

Somalia is the most violent country in the ACLED dataset when measured on number of violent events; and the ninth most fatal country when measured in terms of conflict-related reported fatalities.<sup>1</sup> While instability and conflict have characterised the Somali state for over two decades, conflict grew gradually in the late 1990s, and intensified dramatically from late 2006 onwards (see Figure 1). Many of the dominant narratives and received wisdom about violent conflict in Somalia do not hold when analysed in light of event data. Such dominant narratives include: 1) the claim that, historically, state failure in Somalia has translated into a power vacuum and the production of ‘ungoverned space’ in much of the country; and 2) more recent narratives of Somalia’s transition into post-conflict recovery and reconstruction. Both narratives are simplifications of complex geographical and spatial distributions of violence and contestation between multiple competing powers across the country. To highlight how dynamics of violence have transformed over time and space, we look in turn at Al Shabaab’s in South-Central Somalia; security in Mogadishu; emerging regimes in Central and South-Central Somalia; and communal violence in Northern Somalia’s contested territories of Puntland and Somaliland.

### Al Shabaab in South-Central Somalia:

Al Shabaab is a militant Islamist group founded in the early 2000s after splitting from Al Ittihad al Islamiya, and linked to sporadic attacks in its early years. The group became most prominent from 2006 onwards when it seized control of Mogadishu in a joint campaign with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). In late-2006, Ethiopia invaded and occupied much of Mogadishu with limited resistance: Al Shabaab was pushed out and became the most prominent militant force in South-Central Somalia, gaining control of almost all of the territory outside the capital and into parts of the Central Mudug region. Until an intensified campaign by African Union and Somali forces in late-2010, Al Shabaab continued to control considerable territory within and surrounding Mogadishu, but in the past three years this has been reduced considerably. Ethiopian and Kenyan involvement in the campaign since late 2011 – and the integration of the latter into the official African Union AMISOM forces – has contributed to the increased momentum of the federal government’s success in retaking territory, although this has created additional tensions within the alliance itself.

