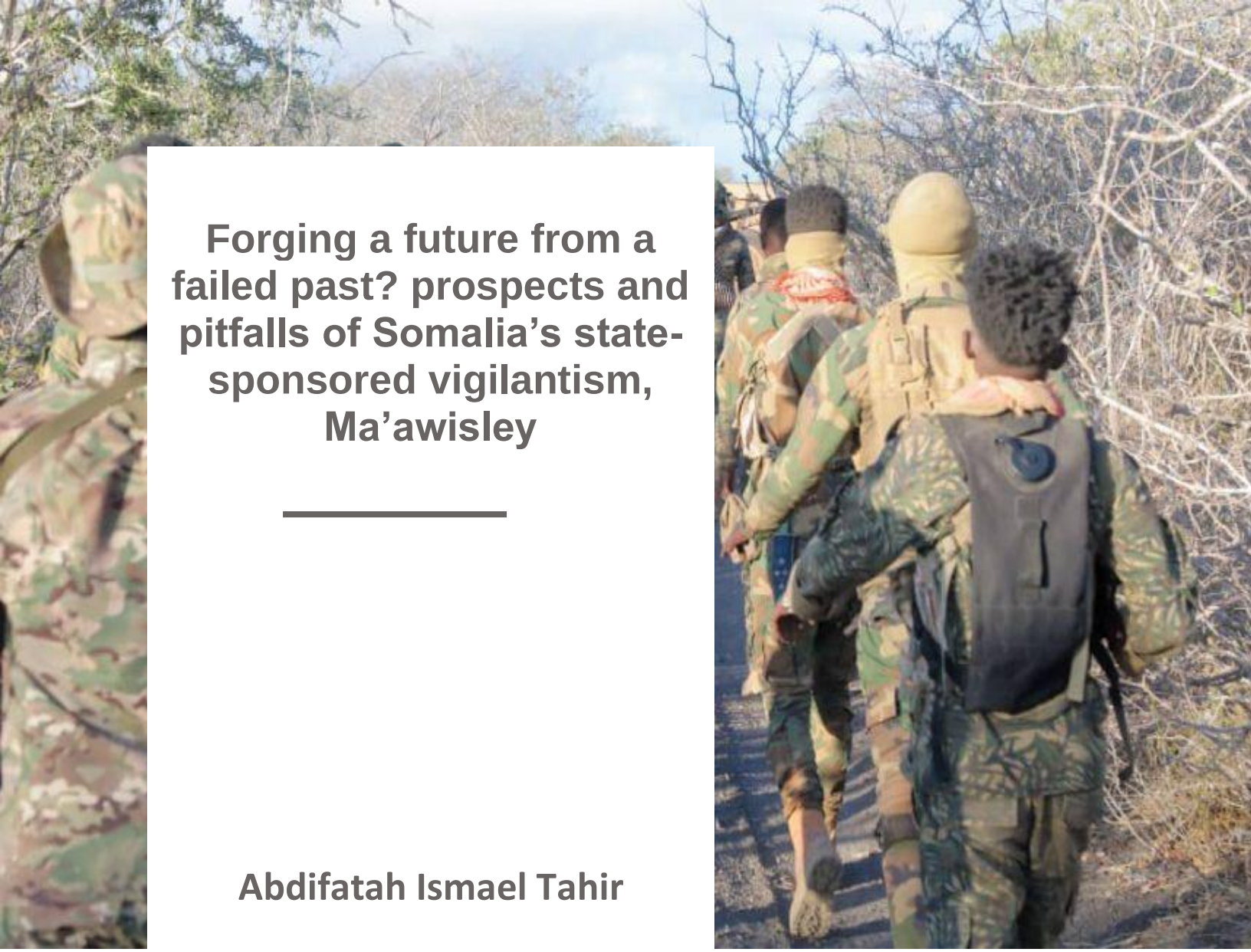

Forging a future from a failed past? prospects and pitfalls of Somalia's state-sponsored vigilantism, Ma'awisley

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2024

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"Stomach is never cured by that which it fell ill"

Abstract

This paper examines the historical and contemporary dynamics of vigilante mobilizations in Somalia. It shows that these mobilizations have repeatedly failed to achieve the desired outcomes, namely quelling insurgencies. The most recent of these mobilizations began in 2022, when the Hawadle clan, refusing to pay taxes and pledge loyalty to Al-Shabaab, launched a significant offensive against the group. Recognizing a potential advantage, the new government, headed by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who succeeded President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo, integrated the clan mobilization into its broader strategy of fighting Al-Shabaab and reclaiming territories in south central Somalia from the group. However, as with previous attempts, this approach proved ineffective. Drawing on interviews and media monitoring conducted between June 2022 and August 2024, the paper argues that these failures result from a fundamental misalignment between the traditional ethos and character of clan-based mobilizations and the external pressures exerted on them by contemporary state-making politics. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the critical need for a dialogue aimed at facilitating a negotiated solution, which it regards as essential for achieving lasting peace and stability. In so doing, the paper contributes to ongoing calls for negotiation and engagement with Al-Shabaab, despite the considerable challenges inherent in such a process.

Keywords: Somalia, Mogadishu, insurgency, counterinsurgency, movement.

Cite this paper as:

Tahir, A.I (2024). *"*Forging a future from a failed past? prospects and pitfalls of Somalia's state-sponsored vigilantism, Ma'awisley*".* Working Paper 2024-01. Hilin, Mogadishu, Somalia.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the participants of this study for their invaluable contributions. I am also deeply appreciative of the University of Manchester for providing access to essential academic resources and for sponsoring the presentation of this work at an international conference.

