SALDHIG INSTITUTE

AL-SHABAAB'S EVOLUTION:

STRATEGIC OR FORCED?

An assessment of the group's strategic, operational, and governance transformation and what drives it.

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Executive Summary

This study analyses the recent strategic and tactical evolution of Al-Shabaab (AS), arguing that the group's nearly two decades of survival stem less from raw military strength and more from its ability to adapt to shifting military, political, social, and economic conditions. Al-Shabaab has moved away from an approach centred on holding territory and engaging in conventional battles towards a "long-war" strategy focused on exhausting adversaries and exercising strategic patience. Over time, it has substantially upgraded its intelligence, communications, administrative, and financial capacities, exploiting technology, the internet, and mobile networks to coordinate and sustain its activities.

Operationally, the group has shifted from frequent large scale, indiscriminate attacks on civilians to a greater focus on military and government targets, including critical infrastructure. Its operations are grounded in detailed intelligence gathering, long term planning, surprise, and the use of overwhelming force to seize a rapid tactical advantage.

Beyond the battlefield, Al-Shabaab has consolidated its governance structures. It has developed systems for taxation, courts, education, healthcare, and water services, aiming to entrench its influence and secure a measure of public acquiescence. The group has also integrated clan elders and local religious scholars into its governance arrangements, establishing a council of clan elders and clerical councils to bridge the gap between itself and local communities and enhance its perceived legitimacy. In parallel, Al-Shabaab has established an opaque but significant governance structure, with FGS-recognised clan elders and representatives operating within government territory. The establishment of these councils mirrors the two pillars that have underpinned Somali social order for generations: customary authority and religious authority.

The group's relationship with local populations has thus evolved from one primarily based on fear to a more complex mix of coercion, service provision, ideological messaging, and social integration. This environment, together with chronic unemployment, poverty, and recurrent drought, has lowered recruitment barriers and facilitated the spread of al-Shabaab's narratives across communities.

> **"Al-Shabaab has transformed into a hybrid organisation combining armed conflict, governance, revenue collection, judicial roles, social influence and media activities."**

Organisationally and financially, al-Shabaab has reached a relatively advanced stage of maturity. It maintains significant financial reserves that could underwrite its activities for years. Evidence in the study points to a pragmatic current within the movement that favours greater political flexibility and may, under suitable conditions, consider loosening or abandoning formal ties with al-Qaeda (AQ) in exchange for substantial political gains negotiated. While its links to al-Qaeda are increasingly symbolic and ideological, the group appears to prioritise more practical, interest-based relationships, such as emerging military and logistical cooperation with the Houthis.

The study determines that Al-Shabaab has transformed into a hybrid organisation that combines armed conflict with local governance, revenue collection, judicial roles, social influence, and media activities. Its primary aim is not strict ideological adherence but organisational survival, maintaining financial assets, and strengthening military strength, even if that requires ideological shifts or the formation of new alliances. The findings show that most major changes were reactive responses to external pressures, yet Al-Shabaab has increasingly turned these pressures into strategic options, making the relationship more of a spectrum than a simple binary. Its future will depend on its ability to adapt to internal Somali dynamics and a changing regional and global landscape.

1. Introduction

This study explores a key aspect of security development in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa. Over nearly twenty years, the group has shown resilience and adaptability to evolving domestic and international contexts. It is not limited to one type of warfare or governance style but consistently demonstrates strategic and tactical flexibility. Thus, analysing the "transformation" of AS involves not only examining its current actions but also understanding how it reacts to various pressures from political, military, and societal domains.

Looking at the organisation's history, AS began as armed cells that relied on direct combat and the capture and retention of territory, but it gradually moved towards a variety of intertwined strategies. This is among the main reasons for its continued existence despite strong military and political pressure. The organisation understood that success in war does not depend solely on military power but on its ability to endure, be resilient, and adapt its form when necessary. As such, AS adopted a "long-war" strategy whose aim is to wear down its opponents rather than seek a quick, decisive victory through direct confrontation.

The tactical transformations of AS have also played an important role in its survival. Here, tactics refer not only to the weapons used but also to communication methods, intelligence gathering, internal management, and even how it manages its finances. AS has taken extensive advantage of modern technology, especially the internet and communication devices, to expand its influence, facilitate coordination among its members, and enhance its psychological impact through sophisticated media operations. This shows that the organisation is not confined to traditional methods but continuously keeps pace with global technological developments.

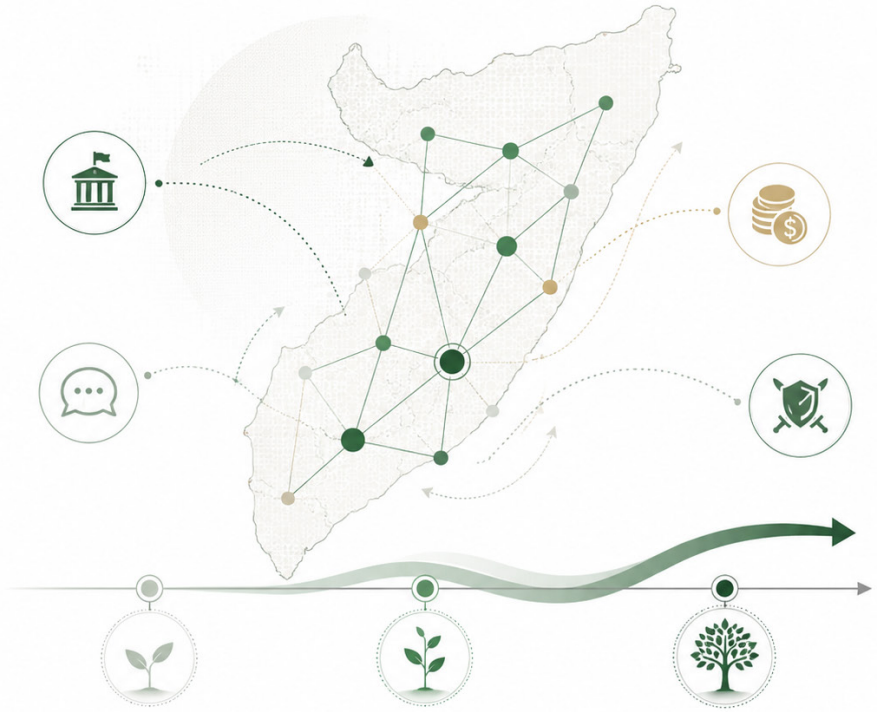
On the strategic front, AS has shown a clear shift in its approach to governance and society. Previously, the organisation was known for large-scale operations that did not distinguish between targets, but it is now apparent that, at times, it seeks to limit actions that directly affect civilians, particularly in areas where it seeks long-term influence. This is part of a new strategy aimed at gaining or maintaining public support, as it has come to recognise that civilians are an important source of finance, information, and protection. Thus, AS's strategic transformation is based on a combination of coercion and co-optation.

Furthermore, AS has markedly improved its internal organisational structure. The group functions in a structured manner, with an administrative system, tax-collection mechanisms, and procedures for managing the territories it controls. This administrative upgrade is vital to the organisation's overall strategy, as it grants economic and social influence that enhances its resilience.

Domestic Somali politics, characterised by disputes and infighting within Somalia's political elite, has created a security vacuum that armed groups exploit. Historically, organisations such as Al-Shabaab have skillfully exploited unstable political environments. Limited political capital is wasted on engineering electoral outcomes rather than on steering strategic security decisions; the politicisation of security institutions serves the interests of the few rather than those of the nation; and the absence of security governance is deliberately caused to create a profitable security sector rather than to promote professionalism, transparency and accountability. These, combined with the lack of a legitimate political framework guiding Somalia's political trajectory, inform Al-Shabaab's strategy and plans.

At the same time, international transformations shape AS's strategy and tactics. Conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, along with rivalry among major powers, create both opportunities and challenges. For example, disruptions in arms markets, the wider availability of technology, and shifts in global politics can affect AS's ability to secure resources, build networks, and secure support. Thus, the organisation is not isolated; it is indirectly linked to the international system.

It is also important to recognise that AS's transformations are not always visible or rapid. At times, change occurs gradually, reflecting learning from past mistakes and adaptation to new pressures. This makes it difficult to predict the organisation's future trajectory, as it can conceal its plans and abruptly change its modus operandi.



2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in data from Saldhig Institute's sources, interviews with individuals possessing extensive knowledge of al-Shabaab (particularly long-term members), and a multi-layered strategic analysis that integrates structural, capability, and psychological dimensions. This approach generates insights that move beyond common assumptions and brings into focus aspects often overlooked in conventional analyses.

The findings suggest that al-Shabaab has sustained itself over an extended period through a strategy rooted in adaptation, preservation of core capabilities, and the fusion of armed struggle with social governance. This has enabled the group to withstand continuous military pressure while maintaining a persistent level of influence.

Data Collection / Interviews

The primary data for this study were gathered through interviews with intelligence sources and subject-matter experts familiar with al-Shabaab. Among those interviewed by the Saldhig Institute were approximately a dozen current and former al-Shabaab officials who occupy, or have occupied, positions of strategic influence in shaping the organisation's trajectory. These respondents provided insider perspectives on the group's organisational structure, its battlefield tactics, its governance practices and relations with local communities, the ideology and doctrines used to guide members, and the transformations that have occurred in recent years.

