

ORION FORUM

# Islamic State in Somalia: A Global Threat and Efforts to Counter the Militants

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On February 01, 2025, the United States (U.S.) conducted an airstrike against the Islamic State.<sup>[1]</sup> This was the first major military operation under the new administration in the U.S. But what is more interesting is that the target of the attack was in northern Somalia; the semi-autonomous region of Puntland to be exact. The United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) reported that 14 Islamic State operatives were killed in the strike.<sup>[2]</sup> Among those killed was reportedly Ahmed Maleninine, a leader within the organization responsible for recruiting members, managing the group's finances, and facilitating external operations across Europe and the United States.<sup>[3]</sup> This strike was followed by another one on February 16, the same month and occurred shortly after the United Arab Emirates (UAE) conducted their own strike on the same day.<sup>[4]</sup> Both strikes highlight important questions for the region and international priorities when it comes to countering terrorism globally. Specifically, what is the significance of the Islamic State in Somalia in the region and globally? What efforts are being undertaken domestically to tackle Islamic State militants, what will they look like moving forward, and how can external efforts by global powers outside of the region continue to support these domestic efforts?

Who are the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS), also known as IS-Somalia, ISIS-Somalia, or Daesh, and what influence do they have locally, regionally, and globally? The group has been operating in Somalia for a decade. It emerged as a breakaway faction of al-Shabaab,<sup>[5]</sup> Somalia's predominant militant organization, which is often described as one al-Qaeda's most successful affiliates and controls large swathes of the country's southern and central regions. By most estimates, al-Shabaab dwarfs the IS-Somalia in terms of size and territorial control in

Somalia.<sup>[6]</sup> Whereas al-Shabaab is estimated to have between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters,<sup>[7]</sup> estimates place IS-Somalia's force numbers at between 600-700, though recent intelligence assessments suggest that the group may have doubled in size over the past year to as many as 1,600 fighters.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, al-Shabaab's reach in Somalia spans over large portions of the central and southern territories, while IS-Somalia has a much more limited geographic footprint in north eastern Somalia, particularly in the area around the eastern mountains of Puntland's Bari region.<sup>[9]</sup>

Though IS-Somalia poses a limited threat to immediate security in Somalia compared to its larger and better-established rival al-Shabaab, over time the group has emerged as a key player in Islamic States' broader global network. Through its regional coordination office, al-Karrar, the group has gained significance by overseeing the financing of other Islamic State affiliates around the world and by directing funds to support operations.<sup>[10]</sup> Reports indicate that the al-Karrar office has facilitated the movement of trainers, as well as financial and tactical support to other Islamic State affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique.<sup>[11]</sup> Beyond Africa, the al-Karrar office has also reportedly sent funds to Islamic State operatives in Yemen, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Afghanistan, including to Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISK).<sup>[12]</sup> The group has also experienced an influx of foreign fighters from countries like Ethiopia, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen.<sup>[13]</sup> Recent assessments also suggest that the group may have also received arms and training from Houthis in Yemen,<sup>[14]</sup> while other reports indicate that the militants have begun to deploy suicide drones against regional forces,<sup>[15]</sup> further suggesting a growing sophistication in how the group is weaponizing technology.

Furthermore, IS-Somalia's chief leader, Abdulqadir Mumin, appears to have become a key figure within the Islamic State's global leadership. It is still not clear whether Mumin was killed in a U.S. airstrike last year. However, some assessments suggest that Mumin may have been and/or is still continuing to act as the global head of Islamic State, while others disagree.<sup>[16]</sup> Whether or not Mumin is alive or dead, or if he is the so-called caliph or not, what is clear is the increasingly important role the militant group in Somalia is playing in Islamic State's global operations. For these reasons, the group is well positioned to facilitate and contribute to

Islamic State's attacks against the West.

Responses to IS-Somalia have been both domestic and international. On the domestic front, some of the most robust efforts against the group have been led by the regional authorities of the semi-autonomous federal member state, Puntland. Forces in Puntland have been fighting against IS-Somalia for years, often with little support from African Union forces or powers such as Turkey or the United States. Kenya, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have provided the member state some support,<sup>[17]</sup> yet Puntland has been leading much of the ground offensives against the militants with some notable operational success.

