



Libera Università degli Studi Sociali
Department of Political Science
Degree Program in Politics: Philosophy and Economics

Chair African Politics and Society

***“TRANSNATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM: HOW INTERNATIONAL AND
REGIONAL COOPERATION SEEKS TO DISRUPT AL-SHABAAB’S
OPERATIONS”***

Prof. Marco Massoni

SUPERVISOR

Ginevra Di Nardo Matr. 104952

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>4</i>
---------------------------------	-----------------

Chapter 1: FROM COLONIAL CARVE-UP TO JIHADIST BATTLEGROUND – The Historical Roots of Al Shabaab.....

1.1 The Colonial Histories of Somalia and Kenya.....	8
1.1.1 Somalia Under Colonial Rule: Fragmentation, Resistance, and Consequences.....	8
1.1.2 Kenya: Empire and Resistance: The Colonial Transformation of Kenya.....	10
1.2 From Independence to Institutional Fragility: Post-Colonial Challenges in Somalia and Kenya.....	11
1.2.1 From Independence to Fragmentation: The Collapse of the Somali State.....	12
1.2.2 Post-Colonial Governance and the Struggles for Institutional Stability in Kenya.....	13
1.3 Al-Shabaab’s Evolution: From Somali Insurgency to Regional Threat.....	15
1.3.1 The Rise of Al-Shabaab in Somalia: State Collapse, Islamist Movements, and the Consolidation of a Jihadist Insurgency.....	15
1.3.2 Al-Shabaab’s Expansion into Kenya: Retaliation, Radicalization, and Cross- Border Jihad.....	17
1.4 Al-Shabaab’s Enduring Threat and the Necessity of Kenya-Somalia Counterterrorism Cooperation.....	18

Chapter 2: TRANSNATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES – Kenya, Somalia, and Global Partnerships Against Al-Shabaab.....

2.1 Intelligence Sharing and Security Cooperation Between Kenya, Somalia, and External Actors.....	23
2.2 Cross-Border and Multinational Military Interventions.....	26
2.3 Diplomatic Efforts, Regional Cooperation, and International Engagement.....	28
2.4 Human Rights Concerns and the Impact on Local Populations.....	31
2.5 Evaluating the Effectiveness and Limitations of Current Counterterrorism Approaches.....	34

2.6 Tactical Successes and Strategical Paralysis – Rethinking the War Against Al-Shabaab.....	36
---	----

Chapter 3: THE VIOLENCE OF STABILITY – Rethinking Security as a Political Practice.....38

3.1 Security Is Not Sovereignty.....	39
3.2 The Political Economy of Permanent Insecurity.....	41
3.3 From Terrorist to Actor – Al-Shabaab as a Political Interlocutor.....	44
3.4 Recalibrating External Engagement.....	46
3.5 Imagining Regional Sovereignty: Collective Security.....	48
3.6 Security Is a Public Good.....	50
3.7 The End of Counterterrorism, or the Beginning of Politics?.....	51

Conclusion.....54

Bibliography.....58

Introduction

In the early morning of 2 April 2015, Al-Shabaab gunmen invaded and opened fire at Garissa University College in Kenya, leading to the death of 148 students and staff members. While the magnitude of the attack stunned the entire world, it was only the most visible occurrence in a far more complex, protracted, and disastrous narrative for East Africans. Al-Shabaab, once considered as a limited Somali insurgency, has evolved into a transnational threat capable of projecting violence across borders, exploiting state fragility, and threatening regional security architecture. The group's violent expansion into Kenya, as well as its attacks, recruitment, and logistical activities, highlights the vulnerability of both state sovereignty and border security. Somalia and Kenya's interwoven geography, history, and accepted perception of threat have sparked conflict, making the region hazardous.

This thesis investigates cooperation and focuses on components of counterterrorism strategy effectiveness, namely intelligence-sharing frameworks and military cross-border deployments to disrupt Al-Shabaab operations. Notably, security cooperation between Kenya and Somalia has increased over the past decade, but the threat has not been eliminated. Instead, Al-Shabaab has continued to adapt by keeping areas of Somalia. It exploits clan resentments, launches attacks in Kenya's cities and countryside, and settles in ungoverned areas and informal markets. The question then becomes not whether Kenya and Somalia cooperate, but whether the metrics and notions of collaboration are appropriate for the complexities of the challenge at hand.

In response, this thesis proposes an overarching question to guide the research: “How do intelligence-sharing frameworks and cross-border military interventions shape the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts against Al-Shabaab’s transnational operations in Somalia and Kenya?” This is not just a question of security capabilities. It is a political issue: one that examines topics such as the meaning of sovereignty, the impact of external forces, and the consequences of viewing ‘insurgency’ primarily as a technical or military endeavour rather than a politically driven one. As such, the thesis aims to examine the limitations of East Africa's counterterrorism framework and raises the question of whether a new political framework is required, one based on legitimacy,

inclusiveness, and regional ownership rather than superficial concerns about a specific threat.

The Somali-Kenyan relationship provides an intriguing topic for investigation. Somalia has been characterized by a collapsing state, external interference, and violated sovereignty, with no coherent policy in place to cope with Al-Shabaab violence within its boundaries. The national army still depends on outside training and financing, and some essential institutions favour donor agendas above internal agreements. Kenya, on the other hand, sees itself as a regional power and a primary Western counterterrorism ally. It keeps forces in Somalia under national and African Union mandates, has established alliances for intelligence-sharing, and has sophisticated monitoring systems. However, Kenya suffers from intra-ethnic conflict, particularly among its Somali and Muslim minorities, as well as challenges of domestic radicalization. These issues undermine the country's claim to strategic vision.

Both governments demonstrate, in their own unique ways, the conundrum of postcolonial security governance. On the one hand, they serve as test areas for intelligence infrastructure development, biometric system deployment, and joint militaristic tactics. On the other hand, they are fragmentation theatres in which state sovereignty is routinely questioned and the boundaries between security, repression, and politics get blurred. The two governments' cooperation is thus more than a logistical arrangement or a common concern; it is a political dividing line built on layers of scepticism, asymmetric narratives, and opposing interests in danger and legitimacy.

The combination of international relations with critical security studies, the history of African politics, and peacebuilding theory poses a solution to the complexity. This thesis does not treat counterterrorism as a set of policies rigidly bound to each other; instead, it is seen as a practice that is always fought over, reshaped, and politicized, indicative of the order of politics at the moment in time. The thesis does not make absolute statements about success or failure; rather, it looks at how cooperation works in practice: what it conceals, what it permits, and what it eventually generates in terms of regional sovereignty and political agency.

Methodologically, this thesis employs a critical and conceptual approach with qualitative methods. It draws on existing literature, policy papers, and scholarly debates to create a distinct viewpoint that situates security within the greater political landscape.

It focuses on the historical reasons that led to the formation of Al-Shabaab, the Kenya-Somalia institutional and diplomatic cooperation syndicate, and the pervasive external influence, particularly from the United States, the European Union, China, Turkey, and the Gulf, among other actors. It raises normative concerns about the current and future elements of statehood, as well as the essence of security in locations where the government is transnational, contested, and primarily externally governed.

This investigation has a huge impact. Since Al-Shabaab continues to jeopardize lives and the legitimacy of regional states, there is a rising need for effective, coordinated, and long-term responses. However, these actions do not necessitate more airstrikes or more rebel body counts. These indicators alone cannot measure effectiveness. The assessment must establish whether the defended or recreated political system serves as a substitute for the insurgency it tries to remove. Does violence prevention exacerbate exclusion or perpetuate inclusion? Does regional collaboration strengthen sovereignty, or does it simply conceal reliance under a new appearance?

Although violence may be reduced to some extent, the underlying oppressive systems still exist. Restructuring is required to change the focus from crisis management to innovative politics, from endless terror battling to developing legitimacy. Security issues are not the primary focus, but they must be placed within a larger political endeavour, one that is rooted in the region, answerable to its history, and in which security evolves from a mere technology to a partnership.

This thesis aims to contribute to the study of counterterrorism by examining the Kenya-Somalia alliance in combating Al-Shabaab, while also contributing to broader observations on African governance issues. A discussion that aims not merely to secure the state, but also to make it worth defending.

Chapter 1

FROM COLONIAL CARVE-UP TO JIHADIST BATTLEGROUND – The Historical Roots of Al Shabaab

Tracing Al-Shabaab's historical roots poses a pathway to the understanding of the contemporary security crisis posed by the organization. Colonial history in the region is deeply intertwined with the group's dawn, from governance failures in Somalia and Kenya to extensive geopolitical struggles in the Horn of Africa. Because European powers ignored historical, cultural, and ethnic realities when drawing their arbitrary colonial borders, there were long-standing torment that would later be exploited by jihadist movements.

In Somalia, political fragmentation and weak state institutions were the consequences of colonial rule, which reinforced clan divisions. The power vacuum that originated from post-independence governance struggles, Cold War proxy conflicts, and external interventions led to the prospering of Al-Shabaab. After Kenya gained its independence, the Somali population continued to be structurally excluded due to colonial-era laws. Al-Shabaab has successfully used the long-standing tensions between Kenya's government and its ethnic Somali community, which became apparent throughout the Shifta War (1963–1967), to increase its power in the nation.

However, collaborative counterterrorism attempts between Somalia and Kenya have been increasing, aiming at more regional security. To combat Al-Shabaab from a united front, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) has been instituted in 2022, replacing AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia)¹. Furthermore, bilateral security agreements and intelligence-sharing institutions like the Joint Operations Centres (JOCs) have made it easier to coordinate intelligence and conduct cross-border military operations².

¹ International Crisis Group, *Somalia*, updated regularly, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia>

² United Nations, *Security Council Adopts Presidential Statement on Transnational Organized Crime, Urges States to Ramp Up Cooperation, Laws, Borders to Combat It*, December 7, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15516.doc.htm>.

This chapter examines the colonial histories of Somalia and Kenya, the post-independence struggles that shaped their modern political landscapes, and how these historical dynamics contributed to the rise and expansion of Al-Shabaab.

1.1 The Colonial Histories of Somalia and Kenya

Somalia and Kenya's histories are tightly connected, shaped by colonial conquest, territorial demarcation, and the subsequent struggle for sovereignty. Communities with mutual ethnic and cultural identities were disembodied by the artificial borders imposed by European powers, creating enduring distress that still influences regional security dynamics. The political instability, governance flaws, and militant insurgencies that still exist in the area today have been greatly affected by these historical divisions.

Cold War geopolitics and post-independence conflicts created cycles of instability in Somalia, while colonial rule solidified clan rivalries. Decades of tension were further compounded in Kenya, especially in the north-eastern areas, by the colonial government's exclusionary policies that targeted the Somali minority.

1.1.1 Somalia Under Colonial Rule: Fragmentation, Resistance, and Consequences

European imperialism and the geopolitical rivalries of the Scramble for Africa led to the dividing of Somalia among multiple colonial powers, with Britain, Italy, and France each claiming a portion, while Ethiopia also exerted its influence over Somali-inhabited territories. The externally imposed colonial borders neglected the pre-existing structures and organizations of the region.

In 1884, the British enacted a protectorate over northern Somalia, for strategic and trade purposes. The British Somaliland was governed indirectly: confiding on clan elders to maintain order. This strategy exacerbated long-standing clan tensions by limiting formal state-building and infrastructure development³. The British continued to pursue a limited interventionist approach, making minimal investments in infrastructure,

³ M. H. Ingiriis, "From Pre-Colonial Past to the Post-Colonial Present: The Contemporary Clan-Based Configurations of Statebuilding in Somalia," *African Studies Review* 61, no. 2 (2018): 55–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.144>.

economic growth, and education. The eventual differences between northern and southern Somalia after independence had been fuelled by this neglect⁴.

Opposingly, Italy had a more direct approach to its territories in Southern Somalia. The Italians created urban centres, promoted settlement farming, and implemented administrative systems modelled after those in Europe. The Italian colonial government gave preference to some Somali tribes, especially those that supported their system of government. Due to Italy's aspirations for a more extensive empire, Italian Somaliland, Eritrea, and Ethiopia were briefly united into Italian East Africa (1936–1941). This short-lived colonial endeavour was destroyed by British forces during World War II⁵.

The Ogaden, a Somali-inhabited region, was incorporated into Ethiopia through the 1897 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty, despite Somali opposition, later fuelling Somali nationalist movements and insurgencies⁶.

Moreover, another part of Somalia, nowadays Djibouti, was colonized by the French, needing the control of the Red Sea routes. While Djibouti remained distinct from Somalia, its Somali population was part of the broader regional struggle for self-determination⁷.

The shattering of the Somali state into different colonies had far-reaching consequences that continue to shape the country's political and social landscape, disrupting traditional governance structures. The British-administered north of Somaliland was largely ignored, while Italian Somaliland saw greater infrastructure investment, albeit with social engineering policies that heightened tensions between clans. These economic and developmental differences between the two regions further widened societal divides⁸. Additionally, post-independence state-building attempts were made far more difficult by the colonial emphasis on clan-based governing structures, which strengthened pre-existing divisions⁹. These colonial legacies persist today,

⁴ Dennis Wepman, *Africa: The Struggle for Independence* (New York: Facts On File, 1993).

⁵ Alfredo Urbano, "Colonial Developmentalist Discourse, Agricultural Planning, and Forced Labor (1900–1940)," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92 (2017): 69–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26857462>.

⁶ Ingiriis, "From Pre-Colonial Past."

⁷ Alfredo Urbano, "Colonial Developmentalist Discourse, Agricultural Planning, and Forced Labor (1900–1940)," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92 (2017): 69–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26857462>.

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Ingiriis, "From Pre-Colonial Past."

influencing Somalia's ongoing instability and vulnerability to extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab.