Interviews were conducted in an open-ended format to avoid restricting responses to brief answers and instead elicit in-depth explanations of the reasons, motivations, and circumstances behind the events under examination.

Analysis

Information obtained from the interviews was subjected to strategic analysis at three interrelated levels. The visible level focuses on observable actions such as attacks, public gatherings, speeches, and the implementation of court rulings. The structural level examines organisational arrangements, internal hierarchies, and the systems through which the group operates. The psychological level explores the ideas, narratives, and tools of intimidation and persuasion that the organisation employs.

This layered analytical lens enabled the study to move beyond describing what happened and instead address why it happened and how it can be interpreted.

Temporal Comparison

The study also incorporates temporal comparison across distinct phases of the organisation's evolution, focusing on the early phase, the intermediate stages, and the last five years. This comparison highlights both continuity and change, clarifying which features of al-Shabaab's strategy and organisation have remained stable and which have been adapted or transformed.

Protection of Data, Ethics, and Security of Sources

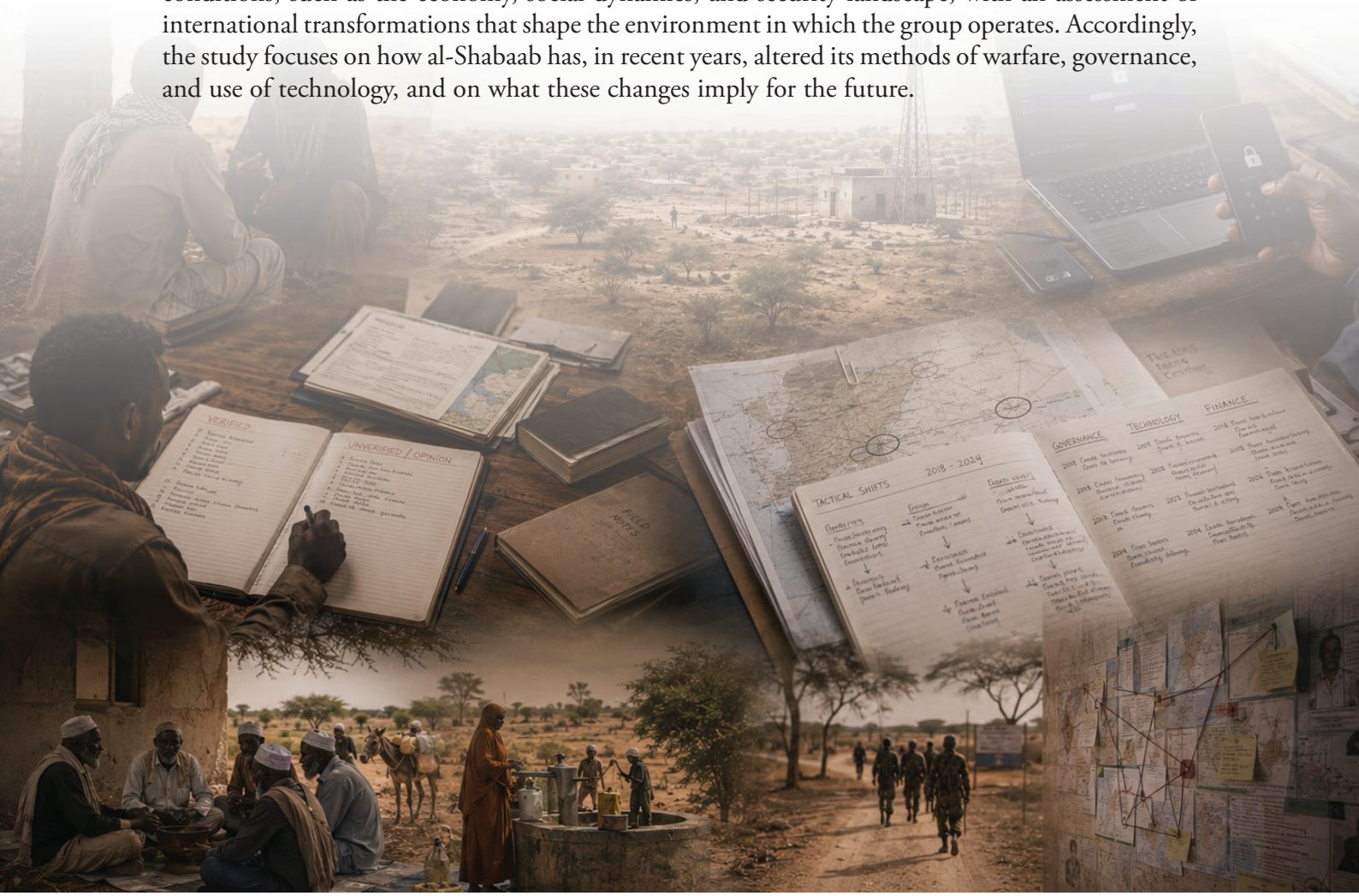
Because the research relies on information from insiders and individuals residing in al-Shabaab-controlled areas, and in some cases within the organisation itself, particular care was taken to ensure that information would not be disclosed in full without the explicit consent of the provider, and that clear distinctions were maintained between verified facts on the ground, personal opinions, and the evaluative judgments of either the source or the data collector.

These safeguards are essential for ensuring that the study is ethically sound and reliable for readers seeking an accurate understanding of al-Shabaab and similar groups.

By bringing together verified data, the experiences of former members, strategic multi-level analysis, and temporal comparison, the study presents a comprehensive picture that is not confined to a single dimension. It argues that a sustainable solution to the challenge posed by al-Shabaab can only be achieved when analysis moves beyond narrow, surface-level understandings toward a deeper grasp of how the group thinks, how it is organised, and what has enabled its continued survival.

The study also underscores the importance of understanding the relationship between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda, and of managing this relationship strategically in a way that does not inadvertently generate new groups or fresh conflicts.

Finally, the study, arguably the first of its kind in this specific configuration, is grounded in the recognition that al-Shabaab is a dynamic organisation whose strategies and tactics are in constant flux. Any serious effort to anticipate its future trajectory must combine analysis of internal Somali conditions, such as the economy, social dynamics, and security landscape, with an assessment of international transformations that shape the environment in which the group operates. Accordingly, the study focuses on how al-Shabaab has, in recent years, altered its methods of warfare, governance, and use of technology, and on what these changes imply for the future.



3. What Has Changed in al-Shabaab's Strategy in Recent Years?

If we look specifically at the last five years, it is clear that al-Shabaab has entered a phase of strategic transformation that affects multiple dimensions: military, political, economic, and psychological. These changes are not the result of a single cause; they stem from a combination of plans devised by the group itself and new circumstances that have forced it to adapt. Any armed movement that has existed for a long time is compelled to constantly reassess how it operates to achieve its objectives; this is a core strategic principle observed among armed organisations worldwide.

From the perspective of the strategies the group employs, al-Shabaab continuously adapts to evolving conditions in both war and politics. Thus, its behaviour over the last five years has been significantly shaped by several key factors:

One of the most important factors is the change in the mandate of the African Union forces deployed in Somalia, from AMISOM to ATMIS, and now to AUSSOM. When the mission›s format and name were altered, the group's mode of operation also shifted. This compelled the group to review the tactics it uses to defend its territory or launch attacks. At the same time, each decision to rename or reconfigure the mission creates within the group a perception that the war is nearing its end and that foreign forces are preparing to withdraw. This, in turn, pushes Al-Shabaab to concentrate and intensify its attacks and military power against the Somali National Armed Forces, so that if foreign troops do leave, they are left facing a national army that is too weak to defend itself effectively.[1]

Another major factor was the government's 2022 offensive against areas under al-Shabaab's control, and the counter-offensive the group launched in response. Whenever military pressure increases, al-Shabaab shifts its tactics —towards guerrilla tactics, rapid raids, and hit-and-run operations.[2]

The 2022 campaign is often misrepresented as having unfolded suddenly, but it was actually the result of a well-planned strategy. It was not improvised nor triggered by a spontaneous clan uprising that the government hastily supported. Instead, it was based on a deliberate, pre-existing plan developed in early 2022. This dual-track approach combined ‹hard› power, such as joint operations, targeted airstrikes, intelligence, and the deployment of national forces and special units, with "soft" power, including amnesty, incentives for defectors, and a politically driven effort to regain the population›s support. Importantly, the strategy foresaw a two-tier force model: professional, manoeuvre-capable national forces working alongside local and regional defence units that maintained their community identities and controlled the hinterland.

The clan mobilisation, later called the Macawisley and formalised as the Community Defence Forces, should be seen more as a premeditated and cultivated part of the strategy rather than its initial trigger. Genuine local grievances against al-Shabaab's taxation and brutality provided much of the energy, but they were directed into, and strengthened by, a government plan that had already designated community forces as a key element. The subsequent campaign resulted in al-Shabaab losing territory across much of Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle.

1 SNA Officer, Feb 2026.

2 Federal Government of Somalia national security planning, 2022; consistent with the framework set out in the National Security Architecture and the associated counter-al-Shabaab operational strategy. For many years, Al-Shabaab had propagated the narrative to its members and supporters that foreign troops were the only obstacle preventing them from taking control of the entire country, and that Somali forces alone would not be able to withstand them even for a short period. However, the 2022 campaign challenged and undermined that long-standing narrative.

