

Risk of worsening existing humanitarian needs in conflict-affected areas



About this report

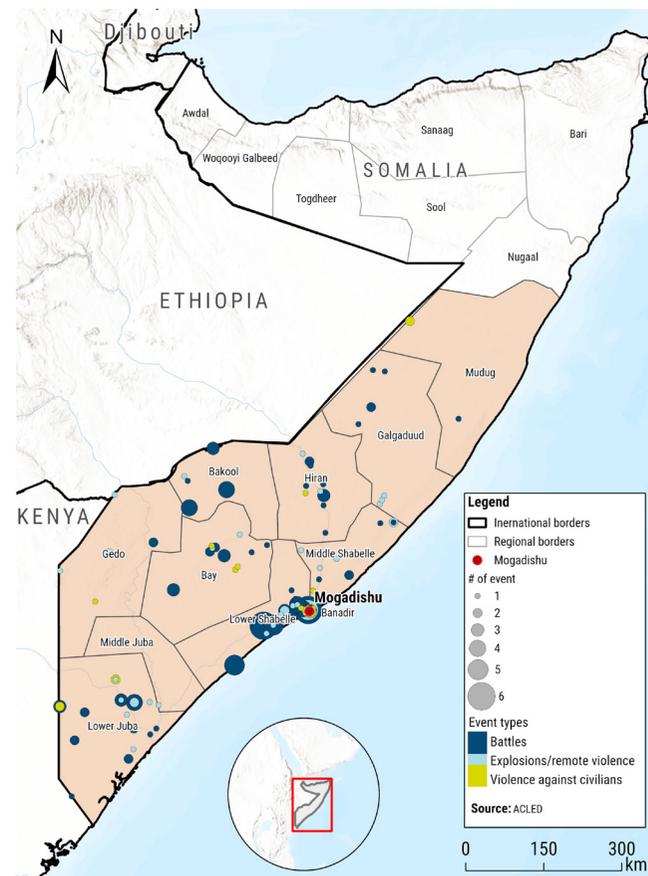
Aim: this report provides a forward-looking analysis of the progressive withdrawal of the African Union Transition Mission, the transition of security operations to the Somali Security Forces (SSF), and how this will worsen existing humanitarian needs in conflict-affected areas.

Methodology: this report is based on the secondary data review of public sources. ACAPS collected existing information and mapped out how the progressive withdrawal of the ATMIS could increase Al-Shabaab activity, worsen security over the next six months, and lead to increasing humanitarian needs in conflict-affected areas.

Scope: the report covers areas with continuing and planned military operations against Al-Shabaab since August 2022.

Limitations: the Impact and Rationale sections of this report present potential deteriorations and possible evolutions of the crisis, considering its specific scope and based on information available as at August 2023. The emergence of new information, as well as the influence of factors not accounted for, may change the outlooks offered. Operational constraints hamper data- and information-gathering. The report does not provide an exhaustive list of themes likely to affect Somalia, and there are other significant events that it does not discuss, such as political differences among federal member states, clan disputes, funding and training issues for the SSF, the limited capabilities of police and law enforcement in Somalia, and the restoration of public services in areas recovered by the SSF.

ARMED VIOLENCE EVENTS IN SOMALIA IN AREAS WITH MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST AL SHABAAB FROM 24 JUNE TO 21 JULY 2023



Sources: ACLED (accessed 15/08/2023); OCHA (accessed 14/08/2023)

Disclaimer: the boundaries, names, and designations used on this map do not imply ACAPS' official endorsement or acceptance. Areas highlighted in orange show the continuing or planned military operations against Al-Shabaab and event types between 24 June and 21 July 2023. The map does not cover conflict in other parts of the country, such as Laas Canood.

BACKGROUND

On 27 June 2023, the UNSC adopted a resolution to extend the mandate of the African Union Transition Mission (ATMIS) by another six months until December 2023 to continue the gradual drawdown of troops and progressive transfer of security responsibilities to the SSF (UNSC 27/06/2023 and 21/12/2022 a). The ATMIS became operational in April 2022, replacing the African Union Mission in Somalia created in 2007. The UNSC mandates ATMIS forces to reduce the threat posed by Al-Shabaab, support the capacity-building of the integrated Somali security and police forces, and conduct a phased handover of security responsibilities to Somalia (ATMIS accessed 14/08/2023; UNSC 31/03/2022).