1.1.2 Kenya: Empire and Resistance: The Colonial Transformation of Kenya

Just like in Somalia, the British had imperial interests in Kenya too. The indigenous communities, economic marginalization, racial segregation, and the rise of nationalist movements, were all consequences of the colonization from the Western power, from a British protectorate in 1895 to a British colony in 1920, ultimately culminating in Kenya's struggle for independence in 1963. The British East African protectorate sought to broaden imperial influence and secure control of commercial routes.

By 1920, the British had renamed the protectorate Kenya Colony, signaling a shift toward more direct colonial control. European settlers established huge commercial farms in the fertile central highlands, known as the White Highlands. The colonial authority removed native Africans from their ancestral territories and sent them to native reserves, where they experienced economic stagnation, congestion, and inadequate living circumstances.

The colonial authority enforced the Hut Tax and Poll Tax, forcing African males to work for pay on settler farms and in British companies. The British also imposed strict land ownership laws, which prevented Africans from producing profitable cash crops, aggravating economic inequities. These economic and social inequities drove early African resistance movements, which began with local populations using political and civil activism to oppose colonial power.

The Mau Mau Uprising (1952-1960) was one of the most dramatic anti-colonial rebellions in African history, sparked by discontent and anger at British control. It attempted to combat colonial tyranny, seek self-government, and reclaim stolen territory. Following the declaration of an emergency in 1952, the British launched a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. It involved widespread arrests, executions, and the forcible displacement of over a million Kikuyu people to detention camps. Despite the British military superiority, the uprising raised international concerns about British

colonial governance. By the late 1950s, Britain had turned its emphasis to constitutional reform, recognizing that independence was unavoidable¹⁰.

On December 12 1963, Kenya officially gained independence from colonial rule, with Jomo Kenyatta as the first Prime Minister and later the first President. Kenya continued to face the lingering consequences of colonialism even after gaining its independence. Colonial legacies in land ownership, governance, and economic inequality continued, the end of colonial control signalled the start of a new age of self-government and nationbuilding. Post-independence politics were defined by ethnic divisions, which were made worse by British divide-and-rule policies. These divisions frequently generated political discussions and regional inequality. Moreover, economic inequality persisted, with rural communities still experiencing poverty and marginalisation as a result of their historical exclusion from resources and land¹¹.

1.2 From Independence to Institutional Fragility: Post-Colonial Challenges in Somalia and Kenya

For both Somalia and Kenya the 1960s were a period of nationalism and state-building. After the British and Italian colonial administrations, the Somali Republic, intended at creating a centralized and stable government with a cohesive national identity. However, the Somali state was plagued by significant structural issues from initial stages, such as retained colonial divisions, inadequate institutions, and the persistent importance of clan politics. In the end, these challenges, combined with authoritarian administration, Cold War interventions, and unsuccessful military campaigns, caused the Somali state to fall in 1991. The protracted civil war, the emergence of terrorist organisations like Al-Shabaab, and continuous attempts at rehabilitation and reconciliation have all been obstacles for Somalia since then¹².

¹⁰ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of the End of Empire in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² Ismail I. Ahmed and Reginald Herbold Green, "The Heritage of War and State Collapse in Somalia and Somaliland: Local-Level Effects, External Interventions and Reconstruction," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 113–27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993185>.

Kenya's post-independence path has been characterised by attempts to preserve national unity and consolidate authority, frequently at the expense of democracy and inclusivity. Kenya experienced escalating ethnic conflicts and inequality as a result of Moi's dictatorial administration and Kenyatta's ethnic favouritism. Even after a new constitution and democratic changes were implemented in 2010, the nation still has issues with governance, ethnic politics, and corruption¹³.

1.2.1 From Independence to Fragmentation: The Collapse of the Somali State

Somalia gained its independence in 1960, creating a new state merging British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somaliland in the south. Having two different colonial legacies, the two regions had different political expectations and administrative systems, albeit they shared the same culture. Therefore, the population in the northern region felt marginalized and underrepresented¹⁴.

Somalia initially embraced a multi-party democratic democracy. But politics was dominated by clan loyalty, with more than 60 political groups that reflected clan interests far more than ideological arguments. This weakened the unity of the central administration by further dividing politics. Public trust was further damaged by nepotism and corruption, and democracy was increasingly seen as ineffectual in resolving Somalia's clan divides¹⁵.

Major General Mohamed Siad Barre threw a coup in 1969 after President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke was assassinated. General Barre suspended the constitution, disbanded democratic institutions, and instituted an authoritarian government based on "Scientific Socialism." Before it became increasingly oppressive and favoured his Marehan clan and its allies, his regime was increasingly popular. The responses to Barre's regime led to years of rebellion and violence from opposition movements like the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Somali National Movement (SNM), and the United Somali Congress (USC)¹⁶. During these years, precisely the 1980s, Barre's administration has been charged with committing acts of genocide throughout this time, particularly the

¹³ Embassy of the Republic of Kenya in Japan, *History of Kenya*, updated regularly, <https://www.kenyarep-jp.com/en/kenya/history/>.

¹⁴ Ahmed and Green, "The Heritage of War and State Collapse," 120.

¹⁵ Ingiriis, "From Pre-Colonial Past."

¹⁶ Ahmed and Green, "The Heritage of War and State Collapse," 120.

1980s. In 1991, Barre was overthrown, but peace did not come. Instead, warlords and militias fought for authority as Somalia descended into civil war. Famine, mass displacement, and the emergence of piracy were caused by the lack of a central administration and the continuous bloodshed. The goal of international interventions like the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) and the United Task Force (UNITAF) was to restore order and give aid, but they mostly failed. The majority of Western forces withdrew after the 1993 "Black Hawk Down" event, which resulted in the deaths of American soldiers in Mogadishu¹⁷. Somalia's government remained unstable, despite considerable attempts to re-establish governance. State-building efforts were continuously sabotaged by insurgencies, mainly from Al-Shabaab¹⁸.

On the other hand, Somaliland achieved relative peace and stability, gaining independence from Somalia in 1991. Effective democratic institutions were built, even if Somaliland was not entirely internationally recognized. This government functioned due to the hybrid government enacted, combining customary law (xeer), Sharia, and democratic principles¹⁹.

Somalia has struggled with a fractured society since attaining independence. Long-term instability has been exacerbated by authoritarian government, clan politics, colonial legacies, and unsuccessful outside interventions. Although the larger area still faces violence and precarious statehood, Somaliland's example shows the possibility of inclusive, democratic administration.

1.2.2 Post-Colonial Governance and the Struggles for Institutional Stability in Kenya

Long-term efforts to create inclusive governance, resolve ethnic conflicts, and create stable institutions are reflected in Kenya's post-colonial political history. After having gained independence in 1963, Kenyan leaders were struggling to consolidate a multi-ethnic state, resultated from decades of British colonial rule.

This was the beginning of the authoritarian regimes and political instability for Kenya: Jomo Kenyatta's and Daniel arap Moi's governances deepened ethnic-based

¹⁷ Ahmed and Green, "The Heritage of War and State Collapse," 120.

¹⁸ Ingiriis, "From Pre-Colonial Past."

¹⁹ Ibidem

inequalities²⁰. Rapid economic development and state-building were prioritised throughout Kenyatta's presidency (1963–1978), but these initiatives were sometimes tainted by claims of nepotism and ethnic favouritism. Kenyatta's ethnic group, the Kikuyu, disproportionately benefited from land, political power, and governmental resources, especially in the Rift Valley's fertile agricultural region²¹.

The attempts of the Northern Frontier District (NFD), the Somali ethnic population in Kenya, to join the Somali Republic were violently suppressed by the government during the Shifta War, declaring the region a “special area”, with strict security measures like curfews, forced relocations, and the collective punishment of communities suspected of supporting the insurgency²². Tensions between ethnic Somalis and the Kenyan government are heightened by the underdevelopment and marginalisation left over from the Shifta War in northeastern Kenya²³.

President Daniel arap Moi followed Kenyatta's presidency, being faithful to the latter's policies and promising to unify Kenya's diverse communities. However, Moi quickly centralized power around himself and his Kalenjin ethnic base. Kenya became a one-party state under KANU, entirely eliminating political competition²⁴. Moi's regime came to represent authoritarianism due to its pervasive abuses of human rights, arbitrary incarceration, and repression of dissent²⁵.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Kenya had become economically dependent on aid and was subject to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by international financial institutions. These plans featured significant cuts to public spending, exacerbating poverty and inequality, particularly in previously marginalized communities²⁶.

Despite his openness to multi-party politics, Moi was harshly criticized for the manipulation that occurred during the 1992 and 1997 elections. Kenya's peaceful democratic transition did not begin until 2002. Daniel Arap Moi resigned as president

²⁰Encyclopædia Britannica, *Kenya: Moi's Rule*, updated regularly, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kenya/Mois-rule>.

²¹ John Lonsdale, *Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895–1914* (1979), https://cooperative-individualism.org/lonsdale-john_coping-with-the-contradictions-1979.pdf.

²² Embassy of Kenya in Japan, *History of Kenya*.

²³ Encyclopædia Britannica, *Moi's Rule*.

²⁴ Lonsdale, *Coping with the Contradictions*.

²⁵ Embassy of Kenya in Japan, *History of Kenya*.

²⁶ Lonsdale, J., & Berman, B. (1979). Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895- 1914. *Source: The Journal of African History*, 20(4), 487–505.

after two decades in office, allowing Mwai Kibaki of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) to take over. The election of Kibaki sparked optimism for economic revival, anti-corruption initiatives, and reform²⁷. However accusation of favoritism and nepotism resurfaced, leading to one of the most violent episodes in Kenyan history in 2007 elections, when Kibaki won the elections over the opposition. This rebellion resulted in over 1,000 deaths and the displacement of over 600,000 people²⁸.

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan led international mediation in response to the crisis, which resulted in a power-sharing arrangement between Kibaki and opposition leader Odinga. A new constitution was drafted and ratified in 2010 as part of the significant institutional reforms started by this coalition government²⁹. Ethnic alliances and corruption continue to dominate politics in Kenya, despite the country's apparent democratic progress.

1.3 Al-Shabaab's Evolution: From Somali Insurgency to Regional Threat

The rise and spread of Al-Shabaab is one of the largest security threats in the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab, a global terrorist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, began as a localised Islamist insurgency and has since grown out of Somalia's decades-long state issues and civil war. Despite military pressure, the group has been able to maintain its insurgency by radicalising marginalised groups, taking advantage of governance shortcomings, and adapting to regional dynamics. Its growth into Kenya is indicative of wider weaknesses in the area, as domestic radicalisation and cross-border attacks have made it more difficult to control its effects.

1.3.1 The Rise of Al-Shabaab in Somalia: State Collapse, Islamist Movements, and the Consolidation of a Jihadist Insurgency

The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 is closely related to the origins of Al-Shabaab. When President Siad Barre was overthrown, Somalia's centralised administration came

²⁷ Embassy of Kenya in Japan, *History of Kenya*.

²⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica, *Kenya: Disputed 2007 and 2013 Elections, a New Constitution, and ICC Proceedings*, updated regularly, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kenya/Disputed-2007-and-2013-elections-a-new-constitution-and-ICC-proceedings>.

²⁹ Ibidem

to an end, and a period of lawlessness ruled by warlords and clan-based militias took over. Islamist movements gained ground in this power vacuum as substitutes for the state, providing a means of justice and government³⁰.

During the 1990s some Islamist groups and their Sharia courts united to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) to manage justice and security in areas like Mogadishu. By 2006, the ICU had established an element of order in the areas it controlled, weakening the power of warlords sponsored by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which the United States had supported³¹.

Al-Shabaab was the ICU's youth militia until a group of extremists took over the group. They advocated for a hardline interpretation of Islam and the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Somalia. In December 2006, the U.S.-backed Ethiopian military incursion sought to remove the ICU and establish the TFG in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab was inspired by the intervention, which was successful in overthrowing the ICU, and reframed its insurgency as a religious and nationalist fight against foreign occupiers³². From 2007 to 2011 Al-Shabaab expanded its operations substantially in central and southern Somalia. Public executions, stonings, and amputations were all part of the stringent Sharia law that al-Shabaab enforced in the regions it controlled³³. Its leadership emphasised Somali nationalism to increase its appeal while also promoting a Salafist-jihadist doctrine. The organisation used taxation, charcoal exports, extortion, and relationships to local criminal networks to fund itself³⁴.

Al-Shabaab's ties with Al-Qaeda was formalized in 2012 joining international jihadist groupings and expanding its foreign fighter recruiting³⁵. The group prevailed against AMISOM, Ethiopian forces, and Somali national troops, all of whom were attempting to silence the terrorist group, thanks to their evolving methods, which included assassinations, suicide bombings, as well as complex attacks³⁶.

³⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*, updated regularly, <https://www.cfr.org/background/al-shabaab>.

³¹ Ken Menkhaus, "State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a 'Functional Failed State' in Somalia," *African Affairs* 114, no. 454 (2015): 1–17, <https://academic.oup.com/afaf/article/114/454/1/2195212>.

³² *Ibidem*

³³ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*.

³⁴ Neil Carrier and Gernot Klantschnig, "Africa and the War on Drugs," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, no. 3 (2012): 377–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007311>.

³⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*

Al-Shabaab's resilience stems from Somalia's persistent governance flaws, widespread corruption, and the central government's incapacity to uphold security or deliver essential services. Al-Shabaab continues to have possibilities to take advantage of grievances, keep recruiting, and portray itself as a respectable alternative to the government due to clan conflicts and regional disintegration.

1.3.2 Al-Shabaab's Expansion into Kenya: Retaliation, Radicalization, and Cross-Border Jihad

The incursion of al-Shabaab into Kenya was opportunistic as well as strategic. The organization targeted Kenya for retaliatory raids, after its intervention in southern Somalia under operation Linda Nchi in October 2011³⁷. The goal of Kenya's military campaign was to diminish Al-Shabaab's control over Kismayo and interfere with its economic vitality, particularly the charcoal trade, which has been a significant source of revenue for the organisation³⁸. But Kenya's intervention also put the nation in the radar of Al-Shabaab, which sparked a devastating wave of international assaults.

