



Query response

Somalia: Al-Shabaab areas in Southern Somalia

- Which areas of Southern Somalia are subject to al-Shabaab's rule?

Sources and limitations

There are few opportunities to map and verify information about power relations in Southern Somalia,¹ and therefore, it is not possible to provide a detailed and exhaustive account of these conditions. This query response focuses on the district capitals and only provides a general picture of power relations outside these areas. The district capitals carry the same name as the districts and are usually the largest city/town in the given district. Al-Shabaab's influence in areas where Somali authorities are present, is not discussed in this response.

The response is primarily based on information from local resource persons and representatives of organizations that work in Southern Somalia, including in al-Shabaab areas (see the reference list). The sources are made anonymous due to their work situation and/or safety.

Background: AMISOM offensive that stopped

Al-Shabaab took control of much of Southern Somalia during the period of 2008-2010, but was primarily an urban phenomenon (Hansen 2013, p. 89). Outside the towns, the organisation was absent or represented through allied clan militias. Al-Shabaab also took control of the Northern part of Mogadishu but failed to conquer the Southern part of the city, where Somalia's internationally recognized government was protected by the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

Between 2011-2015, AMISOM and other government-affiliated forces drove al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu, followed by many other towns in Southern Somalia. The offensive against al-Shabaab then more or less came to a halt, and in 2016 and 2017, some towns fell back into al-Shabaab's hands because AMISOM withdrew from these towns.² The reasons behind

¹ Al-Shabaab's presence is largely confined to Southern Somalia, but they are also active in the Galgala area Southwest of the coastal city of Bosaso in Puntland (Ahmed 2018; Reuters 2018).

² Amongst others, this applies to Badhadhe, Adan Yabal, Rabdhure, Tieglow and El Bur. These towns fell back into al-Shabaab's hands in January 2016 (BBC 2016), June 2016 (source H 2016a, p. 4), July 2016 (source H 2016b, p. 6), October 2016 (Garowe Online 2016) and April 2017 (Hassan 2017), respectively.

AMISOM's withdrawal are complex and somewhat unclear, but the withdrawal was partly due to fears that spreading the forces over too wide an area with long supply lines would make them vulnerable to attacks from al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab-controlled district capitals

Table 1 provides an overview of the district capitals that al-Shabaab controls. Al-Shabaab also has control over other towns/villages, but we do not have an exhaustive overview of these. However, sources agree that al-Shabaab controls most of the Middle Juba region. According to source C, a significant part of the organization is located in these areas.

Table 1: Al-Shabaab-controlled district capitals

Region³	District capital
Bay	Rabdhure Tieglow
Galgudud	El Bur El Der
Middle Juba	Buale Jilib Sakow
Middle Shabelle	Adan Yabal
Mudug	Haradhere
Lower Juba	Badhadhe Jamame
Lower Shabelle	Kurtun Warey Sablale

The table was prepared by Landinfo based on information from sources A, B, C, D and the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (2018, p. 22).

The district capitals not mentioned in Table 1, i.e. the vast majority of them,⁴ are controlled by the government.⁵ The sources agree that the government has little or no permanent presence outside the district capitals they have taken hold of with AMISOM's help and that, consequently, these constitute separate enclaves.

³ Somalia is in a process of federalization, where different regions are merged into states. For example, Galgudud and Southern parts of Mudug form the state of Galmudug. However, regional terms are still used as a geographical reference.

⁴ The district capitals have the same name as the districts. An overview of the various districts is available here: <http://www.fsnao.org/downloads/Somalia-Administrative-Units-Districts.pdf>.

⁵ The government here comprises the federal government in Mogadishu and the various regional actors that support them.

Al-Shabaab's presence and influence outside the district capitals

Al-Shabaab's size is unknown,⁶ but sources agree that the organization is not big enough to be present in every area the government has not taken hold of. According to sources E and F, who have extensive experience from various al-Shabaab areas, it is primarily in towns and larger villages that al-Shabaab has a permanent presence and implements their strict interpretation of Sharia.

The sources moreover agree that al-Shabaab also has influence in areas where they do not have a permanent presence. According to source F, they are not concerned with “everything and everyone” in such areas but primarily with people paying taxes (zakat) and not cooperating with the government. Al-Shabaab may also subject the population in these areas to recruitment pressure.⁷

Strong clans can have some room for negotiation with al-Shabaab, but the sources claim that most people submit for fear of reprisals. Al-Shabaab has an extensive network of informants and their fighters can move relatively freely in areas not taken hold of by the government. They operate in small, mobile groups that can assemble as needed, for example in order to launch an attack or react towards people who opposed them (source A, meetings in 2017 and 2019). According to the sources, such al-Shabaab groups are particularly active around the areas where the government and its supporters are present. This is supported by the fact that al-Shabaab continues to carry out attacks against AMISOM and other government forces in such areas (ACLED 2019).

Al-Shabaab's influence is not based on fear alone. According to the sources, there is a wide perception throughout the population of Southern Somalia that al-Shabaab is less corrupt than the government. This is underscored by the fact that even people in Mogadishu and other government-held towns turn to al-Shabaab courts outside these areas in order to handle disputes (source A, meeting in 2019; Garowe Online 2018).

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⁶ Estimates of al-Shabaab's size vary and are highly uncertain. The United States Africa Command estimates that al-Shabaab has between 3,000 and 7,000 combatants (Belfakir 2019). By comparison, AMISOM has approximately 20,000 soldiers (UNSC 2018).

⁷ Recruitment to al-Shabaab is discussed in more detail in a separate query response (Landinfo 2018).

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