1. Introduction

For more than three decades, Somalia has been embroiled in a protracted conflict. Various armed factions have competed for power and territory. The most dangerous of these factions remains to be Al-Shabaab, a militant Islamist group that wreaks havoc in the southern parts of the country. The group's origin and evolution are complex and contested. Some commentators argue Ethiopia's invasion in 2006 has provoked a nationalist backlash that gave Al-Shabaab the necessary push to present itself as a legitimate resistance movement against a foreign occupation [1]. Others suggest the group is a continuum of the past pan Somali struggle as it shares similarities in terms of ideology, tactics, and mobilization [2]. Regardless of perspectives on formation, the consensus is that Al-Shabaab has shown remarkable resilience against political and military pressures from international forces, Somali governments, and moderate Islamic movements, such as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a [3]. Most recently, in 2022, local clans launched a significant offensive against Al-Shabaab. This has later become central to the government's efforts to defeat the group. Like previous efforts, this too seems to have failed. In this paper, I argue that such failure stems from a critical misalignment between the nature of clan-based traditional mobilizations and the external pressures exerted by the state to transform them into a sponsored vigilantism, thereby undermining their localized scope, utility, and efficacy.

Vigilantism is commonly defined as the public declaration for the restoration of order through violent acts committed voluntarily by private citizens exercising their "autonomous citizenship" to carry out punishment for actual, perceived, or imputed violations of institutionalised norms [4]. In other words, for any action to be considered vigilante, there must be a social group that sees vigilantism as essentially a collective action, offenders who have purportedly committed crimes punishable under the existing order, lethal or non-lethal means of violence to punish these offenders, and justification for private citizens acting differently from the official law enforcement agencies [5]. Instead of seeing vigilantism as something that happens outside the state or that is done by "autonomous citizens", Super [6] argued that the role of the state should be highlighted as it in many cases shapes and produces vigilante violence. My use of this concept builds on this view primarily because the contemporary practice of vigilantism in the Somali context is inextricably linked to the modern state formation, as will be shown later.

The contemporary discourse on vigilantism is mainly about the merits and demerits of its deployment. Proponents argue that vigilante groups can fill gaps in state-provided security, particularly in contexts where formal law enforcement is perceived as ineffective [7]. For example, in counterinsurgency battles, regular forces are frequently overworked partly because of the less flexible ways in which they are organised and equipped. Therefore, utilising vigilante forces increases the state's strategic and operational capability [8]. Conversely, detractors highlight that such tactical benefits are outweighed by the harm vigilantes may cause to the civilian population even when militias work with highly skilled regular forces [9]. They point out that the mere raising of a militia opens a world of

opportunities for armed groups and their commanders [10], including taking advantage of their powerful presence in a village and coercing or abusing civilians [11]. Moreover, vigilante forces intensify the conflict by inspiring the insurgents to target particular communities associated with the vigilantes for reprisal [12]. Seen this way, vigilantism exacerbates existing social divisions and conflicts by reinforcing ethnic, religious, or political identities [13].

In this paper, I reinforce the latter view by highlghting how social structures, legacies of governance, and fragmented form of power relations intersect to produce the failed outcome of state-vigilantism in conflict-prone societies. In doing so, I make a case for why the state in Somalia often fell short – and continue to do so – of achieving sustainable security outcomes from sponsoring vigilante groups. I argue that the current initiatives to counter Al-Shabaab through the mobilization of clans are and remain ineffective because of a mismatch between what the prevailing social and cultural conditions offer and what contemporary state-making demands. Traditional clan-based mobilizations were intrinsically communal, characterized by explicit expectations and obligations rooted in clan loyalty and mutual protection. In contrast, counter-insurgent vigilante groups function as extensions of state power, characterized by unpredictability, shifting alliances, and agendas, diverging significantly from their grassroots origins. To substantiate this, I note several main factors. Firstly, the spatiality and reach of clan-based mobilizations have undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, groups mobilized on a clan basis operated within their territories, focusing on protecting their communities and resources, except for limited occasions when they embarked on offensives for material gain rather than advancing abstract ideas of state-making. In contrast, colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary state-sponsored vigilante groups extend their operations beyond clan territories, often being asked to engage in offensive actions in distant lands outside their turf for political projects that, in many instances, fall beyond their comprehension and desire to participate in the manner and interpretation the state actors project.

Secondly, a temporal distinction exists between traditional community-driven mobilizations and modern state-sponsored vigilantism. Traditionally, clan-based mobilizations were formed on a seasonal basis, providing protection for communities during specific periods of increased vulnerability when conflicts over resources were more likely, and hence did not maintain a constant presence. Conversely, state-sponsored vigilante groups exhibit greater permanence and are structured to align with the broader strategic objectives of the state. In other words, their activities are embedded within a larger and long-term political projects and ambitions, rather than merely addressing specific and immediate conflicts. Finally, clan-based mobilizations were historically constructed around a communal narrative, where the primary focus was on protecting the local community from external threats. These groups functioned as extensions of existing social and tribal structures, with their actions driven by a shared commitment to safeguarding the survival and integrity of the community. In contrast, modern vigilante groups' actions are justified by the perceived need to defend or promote specific religious orientations. This marks a significant departure from the traditional ethos of clan-based mobilizations. Thus, I argue

that the utility of clan-based mobilizations is most evident when it aligns with and serves local agendas.