The group began a series of attacks on Kenyan soil, from grenade attacks to coordinated assaults. One of Al-Shabaab's major international terror operations was the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, which killed at least 67 people. It demonstrated the organization's capacity to enlist and use members of Kenya's Muslim communities³⁹. The 2015 attack on Garissa University College, which claimed 148 lives, was a further event that demonstrated the gravity of the threat.⁴⁰

Moreover, apart from retaliatory motives, Kenya's internal socio-political dynamics were manipulated: the north-eastern regions inhabited by ethnic Somalis have been long marginalized by the Kenyan state, suffering from underdevelopment, police abuse, and human rights violations. Al-Shabaab claimed itself as a defender of the Somali Muslims against a repressive Kenyan state. By doing so, the organisation successfully

³⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*.

³⁸ Johannes Brynildsen, *Containment or Contagion? A Summary of U.S. Strategy toward Somalia since 2001*, FOI Memo 5742 (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2016), https://www.foi.se/download/18.7fd35d7f166c56ebe0bbdf9/1542369068783/Containment-or-Contagion_FOI-Memo-5742.pdf.

³⁹ Sarah Zeiger, *We the People: Thinking About Radicalisation in Kenya* (Twaweza East Africa, 2017), <https://twaweza.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SzWKenyaRadicalism-EN-FINAL-1.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*.

enlisted Kenyan citizens, especially members of coastal Swahili Muslim groups and ethnic Somalis⁴¹.

The coastline area became a breeding ground for Al-Shabaab's radicalisation activities, especially in the counties of Mombasa and Lamu. Some Swahili Muslims, who had historically been economically marginalised, were lured to Al-Shabaab's ideology, which was frequently spread by radical mosques and preachers. In order to draw in disillusioned youth, the group's recruitment network in Kenya grew more complex, utilising both local contacts and internet platforms⁴².

Despite being more effective in terms of military operations and intelligence collaboration, Kenya's counterterrorism response has frequently come under scrutiny for violations of human rights. In addition to alienating Muslim populations, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and indiscriminate security sweeps have bolstered Al-Shabaab's victimisation and persecution narrative⁴³. Long-term counter-radicalization efforts have been hindered by this dynamic, which has hindered attempts to foster trust between the state and local populations.

Al-Shabaab is a persistent threat despite Kenya's efforts to strengthen its borders, improve regional intelligence sharing, and support AMISOM's stabilisation efforts in Somalia. The group's ability to carry out intricate attacks in urban areas, cross-border raids, and suicide bombers demonstrates its long-term operational capability and flexibility in response to changing security conditions⁴⁴.

1.4 Al-Shabaab's Enduring Threat and the Necessity of Kenya-Somalia Counterterrorism Cooperation

The historical and structural frameworks examined in the previous sections must be taken into consideration when analysing the formation and development of Al-Shabaab. Violent extremist organisations have thrived in Somalia and Kenya due to colonial legacies, post-colonial government shortcomings, and the long-standing marginalisation of Somali inhabitants. Particularly, al-Shabaab has shown a remarkable

⁴¹ Zeiger, *We the People*.

⁴² Ibidem

⁴³ Brynildsen, *Containment or Contagion?*.

⁴⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, *Al-Shabaab*.

capacity for growth and adaptation, evolving from a regional Somali insurgency into an international terrorist group. Its tenacity and regional threat demonstrate how urgently Kenya and Somalia must cooperate its counterterrorism efforts.

Al-Shabaab remains a dominant force, regardless of military pressure from the African Union Transmission Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and its international partners. It holds southern and central Somalia and in the urban centres maintains its attacks⁴⁵. The organisation keeps on running because of its capacity to escape local clan dynamics, inadequate institutions, and socioeconomic outrages. Where governments cannot reach, Al-Shabaab does, acting as a de facto government following its strict interpretation of Sharia law⁴⁶.

The broad financial portfolio of Al-Shabaab is a major contributor to its durability. It uses extortion, the illegal sale of goods like sugar and charcoal, and taxes on farmers and businesses to finance its operations. Keatinge (2014) claims that the gang has continued to make millions of dollars a year from the charcoal trade alone in spite of international restrictions. Additional financial resilience has also been supplied by remittances from the Somali diaspora and suspected connections to international crime networks⁴⁷.

The underdevelopment and marginalisation of Kenya's north-eastern region, which is primarily home to ethnic Somalis, has allowed Al-Shabaab to grow. A sense of estrangement and mistrust towards the Kenyan government has been cultivated by the region's historical neglect as well as abuses of state security. Al-Shabaab's recruitment themes, which highlight Islamic solidarity and resistance against perceived state persecution, have become more appealing to certain elements of the populace as a result. Al-Shabaab targets Muslims who speak Swahili along Kenya's coast in addition to the Somali community, taking advantage of pre-existing frustrations about discrimination, poverty, and marginalisation⁴⁸.

The attacks on Kenya, such as the siege of Westgate Mall in 2013 and the massacre at Garissa University in 2015, highlight the transnational character of Al-

⁴⁵ Carrier and Klantschnig, "Africa and the War on Drugs."

⁴⁶ Zeiger, *We the People*.

⁴⁷ Tom Keatinge, *The Role of Finance in Defeating Al-Shabaab*, RUSI Whitehall Report 2-14 (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2014), https://static.rusi.org/201412_whr_2-14_keatinge_web_0.pdf.

⁴⁸ *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Taylor & Francis, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujme20>.

Shabaab's activities and its ability to carry out significant strikes outside of Somalia's boundaries⁴⁹. These assaults were part of a larger plan to destabilise the area and dissuade international military participation, in addition to being reprisal for Kenya's military action in Somalia, known as Operation Linda Nchi⁵⁰.

The threat posed by Al-Shabaab is multidimensional and multinational, making solo counterterrorism strategies ineffective. Despite their tense past history, Kenya and Somalia are coming to understand each day how important cooperation is. One significant step towards a more coordinated military response was the 2012 inclusion of Kenya's Defence Forces in AMISOM⁵¹. Furthermore, the creation of Joint Operations Centres (JOCs) has made it easier for regional actors to share intelligence, but there are still major issues with coordination, trust, and capability⁵².

Persistent disagreements, such as the conflict over Kenya and Somalia's maritime borders, and claims of political meddling between the two countries further hamper regional cooperation. Joint operations and intelligence-sharing initiatives have occasionally been impeded by these problems⁵³. However, with the help of outside parties like the US and the EU, the mutual need to eliminate Al-Shabaab's danger has sparked continuous bilateral and multilateral security engagements⁵⁴.

This chapter's historical trajectory shows how colonial partitioning, post-colonial governance flaws and systemic marginalisation created the conditions for the disenfranchisement of the north-eastern Kenyan region and the collapse of the Somalian state. Al-Shabaab was able to establish itself and grow stronger as a result of these circumstances.

The group's transformation from a Somali insurgency to a regional terrorist organisation left Kenya and Somalia facing a common danger that cut over national boundaries. Al-Shabaab's ongoing tenacity serves as a reminder of the long-lasting effects of past mistakes and institutional weakness. The need for a transnational counterterrorism

⁴⁹ Zeiger, *We the People*.

⁵⁰ Kam Damaris Seleina Parsitau, "A Critical Analysis of Al-Shabaab's Recruitment Strategies in Kenya," *African Journal of Empirical Research* 4, no. 1 (2023): 35–47, <https://ajernet.net/ojs/index.php/ajernet/article/view/306>.

⁵¹ Clare Lockhart, "The Link Between Development and Security: Past Lessons and Current Challenges," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2014): 261–72, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/brownjwa20&div=48&id=&page=>.

⁵² *The Journal of Modern African Studies*.

⁵³ Parsitau, "Al-Shabaab's Recruitment Strategies."

⁵⁴ Zeiger, *We the People*.

approach is highlighted by its ability to finance its operations through illegal economies, recruit across national borders, and adjust to military constraints. Despite long-standing hostilities, Kenya and Somalia have moved closer to cooperation through mechanisms for intelligence sharing and coordinated military missions. However, the efficacy of these measures remains a subject of critical analysis.

Chapter 2

TRANSNATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES – Kenya, Somalia, and Global Partnerships Against Al-Shabaab

With an emphasis on the fall of the Somalian state, the effects of colonial border divisions, and the general weakness of political institutions in the Horn of Africa, the previous chapter explored the circumstances that gave rise to Al-Shabaab. It defined how Al-Shabaab was able to grow its power due to regional factors like the marginalisation of ethnic Somali inhabitants in Kenya and the cross-border spill over of violence. These political and historical frameworks are essential to the group's development from a small-scale insurgency to a significant regional threat.

This chapter will address the issues that arose throughout the attempts to overcome Al-Shabaab's increasing influence. Counterterrorism, broadly defined, refers to the tactics, regulations, and procedures used by governments or alliances to avert, discourage, and address terrorist attacks. Counterterrorism in East Africa includes military operations, intelligence cooperation, diplomatic alliances, and legislative reforms meant to weaken Al-Shabaab's operational capabilities.

Al-Shabaab is marked as a terrorist organization by the United Nations, the United States, and many regional actors. Commenced as a Somali Islamist movement, its transnational role is now settled: the group's operations are now across national borders, not solely within Somalia's soil: particularly in Kenya, where Al-Shabaab enacted its notorious attacks such as the 2013 Westgate Mall siege and the 2015 Garissa University massacre. Its networks include recruitment efforts aimed at both domestic and global audiences, funding from diaspora communities, and foreign combatants.

Intelligence sharing, or the systematic exchange of security-related data between agencies and governments, is an essential aspect of this chapter. Given it allows actors to predict threats, oversee suspects, and carry out cooperative operations across borders, effective intelligence sharing is essential to contemporary counterterrorism. Bilateral agreements, regional platforms like AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia), and assistance from foreign partners like the US via AFRICOM (United States Africa Command) where its mission is to strengthen defence capabilities, support crisis response, and deter and defeat transnational threats in Africa, and the EU have all been

part of the intelligence sharing between Kenya and Somalia. But despite these initiatives, obstacles including political rivalry, mistrust, and capacity constraints frequently reduce their efficacy.

Ultimately, here is addressed a central question: How do intelligence-sharing frameworks and cross-border military interventions shape the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts against Al-Shabaab's transnational operations in Somalia and Kenya?

This chapter lays the groundwork for the thesis's subsequent phase, which will examine other, more sustainable routes to regional security in the Horn of Africa, by combining factual inquiry with critical reflection.

2.1 Intelligence Sharing and Security Cooperation Between Kenya, Somalia, and External Actors

In the offensive against Al-Shabaab, intelligence sharing has emerged as an essential component of transnational counterterrorism initiatives in East Africa. In order to prevent attacks and plan outcomes, this approach entails sharing threat intelligence, surveillance data, and tactical information across institutional and state borders. The efficiency of intelligence-sharing frameworks in Somalia and Kenya is, however, constrained by a combination of political conflicts, historical mistrust, and institutional fragmentation, alongside safety-related issues.

Through bilateral security agreements and the founding of Joint Operations Centres (JOCs), which act as hubs for formal tactical coordination between Kenya and Somalia, communication was endorsed between Somali units and Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) operating in border areas, especially in the vicinity of the Jubaland corridor, which serves as a vital cross-border route for trade, migration, and security operations between Kismayo, Somalia, and Garissa, Kenya⁵⁵. It is essential to both economic trade and regional stability. JOCs offer instant access to cross-border intelligence, facilitating swift joint operations against Al-Shabaab groups that are traveling between the two states. However, because of the tensions between Kenya and the Federal Government

⁵⁵ Jay Bahadur, Ken Menkhaus, and Benjamin Petrini, *Navigating Trade Controls in Somalia: The Illicit Economy in Legal Markets* (Rift Valley Institute, 2021), <https://riftvalley.net/publication/navigating-trade-controls/>

of Somalia (FGS), compliance has frequently failed. Mogadishu believes that Kenya's backing of Jubaland undermines federal sovereignty, which has made people reluctant to share critical information and frequently leads to intelligence utterly bypassing federal channels⁵⁶.

The defected command structures on both sides exacerbate mistrust. Internal security cooperation in Kenya is fragmented and has little communication between the KDF, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), and the police's Counter Terrorism Police Unit (CTPU). In Somalia, the federal government and different regional administrations each have their own military forces and intelligence services. This leads to conflicting allegiances and erratic threat reporting, as regional players like Jubaland's Darawiish troops usually pursue their own plans, often at odds with national security goals. As a result, the system's ability to stop international threats before they happen is compromised because intelligence sharing is frequently more reactive than strategic⁵⁷.

Important duties related to intelligence coordination have also been carried out by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and its successor, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). Multinational forces from Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, and Ethiopia partnered on strategy and intelligence sharing under AMISOM, especially during urban offensives like the Kismayo operation. However, AMISOM has structural issues with confidence within country contingents, data standardisation, and communication. Instead of being disseminated widely, intelligence tends to stay divided within national units⁵⁸. As the emphasis has switched to Somali ownership of national security with the implementation of ATMIS, it is projected that intelligence capabilities will become gradually centralised within federal departments. This objective is still far from being accomplished in reality itself. The National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) of Somalia is accused of infiltration and politicisation, and it lacks adequate technical infrastructure. According to EUCAP's most recent capacity-building assessment, continuous attempts to create judicial and maritime intelligence frameworks have been hampered by inadequate interoperability with regional partners and a lack of coordination among Somali ministries⁵⁹. EUCAP (European Union Capacity Building

⁵⁶ United States Africa Command, *AFRICOM*, updated regularly, <https://www.africom.mil>

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*

⁵⁸ Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

⁵⁹ European External Action Service, *About EUCAP Somalia*, updated regularly, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-som/about-eucap-somalia_en?s=332

Mission) is a civilian mission under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) that supports partner countries in strengthening their internal security and rule of law through training, advising, and capacity-building efforts.