The real danger to the group was less about the enemy's firepower and more about its strategic approach: for the first time, the state had a clear plan that involved turning the entire population into the front line. Since the community, rather than a distant army, became the enemy, al-Shabaab couldn't rely on its usual tactics of intimidation and claiming to provide services. Instead, it had to respond on the government's terms—aiming to fracture the mobilisation, punish cooperation, and intimidate or eliminate elders and local leaders supporting it. Meanwhile, it waited for the fragile clan coalitions—constantly vulnerable to setbacks in consolidation—to break apart before stepping in again. This incident correctly challenges any view that sees al-Shabaab as the sole strategic player: here, it was the state's deliberate action, and the group was merely reacting.

The rise of US airstrikes has also had an impact particularly since 2017 after the Trump Administration classified Somalia an active combat zone which granted AFRICOM greater flexibility to undertake airstrikes in Somalia without high-level approval. This resulted in over 200 airstrikes between 2017 2021 –, which is more than three times combined airstrikes conducted by President Bush, Obama and Biden[3]. US airstrikes and with Turkey's entry into air operations against the group.[4], have altered the leadership structure and the movement patterns of armed operations, as leaders and critical bases become prime targets.[5]

Another factor is the reported relationship between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, which many analysts regard as part of a broader web linking armed groups across the region. This relationship can affect technical aspects such as access to weapons, training, or financing.[6]

Natural disasters such as floods and droughts alter social and economic environments, indirectly influencing armed groups› actions, particularly when these groups seek to gain community support by offering relief and basic services that the state would usually provide. Recently, this has led Al-Shabaab to exploit climate change both tactically and strategically.

3 New America (2026), the War in Somalia, live Statistics.
4 A Senior member of AS, Middle Shabelle, Jan 2026.
5 A Member of AS's Jabhad, Jan 2026.
6 A member of AS's Technical Office, April 2026.

4. How Have Al-Shabaab's Military Operations Changed?

When examining the ongoing conflict in Somalia, it is clear that Al-Shabaab continually develops and refines the tactics it employs in its attacks. Long-standing armed movements generally adhere to one key principle: "the survival of the organisation depends on its ability to adapt to a changing battlefield." Accordingly, al-Shabaab combines military tactics, psychological warfare, and strategic planning to maximise the chances of success in its operations. The group consistently uses explosives, complex (multi-phase) attacks, and strategically chosen targets to weaken the government's capacity and that of its allied forces.[7]

Although there have been no radical changes to the basic methods or tactics they employ, notable improvements have been made. Between 2008 and 2020, Al-Shabaab was known for indiscriminate attacks that frequently inflicted heavy casualties on civilians. However, from 2021 onwards, marked by the Taliban, its ideological partner, taking control of Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab undertook a review of its methods of warfare[8]. The Taliban, whether in reality or in propaganda, is widely portrayed as having largely avoided large scale targeting of civilians and as framing its struggle as a nationalist effort confined within Afghanistan's borders. This, in turn, helped it secure broader support among Afghans.

After 2021, al-Shabaab increasingly shifted its attacks towards military fronts, ambushes, and state infrastructure. To better understand how the group operates, it is useful to outline the main techniques and steps it follows during an operation.

Intensive Intelligence Gathering

Every major attack begins with a lengthy, covert information-gathering phase. Though unseen, it is arguably the most critical stage. al-Shabaab combines multiple methods of intelligence collection using nformation from people physically present in or near the target area, images and videos captured by drones on-foot reconnaissance missions carried out covertly by small teams and probing or "test" attacks to measure the reaction of defending forces.

This process functions like military research. After gathering enough data, attack planners can evaluate troop numbers, weapon availability, and the arrangement of defensive positions, which greatly improves the chances of success. Security studies[9] show that groups like Al-Shabaab often rely on local intelligence from communities or from agents they have embedded in target areas to wield their influence.

Organisation of the Assault Force

The fighters used for major assaults are not common foot soldiers. They undergo rigorous training and psychological conditioning, which lasts from three to eight months. This preparation is based on four key pillars such as religious and psychological indoctrination, to ensure the fighter believes in what he is doing; military ethics and discipline, to create order, hierarchy, and unquestioning obedience; morale and motivation, teaching the fighter to see the operation as a religious duty that will bring divine reward and paradise in the afterlife and comprehensive combat training on weapons, movement, and coordination in battle, so that each person understands their role, from ordinary fighter up to field commander.

7 COI Report – Somalia: Security Situation, May 2025.
8 Senior Member of Al-Shabaab's Defense Committee, February 2026.
9 Centre for Preventative Action (2025) Conflict With Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

During this period, fighters are typically denied access to phones and are not informed of the destination or the exact mission until the final moments. The result is a highly cohesive force marked by strong discipline and firm determination. Psychologically, the fighter enters the battlefield fired by zeal and a desire for martyrdom.[10]

Time as a "Hidden Weapon"

At times, the most powerful weapon is not a gun or an explosive, but time. Al-Shabaab rarely attacks newly established positions. Instead, it waits for signs of fatigue and neglect for example it observes whether troops have stayed in the same base for an extended period, number on leave rotation, time spent by commander in urban centres as opposed to on the front lines and decline in morale.

Once such conditions materialise, the base becomes vulnerable. The attack may appear sudden, but in reality, it is the result of a deliberate strategy of waiting for the optimal moment.[11]

Surprise

Al-Shabaab's attacks are often characterised by an element of surprise. Even when rumors or suspicions surface from unusual activity in the area, many important details are often still unknown. This includes but not limited to the exact timing of the attack, the precise target as well as the type or format of the operation.

The element of surprise acts as a psychologically potent tool. When a soldier suspects an attack could happen but remains uncertain about the timing, his mind endures ongoing stress. Over time, this diminishes alertness and impairs decision-making abilities.[12]

Use of Overwhelming Force

Once the attack begins, the group employs force that exceeds the defenders' capacity. This comes from several elements such as high morale among the attacking force, clear plan with multiple axes of advance and contingency options, number superiority over the troops manning the base and the use of heavy weapons such as RPG-7s, mortars, B-10 recoilless rifles, technicals, and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). The strategy of "overwhelming force" often causes the base's defences to collapse within the first few minutes of the attack.[13]

Timing of the Attack

Most major attacks take place before the dawn prayer. This timing offers two natural advantages. First, sleep and shocks means that solders arejolted awake by explosions and gunfire, leading to confusion and fear. Secondly, darkness is a fear-inducing factor in itself; individuals cannot easily gauge direction, attacker numbers, or distance.

10 A Member of AS's Jabhat, Jan 2026.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

The targeted soldier experiences something akin to a war nightmare: a massive explosion, shouting, gunfire emerging from the dark, and complete uncertainty about "Who is alive? Who is dead? Who has fled? What is happening? Where should I go?" At that moment, the brain prioritises survival over fighting.[14]

Anticipation of Outcome

Operations are rarely launched at random. The group uses a projected "success probability" derived from vetted planning. If the intelligence and operational plan indicate a likelihood of success above roughly %90, the operation proceeds; otherwise, it is postponed[15].

This method makes major attacks highly planned. The group has long been known for complex, multi-stage operations that typically begin with explosions and are followed by an armed assault.

In summary, al-Shabaab's tactics are not limited to direct combat. They combine intelligence collection, psychological conditioning, strategic patience, surprise, and overwhelming firepower. There is also a deep psychological dimension that targets the defending soldiers through fear, confusion, and demoralisation.

Understanding these elements is crucial for anyone seeking a deeper grasp of how the military machinery of armed groups operates and why their attacks can sometimes have such a profound impact.[16]

14 Ibid.
15 Senior Jabhad Operations Commander, Middle Jubba, March 2026.
16 Ibid.

5. What Is the Role of Technology in Al-Shabaab's Operations and Strategy?

A close examination of how the organisation currently functions shows that Al-Shabaab does not treat technology as a mere add-on but as the backbone of its day-to-day operations. To present itself as a "state-like" actor - administering territories, collecting revenue, enforcing court rulings, and spreading its ideological message through coercion and persuasion - it embeds technology across three main spheres: administration and economy, military and intelligence operations, and media influence. Al-Shabaab remains the most serious security threat in Somalia[17] and continues to adapt to new technologies to reinforce its resilience.

Use of Technology: Communications, Drones, and the Internet

AS uses technology systematically across all levels of the organisation[18]. Administratively, it exploits Somalia's heavy reliance on mobile phones and digital money. This enables orders, payments, and administrative communications to flow rapidly through channels that are not easily monitored. A 2020 Hiraal Institute report, for example, highlighted the security risks arising from Al-Shabaab's exploitation of mobile money systems, demonstrating that this is not speculation but a recognised security concern.

Militarily, the group relies on a mix of phones, internet based tools, and other devices to transmit orders and intelligence. The key issue is not merely that technology is used, but that a modern armed organisation cannot function effectively without continuous communication. A fighter deployed in a remote area, an informant in a government held town, and a commander in a forest hideout are all connected by an invisible thread: communication.

Regarding drones,[19] credible reports indicate that Al-Shabaab has used a small number of commercially available civilian drones, converting them for military use and experimenting with their use as bomb carriers, though long running attempts have generally failed. The group is still seeking more sophisticated systems, either by purchase or via new allies, foremost among them the Houthis in Yemen. [20]

Strategically, this highlights one core point: technology shortens the distance between planning and execution. It enables the group to see, hear, and broadcast messages before its adversaries can fully react.