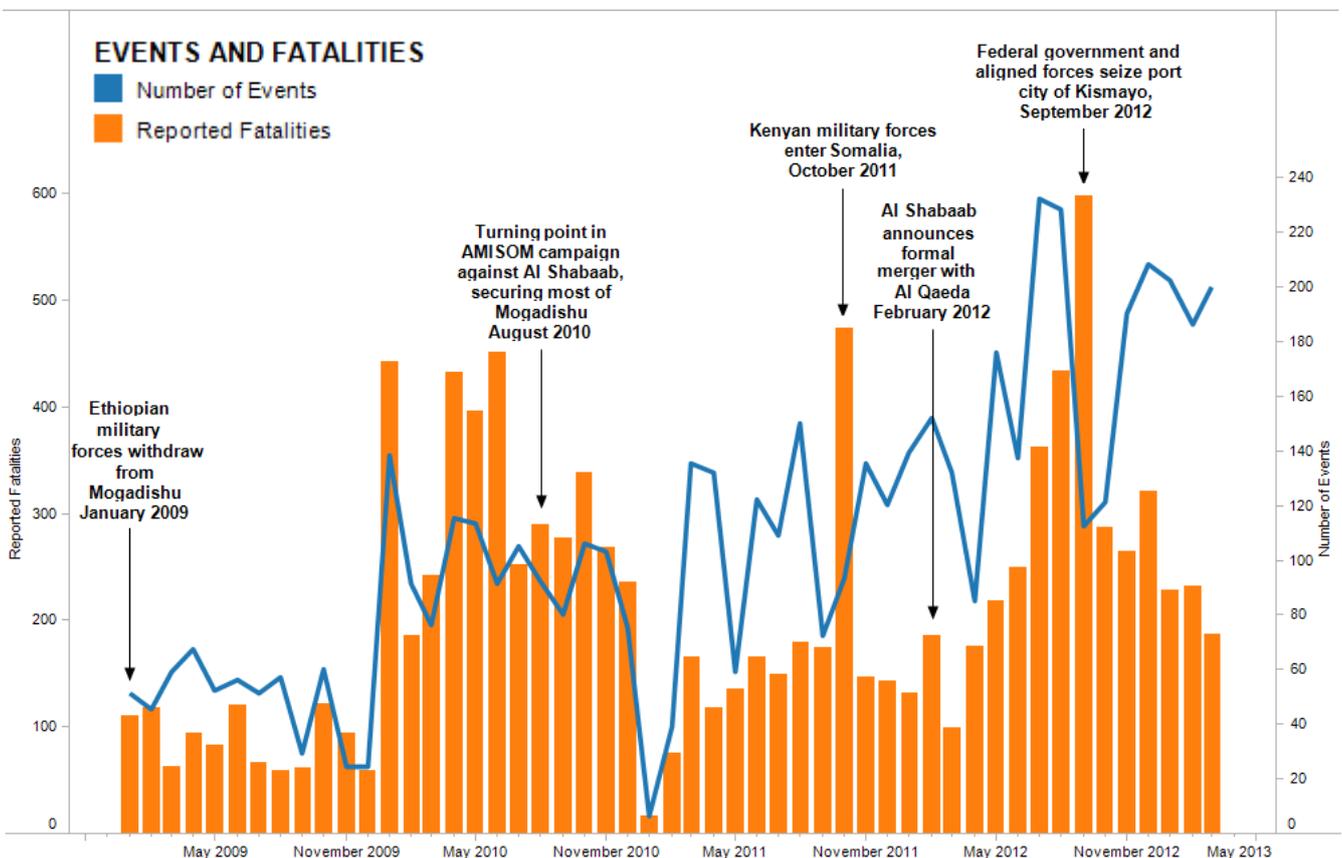


Figure 1: Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities, Somalia, 2009 - March 2013.

1. Please note: fatalities data for the years 2005 – 2008 is incomplete, and so not presented here. Full event data is available online.

As of early 2013, the federal government and aligned forces had re-taken all major urban centres in South-Central Somalia, with Al Shabaab relocating its headquarters to the town of Jilib in Middle Juba, and retaining control over largely rural areas.

In discussing Somalia, analysts often draw on themes of state failure and ‘ungoverned space’ in relation to areas outside the federal government’s control. Event data analysis reveals that the spatiality of governance is actually far more complex than this received wisdom suggests. Figure 2 illustrates areas of Al Shabaab activity or presence (violent or non-violent) between 2010-2012, and highlights territory in which battles between Al Shabaab and other conflict actors occurred. These conflict actors include federal government and aligned forces (AMISOM, Ethiopian and Kenyan militaries), as well as militias such as *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa* and other localised militant units which contested Al Shabaab control in a given location.

The figure clearly illustrates the expansion of federal government and aligned forces’ reach over time, but the earliest image of 2010 reveals that even before the intensi-

fied assault on Al Shabaab positions outside Mogadishu, the group was already engaging in sporadic conflict with local actors. As battles are coded in ACLED as clashes between armed groups, these engagements attest to challenges to actors’ monopoly on force in a given territory. In this way, this dynamic reveals the contested nature of power and governance within Somalia, rather than its absence or vacuum more generally.

Over the course of these events, the group has undergone considerable transformation. Since 2012, the group has been formally aligned to Al Qaeda, thereby definitively preventing any possible role in a negotiated resolution. Tactically, the group has also evolved: during periods of relatively uncontested control over territory, there were limited reports of Al Shabaab engaging in targeted violence against civilians. While conscious that this dearth of event data may be in part a function of limited information and access to Al Shabaab territories, there is also evidence from the mounting levels of violence in areas where the group is under strain that its relationship with populations in its jurisdiction has shifted. Specifically, arrests, detention and executions of non-combatants for alleged spying within Al Shabaab ter-

**Discussions on Somalia often draw on themes of state failure and ‘ungoverned space.’ Event data reveals that the spatiality of governance is far more complex: Figure 2 highlights the wide-ranging areas in which Al Shabaab has engaged in battles with armed actors contesting their power.**