ATMIS is currently primarily focused on getting ready for a complete withdrawal, yet it still has few advisory capabilities. This raises questions about whether Somali-led intelligence coordination will be resilient or fracture up even further.

Although there are still obstacles, external forces continue to offer invaluable assistance. The major intelligence agency in the area, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), provides Somali and Kenyan forces with satellite imagery, drone monitoring, and signal interception. These tools have disrupted Al-Shabaab leadership cells and improved the targeting precision of military operations. AFRICOM leadership invested in ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) tools and regional interoperability during a regional visit in November 2023, emphasising intelligence support as a pillar of U.S. participation⁶⁰.

The European Union has adopted a different strategy, emphasising long-term institutional building, through its civilian mission EUCAP Somalia. Its assistance includes judicial cooperation procedures, legal advisory functions, and the creation of Somali Coast Guard intelligence on trafficking routes and marine threats. Despite their value, these initiatives frequently lack links to military intelligence pipelines and proceed more slowly than compelling tactical demands⁶¹. Additionally, because AFRICOM and EUCAP function independently, there may be policy gaps or overlaps when cooperation is weak.

Crucially, the entire intelligence ecosystem is susceptible to public outrage as well as inside sabotage. Intelligence operations are frequently seen by Somali individuals and, to a lesser extent, Kenyan populations in the northeast as arcane and arguable. Deep cynicism has resulted from instances of mistaken identity, mass detentions, or drone strikes driven by flawed intelligence. These episodes have the potential to radicalise people or encourage communities to accept Al-Shabaab as a lesser evil, rather than promoting trust in the state⁶².

⁶⁰ United States Africa Command, *AFRICOM*

⁶¹ European External Action Service, *About EUCAP Somalia*

⁶² United States Africa Command, *AFRICOM*

In conclusion, intelligence sharing between Somalia, Kenya, and their foreign allies continues to be a politically delicate but strategic component of regional counterterrorism. On paper, platforms like JOCs and multilateral missions have more potential, but in practice, they are hindered by donor dependency, disjointed chains of command, and mistrust. Suppose these structural problems are not resolved through improved openness, local ownership, and integration: in that case, intelligence cooperation will not be able to weaken Al-Shabaab's cross-border activities in the long run effectively.

2.2 Cross-Border and Multinational Military Interventions

The regional counterterrorism architecture has placed a strong emphasis on military actions against Al-Shabaab, especially through multinational campaigns run by AMISOM and ATMIS and cross-border operations spearheaded by Kenya. Targeting valuable insurgent leaders and reclaiming territory are a pair of significant tactical successes that have resulted from these efforts, but they have mostly fallen short of establishing long-term security. Political tension, local distrust, and ongoing insurgency adaptation are frequently the price paid for operational successes.

Nairobi's official military involvement in Somalia began in October 2011 with Operation Linda Nchi. The operation quickly developed into a deeper occupation of portions of southern Somalia, including the vital port city of Kismayo. It was first framed as a defensive measure to safeguard Kenya's borders and tourism industry in the wake of a wave of kidnappings and cross-border incursions by Al-Shabaab. Kenya's position was initially unilateral, but it quickly became part of AMISOM's Sector II framework, which gave it international legitimacy. However the core issue remained unresolved by this integration: Kenya's military involvement has frequently been influenced more by national interests than by a coordinated regional strategy, such as securing commercial routes through Kismayo and aiding the Jubaland government⁶³.

Urban strongholds like Mogadishu and Kismayo were successfully retaken by AMISOM's larger operations, which included multinational battles involving Ugandan,

⁶³ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), *What's Next for the Fight Against al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia?*, September 4, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/09/04/whats-next-for-the-fight-against-al-shabaab-in-kenya-and-somalia-august-2024/>

Burundian, Ethiopian, and Kenyan forces. However, Al-Shabaab did not become impotent as a result of these successes; instead, the organisation changed its strategy, withdrawing to rural areas and assuming a flexible, rebellious stance. The recent 2023 attack in Bulo Marer, which resulted in the deaths of more than fifty Ugandan peacekeepers, highlights the brittleness of these victories as well as the ongoing deficiencies in base defence and operational planning⁶⁴. The attack's magnitude and complexity sparked concerns about ATMIS and AMISOM's preparedness, especially as the mission draws to an end and Somali forces are expected to assume control. Even after years of foreign assistance, Somali National Army (SNA) forces are still dispersed and highly dependent on outside parties, particularly for logistics and air support⁶⁵.

The United States has contributed to the military battle in parallel by providing elite Somali forces like the Danab Brigade with training, drone monitoring, and airstrikes, mostly through AFRICOM. In addition to interrupting immediate threats, these operations have been successful in cutting off components of Al-Shabaab's leadership. Their strategic significance is less evident, though. Even when drone strikes are accurate, they don't address the systemic issues that fuel radicalisation and function in a political vacuum. Although competent units have been formed by AFRICOM's training of Somali special forces, these units operate independently of broader security reform and are not integrated with attempts to stabilise the civilian population⁶⁶. The excessive dependence on foreign weaponry runs the risk of discouraging local actors from working towards community reconciliation or governance reforms in areas of contention over time.

The current cross-border operations in Kenya serve as additional evidence of the limitations of kinetic techniques. Even with the military stationed in Somalia for over ten years, Al-Shabaab still conducts lethal incursions into Kenyan territory, particularly in the border counties of Mandera, Garissa, and Lamu. An attack on a Somali border facility in March 2025 that took the lives of many Kenyan officers serves as an example of the group's persistent capacity to carry out cross-border attacks⁶⁷. Instead of reducing Al-

⁶⁴ France 24, *More Than 50 Ugandan Peacekeepers Killed in Al-Shabaab Attack in Somalia, President Says*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230604-more-than-50-ugandan-peacekeepers-killed-in-al-shabaab-attack-in-somalia-president-says>

⁶⁵ ACLED, *What's Next for the Fight Against al-Shabaab?*

⁶⁶ United States Africa Command, *AFRICOM*

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, *Six Personnel Killed in Attack on Somali Border: Kenyan Police*, March 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/23/six-personnel-killed-in-attack-on-somali-border-kenyan-police>

Shabaab's power, Kenya's militarised strategy seems to have made a security conundrum worse by provoking assaults without creating lasting deterrents. Cross-border operations, in the absence of full political participation or local legitimacy, appear to provide only temporary containment, given the ongoing threat on Kenyan soil.

It is important to recognise the humanitarian implications of these campaigns, even though they are not the primary concern. Increased public animosity, infrastructure loss, and population displacement have all frequently been the outcomes of military offensives. These repercussions make the already precarious connection between local communities and national forces even more difficult, as the latter may view the state as a violent actor rather than a protector. Al-Shabaab may take advantage of the gaps created by the lack of cohesive post-operation stabilisation frameworks.

Whereas multinational and cross-border military interventions have yielded some tactical wins, they have not resulted in a strategic triumph. Their long-term effects have been lessened by their excessive dependence on physical force, lack of coordination between actors, and restricted integration with political and governance initiatives. The brittleness of these achievements is made more evident as ATMIS retreats and Somali forces take on more responsibilities. Regardless of the results on the battlefield, the cycle of violence is likely to persist unless counterinsurgency tactics are reoriented towards more comprehensive, locally based approaches.

2.3 Diplomatic Efforts, Regional Cooperation, and International Engagement

A parallel framework of international engagement, regional collaboration, and diplomacy has set out to stabilise Somalia and Kenya through policy coordination, sanctions, and governance adjustments, even as military operations have dominated the international response to Al-Shabaab. However, fragmentation, conflicting mandates, and a lack of political flexibility have made these initiatives difficult to implement. Diplomatic instruments have frequently shown themselves to be reactive, disengaged from local circumstances, and limited by institutional inertia as well as geopolitical objectives.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) was established to encourage reconciliation, institutional reform, and inclusive governance. Still, because to

opposition from Somali elites and overlapping mandates with the African Union and bilateral funders, UNSOM's effectiveness has consistently been circumscribed. Even though UNSOM provides guidance support for Somali-led political processes, it functions within a diplomatic framework with a diffuse and frequently circumvented implementation authority. Inconsistent coordination between donor missions, ATMIS, and UNSOM results in strategic silos rather than cohesive strategy. The effectiveness of international diplomacy is further limited by the ambiguity surrounding leadership in Somalia's security governance, making UNSOM's political guidance primarily symbolic during actual tense situations⁶⁸.

By using coercive diplomatic measures including sanctions as well as civilian capacity-building, the European Union has helped to stabilise Somalia's institutions and diplomatic efforts. Targeting those associated with ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab, the EU's autonomous counterterrorism sanctions list aims to limit their financial and mobility activities⁶⁹. However, the unofficial money systems that support Somali insurgent groups are frequently overlooked by these sanctions. Particularly, al-Shabaab depends largely on extortion, taxes, and local smuggling networks that operate outside the purview of official financial control. Sanctions' deterrent effect is diminished in such a situation, and their political value becomes, once again, more symbolic.

Diplomatic practices have remained constantly stiff on the tactical level. Following a containment strategy that places a higher priority on military annihilation than on negotiated settlement, the majority of international parties still refrain from engaging Al-Shabaab in political endeavours. This standpoint lingers despite the movement's tenacity and strong ties to Somali society. Some policy circles have started to challenge the long-standing reluctance to consider discussion, arguing that in order to secure long-term stability, non-military options might be essential. According to a 2022 study, this policy should be re-examined since it runs the danger of escalating conflict

⁶⁸ Michael Keating and Lidet Tadesse Shiferaw, *Peace and Transition Processes in Somalia* (PeaceRep, June 2022), <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Somalia-Report-Digital.pdf>

⁶⁹ Council of the European Union, *Fight Against Terrorism: Council Adds an Individual to Its Autonomous Sanctions List Against ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaida*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/01/16/fight-against-terrorism-council-adds-an-individual-to-its-autonomous-sanctions-list-against-isil-da-esh-and-al-qaida/>

and alienating communities governed by or controlled by Al-Shabaab⁷⁰. Yet, most worldwide and regional stakeholders still oppose this approach, considering political involvement with recognised terrorist organisations to be both strategically and normatively unacceptable. This inflexible stance is a reflection of both domestic political considerations, particularly among donor states, and international systems of justice.

This contradiction is best shown by the United States. U.S. strategy has prioritised short-term counterterrorism through airstrikes and elite training missions, while underinvesting in long-term political solutions, despite the fact that it is still one of the most powerful actors in Somalia. The United States' engagement is still disjointed from the larger global infrastructure, which restricts its ability to significantly influence governance or efforts at reconciliation, regardless of calls for a more integrated diplomatic approach. The legitimacy of the United States and the general efficacy of international cooperation are both weakened by the absence of a solid and coordinated political agenda⁷¹.

Diplomatic efforts are further complicated by geopolitical competition. Frequently eschewing multilateral frameworks, Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey, have invested heavily in competing Somali factions and institutions. These expenditures, which range from military training to infrastructure projects, are driven more by larger regional rivalry than by common security goals. As a result, loyalty is divided among rival foreign backers rather than to the Somali state itself, leading to a disjointed state-building process. These clashes undermine the credibility of international diplomatic frameworks, exacerbate political polarisation, and undermine governmental impartiality⁷².

Certainly, internal manipulation of diplomacy is common. For their own or their faction's benefit, Somali political leaders regularly manoeuvre or hinder international projects. For instance, elite opposition and inadequate interministerial coordination have weakened reintegration initiatives for Al-Shabaab defectors. Because they are concerned

⁷⁰ International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, Report no. 309, June 21, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/309-considering-political-engagement-al-shabaab-somalia>

⁷¹ Paul D. Williams, *US Policy Towards Somalia: Needs a Reset* (Chatham House, July 14, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2020-07-14-us-policy-somalia-williams.pdf>

⁷² *Limes: Africa italiana*, no. 2/2024, <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/africa-italiana-14630248/>

about political backlash or security threats, some local leaders refuse to work with donor-led reintegration programs. Defection is discouraged and individuals who leave militant networks are left vulnerable as a result of the policy environment. International funding for these initiatives is frequently out of step with local political dynamics and lacking local enforcement⁷³.

In conclusion, geopolitical rivalry, conservatism, and fragmentation continue to complicate diplomatic efforts in Kenya and Somalia. Although these instruments are crucial for supporting military operations, they have all too frequently served in isolation, lacked flexibility, and failed to establish local legitimacy. They will only have little contribution to the weakening of Al-Shabaab and bringing stability to the area if they don't move towards more integrated, context-sensitive diplomacy that is based on political realism and strategic coordination.

2.4 Human Rights Concerns and the Impact on Local Populations

Operations against terrorism in Kenya and Somalia have been justified on the grounds of regional and international security. However, this security architecture is marked by an upsurge in human rights abuses, a drop in public trust, and unfavourable consequences which pose the risk of strengthening violent extremism rather than reducing it. The use of military operations and international diplomatic instruments has frequently resulted in civilian losses, legal ambiguities, and the persecution of marginalised groups, despite their frequent portrayal as impartial and technical. The legitimacy challenge that state and international actors face in their battle against Al-Shabaab is centred on these results, making them more than just incidental problems.

Over the course of the mission, there have been ongoing claims of abuses by AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) forces in Somalia. The lack of accountability procedures, arbitrary detentions, and civilian deaths during raids have all damaged public trust in these organisations. Human Rights Watch has documented a pattern of violations by Somali forces and peacekeepers during counterterrorism sweeps,

⁷³ European External Action Service, *A Window of Opportunity for Somalia: Analysis and Recommendations on the International Stabilisation Efforts* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023), <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9bd9a270-ab53-11ed-b508-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

ranging from sexual violence to indiscriminate attacks⁷⁴. Even with the switch from AMISOM to ATMIS and the verbal focus on Somali ownership, the lack of efficient control still feeds animosity, especially in areas where communities are frequently caught between state-aligned security efforts and Al-Shabaab insurgency.