17 A member of AS's Technical Office, April 2026.
18 Paul D Williams (2024) The Somali National Army Versus Al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment.
19 A member of AS's Technical Office, April 2026.
20 Saldhig Institute (2026) The Strategic Nexus Between Al-Shabaab and The Houthis and its Implications for the Region and Global Security.

Intelligence-Gathering Techniques

In intelligence work, al-Shabaab's strength does not lie in gadgets alone; it lies in the fusion of technology with deep social penetration. AS invests heavily in infiltrating security forces, state institutions, the business community, and civilians to gather accurate information. This human-centred intelligence model is more dangerous than any single device, because the most valuable information is almost always provided by someone who sees, hears, or sits where decisions are made.

Studies of Amniyat,[21] the security and intelligence wing of Al-Shabaab, show that the organisation has long developed a dense information gathering system built on surveillance, intimidation, organised spy networks, and careful prioritisation of targets. Amniyat is the group›s most critical arm, enabling its survival, penetration, and covert operations.

Here, technology functions as an amplifier rather than a replacement for humans. Phones transmit messages, the internet facilitates contact, and drones provide imagery, but insiders are the ones who confirm what is really happening. This is why AS often outmanoeuvres stronger, better-equipped adversaries: it has internalised an old lesson of war - "information is power; accurate information is half of victory."

Psychologically, this form of intelligence fosters a pervasive sense that "anyone could be an eye or an ear." It erodes internal trust within institutions and confers an advantage on the group that cannot always be countered by firepower. [22]

Use of Social Media and Media Platforms to Project Its Message

On social media and across broader media operations, AS pursues two parallel goals: disseminating its message and shaping psychological impact. The group does not merely want to be heard; it wants to be felt. It uses websites, affiliated media outlets, and social media accounts to broadcast claims of responsibility, combat footage, threats, and, at times, tailored messages for specific supporter segments. Since 2022, the Federal Government of Somalia has invested considerable effort in countering Al-Shabaab's online footprint by closing websites, engaging with social media platforms to close accounts that propagate terrorist material, and actively debunking Al-Shabaab messaging through counter-messaging.[23]

Despite government efforts, Al-Shabaab continues to thrive in this space. In 2024, the CTC at West Point described al-Shabaab as one of the earliest groups in the Horn of Africa to grasp the strategic potential of social media, including direct, real-time use of platforms during major events. The study showed that the group deliberately migrates to new digital spaces when pressure is applied on its existing channels, treating the media environment as a battlefield in its own right.[24]

Al-Shabaab's propaganda is not limited to recruiting or rallying support and it operates on three layers. First, the group projects an image of an organisation that remains active, organised, and operationally capable. Secondly, it uses propaganda to initimidate targeted communities, officials, and institutions. Thirdly, it appeals to those disillusioned with the state's failure to provide services, justice, or security and fourthly it constantly preserves and reinforces its own narrative, so that it does not lose the "war of meaning".

21 Sinko G and Besenyo S (2023) More than Survival: The Role of Al-Shabaab Secret Service, Amniyat, in Information-Gathering
22 A member of AS's Amniyat, Lower Shebelle, Jan 2026..
23 AS Media Expert, Mogadishu, Feb 2026.
24 Gilroy, G. (2021) The Online Frontline: Decoding Al-Shabaab's Social Media Strategy.

In sum, Al-Shabaab uses technology in an integrated fashion that reflects how a modern armed organisation must operate: administration and economy, communications and operations, intelligence and media, and psychological impact. Its real strength does not lie in the tools themselves, but in how it fuses them with human networks, organisational systems, and strategic intent. This is why understanding AS's use of technology is not a purely technical issue; it is key to understanding how the organisation survives, exerts influence, and endures despite persistent external pressure.

6. How Has al-Shabaab's Overall Strategy Changed in Terms of Governance, Warfare, and Politics?

When one examines Al-Shabaab's overall strategy, the picture is more complex than any single label can capture. On the surface, the group still repeats the slogans and objectives it has held since its formation; its media output and leaders' speeches do not indicate a formal retreat from its broad political and military ambitions. But once we move beyond rhetoric and focus on behaviour, clear shifts become apparent.

In practice, the group is no longer just "a terrorist outfit that carries out attacks." It is seeking to present itself as a force that fights, governs communities, collects taxes, resolves disputes, launches attacks, withdraws, and then returns. This marks a significant strategic transformation: the stated end-goal has not changed, but the pathway towards it has become more flexible, multi-layered, and attuned to social psychology and war-weariness.

Territorial control has remained highly fluid since the start of the offensive campaign in 2022. By mid2025-, Al-Shabaab had re-established itself in parts of the two Shabelles, Hiiraan, Galgadud, and Mudug that it had previously lost during government offensives. In 2026, the government again made significant gains in Lower Shabelle and parts of Middle Shabelle, with the key objective of securing the Shabelle River›s intersections to impose significant operational degradation.[25]

How Has the Group's Strategy Shifted in Political and Military Terms?

If we separate official discourse from actual practice, the most significant change is clearly in the latter. Al-Shabaab continues to present itself as a political religious authority entitled to lead society and to be struggling for the "liberation" of Muslim lands. But to keep that claim alive, it has leaned on a lesson known to all protracted insurgencies: the population to be governed is part of the battlefield, not merely its backdrop.

Operational Behaviour

In day-to-day practice, AS displays two parallel faces: one geared to governing communities, the other to continuing the war.

On the governance side, it has worked hard to persuade those under its sway that it is a "state" or at least a stronger alternative to some official administrations. It has strengthened its provision of services and administration to secure two things through a mix of coercion and consent: obedience and a degree of acceptance. It operates tax systems, courts, and administrative mechanisms that regulate daily life, even in areas where it is not physically present.

25 Ibid.

Key governance functions include:

Education:

It sets up schools, both religious and secular, up to the level of local "universities." Quality may be low, but the goal goes beyond knowledge transfer. It is shaping a generation ideologically and giving communities the sense that "someone cares enough to provide services."

Basic Infrastructure, Water & Health Care:

In towns, it has helped establish clinics or hospitals; in rural areas, it occasionally sends mobile health teams that conduct check-ups and distribute medicine for free. For communities exhausted by state neglect, critical healthcare interventions provide Al-Shabaab with influence and leverage through perception control. The group facilitates community healthcare initiatives and claims the actual outputs (infrastructure, medicine provision) whilst not making tangible investments, as it›s all community driven. The same model is used to create wells, water points and basic road repairs.

Through this perception control, Al-Shabaab can control commerce, population movement, and the loyalty of pastoral and rural communities. International reporting has noted that the group leverages taxation and influence along key routes and over resources where the state is absent or weak.[26]

This reveals a deeper strategic insight: the group has understood that bullets alone do not hold territory; what holds territory is a blend of fear and facilitation of service provision.

Justice:

This is the backbone of its claim to legitimacy. A court that resolves disputes quickly, however harsh or contested its rulings appear, is more effective than a slow, unreachable formal system. For this reason, al-Shabaab courts sometimes receive cases even from outside their own areas of control.

26 https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/-316/01-2025fighting-climate-change-somalia_0.pdf

Incorporating Clan Elders and Clerics

Al-Shabaab has also recognised that Somalia cannot be ruled by military command alone; one must work with or dominate traditional elders, chieftains, religious scholars, and local notables.

Accordingly, it has established a council of clan elders representing different lineages, known as "Nuqabo", as well as other forums for sultans and chiefs. In parallel, it has formed clerical councils. These mirror the two pillars that have underpinned Somali social order for generations: customary and religious authority.

These structures serve several purposes for example, monitoring and channelling community grievances before they escalate; managing inter-clan conflicts in ways that do not produce new armed fronts against the group; using elders and clerics to legitimise al-Shabaab's rule; making territorial administration appear "collective" and locally grounded, even though ultimate power rests firmly with the group.

This technique is both psychological and political. In many rural and remote regions, locals tend to value those who listen, resolve disputes, and maintain a basic sense of order. When Al-Shabaab includes a respected elder or scholar from a community, it lessens the view of it as an outsider and repositions itself as a local or "Somali" authority.

Intelligence Indications and the Possibility of Political Flexibility

Strategically, intelligence reporting indicates a shift towards at least contemplating a negotiated end to the conflict, amid recognition that neither side can achieve an outright military victory. Each side wants to come to the table from a position of strength.[27]

A senior Al-Shabaab member told Saldhig that the group would, in principle, be ready to abandon global jihad and formal affiliation with al-Qaeda, but could not announce this publicly. They would prefer to present and trade such concessions at the negotiating table, once they knew what they would gain in return.

To understand this, one must appreciate the psychology of armed Islamist movements: they fiercely protect the symbols, names, and brand values that attracted their support base. Even when an internal recalibration occurs, they rarely make direct concessions openly. Instead, they prefer to signal change gradually through shifts in practice. Politically, this is encapsulated in the logic: "Let the symbol remain, even if behaviour changes."

27 A senior member of AS's, Jan 2026.

Territorial Control vs. Constant Attacks: Which Does AS Prefer?

The accurate answer is both, but with flexible prioritisation. Al-Shabaab today is not fighting like a conventional army seeking to seize every city at once and plant its flag everywhere. Nor is it content with operations that have no territorial implications. It has chosen an intermediate model: avoid overextending itself across vast, exposed territory while preserving the ability to remain visible and to return to previously held areas.