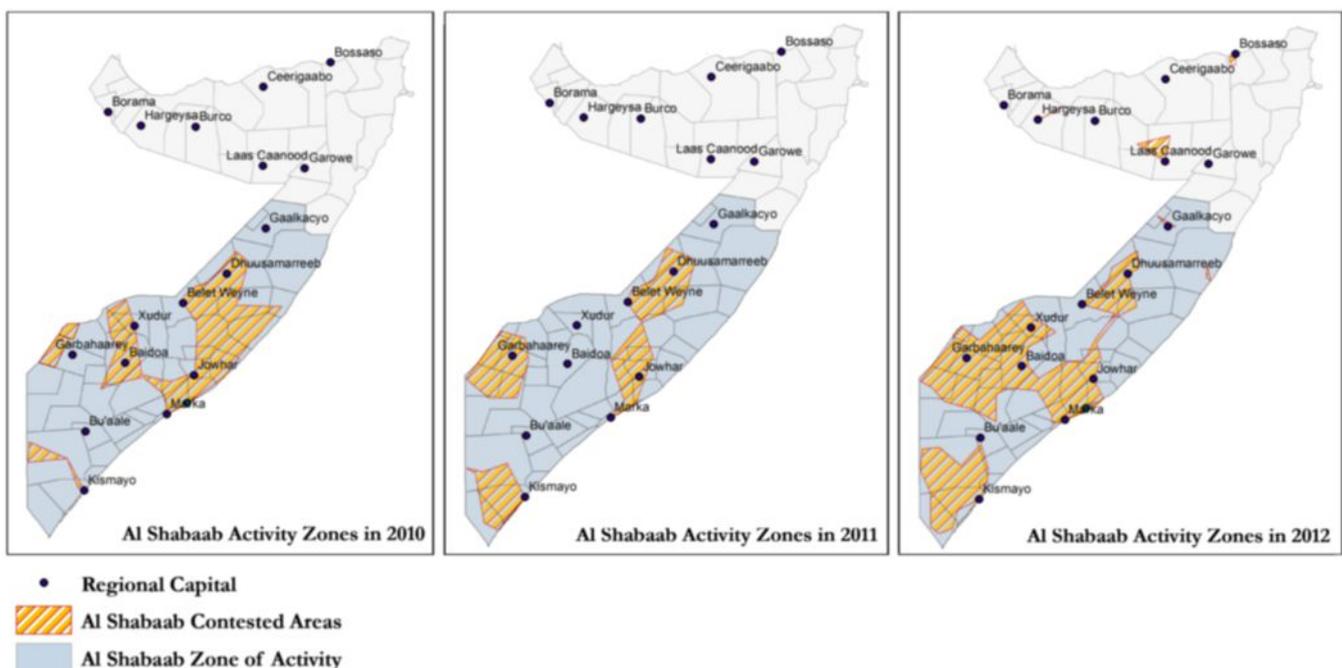


Figure 2: Map of Al Shabaab Activity Zones and Areas of Contested Activity, Somalia, 2010 - 2012.

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ritory have increased, as have guerrilla-style tactics on both military and civilian targets, including hit-and-run attacks; remote and improvised explosive devices; and suicide bombings in territories which have been recently seized from Al Shabaab.

This evolution in tactics reflects the group’s reduced organisational capacity: Al Shabaab could no longer mount the kind of sustained campaign it employed when it was expanding its territorial control, nor when it was defending its positions in and around Mogadishu as recently as 2010 / 2011. With reduced forces and capacity, however, the group can still have a significant destabilising effect. When Ethiopian forces temporarily withdrew from Hudur in March 2013, Al Shabaab was prepared and in position to retake the town quickly, facilitated by the group’s sustained – though low-level – presence and activity. More generally, if the federal government is to establish itself as the legitimate authority in these newly seized regions, it must quickly deliver a peace dividend to populations who have lived through persistent and reinforcing crises of conflict and food security in the past three years.