Previous UNSC resolutions maintain that ATMIS troops are to exit Somalia by December 2024, following extensions in the drawdown of troops. The main reasons for the extension include the lack of training and capability of the Somali forces to assume security responsibilities (UNSC 21/12/2022 b; Heritage Institute 31/01/2023; UNSC 21/12/2022 a). The withdrawal of troops follows a four-phase timeline between April 2022 and December 2024, but given the extensions, it is unclear whether a complete drawdown will be completed by then (Heritage Institute 31/01/2023; Brookings 27/01/2023; ISS 26/04/2023 and 29/03/2022; VOA 31/01/2023; ACLED 21/04/2023).

The first drawdown was completed on 30 June 2023. 2,000 of the over 18,000 ATMIS troops withdrew from Somalia, with the drawdown of another 3,000 set to take place by the end of September (ATMIS accessed 14/08/2023; ATMIS 09/07/2023; VOA 04/07/2023). Six forward-operating bases were also handed over to the Federal Government of Somalia as part of the UNSC resolution (ATMIS 09/07/2023; The EastAfrican 18/06/2023).

The ATMIS has been instrumental in holding territory and providing other kinds of support to the Federal Government of Somalia. This has included ammunition and medical and logistical support but mostly been confined in the garrisons. The mission has also been acting as the holding force in urban areas while the SSF advance into less populated areas, particularly during the continuing counterinsurgency operations against Al-Shabaab (Brookings 27/01/2023; ATMIS 27/03/2023; ICG 21/03/2023; ISS 26/04/2023; UNSC 22/02/2023; ACLED 21/04/2023). It has provided security for Somalia's leaders and the country's economic sources, including ports and airports (VOA 17/06/2023).

Since August 2022, the SSF, with the support of clan militias, ATMIS troops, US special forces, and the Turkish military, have launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab in central Somalia starting from Hirshabelle state before expanding to Galmudug state (ACLED 03/03/2023 and 21/04/2023). The SSF and clan militia have since managed to regain control of several villages and Al-Shabaab strongholds in Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions. Government forces have also secured main supply routes and disrupted checkpoints under Al-Shabaab control (ICG

21/03/2023; ACLED 03/03/2023). The counterinsurgency, which has mostly been focused in Galgaduud, Hiran, Middle Shabelle, and Mudug regions, plans to expand to Southwest and Jubaland states in southern Somalia in the second phase. The second phase was initially planned for the end of March 2023 but got delayed because of political differences among federal member states (ACLED 21/04/2023 and 30/06/2023).

RATIONALE

Continued ATMIS withdrawal would reduce the SSF's ability to hold and control areas retaken by the Federal Government. This ability would further decrease should the military offensive expand to new and remote areas, which would increase the locations requiring security. As a result, Al-Shabaab attacks can be expected to intensify in the next six months (ACLED 24/03/2023, 02/06/2023, and 30/06/2023; VOA 17/06/2023). The SSF do not have sufficient funding, training, and equipment to establish a sustainable security personnel in the long term, diminishing their ability to be a fully autonomous and effective security provider by 2024 (GO 05/07/2023; ICG 21/03/2023; ISS 26/04/2023; ACLED 21/04/2023; Heritage Institute 31/01/2023; VOA 17/06/2023 and 31/01/2023).

The drawdown and handover of forward-operating bases have coincided with an increase in Al-Shabaab attacks in Somalia, including on a base in Gedo region captured by Al-Shabaab in early July (VOA 13/07/2023; GO 05/07/2023; ACLED 30/06/2023 and 02/06/2023; DW 26/05/2023). Between late May and late June 2023, Al-Shabaab attacks targeted ATMIS troops in central and southern Somalia, such as the attack on a base manned by Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces in late May that left 54 soldiers dead. This trend is a matter of concern as it raises questions about the timing of the withdrawal and the ability of the SSF to protect the areas under its control against large-scale Al-Shabaab attacks (ACLED 30/06/2023; The EastAfrican 18/06/2023 and 05/06/2023; Al Jazeera 26/05/2023).

The progressive ATMIS withdrawal occurs while the participation of the clan militia, whose support has played a key role in recovering territory from Al-Shabaab, has considerably diminished. This will leave a security vacuum that would heighten Somalia's vulnerability to armed group attacks (ACLED 30/06/2023, 02/06/2023, and 21/04/2023; AFTH 06/06/2023). Hirshabelle state is a particular area of concern. A tax dispute in Hiran region in April, coupled with claims of a lack of payment for clan militias, led to Al-Shabaab regaining control of previously recovered strategic villages in Hiran region, after the SSF and allied clan militia withdrew from the bases (ACLED 21/04/2023 and 02/06/2023; Horn Observer 18/06/2023).