This is why the group is often seen withdrawing under pressure, only to reappear days, months, or a year later, once government forces have thinned out, grown fatigued, or turned on one another. Hiiraan, Galgadud, and Middle Shabelle have all seen this repeated "hand-over-hand" control, while in other areas the group has rebuilt its networks and resumed attacks after being pushed out by government offensives.

This underscores that holding territory is not merely an immediate tactical goal but a strategic one: territory provides tax revenue, supplies, concealment, mobility, and a form of social legitimacy. Meanwhile, continuous attacks sustain psychological presence and political pressure. The group deliberately blends incomplete governance with uninterrupted violence.

How Does the Group React to Heavy Military Pressure?

Here, al-Shabaab's most resilient strategic pattern becomes clear: withdrawal without seeing it as defeat, but rather as a component of "long war" planning.

When a major offensive is launched particularly when government forces, local clan militias, and external partners combine - al-Shabaab rarely responds by clinging to every village at any cost. Instead, it tends to pull back to avoid avoidable large-scale losses; wait for its adversaries to overextend, spreading across large areas with long supply lines, growing fatigue, and fragmentation. Launch a counter-campaign based on persistent attacks, disruption of logistics, intimidation of collaborators, and gradual re-entry into lost territories.

This is a key reason the conflict endures. Initial military gains do not easily translate into lasting stability because al-Shabaab views war as a test of endurance, not a short contest with a clear finish line. Both Crisis Group[28] and the EU[29] have noted that the government's 2023-2022 gains were significant, but that consolidating them proved challenging, creating space for al-Shabaab to reorganise and re-enter some of the areas it had lost.

Any claim that AS should be "out-governed" requires characterising the governor meant to do it. The FGS is not merely a vacuum; it has real if uneven strengths and well-documented weaknesses, and AS's governance must be read against them. On the asset side, the FGS holds the major urban centres, commands international recognition and donor support, fields a national army that with partner enablers and clan allies has retaken significant territory, and can offer what AS structurally cannot: integration with the formal economy, external trade and banking, internationally recognised education, and a path to statehood the international system will accept. Its 2022 alignment with clan militias showed that, when matched to communities, the state can reverse AS gains quickly.

On the liability side, the weaknesses are familiar and consequential: an unresolved settlement between the centre and the federal member states; politicised and at times predatory security institutions; reliance on external forces whose mandates are uncertain; corruption that diverts resources and legitimacy; and political capital consumed by electoral manoeuvring rather than service delivery.

28 Crisis Group (2023) Sustaining gains in Somalia's offensive against Al-Shabaab.
29 European Union Agency for Asylum (2026). COI Report – Somalia: Security Situation.

The result is that, in many districts, the state's advantage in resources does not translate into an advantage in perceived governance and AS exploits the gap by facilitating community efforts and attaching its name to them. In this sense AS is content to "be like water," flowing into whatever space the state leaves, so that its strength is in part a measure of the state's gaps. The contest is frequently not between AS services and FGS services, but between AS's claimed provision and the state's visible absence.

This points to an uncomfortable comparative judgement: AS adapts faster than the state it fights. Its decision-making is more centralised and less encumbered, its incentives are clearer, and it is not slowed by donor conditionality, electoral cycles, or inter-governmental disputes. That relative adaptiveness not superior resources is among its most important advantages, and any serious response has to close the agility gap, not just the resource gap.

Conclusion: What Has Really Changed in Al-Shabaab's Overall Strategy?

Al-Shabaab's overall aims, as conveyed in its rhetoric, remain largely unchanged. However, its operational strategy has evidently evolved.

It has evolved into an organisation that integrates governance, warfare, taxation, adjudication, social penetration, and calculated withdrawal and return. It has realised that in Somalia, sheer force is not enough; durability comes when force is combined with service provision, when attack is paired with administration, when terror is wrapped in dispute resolution, and when retreat is turned into a component of resilience.

This is why al-Shabaab cannot be adequately understood as merely a terrorist group executing isolated attacks. It is a project that seeks to merge war-making and state-like rule into a single, adaptive strategy.

7. How Has the Relationship Between Al-Shabaab and Local Communities Changed?

Based on available data, the majority of people under AS control are from rural areas or small towns. The connection between AS's administration and these communities is based on two main pillars: well-defined boundaries and mutual needs.

Within the internal "wilayat" (provinces), real authority flows from AS; local communities have virtually no say in shaping the higher levels of governance. However, at lower levels of administration and security, some roles are assigned to locals, such as members of the Hisbah (police) in remote or small rural settlements and other grassroots functionaries.[30]

This creates a hybrid system: upper-tier authority comes from the organisation, while implementation at the bottom is carried out by faces the community recognises. That prevents the administration from being entirely detached from its environment and allows it to blend into local society in a controlled way. Psychologically, it is easier for communities to adapt to a regime who's lower-level officials are neighbours or relatives, people about whom they can say "so-and-so is from our area."[31]

Residents in these areas have clear basic needs: security, justice, resolution of inter-clan disputes, education, health care, water, and so on, whether paid for or free. Many of these needs are at least partially met, or people are made to feel they are being addressed. On the other hand, AS needs from the population the classic pillars of any local authority: compliance with its orders, tax payment, recruits, and ideological alignment. The relationship is therefore not one-directional; it is a reciprocal exchange of needs.[32]

A key factor sustaining this arrangement is the role of traditional elders, religious leaders, and the business community. These three groups are the connective tissue between the organisation and society: they transmit messages, address grievances, mediate when conflict arises, and shape the trajectory through which Al-Shabaab exerts its power. Analytically, this is crucial in a society whose structures still rest heavily on clan and religion: whoever manages elders and clerics indirectly manages public discourse, social stability, and the degree of acceptance or rejection of the authorities.

Compared to earlier phases, the data indicate a clear evolution. Initially, the relationship was primarily driven by fear, with locals maintaining distance; many AS cadres were outsiders from other regions, reinforcing social separation and hindering grievance communication. Over time, however, a social "fusion» process has occurred: locals have been integrated into lower-level roles, recruited into the movement, and in some instances elevated to mid-level positions. [33]

This has been accompanied by a more flexible, albeit carefully controlled, approach: when community fear or discontent is detected, the group convenes meetings, holds dialogues, and projects an image of "serving the people." Residents are asked about their complaints, and some are addressed. This has reduced the distance between the population and the administration to the point that, today, some communities can file complaints against certain officials, and elders can exercise visible influence. Even if major grievances take time to resolve, the feeling of "we are being heard" carries substantial psychological weight.

30 Clan Elder, Mubarak, Lower Shabelle, Feb 2026.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.

Media, education, and training provided by AS also help narrow the gap. According to local testimonies, in AS-run areas it is very rare or difficult to find someone who has not, at some point, attended one of the organisation's lessons or courses, including shopkeepers, herders, women in petty trade, porters, drivers, and other workers alike. Refusing to attend can, at times, result in punishment. This shows that the group's impact is not confined to armed coercion; it also involves the continuous reshaping of community mindsets and everyday practices.[34]

At the ideological level, people are taught that AS's project represents "the religion," while the state is portrayed as un-Islamic. This framing is reinforced by lived experience, media isolation, and events such as US airstrikes, which are interpreted to support the group's narrative: that "America bombs us because we implement Sharia," and that "African Union forces are here to fight against our traditions and religion."

Overall, the relationship between AS and local communities has shifted from a purely fear-based dynamic to a more complex mix of fear, adaptation, limited trust, and social integration.[35]

34 Businessman, Buale, Feb 2026.
35 Clan Elder, El-Adde, March 2026.

8. How Has the Recruitment of New Members Changed?

Available data indicate that the growing integration between al-Shabaab and local communities has made recruitment much easier than before. When people are exposed daily to the group's ideas - through its media, educational activities, family ties, or work relations - this exposure gradually creates an environment in which the organisation is seen as part of everyday life rather than as something entirely external.

As a result, recruitment is no longer reliant on one-off campaigns or visible drives. It has become a near-routine, embedded process within community life. A young person growing up in an area where the movement's discourse dominates the mosque, local media, family conversations, and compulsory courses lives in a context where the boundary between "ordinary society" and "the organisation" is extremely blurred. In that environment, joining the group appears less like a radical step and more like a normal or even expected path. Structural conditions already smooth the way.

This embeddedness highlights a key point that many international observers often overlook: al-Shabaab rarely recruits from government-controlled areas across the front line. Instead, it primarily recruits from populations within the territories and communities it already controls or influences, relying on its existing social base rather than poaching from the state. This has important implications — the group's recruitment capacity expands and contracts in tandem with the territory it dominates. Therefore, challenging its social influence, along with countering its messaging, is crucial for limiting its manpower.

Two socio-economic factors deepen this pattern: structural poverty — sharpened by recurrent drought — and unemployment. When many young people face severe hardships and see limited prospects for a better future, any offer that provides a sense of "meaning, duty, honor, and a role" becomes more appealing. If this is presented within a religious argument framed as obligation and reward, it creates two strong motives: one psychological (identity, purpose, status) and one material (a way out of despair). The recruit is told they are not just a worker or fighter but are fulfilling a "religious duty" and holding an honorable position. For young people seeking identity and significance, this message is especially persuasive.