The group has also evolved territorially: while the federal government has made significant progress in formally ousting Al Shabaab authorities throughout the South Central region, Al Shabaab operatives and aligned militants remain active in recently seized territory (as discussed above) and in the capital, Mogadishu. While Al Shabaab

attacks and fatalities in the capital have been declining since the AMISOM-led campaign to regain the capital (see Figure 3) they continue to be a presence in Heliwa, Yaqshid, Wardighley and Daynile areas in particular.

Furthermore, under military pressure in South-Central Somalia, Al Shabaab has expanded both southwards and to the north-east. In the former, Al Shabaab militants and aligned combatants have been active in north-eastern Kenya, where they continue to have a destabilising effect on security. They have been drawn into a reinforcing cycle of Somali militant-orchestrated attacks on security forces, who have at times responded with indiscriminate crackdowns on the wider ethnically Somali population, contributing to militants’ further radicalisation. In Somalia’s north-east, Al Shabaab militants have been reportedly operating and establishing bases in the rural and relatively inaccessible region of Bari. Establishing themselves in this region and aligning themselves with local militias may provide them with an opportunity to regroup.

These evolving dynamics should remind analysts that while Al Shabaab has been undoubtedly weakened by the intensified campaign against it, it remains organisationally viable and is adapting its reduced capacity to new theatres of violence. In both direct and indirect ways, it continues to pose a threat to the stability of the federal government and undermine the new regime’s ability to establish and maintain lasting security and peace.