Analogous to this, there have been some significant but little-recognized human costs associated with U.S. drone strikes and special operations. Independent tracking groups like Airwars claim considerably higher casualty figures than those formally recognised, despite AFRICOM's explicit pledge to minimise civilian deaths⁷⁵. The credibility of counterterrorism narratives is weakened by the secrecy surrounding these operations and the absence of open inquiry into losses to civilians. Crucially, when local complaints are disregarded and there is no compensation, the populations most impacted by drone strikes frequently see them as foreign aggressors rather than protectors.

Human rights abuses in Kenya have been increasing and are frequently directly linked to ethnic profiling. A pillar of Kenya's internal counterterrorism force, the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) has been accused of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and targeting ethnic Somali groups in the country's northeast⁷⁶. The very communities these operations claim to safeguard have become fearful, distrustful, and in some cases, radicalised, as a result of these operations, which are carried out on the basis of national security. Instead of targeted, intelligence-based enforcement, the general securitisation of border counties like Garissa and Mandera runs the risk of mistaking ethnicity with extremism and resulting in communal punishment.

These violations have wider ramifications that are both structural and strategic. People who witness or even experience state brutality are more inclined to join rebellious governance structures or other parallel systems of authority and are less likely to cooperate with security forces. Attempts to “win hearts and minds” fall short when governmental actors commit or condone abuse and when there are no processes for justice

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: Somalia*, January 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/somalia>

⁷⁵ Airwars, *Civilian Casualty Claims: US Forces in Somalia*, updated regularly, <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/?belligerent=us-forces&country=somalia>

⁷⁶ Amnesty International, *'We Live in Perpetual Fear': Violations and Abuses of Freedom of Expression under the Transitional Government* (AFR 32/2008/2015, 2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr32/2008/2015/en/>

or reconciliation in place⁷⁷. This dynamic is particularly risky in places where Al-Shabaab portrays itself as a more trustworthy entity than the government and offers protection or basic services.

Human rights violations also plague efforts to encourage disengagement from Al-Shabaab through donor-funded reintegration initiatives. These initiatives frequently lack stable political backing from local authorities, clear legal frameworks, and sufficient protections for defectors⁷⁸. Consequently, those who quit militant networks sometimes experience shame, targeted assault, or even re-arrest. The legitimacy of these initiatives is further undermined by the absence of cooperation among Somalia's defence and judicial ministries. In such a scenario, if enforceable rights, local enforcement ability, and political will are not aligned, worldwide support for the removal of the group becomes meaningless.

Somalia and its partners have been repeatedly challenged by international legal requirements, to align security policies with the principles of the rule of law. However, the implementation is still uneven. Many counterterrorism programs are implemented in informal legal settings or during emergencies, where accountability procedures are either non-existent or politically regulated⁷⁹. The credibility of both national and international institutions is harmed by the gap between normative frameworks and actual practices, which permits abuses to continue with impunity.

En masse, the human rights aspect of counterterrorism initiatives in Kenya and Somalia exposes a structural inability to achieve a balance between security requirements and moral and legal requirements. Al-Shabaab continues to take advantage of this lack of legitimacy, using it as a rationale for its own atrocities as well as a propaganda tool. Current tactics run the danger of creating the very instability they are intended to prevent if they do not address these systemic harms.

⁷⁷ International Crisis Group, *Counter-terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/counter-terrorism-somalia-losing-hearts-and-minds>

⁷⁸ EEAS, *A Window of Opportunity for Somalia*

⁷⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1811 (2008)*, S/2008/769, December 10, 2008, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/595030?v=pdf>

2.5 Evaluating the Effectiveness and Limitations of Current Counterterrorism Approaches

Somalia and Kenya's counterterrorism efforts over the past 20 years have yielded a paradox: notable tactical successes but little indication of long-term strategic change. Despite constant military pressure, drone attacks, targeted murders, and regional security collaborations, the main target of these efforts, al-Shabaab, persists and adapts. The group's tenacity exposes serious flaws in the rationale and structure of the counterterrorism framework itself, going beyond operational resilience.

The excessive focus on militarised solutions at the expense of public trust, political inclusion, and governance evolution is one of the most obvious flaws. In both nations, counterterrorism has frequently been conducted with the presumption that destroying enemy fighters will cause their networks to deteriorate. However, this assumes that the only sources of Al-Shabaab's power are its fighters or infrastructure. The group's ability to rule in ungoverned areas, administer justice when the state is unable to, and take advantage of the void left by weak institutions is actually what allows it to survive. These structural conditions have not been addressed by kinetic force alone⁸⁰.

Strategic fatigue is another effect of this militarisation. Significant short-term advances, particularly in reclaiming territory, have been achieved through the use of elite foreign-trained forces, drone monitoring, and joint offensives, but these successes have seldom persisted in the absence of political reconciliation or local ownership⁸¹. The Somali National Army in Somalia is still dispersed, insufficiently prepared, and beset by problems with politicisation, corruption, and inconsistent leadership. The impending ATMIS removal simply serves to highlight how vulnerable states are and how dangerous it is to cut off contact with outside partners prematurely⁸².

Kenya's counterterrorism machinery has turned into a weapon of securitised governance, frequently unfairly targeting ethnic Somali communities in the country's northeast. Here, suspicion has risen to engagement and mass punishment has supplanted targeted policing. The state's response has distanced communities rather than fostering

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, *Losing Hearts and Minds*

⁸¹ Williams, *US Policy Towards Somalia*

⁸² Keating and Shiferaw, *Peace and Transition Processes in Somalia*

trust, which is exactly what extremist narratives thrive on⁸³. Such actions have long-term consequences, including social disintegration and the decline of public credibility, both of which are necessary for any counterterrorism operation to be effective.

Despite its best efforts, international cooperation remains frequently inconsistent. Overlapping mandates, bureaucratic competition, and poor strategic alignment have resulted from the growth of actors, including EUCAP, UNSOM, ATMIS, and bilateral operations. These missions frequently function in parallel, sometimes contradicting rather than supporting one another. Donor weariness and fluctuating geopolitical objectives further compound this, destabilising financial streams and complicating long-term planning for local institutions. The existence of numerous donors with conflicting agendas has weakened accountability and obscured the definition of what a well-coordinated, locally based counterterrorism plan ought to entail.

Furthermore, the counterterrorism playbook's fundamental presumptions have consistently been ignored to be updated. Instead of portraying Al-Shabaab as a domestic political player ingrained in Somali society, it still portrays it as an external threat that must be eradicated. The complete rejection of communication limits the policy horizon and limits statecraft to cycles of escalation and retaliation, even though engagement is still a politically delicate concept⁸⁴. Instead of resolution, the outcome is a kind of ongoing containment.

Additionally, political meddling, unclear laws, and a lack of cooperation have hindered efforts at reintegration for ex-militants. Many disengagement initiatives are still only surface-level and do not offer livelihoods, long-term protection, or assistance with community reintegration. A lack of trust in governmental institutions causes some defectors to be reabsorbed into conflict, while others experience repeated persecution⁸⁵. Exit routes are restricted, often tragically so, in the absence of viable, rights-based alternatives to militancy.

However, there are not many signs of improvement. Elite forces may operate efficiently with the correct incentives and training. Several significant plans have been thwarted by improved regional intelligence cooperation, particularly between Kenya and

⁸³ Amnesty International, *'We Live in Perpetual Fear': Violations and Abuses of Freedom of Expression under the Transitional Government* (AFR 32/2008/2015, 2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr32/2008/2015/en/>

⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement*

⁸⁵ EEAS, *A Window of Opportunity for Somalia*

outside allies. However, these achievements are still brittle and are usually isolated from larger governance projects. Such tactical victories will remain anomalies rather than signs of systemic change unless persistent efforts are made to overcome elite capture, corruption, and inter-institutional rivalry.

Conclusively, both objectives and strategies need to be re-evaluated. Counterterrorism cannot continue to be an isolated, technical endeavour. It needs to be ingrained in a political philosophy that places equal importance on legitimacy and lethality. In addition to reducing the efficacy of existing tactics, the persistent inability to combine military, legal, and social aspects into a cohesive approach has frequently made the insecurity that these strategies were intended to address worse.

2.6 Tactical Successes and Strategic Paralysis – Rethinking the War Against Al-Shabaab

The various facets of transnational counterterrorism initiatives in Kenya and Somalia have been extensively analysed in this chapter, with an emphasis on their operational mechanisms, political reasoning, and unforeseen repercussions. The picture that emerges is one of conflict rather than failure per se, where structural weakness coexists with tactical success and violence is limited but rarely resolved.

Al-Shabaab's geographical grip has unquestionably been weakened by military operations at different times, and intelligence coordination has improved in some areas. Parts of Kenya and Somalia are now more defensible thanks to outside assistance, including funds, training, and drone surveillance. However, these results are still generally reversible, contingent, and fragile. The fundamental causes of conflict, such as identity-based marginalisation, state fragility, discriminatory governance, and economic precarity, are not only ignored but, in certain situations, made worse by the very instruments used to repress them.

The region's counterterrorism operations have been shaped more by urgency than by depth. The goal of responses is to rapidly eradicate threats rather than alter the conditions that allow them to proliferate. Mistrust hinders intelligence sharing, international operations are frequently carried out in silos, and diplomatic attempts are

unable to keep up with the complexity of the situation on the ground. There is fragmentation rather than integration. Local ownership is replaced by dependency.

Most importantly, this chapter exposes a deficiency in strategic creativity. In the military, intelligence, and diplomatic spheres, the prevalent view is that Al-Shabaab is a passing phenomenon, an insurgency that can be put down by attrition. However, Al-Shabaab has developed into something much more complicated: a political player, a replacement for the government, and in some places, a perceived substitute for failing or corrupt state institutions. Current tactics are ineffective not because they lack resources or are passive, but rather because they continue to deny that the battlefield is a political, psychological, and institutional arena as well as a physical one.

Counterterrorism in Kenya has become part of a larger internal control system that is frequently too similar to authoritarian policing and racial profiling techniques. Because of Somalia's dependence on foreign support, the establishment of responsible indigenous institutions has been impeded, and numerous reform initiatives have been hijacked by powerful individuals who profit from ongoing instability. Communities are left manoeuvring between security troops and rebels in the meantime, with no reliable or safe actor to turn to. Without legitimacy, even the most sophisticated security system will find it difficult for it to bring forth enduring peace.

This chapter leaves us with one main outcome: counterterrorism in Somalia and Kenya is trapped in a perilous cycle. Operational responses are still outpacing political solutions, and external actors continue to control agendas that need local legitimacy to be successful. Until this is changed – until government, not just weapons, is used to combat violence – the region will continue to experience reactive crisis management instead of long-term change.

This establishes the setting for the following chapter, which will examine how counterterrorism might be rethought, not only reorganised, with a focus on political inclusion, regional sovereignty, and grassroots resilience as the cornerstones of long-term security in the Horn of Africa.

Chapter 3

THE VIOLENCE OF STABILITY – Rethinking Security as a Political Practice

For over a decade, stability has been the guiding principle underpinning counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa. In both Kenya and Somalia, the use of drone missile strikes, sharing of sensitive information, external military training, and joint cross-border operations have been framed as the preferred response towards the advancement of the threat Al-Shabaab poses. However, the highly sought-after stability in this region has come at a price. For one, it does not dismantle the structural conditions that allow insurgency to fester. Additionally, it reinforces systems where violence is carried out under the guise of peace, and sovereignty is heavily dependent on compliance in a global security framework.

Starting from an imperative premise, this chapter argues that the current counterterrorism paradigm has prevented a truly transformative peace by prioritizing tactical effectiveness over political inclusion. The so-called violence of stability is sheltered not just on the battlefield, but now uninhibited by the erosion of democratic tolerance, the rise of authoritarianism, the collapse of civic space, and the privatization of sovereign state powers entrusted to other countries. In this context, stability is envisioned as a self-reinforcing, value-free, technocratic illusion sustained through militarization, donor dependence, with no political reasoning or regional self-determination considered.

The historical background and operational tactics of the Kenya-Somalia counterterrorism nexus have been examined in Chapters 1 and 2, but this chapter extends the approach to analysis. The primary issue changes from what measures are being implemented to what political system is being formed and for whom. The intention is not to forego the requirement of security, but to consider security as a political issue. Security is reference-dependent. It always carries a certain burden of disposition, ideology, exclusivity, as well as power relations. And those paradigms are often crafted in Washington, Brussels, Ankara, and Doha, but rarely in Mogadishu, Nairobi, or Garissa.

Citizen participation is needed for sustainable security. This participation must occur along with the construction of a framework of regional power politics, governance, and inclusive institutions. Security, this chapter contends, is not something that can be achieved through militarized strategies or overt displays of authority. It cannot be merely

given but instead must emerge from collaboration with the people. To build this case slowly, it is necessary to shift focus to the paradox within dominant structures: how counter-terrorism efforts designed to combat fragility actually sustain it, and how externally imposed intervention simultaneously invokes and undermines sovereignty, and how Al-Shabaab, in some contexts, occupies the governance void left by the retreating state. These issues extend far beyond the scope of Somalia and Kenya. They capture the attention of a more complex problem facing ex-colonial countries dealing with a world that has multiple centres of power, where new allegiances like China, Turkey, and Gulf countries provide alternatives to Western dominance, but also fail to address underlying dependence. Within this framework, changing notions of security as a political pursuit involves redefining models of cooperation that are free from militarised paternalism and authoritarian centralism. It entails asking: do regional institutions provide effective collective security without employing dominant frameworks? Is it possible to deal with violent insurgencies without using inherently exclusionary state violence? What does a liberally conceptualized, locally defined peace and security framework truly involve?

