godane in 2014⁸. These drone targets were a blow to the group and eliminated progressive threats those individuals posted to the country and the region. U.S air attacks forced al-Shabab leaders and military commanders scatter and hibernate for quite length of period, it inflicted huge military, territorial and leadership setbacks, internal divisions as result of power struggle among competitors. U.S also recently carried out airstrikes at al-Shabab bases in Amara and Ba’adweyne villages, backing for SNA and Galmudug forces in the battlefields. American airstrikes are not enough for defeating al-Shabab, but undermines its overall capabilities. Therefore, al-Shabab would have controlled majority of Somalia, if regional and international partner forces didn’t contribute on the course of war on terror in Somalia.

Puntland and Galmudug security and counterterrorism cooperation in Mudug region

The relations between Puntland and Galmudug is much better than ever before, communities in both side of Mudug, have tasted the results of al-Shabab’s terror acts whose territories had a history of hosting al-Shabab operatives, who carried out terrorist attacks in Galkayo. On multiple

⁶ AF-meer (2021) al-Shabab series interview, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=af%20meer>,

⁷ Reuters Staff (2008) U.S. air strike kills al Qaeda boss in Somalia. *Reuters*, retrieved form <https://www.reuters.com/article/news-somalia-conflict-col-idCAL0140287720080501>

⁸ Alexander, D (2014) U.S. confirms death of al Shabaab leader Godane in Somalia strike. *Reuters*, retrieved from, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-usa-islamist-idUSKBN0H01OO20140905>

occasions, Puntland successive administrations had accused Galmudug of harboring al-Shabab elements in its territory, who organized terror plots against Puntland, which Galmudug has denied. Nevertheless, Puntland administrations have been committed to fight al-shabab and have been at the forefront in combating radical Islamist organizations including al-Ittihad Al-Islamiya in 1992, the Islamic Courts Union, al-Shabab and the Islamic State, without federal government support. Despite all these, Puntland lacked a clear counterterrorism strategy to tackle al-Shabab in Mudug region, a region with porous borders with war-torn southern Somalia. In general, Puntland and Galmudug have never cooperated in the fight against terrorism until 2020.

Both states separately adopted one tool of counterterrorism, which is the use of military force that might not deliver the desired results, since al-Shabab avoids direct military confrontation against regular armed forces. Direct military confrontations inflicted the group with heavy casualties, territorial losses, and financial setbacks. Therefore, al-Shabab favored the use of more destabilizing and more effective terror tactics including ambushes, IEDs, suicide bombs, assassinations, vehicle, or person born IED attacks (VBIED and PBIED), complex attacks, roadside bombs, hit and run attacks against government officials, police, military, public, government installations and foreign nationals in Somalia. Since 2018, al-Shabab has increased momentum to expand its military presence in southern Mudug region.

Galmudug and Puntland have never had a criminal extradition agreement whether a terrorist, murderer, or robbers. For example, in 2012 Puntland authorities detained Abdirazak Hussein Tahlil (Ina Calool Geel) in Galkayo, he was reportedly possessing explosive materials to orchestrate terror plots in Puntland. Puntland military court sentenced him to death in 2013. Therefore, his death sentenced heightened tensions between Puntland and Galmudug authorities. In response, armed clan militia from Tahlil's clan has abducted two civilian men from Puntland side, which later compelled Puntland authorities to release Tahlil in 2014, following a presidential pardon in exchange for civilian hostages. In 2017, Puntland authorities again arrested Abdirazak Tahlil in Galkayo, this time for being the head of logistics for al-Shabab in Mudug region. Consequently, Puntland court again sentenced him to death in 2018. This sentence again angered Galmudug authorities, which requested the Federal government to intervene the case. However, Puntland transferred Tahlil's case to Somalia military court, which later dropped all charges against him and released. There is an unofficial agreement between the

two states of extraditing criminals to each one's own state, but they informally agreed to extradite suspects from other clans not from either state to where he/she committed a crime regardless of state.

In November 2018, al-Shabab carried out a mass casualty terrorist attack in south Galkayo where tens of people killed, and others injured. This terrorist act angered Galmudug authorities and forced to join the war against al-Shabab. However, in late 2019, Puntland deployed tens of police and paramilitary units (Birmad and Godir) to Galkayo, in order to tackle terrorism and organized crime, where al-Shabab has been conducted disturbing terrorist attacks since 2008. Puntland also sent hundreds of old and newly recruited police officers from Mudug region to Qardho police academy 'Horgoble' for training and undergone a biometric registration to be regularly paid. The government provided police in Mudug region with limited resources to enable them to address al-Shabab and organized criminal groups threats in the region. Therefore, Galmudug and Puntland recognized al-Shabab as a strategic threat to both states and compelled them to cooperate and combine their counterterrorism efforts to drive al-Shabab out of Galkayo.