Data collection for this study entailed two principal techniques: interviews with key informants and systematic media monitoring. The interviews were conducted with a strategically selected cohort of key informants. The selection criteria for these informants included their direct pertinence to the study's focus, their experience and or expertise in the subject area, and the diversity of perspectives they could contribute. Semi-structured interviews were employed to ensure a flexible yet systematic approach, guided by a framework that covered all relevant topics while allowing for the exploration of emergent insights. These interviews were conducted both in person and via telephone, contingent upon the availability and preference of the informants. In addition to interviews, media monitoring was utilized to capture a wide array of information from various sources. This process involved the systematic tracking and analysis of news articles, social media posts, blogs, and other pertinent content between June 2022 and August 2024. Such a wide range of sources provided insights into public discourse, prevailing narratives, and emerging trends related to the research topic. The remainder of the paper will be organized into three sections. The first section will explore the historical dynamics of state-sponsored vigilantism in Somalia, providing a contextual foundation for understanding contemporary practices during colonial and immediate postcolonial periods. The second section will focus on the current state-sponsored vigilantism, specifically the *Ma'awisley* movement, with an emphasis on its emergence and the challenges it faces as a counterinsurgency strategy. The third section will examine the implications of ongoing counterinsurgency efforts for a durable political settlement.

2. A failed past: state-sponsored vigilantism in a historical context

2.1 Colonial authorities

State-sponsored vigilantism has a long history of failure in Somalia, dating back to the colonial period. In the late 1890s, Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (better known as the Sayyid) formed a formidable resistance movement against the colonial and imperial powers that ruled the Somali peninsula in the late 19th and early 20th centuries [14]. The Sayyid 's vision of a united and independent Somali nation was inspired by his religious and nationalist ideology, which appealed to many Somalis who resented the foreign intrusion and oppression [15]. He mobilized thousands of followers to wage war against the British, Italians, and Ethiopians, who had divided the Somali territories among themselves and exploited its resources and people [16]. He used poetry and diplomacy to rally support and undermine his enemies. He also established an administration that provided services such as justice to inhabitants of the territories he controlled [17]. The Sayyid initially tried to defeat the British with conventional warfare, but he later realized that this strategy was ineffective after his army suffered a heavy loss at Jidbaley in 1904 [18]. This prompted him to switch to a

more mobile and guerrilla style of warfare, and in this vein, he launched a major assault on Berbera, the administrative seat of the colonial authorities, in 1912.

Discontented by the challenge to their authority and power posed by a smaller yet more efficiently organized native resistance, the British, who had previously avoided significant confrontation with the Sayyid, dispatched a substantial expeditionary force under the command of Richard Corfield with the objective of quelling the rebellion once and for all. However, the British was defeated and Corfield was killed in a battle with the Sayyid in 1913 [19]. Following this setback, the British changed course, pursueing alliances with local clans that harbored preexisting antagonisms towards the Sayyid. These antagonisms were not only clannish but also religiously motivated, as the Sayyid encountered resistance from factions that opposed his doctrinal positions. Additionally, other hostilities arose from his contempt, insults, and brutal reprisals against clans that did not support the resistance.[20] Leveraging these local dissentions, the British recruited substantial contingents from Somali clans to combat the Sayyid. They also distributed weapons to clans willing to fight alongside them. This counterinsurgency strategy yielded initial successes but later caused significant mayhem. A particularly severe episode of such mayhem occurred in 1912 – a year referred to as "Xaaraamacune" (the year of disaster) – when the availability of weapons, clan vendettas, and drought, converged to create an unforgettable killing, maiming, famine, and suffering [21].

In a nutshell, the deployment of vigilantism as a counterinsurgency measure revealed the inherent vulnerabilities of the clan system for political projects. This is the case because what the colonial authorities regarded as a cost-effective and quick-fix strategy to combat anti-colonial resistance has turned into a social, economic, and administrative nightmare, engulfing the entire region, and prompting rigorous yet not so successful demobilization efforts.

2.2 Postcolonial governments

Like the colonial authorities, Somalia's postcolonial governments have adopted similar strategies of state-sponsored vigilantism to suppress insurgencies, yielding comparable outcomes of failure. To understand the dynamics of this vigilantism, it is imperative to examine the political conditions of that period. In 1969, a military coup led by General Mohamed Siad Barre overthrew the democratic government and established a socialist dictatorship. Barre professed an intention to create a new Somali society grounded in equality, justice, and development. To this end, he implemented various directives and established laws aimed at fostering nationalism, including the prohibition of clan-based associations and identities, the abolition of traditional titles and ranks [22], and the promotion of a common Somali language and culture. Barre asserted that his vision entailed building a socialist order compatible with Islam and the Somali way of life. However, his regime faced criticism from influential societal segments, particularly religious leaders who perceived his ideology as foreign and infringing upon their rights and freedoms. Moreover, these reforms

failed to significantly enhance the country's political and social cohesion, instead alienating and antagonizing some organised groups and major clans who were prepared to violently resist the regime [23].

The first of such resistance came when Barre lost the war with Ethiopia in 1977. At this juncture, officers of the Majerteen clan tried to overthrow him. Barre survived the coup, after which he surrounded himself with members of his own subclan, the Marehan [24]. Consequently, the state institutions deteriorated and lost strength [25], resulting in the formation of armed insurgencies. The first two significant movements were the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), established in 1978 by dissident army officers from the Majerteen clan who had defected from the government following the attempted coup, and the Somali National Movement (SNM), founded in 1981 by members of the Isaaq clan based in London and Saudi Arabia [26]. They operated from bases in Ethiopia and launched attacks on government targets in northern Somalia. In response, Barre organized militias from clans loyal to him, providing them with arms to form vigilante groups to defend the country. This strategy, mirrored the repressive methods of colonial powers, eroded the legitimacy of his regime. Contrary to quelling the dissent, it fueled greater resentment and resistance among the population.