Mapping Al-Shabaab's military defeat is not the objective of this chapter. Instead, it seeks to address the problem that enables this insurgency and proposes an alternative political order that does not depend on the constant stability of violence for perpetual security to exist.

3.1 Security Is Not Sovereignty

In modern counterterrorism conversation, the exercise or assertion of security has been confused with the exercise of sovereignty. The complexity is most apparent in the Horn of Africa, where Kenya and Somalia have increasingly associated political authority with security capability. This alignment is more fragile than resilient. Security may mitigate some indications of disorder, but, it fails to confront the more fundamental inquiries regarding who holds power, in whose name authority is exercised, and with what legitimacy. Sovereignty is defined not by the capacity for conflict but by the authority to govern.

The lack of a central authority in Somalia has resulted in a power vacuum, prompting several entities to either assert or contest sovereignty, including federal

governments, clan warlords, proxy financiers, AMISOM/ATMIS forces, and Al Shabaab. The international legitimization of the allegedly sovereign federal government is on the rise; nevertheless, in practice, it resembles a passive recipient rather than a provider of sovereignty⁸⁶. Benevolent international interventions, albeit appearing supportive, have effectively supplanted sovereign responsibilities such as border security, salary disbursement, and the establishment of strategic operational directives. In this regard, the government's reliance on foreign entities, intelligence agencies, and civilian contractors signifies weakness rather than strength.

The principle of conditionality clearly influences the development of sovereignty. Security assistance is seldom independent of benefits; it is accompanied by expectations, priorities, and strategic alignments. The Somali state is evaluated not by the responsiveness of its inhabitants, but by its collaborations as a partner. Achievements are assessed via intelligence communication, army deployment, or compliance with donor preferences. Somalia increasingly presents a paradox: the greater the influence of foreign assistance, the lesser its sovereignty becomes.

Kenya presents a distinct, although equally illuminating, scenario. Kenya has enhanced its state infrastructure with more sophisticated structures, attempting to establish itself as a regional force and a preferred counter-terrorism ally. However, this position entailed the reconfiguration of their internal governance to meet transnational security requirements. The securitization of the Somali borders, particularly in Garissa, Mandera, and Wajir counties, has established a framework that perceives entire regions not as political communities but as areas of suspicion. Military patrols, curfews, extensive surveillance, and police enforcement have become routine. Counterterrorism serves as the rationale for a style of governance that is singular rather than constitutional⁸⁷. This transition has adversely affected Kenya's sovereignty by increasing dependence on foreign intelligence and surveillance services, such as US fusion centre assistance and EU-funded border monitoring initiatives.

Concurrently, it fosters a domestic perspective that views the political contract between the state and citizen through a lens of security pragmatism: determining who

⁸⁶ Gamal Gasim, *The Dangerous Chipping Away of Somalia's Sovereignty*, Arab Center Washington DC, January 15, 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-dangerous-chipping-away-of-somalias-sovereignty/>

⁸⁷ Cindy Horst, "Whose Security? Somali Refugees, Host Communities & Politics in Kenya," *Africa Today* 57, no. 4 (2011): 3–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.57.4.3?seq=1>

merits protection, who constitutes a threat, and who may be sacrificed for national interests. The danger lies in sovereignty being redefined away from popular legitimacy, transforming instead into the state's ability to exert power on behalf of others.

Moreover, both Kenya and Somalia have increasingly invoked claims of sovereignty to justify their authoritarian practices. In Somalia, external interference is held accountable for criticism, despite these entities being the state's essential support. In Kenya, sovereignty is invoked to obstruct international examination of chronic human rights abuses, even when these abuses result from coordinated security operations. This is where sovereignty is only a linguistic embellishment that state officials employ ineffectually. Sovereignty is relinquished from the populace through governmental legitimacy and rarely by counter-constitutional authority, undermining authentic democratic agency.

The distinction between security and sovereignty is significant. It determines whether nations are developing coercive power or political legitimacy, whether borders serve as sanctuaries or sites of oppression, and whether diplomatic ties promote autonomy or reinforce reliance. This approach, viewing sovereignty as an inherent consequence of security, severely undermines the authority it seeks to protect.

A sovereign state can prioritize internally, allocate resources fairly, and form alliances on its own terms, rather than being constrained by challenged legitimacy supported by inflexible security frameworks. A comprehensive strategy for establishing lasting peace and effective administration in the Horn of Africa necessitates recovering sovereignty not merely as a security measure, but as a geopolitical imperative. This entails a transition not only towards counterterrorism but also towards the establishment of organizations proficient in conflict mediation, interest aggregation, and offering alternatives to violent mobilization. In the absence of this, the entire region risks being caught in a cyclical pattern of seeming sovereignty devoid of authentic implementation, where the semblance of authority supplants true governance.

3.2 The Political Economy of Permanent Insecurity

The evolving counterterrorism landscape in East Africa shows that it has transformed into a self-sustaining political economy, characterized less by crisis reaction

and more by the management of systemic insecurity, aiming for a perpetual security. The persistence of Al-Shabaab violence signifies, rather than a strategic failure, a facilitation of a security 'given' system that distributes resources, legitimizes elite governance, and perpetuates global power dynamics. This fabricated reality is ironically based on the premise that Al Shabaab serves as a crucial antagonist while also legitimizing the system's existence. This undermines the ethics that question whether the fight against terrorism is one where legitimate threats significantly shape its objectives.

The fundamental premise of the rationale presented is a security aid framework that includes training initiatives, equipment transfers, collaborative operations, and intelligence exchange. Both Kenya and Somalia self-identify as essential allies in the global fight on terror, thereby securing billions in financial assistance and favourable political relations. In Somalia, the federal government's survival at times depended on aid relief obtained through counterterrorism programs. The Somali National Army still relies heavily on support from the African Union mission (ATMIS) to operate⁸⁸. At the same time, most international organisations now only deal with Somalia through donor-funded programmes that aim to reform its security forces. These aid programmes have become the main way outsiders engage with the Somali state. Kenya's participation in the counter-terrorism coalition has strengthened its regional power and garnered diplomatic and financial assistance from the US and EU. The dependencies are not solely institutional; they also contain political dimensions. Where there is a threat, there is also assistance.

The rise of security ministries, the inviolability of military expenditure, and the frequent imposition of states of emergency and laws, occur despite the presence of inadequate infrastructure. In this setting, Al-Shabaab's presence is operationally beneficial, though not ideologically. A parallel economy is recognized, comprising unregulated military affiliates, private consulting firms, and the UN, which increasingly participates in training for the evolving nature of warfare, to transform military strategies over decades, while discontinuing ineffective methods and adopting enhancements⁸⁹. All are encompassed inside the confines of the defender's rationale,

⁸⁸ Caleb Weiss, *The Somali National Army Versus al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment*, CTC Sentinel, February 2024, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-somali-national-army-versus-al-shabaab-a-net-assessment/>

⁸⁹ United Nations Development Programme, *Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Security Sector Governance (SSG)*, updated regularly, <https://www.undp.org/somalia/projects/security-sector-reform-ssr-and-security-sector-governance-ssg>

which necessitates modification to recognize the effects: the quantity of workshops conducted, training sessions, enhancements, and benefits.

However, the larger failings of the entire system, albeit not fully apparent, are obscured, as systemic and surgical methods are deliberately overlooked in operational practices. They achieved their aims by prioritizing management over addressing violence in adoption, while dismissing the initiation of removal techniques. Al-Shabaab adapts and disperses over time. Security apprehensions in Kenya have justified increased executive power, military oversight in civilian regions, and the expansion of monitoring mechanisms.

Critics have characterized these practices as either simplistic or treacherous, thus placing civil society in a precarious situation. The rhetoric of emergency subordinates democratic accountability across several situations under the guise of terrorism. A profoundly complex and nearly conflicting principle emerges. A condition in which violence is transformed into a sociological commodity, and the continuation of insurgency is embedded inside the institutions designed to eradicate it. It does not need the occurrence of battle but offers the possibility for it. The intersection of political and economic systems renders dispute resolution unfavourable. A permanent state of emergency can be utilized as a form of governance: clear, financially viable, and diplomatically indisputable. This is not intended to propose a conspiracy or to exempt the evident threat posed by Al-Shabaab. The counterterrorism framework is devoid of political neutrality. Power, capital, and attention are distributed to favour elite interests, exacerbating public dissatisfaction.

The result is a diminishment of sovereignty, with decisions arising not from national interests but from donor expectations. Public institutions are established to safeguard citizens, not to acquire financial resources. Altering an institution will not resolve this issue, as other measures will be necessary to deconstruct such reasoning. A comprehensive reassessment of security is necessary: what are its objectives, and who are its target beneficiaries? The technocratic approach to counterterrorism, lacking democratic legitimacy and a framework of political justice, ensures that the most militant faction of Somalia's government will depict the ongoing conflict with Al Shabaab as an excessive display of violence, rather than as violence that is transformative or

reconfiguring. Achieving enduring peace necessitates a somewhat more onerous acknowledgment: the eagerness to create a system that is independent of warfare.

3.3 From Terrorist to Actor – Al-Shabaab as a Political Interlocutor

After years of activity, Al-Shabaab can be seen not merely as an enemy to be defeated, but as a political entity necessary for deeper examination. The group has perpetrated tremendous violence, enforced a harsh ideology onto society, and has taken every measure to undermine efforts for state democracy in Somalia. The persistence of Al-Shabaab, despite years of military operations, targeted assassinations, and international counter-terrorism assistance, is puzzling. Ultimately, there is no evidence indicating that force has effectively displaced the group. The persistence of this entity may be attributed not only to its violence but also to its exploitation of political vacuums.

Al-Shabaab functions effectively in the absence of governance. It imposes taxes in regions where all public services have fallen apart. In jurisdictions where the judicial system is profoundly corrupt and/or disjointed, it regulates itself through stringent “laws.” In contexts where political authorities are viewed as ineffective or self-interested, Al-Shabaab assumes a more tyrannical role, exerting dominance. The Entity's ability to establish extreme order in highly lawless regions is strategically effective. This is profoundly strategic, enabling the group to assert authority while negligently managing the environment that had inadequate governance. It must be recognized that its primary strength significantly arises from the lack of indisputable competing elements⁹⁰.

If one perceives the group solely as a terrorist organization to be eradicated as a harmful influence on mankind, one neglects the socio-political context that fosters its emergence. It is one matter to assert that certain individuals opt to endorse Al-Shabaab, or at the very least, acquiesce to its presence. In this instance, the blame lies not with jihadism but rather with the total lack of an effective state. This indicates that Al-Shabaab functions not just as a tyrant of Somali sovereignty, a disturbing concept, but also as a deconstructive reflection of it. What implications might arise from regarding Al-Shabaab as a political rival, acknowledging them as a political equal while repudiating their

⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement*

ideology? We contend that, at a minimum, their defeat must extend beyond mere military action.

Interestingly, some have proposed the potential for interaction with stipulations. It is more precisely characterized as a discussion with the peripheries of leadership rather than negotiation with leadership itself. This comprises local recruitment channels and political agreements that provide foundational support. This approach necessitates exceptional political daring, particularly regarding the legitimization of extremism⁹¹. However, their alternative, the perpetual cycle of military operations characterized by the seizure and recapture of territory, is equally, if not more, futile and hazardous. The lower tiers of Al-Shabaab exhibit a greater degree of internal variability, which is crucial for analysing the group's internal divisions.

To regard the group as a homogeneous entity without conflict is to forfeit the potential to leverage fragmentation opportunities: the gradual dissemination of political and psychological power that could, in a distant future, render demobilization more feasible than annihilation. However, not all dilemmas are thus ambiguously stated. What is a responsible discourse on terror-enabling engagement? What of the victims' betrayal? It is unnecessary to underscore that no answers are currently available. Both sides persist in disregarding these factors, yet remain without a favourable resolution to the conflict. Governments are exploiting these uncertainties and issues to maintain a politically stimulating military posture without a clear objective, which is where the peril lies.

There exists a fundamental distinction between surrendering and engaging in a reasoned dialogue with the opposition. This discussion acknowledges that the insurgency, seemingly stemming from sheer violence, reflects deeper, more significant political issues. Contemplating the future beyond Al-Shabaab does not imply granting them the chance to engage in dialogues. Instead, it signifies the creation of a table sufficiently sturdy that no individual is motivated to place themselves outside of it while wielding a weapon. It signifies the reconfiguration of power and government in Somalia and Kenya, an architecture that derives its legitimacy from authentic accountability, participation, and representation rather than external financial or military support. Unless that political

⁹¹ Idil Osman, *Engaging Al-Shabaab in Somalia: Military Failures and the Merits of Dialogue*, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, November 2023, <https://mecouncil.org/publication/engaging-al-shabaab-in-somalia-military-failures-and-the-merits-of-dialogue/>

framework is restructured, the conditions enabling Al-Shabaab's prominence will endure. Consequently, violence will persist.

3.4 Recalibrating External Engagement

The geopolitical environment of East Africa is changing since the growing influence of non-Western countries such as China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. Each of these states has its own targets, and they are influencing the breadth of foreign engagement in the Horn. This evolution is resulting in a more multipolar environment, but not necessarily more sovereign.

In Somalia and Kenya, these players are not silent parties. China's substantial infrastructure expenditure, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, has resulted in significant port, railway, and highway building, creating a debt cost. The infrastructure debt dilemma is vividly demonstrated by Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, which was greatly sponsored by Chinese loans: the railway's construction comes with strained finances and a complete set of political leverage paid to Beijing⁹².

Concurrently, Turkey and the UAE have funded opposing political forces while investing in ports, military bases, and religious institutions, bringing their geopolitical rivalry on Somali territory. Turkey's presence in Mogadishu, that has an embassy and a military training academy, responds to Somalia's central government. However, such activity is countered by the UAE's participation with autonomous territories such as Puntland and Somaliland, which exacerbates federal tensions and complicates efforts to achieve a coherent national security strategy⁹³.