Compared with earlier periods, when recruitment often had a more visible element of coercion and intimidation, the current pattern relies much more on gradual ideological persuasion[36] and life-chances. The aim is to push individuals, step by step, to view joining as either normal or as their "best available opportunity."

36 Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab has increasingly used that event as a model for its own narrative, depicting it as a scenario that could be replicated in Somalia in the foreseeable future. According to the group's messaging, those who aspire to secure their interests in the future are encouraged to support efforts aimed at bringing down the Federal Government.

The Mix of Coercion, Service Provision, and Indoctrination

Al-Shabaab's influence rests not on a single instrument but on a layered combination of fear, propaganda, social services, and disciplined organisational practice. This is one reason this study avoids simplistic explanations such as "they rule only by fear" or "it is only misinformation," and instead examines the deeper drivers of the group's endurance and evolution.

Evidence suggests that AS operates in ways many locals perceive as "state like." Across both military and civilian functions, it often seeks a high standard of execution. Operational failures are more often due to a lack of skills than to a lack of commitment to the mission. Analytically, this is crucial:[37] it helps explain why some people can experience the group as an authority with internal cohesion and predictable rules, in contrast to weak or fragmented state structures.

In terms of compliance, there is a strict system of accountability and fear of punishment, affecting both ordinary civilians and even AS members. Human behaviour is guided by belief and conscience, but when these are reinforced by fear of organisational sanction, they become powerful constraints. People are caught between two ropes: internalised conviction on one side and fear of retribution on the other. This is one of the most potent formulas for social control, as it limits the space for genuine free choice.[38]

On the ideological side, regular lessons, media output, and constant meetings create a long-term process of worldview formation. Someone who hears the same narrative every day, sees the same imagery, and has no access to competing sources becomes more likely to accept that narrative as reality. This aligns with a well-known psychological principle:[39] "A perspective that is repeated constantly and faces no serious competition gradually turns into something believed -or at least accepted- as truth."

Service provision - security, justice, water, education, and health - adds another stabilising layer. The person who relies on a provider for daily survival tends, at a minimum, to feel dependent on that provider, even if there is no genuine affection or full consent. Influence, in this sense, grows from a mix of needs being met, fear being instilled, and ideas being continuously amplified.[40]

In summary, the data show that the relationship between AS and communities within its areas of control has undergone a major transformation: from a phase dominated almost entirely by fear to one characterised by social integration, service provision, structured roles for elders and clerics, constant indoctrination, and an administrative system that many experience as functional. Recruitment now leverages this environment, especially in contexts of unemployment, drought, and a youth heavy population, to draw new members into the organisation as a seemingly natural or even desirable life path.

37 Member of AS's Wilayat Office, Jilib, April 2026.
38 Member of AS's Amniyat, Feb 2026.
39 Businessman, Sakow, Jan 2026.
40 Ibid.

9. How Can the Future of AS's Strategy and Tactics Be Predicted?

AS is deeply dependent on Somali society in every respect, which has been significantly shaped by Fazul Abdullah, AQ Senior East Africa Operative, who convinced AS that establishing deep relationships with communities is critical to sustaining the group's existence. Despite AS accumulating a very large financial reserve between 2009 and 2022, it is still affected by whatever affects ordinary Somalis; economically, militarily, and in all aspects of daily life and survival. Broadly speaking, Somali livelihoods depend heavily on imported goods and remittances from the diaspora, which support a large share of households.

This makes the country, and by extension AS, highly vulnerable to global shocks. South Central Somalia is the economic hub and the breadbasket of the country, capable of offering long-term food security. However, as a result of power contestation between the government and Al-Shabaab, South Central Somalia has become a theatre of war, leaving Somalia import-dependent, not out of choice but out of necessity.

There are two common cognitive traps in thinking about the future. The first is one of excessive fear, which imagines sudden collapse, the other is complacency, which insists on that nothing major will change, in other words, the status quo will sustain. The reality is usually somewhere in between. The most plausible five-year outlook is neither total breakdown nor full stabilisation, but continued turbulence and uneven instability.

Somalia, as recently experienced during the United States-Israel conflict with Iran, has faced spillover effects and threatened to derail the country's long-term recovery[41].It is heavily import dependend, limiting Somalia's ability to aborb disruptions emanating from the conflict. This includes imports for food, medicine, electronics, fuel. According to FAO, since 2005, over %70 of Somalia›s food consumption has been sourced from imports or international aid[42] while remittances services made up %25 of GDP in 2025,[43] Somali data also shows increasing remittance flows and external trade in 2024.

The most vulnerable state isn›t just the poorest but the one heavily reliant on external aid and lacking internal reserves. Somalia has minimal food and medicine stockpiles, weak domestic production, limited diversification in import sources, and a remittance system vulnerable to external regulation. It also suffers from underinvestment in water and agriculture, with no comprehensive national strategy that fully integrates security, trade, climate, and global politics. This situation increases the severity of shocks now and in the future.

41 ISS (2026) How the Iran War Could Derail Somalia's Fragile Recovery.
42 FAO (2022) Food Systems Profile – Somalia.
43 FGS (2025 (2025 Investment Climate Statement by the Federal Government of Somalia.

How Might These Conditions Affect AS?

Placed against this backdrop and given credible information indicating that Al-Shabaab is now at or near its peak in manpower, weaponry, experience, and organisational maturity, the group is likely to be one of the least immediately affected actors in the system[44], despite frequent official claims that it is weakening. The loss of large swathes of territory, including major cities and towns, as well as the elimination of a significant number of Al-Shabaab leaders over the years, led Government officials and security analysts to predict that Al-Shabaab would be unable to recover. Yet if being forced out of urban centres were enough to break the group, it would have collapsed in 2012-2011, when it was expelled from Mogadishu and most major regions. Its survival and later resurgence indicate that its resilience rests on deeper strategic foundations that require a more nuanced understanding.

This raises a key question: what has enabled AS to withstand nearly two decades of war, and what is likely to sustain it?

Core Strategies and Mechanisms Underpinning AS's Resilience

Several recurring strategic and tactical choices help explain the group's continued survival and are likely to remain in place:

01

Prolonging the war

AS deliberately avoids moves that could bring the conflict to a quick, decisive conclusion, such as standing and fighting in ways that would pit its full force against superior combined firepower. It prefers to prolong the war over time, trading space for durability.

02

Preserving influence rather than symbols of victory

The leadership shares one core priority: the organisation›s survival and the preservation of influence. They are not attached to holding a town if defending it would incur unsustainable costs. Instead, they focus on making it difficult for the new occupier to consolidate control or feel secure.

03

Continuous self-development

The group invests in growth across all dimensions, including arms production, administration, and trained forces. Informed insiders note that AS is moving closer to self-sufficiency in several domains and is increasingly able to operate without many forms of external supply.

04

Exploiting and preparing for political and military openings

AS prepares for both scenarios: political negotiation and continued armed struggle. It aims to be ready for whichever avenue - talks or force - offers the best opportunity at any given time.

04

A very large financial reserve

Above all, AS benefits from a substantial financial war chest, reportedly large enough to sustain the organisation for many years. Its financial reserves are estimated to be between **120-90$million USD**[45]. This buffer underpins its long-war strategy, funding recruitment, logistics, and governance even under severe pressure.

44 Member of AS Shura Council, April 2026.
45 Senior AS Financial Auditor, Jilib, April 2026.

10. What, Then, Can Be Expected from AS in the Coming Years?

Several trends are likely to shape AS's trajectory in the short to medium term. AS is currently focused on developing a more professional military apparatus, with stronger command structures and steadily improving firepower. Its counter offensive campaigns in Galgadud, Hiiraan, and Middle Shabelle showcased forces capable of withstanding simultaneous pressure from federal troops, local clan militias, and intensive airstrikes. In parallel, the group has invested in enhancing its weapons manufacturing and IED capabilities.

Another likely priority is deepening external relations to expand options for talks and support. Strengthening ties with external actors, particularly the Houthis, from whom it can obtain military equipment, and with states or political forces interested in mediating talks, will likely be a focus. The cultivation of relations with additional countries, with Iran at the forefront, could further bolster the group's military and political leverage.

AS is also working to project itself as a state like system capable of engaging with the wider world. The absence of a national political settlement, reflected in the persistent stand off between the federal centre and the member states, and compounded by poor governance across the government machinery, provides AS with space to present itself as an alternative order.

As noted earlier, AS is pursuing administrative reforms and attempting to repair its public image and relationships with local communities. For years, it has branded itself as a nationalist "liberation" movement. This narrative may gain further traction from developments such as Ethiopia's efforts to secure access to Somalia's coastline and Israel's recognition of Somaliland, which AS can frame as evidence that Somali sovereignty is under threat and that only a strong, independent Islamic authority can protect it. By highlighting such issues, AS can both mobilise domestic support and, externally, present itself as an organised, state like actor capable of negotiating with regional and international powers.

Absent a major shift in Somali state capacity or regional dynamics, the most plausible forecast is that AS will remain a central, adaptive actor. It is likely to sustain a long war strategy, further refine its military and administrative apparatus, leverage external alliances, and preserve core ideological symbols while maintaining considerable practical flexibility.

11. How is the Relationship Between AS, al-Qaeda and the Houthis Structured?

Qaeda and the Houthis Structured?