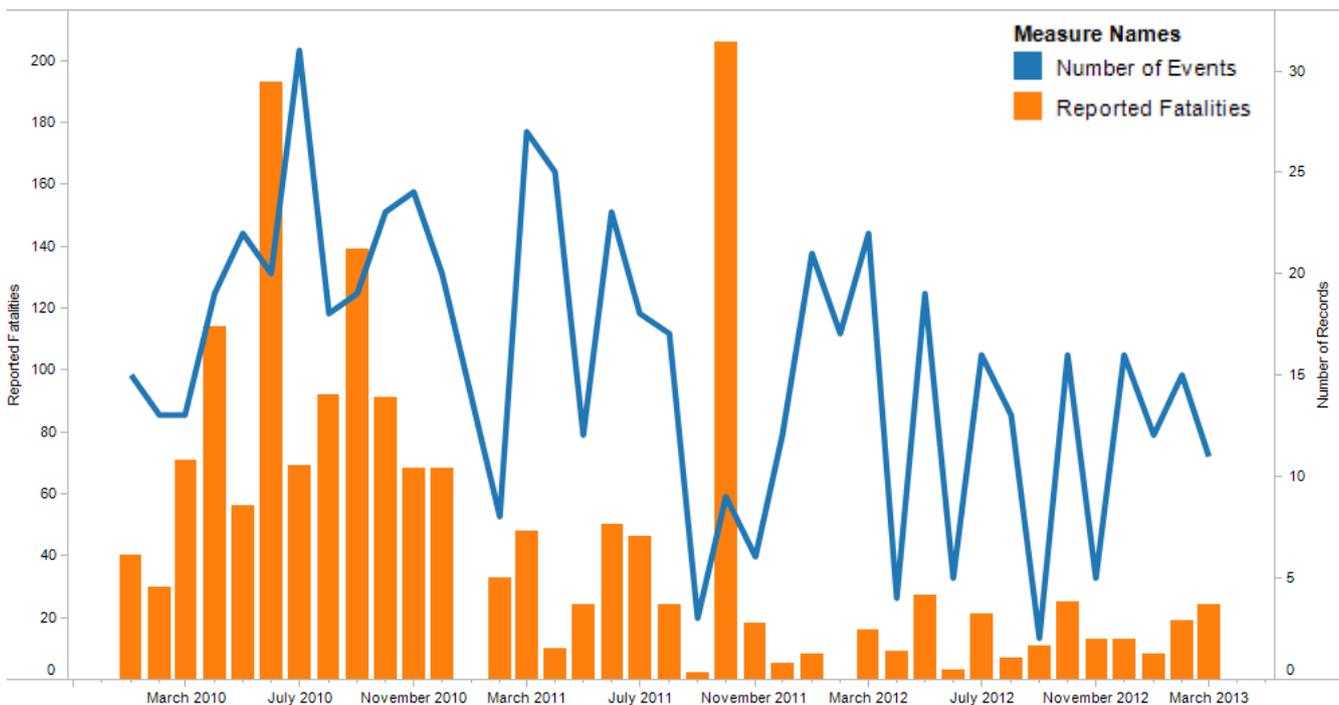


Figure 3: Al Shabaab Events and Reported Fatalities, Banaadir Region, Somalia, 2010 - March 2013.

**Security threats in Mogadishu:**

Al Shabaab’s sustained presence and persistent attacks in Mogadishu have been discussed above. However, Al Shabaab is far from the only violent actor in the city. Analysis of interaction data reveals a very high level of violence perpetrated by unidentified armed groups. Some of this violence can certainly be attributed to Al Shabaab operatives or aligned militants who do not claim official responsibility for attacks or are not apprehended (thereby suggesting that the level of sustained violence by Al Shabaab in the city discussed above is actually underestimated). However, the diffuse nature of the violence and the fact that militants are not identified with an organised group indicates that violence is proliferating in a fractious conflict environment.

Most of the violence perpetrated by unidentified groups is sporadic, low-grade targeting of soldiers, security forces and civilians who interact with them (such as businesses which security forces frequent). Because of this targeting, the assailants are potentially combatants who are ideologically – though not formally – aligned with the Al Shabaab agenda, or that of a range of smaller, localised militia leaders.

This persistent violence speaks both to the specific threat

these individuals and groups to which they may be aligned pose; but also to the broader danger that the inability to establish meaningful security and rule of law will undermine the legitimacy and stability of the federal government in the longer-run.

**Emerging regimes in Central and South-Central Somalia:**

**The federal government in Somalia faces challenges establishing local administrations in a context of multiple competing claims from proxy and aligned militias, and countervailing pressures from international interests including Kenya and Ethiopia.**

Contrary to the association of Somalia with state failure and subsequently ‘ungoverned space’ for the past decade, the country may now be entering a period where too many forces are contesting authority and competing for territory, particularly in the newly seized areas of the South-Central region. Figure 4 shows the enormous number of discrete, non-state actors involved in conflict events in Somalia since January 2010. This includes extraordinarily diverse and complex local clan-based militias, local political militias, external militaries and various other militant forces which may retain a vested interest in the allocation of power in the coming months.

Various degrees of autonomy and independence have been de facto tolerated in Somalia over the past two decades, with the North-Western Somaliland and North-Eastern Puntland regions being the most adamant in distancing themselves from the centralising agenda of the