These foreign rivalries have a direct impact on security. Foreign actors risk encouraging division rather than unity by backing different and opposite power centers in Somalia. This division undermines counterterrorism operations and creates political vacuums that Al-Shabaab might exploit. Al-Shabaab has sometimes portrayed itself as a

⁹² Katherine P. Kallergis, *Africa and the Gulf Are Growing Closer. Will It Increase Global Tensions?*, Council on Foreign Relations, April 5, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/africa-and-gulf-are-growing-closer-will-it-increase-global-tensions>

⁹³ Cinzia Bianco, *Diversification Nations: The Gulf Way to Engage With Africa*, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/diversification-nations-the-gulf-way-to-engage-with-africa/>

nationalist response to foreign involvement, recruiting those disillusioned by exterior influence through sovereign and religious authenticity. In Somalia and Kenya, Al-Shabaab thrives in areas where the state is absent or believed to be undermined by foreign powers⁹⁴.

These foreign rivalries have a direct impact on security. Foreign actors risk encouraging division rather than unity by backing different and opposite power centers in Somalia. This division undermines counterterrorism operations and creates political vacuums that Al-Shabaab might exploit. Al-Shabaab has sometimes portrayed itself as a nationalist response to foreign involvement, recruiting those disillusioned by exterior influence through sovereign and religious authenticity. In Somalia and Kenya, Al-Shabaab thrives in areas where the state is absent or believed to be undermined by foreign powers.

The effects of Qatar's presence may be subdued, but they are nonetheless there. Qatar's attempts at dispute resolution, even if limited, continue to contribute to the Gulf rivalry that greatly influences Somali politics. The danger is that Somalia becomes less an object of international diplomacy and more a platform for geopolitical contests, where opposing forces clash at the expense of domestic integration, unity, and security capacity⁹⁵.

This multipolar shift presents both opportunities and risks for Kenya. Increased access to non-Western partners strengthens Nairobi's position in comparison to conventional funders, but it also introduces new disadvantages. Kenya's reliance on Gulf security relationships and Chinese-sponsored infrastructure finance contradicts conflicting expectations, upsetting the country's long-term strategic strategy. The region's failure to offer a unified security policy, along with cross-border militant activity, has rendered the Kenya-Somalia border very unsafe and violent. What emerges is an image of strategic uncertainty. More actors imply more opportunities, but also increased complexity, fragmentation, and policy incoherence.

East African states have the task of transitioning from passive consumers of foreign-sponsored agendas to active shapers of the regional order. These initiatives will

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement*

⁹⁵ Harun Maruf, *Somalia Tries to Keep Rival Gulf States at Bay*, VOA News, September 23, 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_somalia-tries-keep-rival-gulf-states-bay/6179486.html

include building institutional capacity, developing regional synergies through IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), and implementing a more balanced diplomatic engagement model that promotes equilibrium over subservience. Somalia and Kenya risk substituting one type of dependency for another in the absence of strategic diversity, the ability to internally absorb, deflect, and reject external influences. This circumstance also reduces Somalia's and Kenya's ability to exercise their influence. If external actors continue to build the security scene around the pursuit of control rather than order, the war against Al-Shabaab will remain fractured, and illusions of sovereignty will persist.

3.5 Imagining Regional Sovereignty: Collective Security

Discussing regional sovereignty in the Horn of Africa today poses an interesting riddle. The concept of sovereignty is the normative language of diplomacy: it is mentioned in speeches, enshrined in constitutions, and advocated in principle. It is, however, constantly damaged by the existence of foreign military bases, donor-driven governance, and transnational terrorist networks, all of which limit East African countries' independence. In this situation, the argument is not for isolation from the rest of the world, but for a new type of sovereignty based on collective regional capability rather than nostalgia or retreat into the past.

The proposal is simple: security must shift from something done to a territory to something created by it. One must picture a future in which Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Djibouti not only work together to resolve crises but also collaborate to construct a shared strategic zone. It would imply a shift in investment in regional institutions as operational entities rather than simple diplomatic façade: the Horn of Africa Security Council, a peacekeeping corps on standby rotation, and political risk assessment synergies based on regional knowledge. This outcome is possible. It strengthens Africa's emerging capabilities for such a change, particularly through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and its substructures, such as the Continental Early Warning System and the African Standby Force, where the former monitors and analyses potential conflicts to enable early responses, while the latter is a multidisciplinary rapid deployment force designed to intervene in crises across the continent.

Political will is difficult to mobilize because of existing inequities, in which larger dominion powers preside over regional formations that smaller states regard with distrust. However, the alternative is already visible: a barrage of controlled operations commanded by foreigners, donor fatigue, and indigenous insurgents adapting to enforced security templates. According to the International Crisis Group, their counterterrorism operations in Somalia, like many other externally driven operations, are the result of operational failure as well as the absence of a working political consensus on fundamental issues, a lack of what peace should be⁹⁶.

However, a non-hegemonic collective security model would require significant changes. It cannot replicate Western and Gulf initiatives in the region while sticking to the control logics used. Instead, a structure must be established that preserves the ideals of mutual acknowledgment, burden sharing, and political inclusion. For example, instead of hosting foreign bases for external powers to utilize, the region may be assigned the task of developing shared standards for access, coordination, and accountability, which would assist in balancing strategic partnership without fragmentation. Furthermore, rather than defining security phenomena solely in military terms, it might aid in displacement and environmental risk, which are early warning mechanisms that occur directly when insecurity begins, whereas a militarized approach does not.

This adjustment will be especially advantageous for Somalia and Kenya. For Somalia, this method provides a way out of dependency, as the restoration of security organs is a responsibility carried by the entire region affected by African dynamics. For Kenya, it presents an opportunity to increase regional influence while preventing the replication of the same inequities that foreign investors, such as the United States, exploit in their sponsorships. For both, it shifts the Al-Shabaab paradigm: they can consider the type of state and region that must be established to prevent the next Al-Shabaab from emerging.

The Horn of Africa lacks capacity. Its strengths are viewed as weaknesses. One may see an Africa in which African-based research institutes define regional security policy, migration is viewed as a common challenge, and competition for external sponsorship is replaced by neighbourly diplomacy. These are not unrealistic, but rather unmade political decisions.

⁹⁶ International Crisis Group, *Considering Political Engagement*

According to Alex de Waal, “*Security is not the elimination of all risks, but the management of political space in which different actors can live together*”⁹⁷. A regional autonomy initiative based on this principle would not require utopia, but only foresight, perseverance, and unity.

3.6 Security Is a Public Good

Security in the Horn of Africa is far too often a privilege, centralized and militarized, and unevenly distributed across political and geographic lines. It is a logic that views safety as a commodity to be bargained over, granted or offered to some and denied to others, but never universal. Security, if it is to imply more than the ability to coerce, must be viewed as a public good: non-excludable, indivisible, and essential to legitimate governance.

When security is allocated for elites and urban cores and peripheral masses are neglected or subjected to hyper-security, the region's political foundations are destroyed. In regions like Jubaland and Kenya's Garissa County, the lack of effective state protection allows for informal government by the public, exactly like Al-Shabaab. Insecurity serves as both an exclusionary symptom and a structural feature. Security becomes meaningful only when it is perceived as a universal entitlement. Incomplete security promotes the disparities that undermine peace⁹⁸. Reconceptualizing security as a public good leads to a greater respect for what promotes safety. It is more than just the absence of violence; it also includes justice, services, accountability, and a sense of belonging.

While examining Somalia's peace-building efforts, it emerges that AMISOM's military achievements were commonly misinterpreted as long-term stability due to a severe lack of local civilian engagement and legitimacy⁹⁹. In the absence of a judicial

⁹⁷ Alex de Waal, *African Political Thought: Critical Perspectives and Prospects for the Future* (London: Zed Books, 2018)

⁹⁸ Amina Mama, “Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Security in Africa,” *Feminist Africa*, no. 22 (2018), https://www.agi.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/429/feminist_africa_journals/archive/22/fa_22_feature_1.pdf

⁹⁹ Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/fighting-for-peace-in-somalia-9780198858624>

system, untrustworthy administration, and elite-captured parliamentary democracy, any structure claiming to provide security is excruciatingly fragile and externally mandated.

This perception still has regional implications. A communal right implies that everyone must politically accept the responsibility for guaranteeing security. Regional entities such as IGAD and the AU's Peace and Security Council have the mandate to respond to violence, even if its scope should extend beyond military cooperation. The long-term vision for African peacebuilding is based on advancing localized, personalized approaches to constructing sociologically legitimate institutions that not only preserve but also embody genuine, rooted stability¹⁰⁰. In this case, security is not only defended, but also offered.

Public goods benefit society as a whole, hence, their availability, including security, should not be determined by proximity to government facilities. Security must be recognized as a basic urban utility, similar to water and fresh air. Furthermore, security must encompass relocation, starvation, disenfranchisement, and corruption. It turns the focus away from who can be protected and toward how we ensure no one goes unprotected, resulting in a more horizontal care strategy. Security becomes just as important as intelligence capabilities. Instead of simply decreasing risks, it seeks to promote peace, changing a fearful existence into one in which society can live openly.

3.7 The End of Counterterrorism, or the Beginning of Politics?

East Africa's counterterrorism efforts go beyond a simple set of policies or military strategies. It's a worldview. It sees instability as a sickness, insurgents as its symptoms, and the state as both doctor and blade. It justifies urgency, secrecy, and the suspension of normal politics as a permanent emergency. This is increasingly becoming a ruling strategy, rather than a reaction to violence, and it appears to be running out of steam.

Along the Kenya-Somalia border, a familiar cycle plays out: Al-Shabaab loses territory, regroups, and strikes again. Civilians caught in the crossfire face governmental intervention not in the form of services or justice, but in the form of monitoring, raids,

¹⁰⁰ Funmi Olonisakin, *Peacebuilding in Africa: Localising the Liberal Peace* (London: Routledge, 2019), <https://www.routledge.com/Peacebuilding-in-Africa-Localising-the-Liberal-Peace/Olonisakin/p/book/9781138744476>

and roadblocks. Cooperating on intelligence targets produces strategic results, but it ignores or bypasses trust and local knowledge. Military operations across the border impede rebel supply channels while also exacerbating wounded nationalist sentiment and supporting Al-Shabaab's foreign occupation propaganda. International funders may still be directing their resources toward this region, but their emphasis is on short-term initiatives that provide rapid results rather than long-term transformation.

After some time, this rhythm becomes clear. What remains is violence as an issue, rather than violence itself. Counterterrorism may chase dangers across deserts and city streets, but it cannot politically solve them, no matter where they originate. It fails to restore legitimacy, civic trust, and optimism to the young of Kismayo and Mandera. Counterterrorism never aimed to attain these kinds of objectives.

The counterterrorism rationale in this case tends to increase the state's decision to first identify the region as a terror suspect before engaging politically with it. This has prompted the region's governments to prioritize eavesdropping technologies over schools, a public judicial system, or elite military units dedicated to violence prevention. This also implies that dissent, migration, and informal government are viewed largely through suspicious lenses rather than patterns of complexity. As a result, society itself is hollowed out, rather than just securitized.

To picture a society after counterterrorism does not mean ignoring the existence of violence. We must consider whether we can end violence without sustaining the fundamental mentality. This strategy requires viewing the insurgency not only as a military challenge, but also as a political one. In areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, the group exploits complaints about corruption, exclusion, and clan marginalization while establishing a repressive system in which the state can only make promises. As a result, it cannot be defeated by only weaponry.

We must undermine it in the exact arena where it claims to exist: authority, fairness, and responsiveness. That area is political, and regaining it will need more than just counterterrorism reforms. It must be completely removed as the key narrative framing concern for state legitimacy and regional strategy, to be replaced by a new form of politics: the painstaking, difficult process of covering inclusion, redistributing dignity, and reviving sovereignty from the ground up. A politics that views borderlands as

dynamic communities rather than hostile areas, and regional collaboration that is not forced by donor designs but welcomed as a tribute to mutual vision and shared destinies.

Such an approach does not imply disbanding the state. It requires an expansion, horizontally, relationally, and lawfully. Security institutions will remain necessary, but they must be part of larger arrangements that view citizens as political persons rather than naive, instruments, or tools. The state must stop acting sovereign for foreign diplomacy purposes and instead exercise it for the benefit of its citizens. While attaining these objectives will require tremendous work, there is yet room for advancement.

Local peace talks in south-central Somalia, unofficial border trade between pastoralist groups, youth movements resisting criminalization in cities such as Nairobi—these stories may lack documented evidence, but they symbolize something far larger. They represent the subtle new beginnings of a different order, one in which protection is viewed as a right rather than a privilege, violence is never tolerated, and conflict has no place in politics and is the only way it can be resolved. Ending a counterterrorism approach does not mean the end of security. This marks the beginning of a deeper, more honest, and messier political existence in East Africa, in which nations create conditions that redefine the sensitivity of dangers rather than simply managing them.

Conclusion

The transformation of al-Shabaab from a domestic insurgency to a multinational player has put into question long-held beliefs about the boundaries between security and politics. In East Africa, notably in Kenya and Somalia, counterterrorism has become the defining logic of governance, diplomacy, and regional cooperation. This thesis examined how sharing intelligence and conducting military operations across borders have attempted to impede Al-Shabaab's activities, demonstrating both what these countries can do and the fundamental limitations of their approach. While collaboration between Somalia and Kenya has yielded some tactical successes, the findings show that these advantages are ultimately limited by political fragmentation, institutional asymmetry, and external dependency. What is observed is that counterterrorism is not a clear or revolutionary concept, but rather a survival strategy: flexible, deeply rooted, and more divorced from the political solutions it was intended to promote.