In the process, public trust in the state's credibility diminished, leading to a decline in voluntary conscription in the security apparatus as individuals became increasingly reluctant to support a government relying on divisive tactics. The armed opposition groups, SNM and SSDF, also used the state's actions to appeal to their constituencies, presenting themselves as viable alternatives. By 1984, the civil war had escalated, forcing Barre to pursue peace talks with his archrival, Ethiopia's President, Mengistu Haile Mariam. Subsequently, the duo signed a peace agreement in 1986 that required both countries to stop supporting rebel groups on each other's territory [27]. This angered the SNM who felt betrayed by their former ally. It intensified its attacks on government forces and invaded major towns and cities in northern Somalia. The government responded with brutal campaigns that involved aerial bombardment, mass killings, and displacement of civilians [28]. But more importantly, it once again armed clans it regarded friend to form vigilantes to fight the insurgencies. Arguably, the government's adoption of counterinsurgency measures rooted in clannism was a significant factor contributing to the destructiveness of the war. By 1991, Siad Barre's regime collapsed and the country descended into anarchy and chaos as various clan-based militias fought for control of territory and resources [29].

The above examination of the history of counterinsurgency strategy in Somalia demonstrates how the state has historically used or misused clan-based mobilization to further political agendas with often negative outcomes. In the subsequent sections, I will examine the recent offensive launched by *Ma'awisley* against Al-Shabaab, the narratives that legitimized this resistance and the underlying factors that contributed to its ultimate failures.

3. Forging a future from a failed past: rise and decline of Ma'awisley

3.1 Nature and origin

Ma'awisley groups are clan-based militias that were first seen in Jubaland in 2014. They have since waxed and waned in various parts of south-central Somalia. In their most recent resurgence in Hiiraan, they initially emerged as community resistance but were transformed into state-sponsored vigilantes against Al-Shabaab. By state-sponsored vigilantism, I mean the practice where the state utilizes armed groups to carry out security functions such as combating insurgents, enforcing law and order, or protecting other state interests [30]. I consider the *Ma'awisley* to be state-sponsored vigilantes because shortly after their formation, they were promoted by the administration in Hiiraan under Ali Jeyte, one of the most popular governors the region has seen, despite his significant disagreements with the government in Mogadishu. More importantly, the federal government continues to endorse and support them as a key pillar of its counterinsurgency strategy. Three main factors can be cited as the triggers for the group in Hiiraan at that time. First, the local clan's refusal to pay taxes or pledge loyalty to Al-Shabaab led to the group's retaliation. On May 27, 2022, they assassinated a prominent elder, Ali Ma'allin Mohamud (Ali Dheere).[31] A month later, they attacked the town of Baxdo, where the local clans delivered a heavy casualty on them. These attackers sparked widespread clan mobilization, with *Ma'awisley* groups vowing to fight until Al-Shabaab is expelled from Hiiraan. Second, Al-Shabaab's incursions into Ethiopia and the subsequent cross-border threats prompted Ethiopia to launch military operations and arm local leaders in Hiiraan to organize resistance [32]. Third, the election of new leadership in Mogadishu has boosted the confidence of the Hiiraan population, as they expected significant logistical support for their resistance.[33]

Figure 1: Map of provinces and major cities in Somalia. Source United Nations.

3.2 The offensive

Regardless of the factors shaping their resurgence, *Ma'awisley* groups have launched significant offensives and made progress in the early days of their campaign. Such successes not only fostered optimism among the people in the region, but they also have created renewed faith in clan mobilization as an effective means of pushing back against Al-

Shabaab. This prompted the federal government to amplify their effort, lend them moral and political support, and provide them with limited logistical assistance. In August 2023, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud established Dhusamareb, the capital of the Galmudug regional state, as his interim command center as part of a strategic initiative to intensify the offensive against Al-Shabaab.[34] A key component of the strategy involved the mobilization of local clans to weaken Al-Shabaab. For example, the President engaged with members of various Habargidir subclans, as well as other clans like the Mururšade and Surre of Dir.[35] As part of the response to his engagement, clans organized themselves to demonstrate their readiness to combat Al-Shabaab. In so doing, they showcased their arsenals as evidence of their organizational capabilities. However, insiders have revealed that this process was largely staged manipulatively as a means to extract resources from the President. The manipulation was so extensive that clans were reportedly renting technical vehicles from each other just to present a stronger appearance during these demonstrations.[36]

The President's efforts were also mirrored by influential political figures from the region – within and beyond the government. The stated objective was to encourage the simultaneous formation of vigilante groups across the region to apply enough pressure to force Al-Shabaab to relinquish more territories. Beyond Galmudug, similar mobilization efforts targeted the Abgaal clans, who already played a significant role within the army and its command structures.[37] However, the elites driving the mobilization were divided. Within the Hawadle clan, there was a growing sentiment that key figures in the federal government were exploiting the ongoing offensive for their own political gain. This led dissenting voices, such as Ali Jayte, to challenge pro-federal government figures [38] at a time when the Hawadle clan was more armed than ever before, making it increasingly difficult for the state to exert control over them. Their contention revolves around the form of authority and the share they will have in such authority in Hiiraan. While the pursuit of equal rights by various clans is not inherently problematic, the mobilization of Ma'awisley factions on both sides has introduced significant security challenges. It is particularly important to note that the authority from which the Hawadle are seeking additional rights, Hirshabelle, is itself reliant on an equally armed clan, which may be resistant to conceding to such demands. These challenges arise from the potential inability of the involved parties to reach a compromise, a resolution that is notably rare in the Somali political landscape.