Al-Shabaab has long been one of al-Qaeda's key branches in East Africa, with ties rooted in ideology and strategic support. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual shift: its relationship with AQ has visibly cooled, while a new, more pragmatic partnership has emerged with actors outside its original ideological universe, notably the Houthis in Yemen.

The Saldhig Institute's February 2026 report highlights that the relationship between AS and the Houthis has evolved into a strengthening strategic partnership. This marks a significant shift in the group's thinking, particularly in how it balances its religious doctrines with interests that go beyond pure ideology. The relationship between AS, AQ and the Houthis is complex but underpinned by pragmatism. Whilst no official agreement exists between AQAP and the Houthis, despite a temporary cessation of their direct hostilities, the Houthis and AQAP continue to see each other as adversaries. The decline of AQ in Yemen, and the Houthis' situation, impacted by sanctions that curtail their market access and regional outreach, has given Al-Shabaab an opportunity and an entry point to make strategic trade-offs in the region.

The Historical Relationship Between Al-Shabaab and al Qaeda

The relationship between AS and AQ was formalised and made public in 2012 under the leadership of Ahmed Abdi Godane[46]. That decision was strategic and delivered at least three key benefits: international jihadi "legitimacy" and recognition under al Qaeda's banner, which helped AS rebrand itself from a largely local insurgent group into a recognised actor within the transnational jihadist milieu; access to training, expertise, and military know how, including in areas such as explosives, operational security, media production, and external operations; and integration into the broader project of "global jihad," which offered an ideological framework and narrative that could attract foreign fighters and external funding, while also strengthening internal cohesion among AS's more hardline factions.

Within a relatively short period, AS became one of al Qaeda's most active affiliates, carrying out attacks inside Somalia and across the region, particularly in Kenya, Djibouti, and Uganda. These operations signalled both loyalty to AQ's global agenda and AS's ability to operate beyond Somalia's borders. Yet even in that phase, there was a built in tension that never fully disappeared.

46 Al-Qaeda operatives had been active in Somalia since 1991. However, the relationship between the two sides remained largely covert until 2012, when their alliance was formally and publicly announced.

AQ's core priority was global operations and the projection of attacks that could symbolically challenge Western powers and their allies. AS, although willing to strike regionally and occasionally frame its actions in global terms, consistently tried to keep the bulk of its activity, resources, and political messaging focused on the Somali theatre, where its primary objectives remained controlling territory, shaping governance, and positioning itself as the dominant actor in Somalia's Islamist and nationalist landscape.

The decline in the AS-AQ relationship was not a single event, but a drawn out process driven by several factors:

1. Leadership Change and Shifting Priorities: After Godane's death in 2014, the new leadership became more pragmatic. Rather than pushing the global jihad agenda further, it focused on holding and managing territory, maximising internal revenue (infaq and zakat) to unprecedented levels,[47] and ensuring the organisation's long-term survival.

2.Security Pressure and Sanctions: military operations by the Somali government and its partners, together with financial and travel sanctions, made sustained, direct contact with AQ far harder. This reduced the day-to-day intensity of the relationship and forced AS to become more self-reliant, developing its own capabilities.

3. Diverging Strategic Focus: While AQ retained its emphasis on global operations, AS increasingly behaved as a locally focused insurgency. This reduced the practical importance of AQ in AS's day-to-day decision-making. The net result is that the AQ relationship today is largely symbolic - a brand and ideological reference - rather than a direct driver of AS's operational and strategic choices.

47 One of the non-public reports produced by the Hiraal Institute in 2020, titled "AS Financing," revealed that Al-Shabaab's revenues during the 2020–2019 period had reached nearly 200$ million.

12. The Emerging Relationship with the Houthis (Ansar Allah)

The Saldhig February 2026 report indicates that AS has begun to build a new relationship with the Houthis in Yemen (Ansar Allah). According to the report, both sides have entered into an arrangement based on mutual interests, each side seeing concrete benefits in the other.

This is a notable evolution, as the Houthis fall outside AS's traditional Salafi-jihadi ideological framework. The relationship is driven less by doctrinal affinity and more by access to weapons, technology, or training from the Yemeni side; potential maritime and logistical channels in the Red Sea / Gulf of Aden theatre and political signalling and leverage for both parties in regional power games.

In other words, whereas AQ brought ideological capital and global jihadi status, the Houthis offer practical, regional, and military advantages at a time when AS is focused on consolidating power within Somalia and expanding its strategic depth.

Internal Tensions: Hardliners vs Pragmatists

One of AS's defining features is the constant pull between two internal currents. The first, the hardline faction, is largely composed of cadres socialised under Godane. This wing refuses to compromise on the founding ideological tenets. It remains committed to the vision of global jihad and is deeply suspicious of any perceived dilution of doctrine. The second, the pragmatic faction, prioritises organisational survival, adaptation to changing circumstances, the exploitation of opportunities, and a strong focus on the Somali arena. It is more open to flexible alliances and calibrated concessions if they strengthen the group's position.

During Ahmed Abdi Godane›s tenure as leader of Al-Shabaab, the movement placed significant emphasis on preserving its internal power structure and consolidating the administration it had established in Somalia. Although Al-Shabaab formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012, Godane's leadership style was often characterised by caution about allowing al-Qaeda's global agenda to overshadow the organisation's local priorities. Many of his decisions, particularly regarding rival factions and internal dissenters, suggested that his foremost objective was to safeguard and strengthen the "state-like entity" the group had built under his control.

In contrast, the current leadership of Ahmed Diriye (Abu Ubaidah) appears to have placed greater emphasis on strengthening Al-Shabaab's ideological and strategic ties with al-Qaeda. In recent years, the group's statements, publications, and media messaging have increasingly emphasised themes such as the unity of the Muslim ummah, support for al-Qaeda's broader vision, and solidarity with jihadist movements beyond Somalia. This shift has led many observers to view the organisation as moving closer to the doctrinal framework and strategic outlook traditionally associated with al-Qaeda.

These two observations—a mostly symbolic relationship and a leadership that prominently invokes al-Qaeda—might seem contradictory, but they are actually reconcilable and offer important insights. Under Diriye, the group has increased its rhetoric referencing al-Qaeda, despite its operational influence actually diminishing. The heightened invocation of al-Qaeda is mainly symbolic and incurs little real cost: it helps maintain cohesion among hardliners and sustains jihadi legitimacy, while actual decision-making stays localised and increasingly

involves non-ideological partners. In this view, the symbolic and practical aspects are not at odds; the symbolism is used to manage internal politics, whereas real choices are pragmatic. The alternative—believing that louder messaging indicates a true doctrinal return to al-Qaeda's global stance—is less consistent with the group's focus on survival, revenue, and local control in Somalia. Though this view is persuasive, the most supported interpretation by current evidence treats it as a strong possibility rather than a certainty.

In the past, these internal differences were more pronounced and led to notable violent confrontations that at times endangered the organisation's cohesion. Two episodes stand out, namely the 2013 internal purge under Godane and the violent internal conflict in 2015 over allegiance to ISIS. The internal purge, a result of disputes over the group's direction between Godane and several senior leaders, culminated in the killings of Ibrahim Haji Jama "Afghan" and Abdihamid Colhaye "Macalin Burhaan", the defections of prominent figures such as Mukhtar Robow Abu Mansur and Hassan Dahir Aweys, and the imprisonment and disappearance of dozens of others whose fate remains unknown. This episode showed how far the hardline camp was willing to go to prevent any challenge to its ideological and organisational dominance.

The second conflict arose when some Al-Shabaab members declared allegiance to ISIS in 2015; the group again experienced a violent internal conflict. Senior figures, including foreign fighters, and scores of rank-and-file were killed, and dozens more were arrested. Ten years on, those still alive remain incarcerated.

This confirmed that although AS has always contained different currents of thought, it has been uncompromising in preserving a single, centralised leadership and rejecting rival jihadi brands.

In sum, AS's external relations reflect an internal balancing act in which the AQ link now functions mainly as ideological symbolism and historical legacy; the Houthi link (and any future pragmatic alliances) responds to concrete strategic needs: arms, logistics, and political leverage; and within Al-Shabaab, hardliners fight to protect doctrinal purity and the global jihad narrative, while pragmatists push for flexible, interest-driven relationships that shore up the group's power inside Somalia. Any serious assessment of AS's future external alignments must therefore track both shifts in the regional environment (e.g., Yemen, the Red Sea, Iran–Gulf dynamics) and the evolving balance of power between its hardline and pragmatic internal factions.

13. What Can Be Understood from the Group's Repeated Transformations?

The group's principles are not untouchable for two key reasons. First, although AS is built on an extremist religious ideology, it can readily bend or sideline parts of that ideology in pursuit of strategic interests it believes will benefit its long term survival. It can also cooperate with actors that do not share its religious outlook, even though, as noted above, publicly acknowledging such ties could trigger internal splits.

Secondly, the group›s survival outweighs everything else. AS's major decisions are guided by three priorities, namely ensuring the organisation›s continued existence; securing the financial resources needed to sustain it; and strengthening its military power so that the internal balance of power in Somalia tilts in its favour.

Internal factionalism also determines the group's direction. Whenever a major or existential decision arises, the two main internal camps clash. The final outcome depends on which side holds real power or controls the leadership at that moment.

The relationship between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda has shifted from an active strategic partnership to a largely symbolic one. At the same time, the group has begun to build new relationships based on direct interests, including its cooperation with the Houthis.