The key point presented here is that elevating counterterrorism from an interim instrument to a governing philosophy risks replacing politics itself. Kenya-Somalia security cooperation is determined not only by regional threats but also by underlying contradictions stemming from colonial legacies, uneven sovereignty, and conflicting state-building programs. These paradoxes are exacerbated by the presence of international actors, whose financing, training, and diplomatic influence have established a system of external responsibility that frequently trumps local legitimacy. In this framework, intelligence sharing becomes a compliance tool rather than a transformational one; military interventions serve to manage threat rather than resolve it; and diplomatic engagement is guided more by donor expectations than national interests. The thesis contends that such a model cannot provide long-term security because it does not address the political vacuums that Al-Shabaab continues to exploit.

Contemporary counterterrorism in East Africa functions in an environment characterized by a mix of state presence and absence. In cities, monitoring systems, collaborative task groups, and diplomatic forums shape the narrative of progress. However, in the hinterlands, where borders converge and governance is improvised, security remains performative. Communities are frequently governed by suspicion rather than service, and the distinction between policing and control gets blurred. Al-Shabaab's

survival is owing not only to tactical agility but also to its ability to integrate itself into these liminal spaces and provide a perverted sort of order when state legitimacy is weak or absent. In this way, the organization is not atypical; instead, it reflects unresolved political issues that continue to afflict postcolonial governance arrangements.

In this context, sovereignty takes on a conditional meaning. People occasionally use it, project it through military operations, or execute it in international venues, but it is rarely grounded in the daily realities of administration. The argument demonstrates that Somalia's federal government is still structurally dependent on external actors, whereas Kenya's regional role has grown into one of a gatekeeper between African security and global interests. These perspectives are neither wholly independent nor entirely imposed; rather, they reflect a hybrid kind of sovereignty characterized by alignment, visibility, and strategic usefulness. However, such sovereignty is brittle. It is not based on public legitimacy or institutional cohesiveness, but on the ability to perform security within externally specified contexts. When security becomes finances, politics is neglected. When politics are put aside, insurgency adapts not only militarily, but also ideologically, symbolically, and socially.

The disorder is not limited to Kenya or Somalia. It mirrors a larger trend in international security governance, in which the vocabulary of counterterrorism has replaced the language of political discussion. Counterterrorism provides a framework that looks to guarantee order while avoiding the pitfalls of pluralism in regions marked by historical marginalization and inadequate institutional capacity. But this promise is illusory. It perpetuates cycles of dependency, distorts state goals, and normalizes emergency as a permanent aspect of government. As this theory has argued, establishing counterterrorism as the dominant concept does not eradicate violence, but rather organizes it. It establishes the norms within which violence is identified, legitimized, and addressed, while disguising the political and economic institutions that cause insecurity in the first place.

To look forward, therefore, is to question whether counterterrorism can be usefully repositioned, rather than how it might be improved. This repositioning begins with an epistemological shift: security as construction rather than reaction. We must replace the belief that politics precedes violence with the recognition that political activity frequently results in violence. Rebuilding this basis entails more than just reforming state

security agencies. It necessitates a rethinking of the social contract: a commitment to inclusiveness, representation, and civic infrastructure as preconditions for peace, not as its aftermath. The best long-lasting security is derived from legitimacy, not force; from trust, not exceptionalism.

This is especially critical in an area where the distinction between domestic and international governance is becoming increasingly blurred. The engagement of Gulf states, Turkey, China, and Western contributors has resulted in multipolarity, which presents both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, regional nations can broaden their partnerships, minimizing reliance on a single player. On the other hand, they risk becoming competitive arenas in which external influence exacerbates internal differences and undermines coherent regional policymaking. Strategic plurality must consequently be accompanied by institutional sovereignty: the power to negotiate, balance, and occasionally resist. It calls for regional frameworks that encourage collaboration not only during times of crisis, but also in the daily architecture of governance. Initiatives like the African Peace and Security Architecture can provide a starting point, but only if they are viewed as expressions of African agency rather as donor tools.

This reorientation is based on a distinct perspective of what security is used for. Security must be recast as a public good: indivisible, participative, and focused on collective dignity. It must be founded on the provision of services, dispute resolution, and recognition of political subjectivity. When communities are treated as threats, they are more susceptible to the appeal of insurgency. When governed as citizens, they become peacemakers. This is not a rhetorical shift. It implies a complete rethinking of how boundaries are enforced, intelligence is exchanged, and legitimacy is generated. It also entails a re-evaluation of what constitutes political expertise, with a focus on local knowledge, lived experience, and democratic imagination.

None of this negates the ongoing threat posed by Al-Shabaab. The group's potential for violence, adaptability, and ideological persistence continues to pose significant obstacles. However, the response must be proportionate not just to the threat's shape, but also to its function. Al-Shabaab exists in part because it addresses, although cynically, a number of unmet needs: security, justice, and identity. Counterterrorism that ignores these prerequisites may momentarily reduce violence, but it will not eliminate it.

Only politics can accomplish this. Politics should be regarded not as elite competition or state consolidation, but as an ongoing negotiation over power allocation, grievance resolution, and future vision.

Finally, it is worth considering what it means to exit the paradigm of permanent counterterrorism. This does not imply retiring from the field of security, but rather broadening its definition. It entails asking what types of communities are being constructed in the name of safety. It entails acknowledging that fear cannot be the cornerstone of order. And, most importantly, it requires a willingness to trust that politics, as imperfect, sluggish, and contested as it can be, is a more long-lasting solution to violence than the illusion of control.

Mahmood Mamdani, writing on the political imperfections of the global war on terror, provides a concise insight that embodies the heart of this thesis: “The language of security is the language of rule. Whoever defines the threat also defines the enemy. The alternative is not to securitize everything but to politicize what has been depoliticized”¹⁰¹. This alternative is neither easy nor certain. But it's vital. For only by returning to politics, not performance politics, but engagement politics, will the region be able to move beyond perpetual emergency and toward something more akin to peace.

¹⁰¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2009)

Bibliography

Ahmed, Ismail I., and Reginald Herbold Green. "The Heritage of War and State Collapse in Somalia and Somaliland: Local-Level Effects, External Interventions and Reconstruction." *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 113–27.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993185>

Airwars. Civilian Casualty Claims: US Forces in Somalia. Updated regularly.

<https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/?belligerent=us-forces&country=somalia>

Al Jazeera. Six Personnel Killed in Attack on Somali Border: Kenyan Police. March 23, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/23/six-personnel-killed-in-attack-on-somali-border-kenyan-police>

Amnesty International. 'We Live in Perpetual Fear': Violations and Abuses of Freedom of Expression under the Transitional Government. AFR 32/2008/2015, 2015.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr32/2008/2015/en/>

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). What's Next for the Fight Against al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia? September 4, 2024.

<https://acleddata.com/2024/09/04/whats-next-for-the-fight-against-al-shabaab-in-kenya-and-somalia-august-2024/>

Bahadur, Jay, Ken Menkhaus, and Benjamin Petrini. Navigating Trade Controls in Somalia: The Illicit Economy in Legal Markets. Rift Valley Institute, 2021.

<https://riftvalley.net/publication/navigating-trade-controls/>

Bianco, Cinzia. Diversification Nations: The Gulf Way to Engage With Africa.

European Council on Foreign Relations. July 2023.

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/diversification-nations-the-gulf-way-to-engage-with-africa/>

Brynildsen, Johannes. Containment or Contagion? A Summary of U.S. Strategy toward Somalia since 2001. FOI Memo 5742. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency,

2016.

https://www.foi.se/download/18.7fd35d7f166c56ebe0bbdf9/1542369068783/Containment-or-Contagion_FOI-Memo-5742.pdf

Carrier, Neil, and Gernot Klantschnig. “Africa and the War on Drugs.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, no. 3 (2012): 377–80.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007311?seq=1>

Council of the European Union. Fight Against Terrorism: Council Adds an Individual to Its Autonomous Sanctions List Against ISIL/Da’esh and Al-Qaida. January 16, 2024.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/01/16/fight-against-terrorism-council-adds-an-individual-to-its-autonomous-sanctions-list-against-isil-da-esh-and-al-qaida/>

Council on Foreign Relations. Al-Shabaab. Updated regularly.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/al-shabaab>

Elkins, Caroline. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of the End of Empire in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt, 2005

Embassy of the Republic of Kenya in Japan. History of Kenya. Updated regularly.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kenya/Mois-rule>

Encyclopædia Britannica. Kenya: Disputed 2007 and 2013 Elections, a New Constitution, and ICC Proceedings. Updated regularly.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kenya/Disputed-2007-and-2013-elections-a-new-constitution-and-ICC-proceedings>

Encyclopædia Britannica. Kenya: Moi’s Rule. Updated regularly.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kenya/Mois-rule>

European External Action Service. A Window of Opportunity for Somalia: Analysis and Recommendations on the International Stabilisation Efforts. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9bd9a270-ab53-11ed-b508-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

European External Action Service. About EUCAP Somalia. Updated regularly. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-som/about-eucap-somalia_en?s=332

France 24. More Than 50 Ugandan Peacekeepers Killed in Al-Shabaab Attack in Somalia, President Says. June 4, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230604-more-than-50-ugandan-peacekeepers-killed-in-al-shabaab-attack-in-somalia-president-says>

Gasim, Gamal. The Dangerous Chipping Away of Somalia's Sovereignty. Arab Center Washington DC. January 15, 2024. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-dangerous-chipping-away-of-somalias-sovereignty/>

Horst, Cindy. "Whose Security? Somali Refugees, Host Communities & Politics in Kenya." *Africa Today* 57, no. 4 (2011): 3–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.57.4.3?seq=1>

Human Rights Watch. World Report 2024: Somalia. January 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/somalia>

Ingiriis, M. H. "From Pre-Colonial Past to the Post-Colonial Present: The Contemporary Clan-Based Configurations of Statebuilding in Somalia." *African Studies Review* 61, no. 2 (2018). <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/from-precolonial-past-to-the-postcolonial-present-the-contemporary-clanbased-configurations-of-statebuilding-in-somalia/1879F5E0766245FD09F07B8C9E656FDC>

International Crisis Group. Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Report no. 309. June 21, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/309-considering-political-engagement-al-shabaab-somalia>

International Crisis Group. Counter-terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds. September 11, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/counter-terrorism-somalia-losing-hearts-and-minds>

Kallergis, Katherine P. Africa and the Gulf Are Growing Closer. Will It Increase Global Tensions? Council on Foreign Relations. April 5, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/africa-and-gulf-are-growing-closer-will-it-increase-global-tensions>

Keating, Michael, and Lidet Tadesse Shiferaw. Peace and Transition Processes in Somalia. PeaceRep, June 2022. <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Somalia-Report-Digital.pdf>

Keatinge, Tom. The Role of Finance in Defeating Al-Shabaab. RUSI Whitehall Report 2-14. London: Royal United Services Institute, 2014. https://static.rusi.org/201412_whr_2-14_keatinge_web_0.pdf

Limes: Africa italiana, no. 2/2024. <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/africa-italiana-14630248/>

Lonsdale, John. Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895–1914. 1979. https://cooperative-individualism.org/lonsdale-john_coping-with-the-contradictions-1979.pdf

Mama, Amina. “Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Security in Africa.” Feminist Africa, no. 22 (2018). https://www.agi.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/429/feminist_africa_journals/archive/22/fa_22_feature_1.pdf

Mamdani, Mahmood. *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*. London: Verso, 2009

Maruf, Harun. Somalia Tries to Keep Rival Gulf States at Bay. VOA News. September 23, 2019. https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_somalia-tries-keep-rival-gulf-states-bay/6179486.html

Menkhaus, Ken. “State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a ‘Functional Failed State’ in Somalia.” *African Affairs* 114, no. 454 (2015): 1–17. <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/114/454/1/2195212>

Olonisakin, Funmi. *Peacebuilding in Africa: Localising the Liberal Peace*. London: Routledge, 2019. <https://www.routledge.com/Peacebuilding-in-Africa-Localising-the-Liberal-Peace/Olonisakin/p/book/9781138744476>

Osman, Idil. *Engaging Al-Shabaab in Somalia: Military Failures and the Merits of Dialogue*. Middle East Council on Global Affairs. November 2023. <https://mecouncil.org/publication/engaging-al-shabaab-in-somalia-military-failures-and-the-merits-of-dialogue/>

The Journal of Modern African Studies. Taylor & Francis. <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujme20>

United Nations Development Programme. *Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Security Sector Governance (SSG)*. Updated regularly. <https://www.undp.org/somalia/projects/security-sector-reform-ssr-and-security-sector-governance-ssg>

United Nations Security Council. *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1811 (2008)*. S/2008/769. December 10, 2008. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/595030?v=pdf>

United Nations. Security Council Adopts Presidential Statement on Transnational Organized Crime, Urges States to Ramp Up Cooperation, Laws, Borders to Combat It. December 7, 2023. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15516.doc.htm>

United States Africa Command. AFRICOM. Updated regularly.
<https://www.africom.mil>

Urbano, Alfredo. “Colonial Developmentalist Discourse, Agricultural Planning, and Forced Labor (1900–1940).” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92 (2017).
<https://doi.org/10.2307/26857462>

Weiss, Caleb. The Somali National Army Versus al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment. CTC Sentinel. February 2024. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-somali-national-army-versus-al-shabaab-a-net-assessment/>

Wepman, Dennis. *Africa: The Struggle for Independence*. New York: Facts On File, 1993.

Williams, Paul D. *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/fighting-for-peace-in-somalia-9780198858624>

Williams, Paul D. *US Policy Towards Somalia: Needs a Reset*. Chatham House, July 14, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2020-07-14-us-policy-somalia-williams.pdf>

Zeiger, Sarah. *We the People: Thinking About Radicalisation in Kenya*. Twaweza East Africa, 2017. <https://twaweza.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SzWKenyaRadicalism-EN-FINAL-1.pdf>

de Waal, Alex. *African Political Thought: Critical Perspectives and Prospects for the Future*. London: Zed Books, 2018