Equally, the elites of the Mururšade clans were divided. Those who were in government wanted to project a greater involvement of the clan to consolidate their influence in the clan whose support is thrown behind former Prime Minister, Hassan Ali Khayre. On the other side of the aisle also stood those who pointed out that the clan cannot meaningfullly participate in a campaign that negatively affects their constituency not because of the pressure by Al-Shabaab but rather more precariously the government's inadvertent decision to block supplies to their members under the control of Al-Shabaab in February.[39] This situation highlights how the clan-based mobilization turned into battleground for the competing political elite who respectively used the offensive as a means to strengthen their position and diminish the influence of their rivals within both the

clan and the broader political landscape. It is in this vein that the mobilization of the Ma'awisley has also precipitated a significant arms race among various clans. A recent incident exemplifies this growing militarization: an arms shipment intended for the Sacad (Habargidir) and Wacaysle (Abgaal) clans' Ma'awisley groups, ostensibly to enhance their defense capabilities against Al-Shabaab, was intercepted by their Marehan counterparts. Despite the fact that the Marehan clan is not currently engaged in active conflict with the intended recipients, the rationale for the ambush was that they had the right to obtain a portion of the arms, which were purchased with state resources.[40] This situation underscores the complex and volatile dynamics of clan-based mobilization in the region. Despite, these dynamics the *Ma'awsiley* centred campaign have made a signficant initial progress allowing the government to seized Al-Shabaab's regional center of operations in Adan Yabaal, Middle Shabelle, in December 2022.[41]

On its side, Al-Shabaab has taken three significant steps. First, it has formally declared war on clans from which the Ma'awisley are drawn. In September 2022, Al-Shabaab carried out a series of violent actions in Somalia, including setting fire to villages[42] and destroying wells in Hiraan.[43] On 2 September, the group ambushed a convoy in Hiraan, killing numerous civilians, including women and children.[44] Furthermore, they targeted elders and other prominent figures leading the resistance and even key combatants in major urban areas. In one incident in Mogadishu, combatants who had been hospitalized in the city after being injured in battle were attacked by the group.[45] They also attacked hotel frequented by those leading the resistance. For instance, on 20 August, the group launched a deadly attack on the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu, which resulted in over twenty deaths following a prolonged 30-hour siege.[46] This escalation prompted elites from the resisting clans to significantly enhance their security measures, in a fashion far surpassing those in place before the offensive. Some have even temporarily relocated to Nairobi.[47] These actions have also placed considerable pressure on other clans, leading some to withdraw from the conflict out of fear that Al-Shabaab might retaliate by systematically targeting not only themselves but also their economic interests.[48]

Second, Al-Shabaab has intensified tactics aimed at portraying the Somali government as weak and unreliable, incapable of protecting even the residents of its stronghold in Mogadishu, let alone providing meaningful support to clans forming Ma'awisley groups to fight them in remote areas such as Hiiraan. For instance, Al-Shabaab has taken decisive action against urban gangs known as *Ciyaal Weero* in December in Kaaraan[49], Mogadishu, who were causing significant disruption among residents.[50] Despite the general appreciation of these actions by residents, many suspected that Ciyaal Weero's level of mayhem bore the hallmarks of backing from organized violent groups such as Al-Shabaab or Daesh. Chief among these voices was the Mayor of Mogadishu, Madaale, who connected the rise of the gang and its subsequent suppression by Al-Shabaab to the group itself.[51] Despite these suspicions, Al-Shabaab denied any involvement with *Ciyaal Weero's* rise.

Thirdly, it promoted or sponsored clan infighting using existing wounds.[52] This has frequently drawn in Ma'awisley members to supporting their respective clans and necessitated intervention from officials of the federal government, who have been dispatched to various clan territories to mediate and resolve these conflicts. In a recent instance, the Director of NISA, Abdullahi Sanbaloolshe, along with the Chair of the Military Court, were sent to mediate conflicts in the regions of Mahas, Moqokori, and Adan Yabaal.[53] Their deployment is not surprising as the group pragmatically engages the clans in both coercive and negotiated ways. Recently, Al-Shabaab needed to cross back over the river dividing their strongholds and the territories from which they were expelled in the early days of the offensive, a move that required not only fighting but also negotiating with local clans. According to sources, the group spent significant resources[54] to facilitate this process, with a portion of the money allegedly used to compensate the clans as part of their strategy to neutralize potential opposition. The clans involved in these negotiations included those living near the river, such as the Jareer Weyne, Baadicade, Mobileyn, and others.[55]

3.3 The narrative

With strong moral support from the Somali society and encouragement from the federal government, the *Ma'awisley* vigilantes expanded their operations beyond traditional clan boundaries. However, this expansion overstretched their capacity and exposed them to threats, ultimately leading to significant setbacks. The government, eager to present a perpetually positive image, viewed these setbacks as detrimental to its vigilante centred counter-insurgence efforts. Hence, it took stern measures against independent media whose reporting sometimes contradicted its optimistic portrayal. Among the measures taken by the government were two controversial steps. The first was the criminalization of spreading of the news of Al-Shabaab.[56] In this regard, the Deputy Minister for Information, Abdirahman Al-Adala, claimed that more than 40 websites were closed.[57] The second was a directive issued by the Minister of Post and Communications, Jama Hassan Khalif, that instructed telecommunications companies to participate in the protection of national security by preventing terrorists from using their networks.[58]

However, the Somali government's attempt to control the narrative as a counter-insurgency strategy has faced several criticisms. For instance, the media organizations expressed concern about the decision. In a press conference held in Mogadishu, they argued that this is a violation of freedom of expression and access to information. The government did not take lightly for its directives to be challenged by the media organisations. As a result, officers of the National Security and Intelligence Agency (NISA) have arrested Abdalla Ahmed Mumin, the secretary general of the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS).[59] This has created an outcry from journalists as well as rights activists and advocates.[60] Similarly, the telecommunication companies have found this directive unreasonable as the government was not in a position to provide them with the safety and security necessary to continue offering services to the public. Their concern was given

credence by the occurrence of an explosion targeting a tower by Hormuud Telecom, the largest telecommunications company in Somalia, by unknown assailants.