Al-Shabaab attacks are likely to continue intensifying particularly in Belet Weyne and Bulo Burto districts in Hiran region and Balcad in Middle Shabelle region, given that the recapture of these areas by the SSF and allied clan militia has diminished Al-Shabaab's capacity to collect

taxes (ACLELED 24/03/2023, 02/06/2023, and 21/04/2023; Horn Observer 18/06/2023; VOA 17/06/2023; GO 19/06/2023). The limited security and lack of holding forces in SSF-liberated areas could increase the likelihood of clans falling back into alliances with Al-Shabaab, particularly if unable to counter their attacks, compromising the progress of the Federal Government's counterinsurgency operations in areas yet to be recovered by the SSF (ICG 21/03/2023).

The drawdown of ATMIS troops and involvement of regional forces could change the conflict dynamics in the next six months. Following the exit of the ATMIS, the Federal Government expects that countries in the region will commit their forces to supporting the counterinsurgency operations but on a bilateral basis. Although it remains unclear whether any countries have committed forces, what the deployment timeline would be, how this would be operationalised, and what the areas of deployment would be, these additional forces are anticipated to increase the Federal Government's combat strength. That said, Al-Shabaab has used the involvement of regional forces to stir up opposition to the Federal Government in the past (ICG 21/03/2023; VOA 04/07/2023; ACLELED 21/04/2023).

IMPACT

Conflict-induced displacement has already occurred in much of Hirshabelle state and is expected to continue as the SSF take the conflict south (ACLELED 30/06/2023; ICG 21/03/2023; OCHA 31/03/2023 and 08/02/2023). An increase in Al-Shabaab attacks would drive additional displacements, especially for people fearing revenge attacks. People that have been under the ideological influence of Al-Shabaab for years will also likely be displaced to remote rural areas with the armed group if the SSF dislodges Al-Shabaab from the areas they currently control (TNH 25/05/2023; ICG 21/03/2023). Based on past displacement trends, hundreds of thousands are expected to be displaced.

With the ATMIS withdrawal and the fallback of some areas into Al-Shabaab control, civilians in these places who relied on and supported the SSF and ATMIS military operations against Al-Shabaab are at risk of facing revenge attacks from Al-Shabaab (VOA 04/07/2023; GO 05/07/2023; ATMIS 22/06/2023). The Federal Government's counterinsurgency operations have relied extensively on clans to provide crucial links to the local populations and mobilise community support, which has been effective in pushing back and dislodging Al-Shabaab from territories (ICG 21/03/2023; CFR accessed 14/08/2023; ACLELED 21/04/2023 and 02/06/2023). Increased cases of kidnappings and indiscriminate killings of civilians may be likely, as well as more violent punishment for collective non-compliance among local populations supporting the Federal Government (ICG 21/03/2023; VOA 04/07/2023; GO 05/07/2023). This will further be aggravated by the limited protection from the Federal Government because of the limited capabilities of the police force and local law enforcement bodies to provide security in these areas (ICG 21/03/2023; VOA 31/01/2023).

Increased Al-Shabaab attacks in areas under the control of the Federal Government or areas likely to be recovered by the SSF will mean the continued rise of humanitarian needs as a result of the lack of access to people in need (OCHA 31/03/2023 and 04/06/2023; ICG 21/03/2023). Access to aid will decrease or cease in areas retaken by Al-Shabaab as the armed group imposes movement restrictions and charges fees on aid at checkpoints, deterring humanitarians from accessing Al-Shabaab-controlled areas despite the severity of humanitarian needs (Brookings 27/01/2023). Al-Shabaab's increased use of improvised explosive devices, particularly along the main supply routes, will continue to restrict and impede the movement of aid and humanitarians, even in areas recovered or controlled by the SSF (OCHA 04/06/2023 and 31/03/2023). More than eight million people are currently in need of humanitarian assistance in Somalia (OCHA 08/02/2023). At the end of February 2023, over 6.5 million people in the country were projected to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse levels of food insecurity between April–June 2023. A continued lack of the humanitarian assistance expected to lessen food consumption gaps in conflict-affected areas will likely lead to severe forms of malnutrition (IPC 28/02/2023).