As of 2020, Puntland and Galmudug began to cooperate the war against al-Shabab after both states and communities recognized al-Shabab as a common enemy because of their indiscriminate terrorist attacks in either of Galkayo. Therefore, both state leaders Mr. Deni and Ahmed Karie (Qor-Qor) met multiple times discussing a joint counterterrorism campaign to tackle al-Shabab. Consequently, the two states mobilized a coherent counterterrorism operation in Mudug region to eliminate al-Shabab from Galkayo in the first place. Ministers of security, mayors, governors, police and military commanders also discussed to root out al-Shabab elements from Mudug region. Now law enforcement is reasonably effective and criminal justice is also quite capable in dealing with al-Shabab cases after Dani administration made some improvements. This is first time, Puntland police had been allowed to access to south Galkayo to pursue al-Shabab suspected elements of being involved in terrorist acts in north Galkayo, without community elders intrude legal process. Since then, both states started to share intelligence and security forces conducted joint counterterrorism operations in Galkayo (south and north), which produced outstanding feedback. For example, in August 2020, Puntland intelligence detected seven al-Shabab's Amniyat networks, who have been operating in Galkayo since 2008. Over 36 al-Shabab Amniyat operatives, logistics heads, and commanders were arrested as part of the

networks. Majority of these operatives were prosecuted at Puntland military courts, eighteen of them were convicted and executed at a firing squad, in June 2021 in Galkayo. This is the largest number of al-Shabab's Amniyat operatives executed on one occasion after April 2013, where Puntland executed thirteen al-Shabab Amniyat militants in Bosaso. Besides that, eight al-Shabab militants have also been prosecuted and convicted, while other operatives are under investigation. Al-Shabab detainee by Puntland intelligence have publicly acknowledged, that they had covert operation centers in both sides of Galkayo.

In August 2021, Puntland authorities contributed eight vehicles mounted with military battle wagons, a water tanker and an ambulance to Galmudug as part of to boost counterterrorism campaign between the two states. Puntland also planned to contribute 200 elite forces with twenty military battle wagons, to south Mudug (Galmudug division) counterterrorism military operations. Puntland counterterrorism operations in Galmudug is indication that on-going Galmudug, SNA and US drone joint military against al-Shabab's military presence in south central, is failed one. Al-Shabab is unarguably one of the most powerful military and political actors in Somalia, which has never been prepared to end the decade and half long armed conflict in Somalia through dialogue. On the other hand, al-Shabab operatives didn't carry out any terrorist attack in Galkayo for the last five months, now, the communities of the two states harvested the fruits of cooperation. Therefore, both states demonstrated their commitment to combat al-Shabab through cooperation.

Despite all these efforts, Puntland still lacks a comprehensive, sustainable, long-term and multi-partner counterterrorism strategy to defeat al-Shabab in Mudug region. Al-Shabab in Mudug region can only be defeated through a comprehensive and multi-partner counterterrorism strategy, most importantly intelligence-led military operations, military force, mobilized communities, and effective counter narrative. Puntland have failed to implement early preventive and intervention programs; education, job creation, polytechnic institutes, to counter radicalization that trajectories to terrorism. CVE approach can effectively halt al-Shabab and other religion terrorist groups like Daish (ISIS) groom society for their extremism ideology. In contrast CVE could create counter narratives that promote Puntland agenda, and can coordinate core Puntland security institutions in order to be on same page on counterterrorism. Optimistically, a genuine, long-term and strategic security and counterterrorism cooperation

between Galmudug and Puntland will lead the region into a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and developed region.

Since Somalia central government collapsed, Mudug region has experience major clan conflicts, Puntland/Galmudug armed conflict over resources and border disputes. Besides that, al-Shabab benefited from the region's clan and political divisions and infiltrated the communities in the region. Therefore, the group orchestrated and carried out the worst terrorist attacks in Somalia after Mogadishu since 2008. Where the state and federal authorities' officials, police and military commanders, journalists, clan elders, MPs and business elites were killed in the region, through various terrorist attacks, including targeted assassinations, suicide bombings, car bombings and complex attacks. The groups exploited the region's law enforcement and criminal justice system weaknesses. Regional and international military partners played a significant role in defeating al-Shabab in Mudug region over the past decade. However, Puntland and Galmudug have never a had security cooperation in the past. After long years of terrorist attacks from al-Shabab, both communities and states in either side of Galkayo, have began to cooperate on security and ultimately began joint counterterrorism operations, where seven al-Shabab's Amniyat networks operating in Galkayo since 2008 were detected. Puntland authorities executed eighteen al-Shabab convicted operatives in June 2021. The joint counterterrorism operations in Mudug is effective so far, but there is strong ambiguity of the sincerity about the unprecedented joint counterterrorism operations between the two states. The political prospects of up-coming federal election are hindering the pure intention needed on current campaign against al-Shabab in Mudug region. In another way, security paradigm shift experts in the region suggest that whether the new security collaboration between the neighboring states became successful or unsuccessful depends on the outcome of upcoming federal election. Which means, it is premature to analyze without knowing whether underpinning political motives that drive both states Puntland and Galmudug to have a joint operation are long-term and comprehensive or are just trojan horse for up-coming federal election. It is clear that Puntland President Mr. Dani is running for the Federal President of Somalia. It is also known that Puntland fight against al-Shabaab in Bari region is subtle and neglected. Al-Shabab and Daish operations are getting stronger and intensifying in the region, each day. On May 5, 2021 al-Shabab stormed Bosaso (Bari region) jail and freed 400

prisoners, where two third of them were al-Shabab and Daesh members⁹. Therefore, the dichotomy between Puntland war on terrorism in Bari region and Puntland war on terrorism in Mudug region, shows that Puntland involvement fighting with al-Shabab in Galmudug soil is just temporary and political. Security analysis advice also, that current joint counterterrorism operations between the two states can only succeed if it is not amalgamated with the shortcomings of campaign politics, the political agenda behind on this operation should only remain one, the eradication of al-Shabab from Mudug region.

⁹ Reuter (2021), Al Shabaab militants storm Somali jail, seven soldiers killed, retrieved from, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-violence-idUSKBN2AX188>