Second, the government sought to create popular legitimacy for vigilante resistance by leveraging religion as a mobilizing force. This approach was meant not only to reinforce the government's control over information but also provide a moral justification for its actions against Al-Shabaab. The government hoped that by addressing the ideological roots of extremism, it could weaken its appeal and influence among the population. Following a national consultative meeting on combating extremist ideologies, held between the ministries of religion and religious affairs of the federal and state authorities in October, the government has prohibited referring to Al-Shabaab by any name other than "*Khawarij*."[61] The term "*Khawarij*" refers to a sect that emerged in the 7th century during the first Islamic civil war (*fitna*) after the death of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The *Khawarij* were known for their extremely rigid and puritanical views. They believed that any Muslim who committed a major sin was no longer a believer and was subject to being declared an infidel (*kafir*). Over time, the *Khawarij* were involved in many uprisings and were known for their uncompromising stance and willingness to resort to violence to enforce their views.[62] Given the government's poor reputation and the need to validate its propaganda efforts, securing a backing for its narrative beyond government circles was crucial. It is in this vein that the President has announced that the federal government is holding a conference to establish an Islamic supreme council.

The conference, between 23 to 26 January 2023, brought together more than 300 religious scholars and preachers from different regions. After well curated and televised discussions, the attendees issued a statement that encouraged vigilante resistance, reinforced the government's position and denounced Al-Shabaab and Daesh as *Khawarij* criminals who have deviated from the path of Islam and have caused bloodshed, chaos and destruction in Somalia. The statement declared that any form of cooperation or support for these groups is sinful and urged the Somali people to reject their ideology and propaganda. Cognizant of the threat that delegitimization posed to their cause, Al-Shabaab actively countered the government's strategic efforts to legitimize state-sponsored vigilantism. For example, the group has increasingly invoked the concept of '*riddah*', apostasy, to reinforce their interpretation of Islam, justify attacks on government and civilian targets, and instill fear in those who might oppose them. Such propaganda content was distributed through texts, audio, and video via social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter,

Figure 2: Some of the sheikhs attending the religious conference in Mogadishu. Source: VOA Somali.

WhatsApp, and Telegram. Sources familiar with the group's media strategy stated that the intention of intensifying this messaging at this time was to undermine government efforts to control the narrative and, consequently, perceptions of the moral and political legitimacy of the war.[63]

3.4 The failure

Despite early successes of the vigilante centred offensive, Al-Shabaab controls a substantial portion of south central Somalia. Not only has the group recaptured some of the territories from which they were initially driven out, such as Elbuur and Cawsweyne, but they also maintain control over the rural areas surrounding towns where the government claims authority – notably Maxas, Moqokori, Aadan Yabaal, Ceeldheer, Masagawaa, and Xarardheere. Some estimates suggest more than 30 % of Somalia's total land area to be in the militant's control. [64] Several factors have impeded the progress of current efforts aimed at reclaiming territories from them. The first is intra-clan competition. For instance, Hawadle clans harbor significant grievances regarding the allocation of power and resources within the Hirshabelle administration and nationally. Similarly, other clans in the area, such as the Gugundhabe and Gaalje'el, have grievances against the Hawadle clans for the same reasons in Hiiraan. Al-Shabaab exploits these intra-clan rivalries, capitalizing on the divisions to further its own agenda. This situation is further complicated by the need for vigilante clans to operate in territories beyond their own. In such cases, clans that feel marginalized by others prioritize ensuring that the anti-Al-Shabaab efforts do not exacerbate their own vulnerability or fragility. For instance, the relationships and balance of power between the Murursade and Duduble clans in Elbur, Galmudug, posed significant barriers to a unified mobilization effort. Segmnents of these clans perceive Al-Shabaab, despite its brutal methods, as a lesser evil compared to the potential subjugation and loss of autonomy under state authorities dominated by powerful rival clans. Moreover, the greater availability of weapons often leads to or exacerbates spontaneous clashes between clans over political or resource related issues, undermining the operations against Al-Shabaab.

Table 1: Percentage of territories controlled by Al-Shabaab in south central Somalia. Sources: field notes.

Region	Control in percentage
Jubada Dhexe	100
Bay	94
Gedo	90
Jubada Hoose	82
Shabeelada Hoose	81
Bakool	71
Galguduud	44
Hiiraan	38
Shabeelada Dhexe	23
Bari	20
Mudug	3