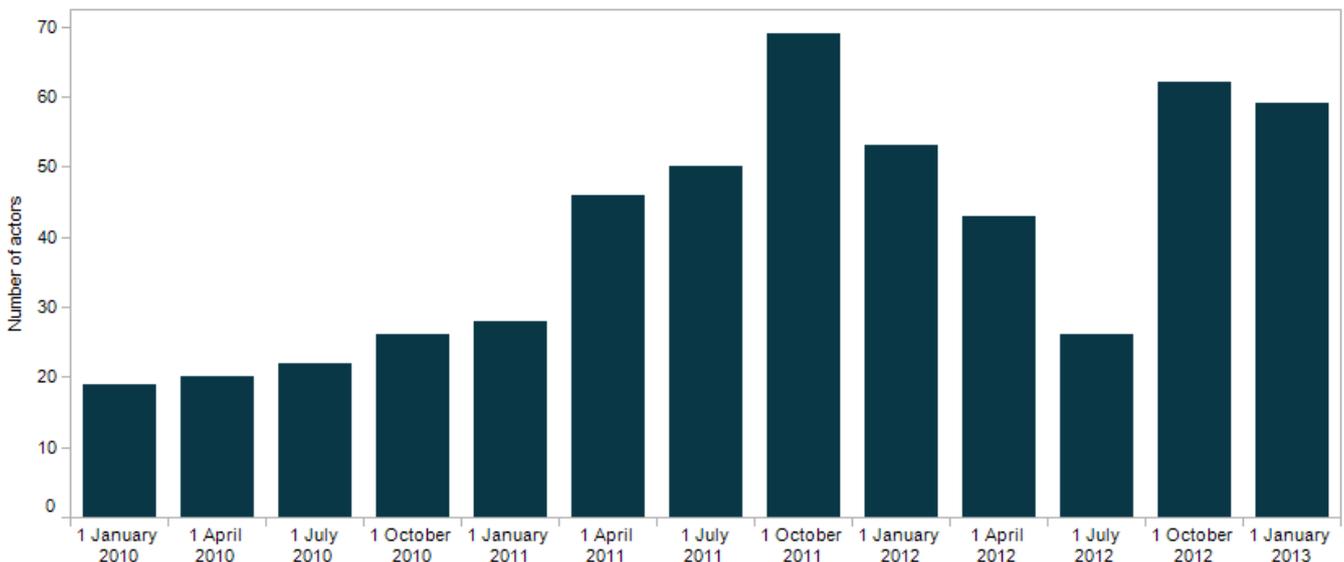


Figure 4: Number of Discrete Conflict Actors involved in Violent Conflict Events, Somalia, 2010 - March 2013.

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Mogadishu government. However, there are comparable agendas arising in the South-Central region, most notably in the Southern ‘Jubaland’ area incorporating the port city of Kismayo. Figure 5 shows some of the regional increases in violence over time.

Two decades of civil war; a weak central government which relied for much of its combat forces on proxy and aligned local militias such as the Ras Kamboni Brigade and *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa*; and the controversial involvement of external, neighbouring militaries in the conflict have combined to produce multiple, clamouring and divergent demands for control over administrations and zones of influence.

Even if the federal government and its allies regain territorial control over the remaining regions of Somalia, precisely how diverse groups with different agendas and investments in local power politics will be integrated or appeased through local power-sharing or administrative arrangements remains to be seen.

Sustained Ethiopian influence in the regions currently under its control is likely to be deeply resented and resisted in light of Ethiopia’s history of involvement in Somalia, and tensions with its own ethnically Somali population across the border. Ethiopia has shown little interest in maintaining direct presence, although its support to various local militias will certainly shape agendas and outcomes in these Central zones.

The Kenyan position is more ambivalent: having entered the conflict as a neighbouring, independent military force at least superficially in response to deteriorating security along its Somali border, the military has been retrospectively legitimised through integration into the AMISOM forces, leaving many within Somalia sceptical about Kenya’s intentions in the region and willingness to withdraw.

Kenya would undoubtedly reap benefits from the establishment of a secure ‘buffer zone’ along its north-eastern border through a semi-autonomous proxy regime in Jubaland. However, while this aligns with the objectives of some actors in the region, Kenya may find itself aggravating cleavages with both local militias and political interests, and the federal government in Mogadishu.

**Communal Violence in Northern Somalia:**

Related to the multiplicity of clan-based actors seeking power in Somalia’s emerging administrations, are levels of communal violence in the country’s North-East and North-Western territories of Puntland and Somaliland. While these areas typically experience far lower levels of violence than Central and South-Central regions, communal violence makes up a higher proportion of their overall violence share, at 16.5% of all conflict events, compared to the national average of 8.4%. Puntland and Somali-