This transformation clearly shows that al-Shabaab is not a movement rigidly bound to a fixed ideology but an organisation that constantly adapts to prevailing conditions. The tension between the hardline faction and the pragmatic wing remains the key factor shaping the group's trajectory.

In the future, if the pragmatic wing continues to gain strength, AS is likely to further expand such interest-based relationships: alliances grounded in strategy and mutual benefit rather than shared religious principles, and willing to reinterpret or downplay doctrinal points whenever they are seen as obstructing core strategic interests tied to the group's survival or long-term goals.

14. Is Al-Shabaab's Evolution Unique? A Comparative Perspective

Testing AS against comparable movements does more than establish whether its evolution is unusual; it helps adjudicate the strategy-versus-necessity question and, in places, actively supports this study's thesis. Two cases are instructive. The Taliban, on taking Afghanistan in the 1990s, adopted conventional military postures, but against modern air power were forced back towards mobile, Mujahideen-era guerrilla tactics — a trajectory closely paralleling AS's own adaptation under sustained airstrikes. Yet the Taliban never resolved the deeper structural problems: they failed to balance tribal dynamics and, even in power, neglected the population beyond its religious life.

ISIS, by contrast, drew the lesson the Taliban missed about state projection — on seizing an area it moved quickly to restore electricity, reopen bakeries, and perform statehood, investing heavily in bureaucratic structure — but made the opposite, fatal error: fixated on holding a visible caliphate, it chose to defend fixed ground against overwhelming force and saw its fighting power decimated, its early financial strength unable to compensate for lost adaptability.

Read together, these cases sharpen the argument. AS appears to have learned from both: it has matched ISIS's attention to administration and finance while avoiding ISIS's decisive mistake, declining to anchor itself to fixed terrain and instead trading ground for survival in precisely the way the long-war thesis describes; and it has matched the Taliban's tactical realism under air power while attending, far more than the Taliban did, to governance and social authority. AS's evolution is therefore not sui generis — every durable insurgency adapts — but its particular combination is distinctive: an unusually attentive student of others' failures, pairing that learning with the exploitation of local opportunity and a deliberate refusal to sacrifice flexibility for the symbolism of holding ground. That combination is itself evidence on the side of strategy, not merely necessity.

15. Strategic or Forced? Weighing the Evidence

The title poses a real question and deserves a direct answer. The honest starting point is that much of the evidence can be read as supporting the forced interpretation: nearly every major driver of AS's recent transformation the changing AU mandates, the 2022 offensive, intensified airstrikes, clan mobilisation, recurrent drought is an external pressure to which the group has reacted. A sceptic could argue, with force, that AS has simply been a skilful improviser, and that its "strategy" is a flattering label applied after the fact to adaptations it had no choice but to make. This alternative must be stated at its strongest before it can be answered.

The answer is not to dismiss it but to distinguish two things it runs together. Tactical adaptiveness – adjusting how the group fights and governs once a shock arrives is abundantly demonstrated, and here the sceptic is largely right: much of AS's conduct is reactive. But reactive adaptation, however accomplished, is not the same as strategic intentionality. Anticipating pressure and positioning ahead of it, accepting short-term cost for long-term position. The case for the latter cannot rest on the reactive list; it must rest on evidence that AS shapes conditions before it is forced to.

On that narrower test, four lines of evidence support genuine strategy. First, finance: building and preserving a multi-year reserve, and constructing a fiscal apparatus that grows with the legitimate economy, is forward provisioning made before the pressure it is meant to survive. Second, patience: the disciplined refusal to attack until defenders show fatigue, and the preference for postponing low-confidence operations, reflect a deliberate subordination of tempo to advantage the group chooses not to act when acting would be costly, which improvisation under duress does not explain. Third, inducing over-extension: trading ground cheaply to tempt the state into thinly holding terrain it cannot consolidate turns the adversary's structural weakness into AS's opportunity, which is an offensive use of the long war, not merely a defensive one. Fourth, learning from others: AS's absorption of the lessons of ISIS and the Taliban is the behaviour of an organisation theorising its own survival rather than merely surviving.

It also helps to be precise about what is flexible and what is fixed, because the strategy-versus-necessity debate can be miscast as a claim that AS will bend on anything. It will not. The group has a fixed ideological core. Its self-understanding as an Islamic authority pursuing the application of Sharia, that does not change, and a wide band of application above that core where it is highly flexible: alliances, the AQ brand, targeting choices, governance arrangements, even openness to talks. What looks like ideological negotiability is almost always movement within that upper band rather than abandonment of the core. The pragmatism is real, but it is bounded.

The verdict, then, is genuinely mixed, but not evenly so. AS's tactics are heavily forced; its grand strategy the long war, the financial buffer, the refusal to trade flexibility for terrain, the willingness to let the state exhaust itself is substantially chosen. The group's distinctive achievement is to have turned necessity into doctrine: it has generalised the lessons pressure taught it into a deliberate way of operating, so that what began as forced adaptation has hardened into strategic preference. This is why "strategic or forced" is ultimately the wrong binary. AS is forced often and chooses well, and its real talent is converting the former into the latter which matters for response, because an adversary that has internalised adaptation as strategy will absorb pressure and learn from it rather than break under it.

16. Conclusion

For nearly two decades, Al-Shabaab has been written off, driven from cities, and declared all but finished, yet each time it has returned. This study set out to ask why and to test a deceptively simple question: is the group's evolution a matter of strategy or of necessity? The evidence resists either extreme. Al-Shabaab's transformation is neither freely chosen nor wholly imposed; it grows out of a constant interplay between calculation and pressure. What sets the group apart is its ability to absorb adversity, including a renamed African Union mission, government offensives, intensified airstrikes, mobilised clan militias, recurrent drought, and the dysfunction of Somalia's political class, turning each shock into a reason to adapt rather than a cause to break.

At its core, the finding is this: Al-Shabaab is no longer simply an insurgency but a hybrid that fuses violence with the apparatus of government. Its staying power rests less on firepower than on patience, a deliberate "long war" in which it prolongs the conflict, trades ground for survival and guards its influence more jealously than any single town or flag. The logic shows on the battlefield, where indiscriminate violence has given way to planned strikes on military and infrastructure targets, and behind it, in the taxes it levies, the courts it runs, and the services it dispenses, through which coercion is dressed as order. This is not consent so much as engineered dependence, and the distinction is one that any serious response must keep firmly in view.

Its hold on the population has shifted in shape along with it. Where the relationship was once enforced almost entirely through fear, it now blends coercion with dependence, relentless indoctrination, and a carefully rationed measure of local participation. In communities worn down by unemployment, poverty, and displacement, joining no longer looks like a leap; it has become an ordinary feature of daily life, woven through the mosque, the marketplace, and the classroom. Binding it all together is technology, the quiet infrastructure of the group's administration and intelligence, and a media machine through which it fights, above all, for the story people tell themselves about who is winning.

The study's sharpest observation concerns belief itself. Al-Shabaab's founding principles, despite their absolutism, appear negotiable when survival, financial gains, or military benefits are at risk. Its relationship with al Qaeda has diminished to a mostly symbolic connection, while a more pragmatic, transactional relationship with the Houthis—and potentially others—demonstrates a willingness to cooperate across ideological boundaries once seen as inviolable. Beneath the surface, there›s an unresolved debate about how adaptable the group can be and whether pursuing negotiations might someday become an option. The outcome of this debate and the dominant stance will influence the group's future more than any individual battle.

What lies ahead is most likely neither total collapse nor complete calm. It's important to be precise: this isn't a static status quo. Instead, it's a dynamic, uneven instability—a constantly shifting balance of progress and setbacks—where al-Shabaab has learned to prosper. This isn't a frozen stalemate. The group's growing resources, independence in weapons and governance, and willingness to fight or negotiate make it resilient to setbacks—such as losing a town or killing a commander—that are often mistaken for turning points. However, this resilience isn't invincible. It relies on conditions that can change: the power vacuum created by weak, contested governance; the desperation that facilitates recruitment; the gap between what the state provides and what communities perceive it to provide; and the cautious acceptance by communities that the group still needs to gain over rather than dominate.

The implications are straightforward. Defeating al-Shabaab using familiar metrics—such as retaken towns or leaders killed—focuses on the periphery rather than the core. Four strategic lines target the centre. First, weaken the group by undermining its legitimacy, which is often based on perception rather than earned trust; success relies on attribution, visible and predictable actions, and above all, justice—not just service delivery. Second, attack its financial resources: since its income from mobile money, trade routes, and extortion can be mapped and disrupted, counter-finance efforts can reach beyond airstrikes. Third, improve agility: al-Shabaab adapts more quickly than the state because it faces fewer obstacles; therefore, consolidating gains, avoiding overreach, and maintaining control over liberated areas are more critical than capturing new territory. Fourth, address political issues: the unresolved relationship between the central government and federal states is al-Shabaab's biggest foothold. Without resolving this political vacuum, security efforts will not succeed in maintaining control.

The conclusion is sobering but not hopeless. Al-Shabaab is neither a band of rigid ideologues nor a gang of impulsive attackers, but a pragmatic organisation whose first loyalty is to its own survival. Because its strength is relational — a function of the state's gaps as much as its own capacities — its future is neither predetermined nor beyond reach. It has always been shaped by conditions within Somalia and the wider region, and by the choices of those determined to oppose it.

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