The second is lack of trust among the political elite, who are important for clan moblisations due to their influence, at the national level. This distrust largely stems from the electoral process in 2022, in which opposition groups that had supported President Mohamud found themselves excluded from the new administration. This exclusion has

engendered a pervasive concern that the current government may be pursuing autocratic political agenda. In other words, there was a prevailing fear that should the government succeed in its efforts against Al-Shabaab, it might seek to bypass the existing power production arrangements in the absence of a viable alternative.[65] The situation is further exacerbated by parliamentary deliberations regarding term extensions, which only deepened existing suspicions and reinforced the prevailing sense of mistrust.[66] Additionally, there was a mistrust between some of the regional leaders and the federal government. For instance, Jubaland and Southwest have actively advocated for a significant role in the campaign against Al-Shabaab. Insiders suggest that this demand was driven more by a fear of future power dynamics resulting from the push back against Al-Shabaab than by a genuine intention to engage in the fight against Al-Shabaab.[67] Most recently, Ahmed Madoobe enlisted significant number of soldiers and received considerable number of pick-up trucks (to be converted into mechanized vehicles for transportation and warfare) from the United Arab Emirates to fight against Al-Shabaab.[68] However, many still see him as the primary beneficiary of Al-Shabaab's presence in the region, as it shields him from challenges to his authority by other powerful clans who might seek to replace him with one of their own.[69]

A third significant factor is the limited financial capacity to sustain the war against Al-Shabaab. With the federal government generating only slightly over $200 million in domestic revenue, substantial mobilization efforts to combat Al-Shabaab were largely impractical without significant external financial support. Although the ruling group publicly committed to prioritizing this war, they assumed power without a comprehensive strategy or financial plan to achieve the objective effectively. Additionally, the perception that the ruling elites were primarily competing for contracts and tenders shortly after assuming power fueled suspicions that the conflict was driven by financial interests rather than a genuine desire to liberate territories from Al-Shabaab.[70] Consequently, the opportunity to make a meaningful progress was missed, not only due to the lack of a coherent strategy but also because the ruling group failed to convincingly demonstrate that their fight against Al-Shabaab was motivated by genuine liberation agenda rather than personal or groups' financial gains.

4. 'Stomach is never cured by that which it fell ill': making sense of failure

Despite its continued use as a strategy to combat insurgencies, state-sponsored vigilantism has consistently failed to achieve long-term stability and peace in Somalia. A proverb frequently quoted by President Mohamud, '*calool waxay ku bukootay laguma daweeyo*' which loosely translates into 'stomach is never cured by that which made it ill,' encapsulates this failure. It highlights the inherent flaw in attempting to resolve current issues using methods that have already proven ineffective. As the history of clan mobilization in Somalia demonstrates, the problems created by vigilantism cannot be resolved by perpetuating the same practices. However, it is important to acknowledge the short-term positive effects of local uprisings against Al-Shabaab. These efforts have indeed had some significant impacts.

First, they have demonstrated that the resolve of people to defend themselves against repressive rule cannot be underestimated. From the Hiiraan-Galgaduud border to the riverine areas, the Hawadle militia defends these regions. Similarly, they defend Ceeldheer, Masagawaa, and Harardhere. Second, they have shown the value of local knowledge in guerrilla warfare and the potential benefits for regular armies in tapping into this tactical and terrain expertise [71]. Despite these short-term gains, the overall impact of vigilante operations has been negligible in terms of contributing meaningfully to the recovery of the state. This is not surprising, given that the history of vigilantism shows how these groups, particularly those rooted in clans with deeply ingrained rivalries, often reignite old hostilities.

Considering this, the repeated failure of clan-based vigilantism as a counter-insurgency effort stem from a fundamental misalignment between traditional clan ethos and practices and the external pressures exerted by the state. Traditionally, clan-based mobilizations operated within the confines of the community's natural rhythms, focusing on short-term, reactive, and seasonal protection during periods of heightened threat. A shift away from this ethos undermines the effectiveness of clan-base mobilization. For example, current vigilantes have been turned into and increasingly seen as extensions of state power rather than independent protectors of their community. Moreover, the demand for year-round, sustained operations against Al-Shabaab require resources, coordination, and discipline that often exceed the clan's independent capacity. As such, the politically motivated, organisationally sophisticated, and hence perpetual nature of the conflict has led to fatigue among both the fighters and the broader community, weakening the initial support for these efforts.

Furthermore, in intra-clan conflict, narrative formation, which played a crucial role in shaping perceptions and rallying support, was historically rooted in certain ethos that were not only vital for upholding social values but also for strategic war planning and preparation. Central to this was the commitment to truthfulness about the enemy. Accurate representations of the enemy enabled the clan to draw necessary resources and personnel, fostering a well-informed and coordinated defense. A famous Somali proverb embodies this ethos: "*Gaal dil oo gartiisana sii*" which transliterates "you may kill an an infidel, but you must give him his due credit." The point here is that false propaganda could severely undermine the clans' strategic efforts and erode the trust that clan members placed in the state, jeopardizing the unity and morale essential for their cause. Another significant aspect was the commitment to maintaining internal cohesion. In other words, the narrative-building process and practices had historically avoided anything that divided members by their degree of Islamic practice. Instead, they focused on highlighting points that represented the clan as a unified whole. In sharp contrast, contemporary clan mobilization is based more on divisive religious orientation. One source pointed out that "*when the very structures that claim to uphold Islamic values are seen as compromised by actions that contradict those values, any attempt to frame vigilante actions as religiously justified becomes inherently flawed*". Moreover, some clan members who may not share the same

level of religious fervor or who may interpret their faith differently feel alienated. As a result, the social cohesion that was essential for effective collective action is undermined.