The region's most recent efforts have come in the form of Operation Hilaac (meaning lightning). Following months of preparations, in January 2025, roughly 3,000 Puntland forces were mobilized against IS-Somalia in the mountains of Al-Miskaad in the Bari region of Puntland, one of the militant group's key command-and-control bases.<sup>[18]</sup> The force mobilized was composed of Puntland's Maritime Police Force (PMPF), its Presidential Guard, Daraawiish, alongside militia.<sup>[19]</sup> During the first phase of operations, Puntland troops have been successful in pushing IS-Somalia militants from key supply routes and several bases. This was not only due to the effective forward deployment of Puntland's troops, but also the government's efforts to engage with marginalized communities, such as the Ali Salebaan sub-clan, that IS-Somalia depends upon in the lead up to the first phase of operations.<sup>[20]</sup>

On the international front, though Puntland's authorities have received limited support from the Somali federal government, African Union forces, and international partners, neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia have aided Puntland forces during the first phase of its Operation Hilaac operations. Among external powers outside of the region, states like the UAE and the U.S. do provide support to domestic efforts to counter IS-Somalia. The UAE has a long-standing relationship with the semi-autonomous region, including supporting Puntland's efforts to counter IS-Somalia and al-Shabaab, as well as the development of regional forces like the PMPF.<sup>[21]</sup> Prior to and during Operation Hilaac, the UAE has also contributed to Puntland's operations against IS-Somalia using drone strikes.<sup>[22]</sup> In fact, since the beginning of the year, UAE has reportedly conducted multiple airstrikes in coordination with Puntland forces.<sup>[23]</sup> It is likely that the UAE will continue to support Puntland, including with airstrikes. However, the

Emirates tends to be more discreet<sup>[24]</sup> about its airstrikes and will likely remain so about future strikes.

On their part, the United States' recent airstrikes are not the first time Washington has targeted the group. Though U.S. airstrikes tend to be less frequent in the northern territories of Somalia when compared to those targeting al-Shabaab, they are not entirely uncommon. The first authorized airstrike on IS-Somalia occurred in November 2017.<sup>[25]</sup> Another notable attack came in late May 2024, when the U.S. conducted an airstrike in a remote town in Puntland, targeting Abdulqadir Mumin, leader of the IS-Somalia, and rumored global head of Islamic State.<sup>[26]</sup> It remains unclear whether Mumin survived the airstrike,<sup>[27]</sup> though local media sources and interviews with Somali security officials conducted by other researchers indicate that Mumin may have survived.<sup>[28]</sup>

Beyond airstrikes, the U.S. has also targeted the militants on the ground. In January 2023, the U.S. military conducted an operation executed by U.S. military personnel in Puntland that resulted in the death of a key IS-Somalia operative.<sup>[29]</sup> The target in question was Bilal al-Sudani, a Sudanese national and former al-Shabaab member, who had been on the United States' radar for over a decade. Previously designated by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2012,<sup>[30]</sup> al-Sudani played a significant role as a financier and facilitator in al-Shabaab<sup>[31]</sup> and later emerged as a significant figure in Islamic State's global financial and facilitation network through the regional coordinating office, al-Karrar.<sup>[32]</sup>

These UAE and U.S. airstrikes, as well as the U.S.-led raid in Puntland demonstrate the growing importance of Africa as the epicenter for Islamic State activity and IS-Somalia as a global threat, not just a regional one. But what does this mean for ongoing and future domestic operations against IS-Somalia?

In Somalia, operations will likely continue to be led by the regional government in Puntland and its forces, with limited ground support from either African Union forces or the forces of the federal government of Somalia, which the regional administration cut ties with last year. At the end of January 2025, President Said Abdullahi Deni of Puntland announced the commencement of Phase 2 of Operation Hilaac in the Bari region of Puntland.<sup>[33]</sup> The objective is to push out IS-Somalia from its remaining strongholds. Puntland forces have been successful in clearing

and securing the territory at the bottom of the valleys by the Al-Miskaad mountains. However, the remaining area of operation is mountainous and features complex cave systems that the IS-Somalia controls. Accordingly, dislodging the militants from the mountains and the cave systems will be complex and prove to be a challenge. Furthermore, the offensive against IS-Somalia is exacerbating tensions between local communities and foreign nationals within the region.<sup>[34]</sup> IS-Somalia's recruitment of foreigners, including illegal migrants, has resulted in the deportation and arrest of several foreign nationals, including Ethiopians, by Puntland authorities.<sup>[35]</sup> These efforts have intensified tensions between Somalis and immigrant communities in parts of Puntland.

For Operation Hilaac to sustain its advantage, Puntland's authorities need to guarantee the consistent and continued deployment of forces. Moreover, the support and effective engagement of local communities like the Ali Salebaan sub-clan is only sustainable in the long run if Puntland authorities are able to meet their promises to deliver development assistance and integrate clan militia into their security architecture.<sup>[36]</sup> Continued support is also needed from external partners. Puntland is already receiving support from neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia, while the UAE is providing ariel support using drone strikes. The United States' efforts in the region are also important. Not only have the airstrikes forced militants to withdraw from territories and helped to build the moral of Puntland forces, but they have also encouraged militants to surrender and/or defect from the group.<sup>[37]</sup>

IS-Somalia is a growing global threat with both the interest and positioning to pose a threat beyond the region and against the West. Domestic efforts to counter the group are promising, but it is too soon to declare victory.

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<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid.

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