Beyond vigilantism, it is imperative to address the structural and systemic causes of the conflict and societal grievances to achieve long-term peace and stability. To this end, four interrelated measures are crucial. First, depoliticizing the security apparatus is vital to ensuring its effectiveness and legitimacy. This goal can be realized through the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework accompanied by rigorous oversight mechanisms that foster accountability and responsiveness of the security regime to the overarching national needs. Second, bolstering the capacities of regional member states in counterterrorism is equally critical. The effectiveness of operations against insurgent groups like Al-Shabaab depends significantly on the operational autonomy and strategic alignment of these states. A unified vision that transcends regional disparities will strengthen collective efforts to neutralize Al-Shabaab's influence across the nation. Finally, advancing the incomplete political settlement is imperative for sustaining counterinsurgency efforts. These include addressing unresolved issues such as power-sharing, resource distribution, and the nature, principles, and practice of federalism as essential elements for building trust among political elites at all levels of society and the state. Equally important is reinforcing judicial institutions and ensuring the supremacy of law as a crucial pillar for creating a stable and cooperative political environment that can support long-term peace initiatives. Most importantly, the question of secessionist administration of Somaliland must be addressed satisfactorily. A political settlement that fails to address these issues would ultimately perpetuate the ongoing instability and fragmentation of the state.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the historical patterns of vigilante mobilization and their strategic deployment by state actors across different periods to counter insurgencies. It highlighted how such state-sponsored vigilantism has often been intertwined with various divisive and inherently contradictory factors, such as ideology, clan identity, and shape-shifting political projects, whose interactions provide short-term tactical advantages but frequently hinder the achievement of long-term political stability. In doing so, it underscores how historical patterns continue to shape present actions and motivations, often leading to similarly detrimental outcomes. The paper exemplifies this by focusing on the current situation in southern Somalia, where President Mohamud has incorporated the Ma'awisley vigilantes into his strategy to reclaim territories from Al-Shabaab. The analysis suggests that this approach, which attempts to forge a passable path forward from a history of failure, represents a futile endeavor. The paper argues that the recurring failures of counter-insurgency measures stem from a fundamental misalignment between traditional clan-based vigilantism and the external pressures exerted by the state. In other words, clan mobilization cannot be effectively employed both as an operational strategy to suppress insurgencies and as a meaningful and sustainable political tool for consolidating power within a highly divided society like Somalia.

This limitation arises because the social framework underpinning clan mobilization is essentially centered on protecting communal interests rather than advancing national agendas. I therefore add my voice to calls for a negotiated solution by scholars and experts who advocate for such dialogue with Al-Shabaab as a means to end the violence. For instance, Menkhaus [72] contends that Al-Shabaab is not a monolithic entity, but rather a complex and diverse movement with political, ideological, pragmatic, and opportunistic factions. He suggests that identifying and engaging with the moderate and pragmatic elements within Al-Shabaab could open avenues for dialogue. Elmi and Aynte [73] also argue that Al-Shabaab is a rational actor responsive to incentives and disincentives. Besides, the fact that Al-Shabaab's role extends beyond that of a terrorist organization is also manifested by how it established a parallel state structure and acts as a social service provider, delivering basic necessities to populations under its control [74]. This is not to romanticize Al-Shabaab or undercut its heinous acts of perpetrating deadly attacks both within and outside Somalia, but rather to acknowledge them as key political actors without whose engagement it would be next to impossible to achieve meaningful peace.

While dialogue is the most promising way to resolve the conflict and establish long-term peace in Somalia, it is crucial to acknowledge that negotiating with Al-Shabaab is neither easy nor straightforward. Numerous challenges and obstacles, such as the preconditions set by both parties, shrinks the possibility of a dialogue. Botha and Abdile [75] point out that Al-Shabaab demands the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Somalia and the establishment of an Islamic state based on its interpretation of Sharia law as prerequisites for any talks. On the other hand, the Somali government insists on Al-Shabaab's acceptance of the federal constitution as conditions for negotiations. Moreover, both parties lack trust and legitimacy in the eyes of not only the Somali public but also of each other. Toros and Harley [76] highlight that Al-Shabaab views the Somali government as illegitimate, corrupt, and dependent on external actors. Conversely, the Somali government regards Al-Shabaab as a terrorist group that has no popular support or political vision. Despite these difficulties, I believe that a negotiated solution with Al-Shabaab is still possible and desirable. International actors, including Qatar and Norway, should be encouraged to facilitate diplomatic negotiations. Qatar's established relationships with Islamic movements uniquely position it as a crucial mediator in these discussions. Similarly, Norway's considerable influence within the Western world could be strategically leveraged to persuade skeptics in the West, thereby minimizing negative external influences.

Regardless of who was, is or would be involved in the initiation of a dialogue, it is imperative to recognize the distinct nature of Al-Shabaab compared to other militant groups such as the Taliban as well as similarities. On the difference, while the Taliban's nationalist agenda respects national borders, Al-Shabaab's transnational jihadist ideology presents unique challenges. On similarities, both have committed heinous crimes against civilian targets that are hard to justify or forget. Some major political actors evoke this as one good reason why Al-Shabaab should no be engaged in dialogue. However, such stance is simplistic. While their history of committing atrocities against civilians is deeply

unsettling, the broader context of Somalia's conflict is replete with similar violence albeit the scale and execution may have differed. In other words, other political actors, including the regime of Siad Barre and various armed groups, have also perpetrated mass killings in Hargeisa and Burao. Even more recently, the Somaliland administration has committed similar atrocities in Las Anod. This history creates a paradoxical situation where individuals responsible for severe human rights violations often hold positions of power or live without accountability. The appointment of former Al-Shabaab senior officers to high-ranking positions within the federal government, despite their troubling human rights records, is a reflection of this glaring inconsistency.[77] This raises a critical question: how can the refusal to engage in dialogue with Al-Shabaab be justified if other perpetrators of violence are not held to the same standard of justice? The dilemma here underscores the complex and morally fraught nature of pursuing peace and justice in Somalia, where the legacy of violence is pervasive and nearly all actors have been implicated in severe human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings.

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