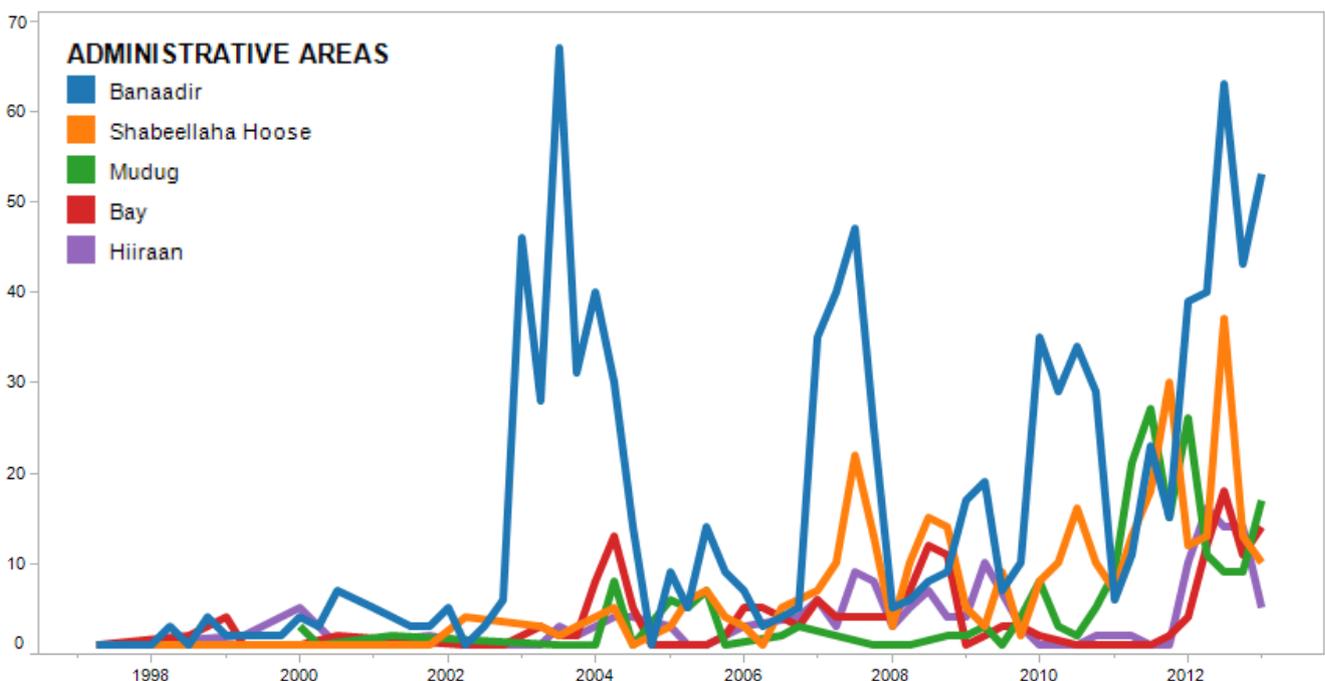


Figure 5: Violent Conflict Events in Top 5 Most Violent Regions, Somalia, 1997 - 2013.

land’s proportion of communal violence is higher than neighbouring Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea, and higher even than Sahel states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger. The violence is also relatively fatal, constituting 19.3% of all conflict-related fatalities.

Communal conflict also has a distinct seasonal profile in Puntland and Somaliland: across all years of the dataset, it is highest on average (in both proportional and absolute terms) in June, October and November, during the projected rainy seasons (FEWSNET, Seasonal Calendar, undated). This is common across arid and semi-arid lands, where competition for cattle, improved resource access, and subsequent improved capacity to sustain livestock contributes to increased raiding activity among communal groups. The Bari region in particular is affected by high levels of conflict, carried out militants active in the Sool, Sanaag and Cayn area, control over which is disputed between Puntland and Somaliland.

Communal violence in these territories is relatively contained and, unlike other forms of violence in Somalia, and is only indirectly linked to wider regional stability. In this sense, it is low-grade violence akin to much of the pastoralist and nomadic conflict which is witnessed in comparable environments and contexts across the continent.

However, violence of this scale illuminates the depth and persistence of – often violently expressed – societal divisions in Somalia other than the government / Islamist divide on which most international attention is focused. In the first instance, it is a reminder that communal violence persists in these territories in spite of their relatively more developed governance and security structures (compared, for instance, to the national / federal government’s reach into South-Central Somalia over much of the past decade). The scale of this violence reflects the intensity of clan-based and communal fault lines, which often overlap with regional identities, livelihoods, marginalisation and vulnerabilities in a potent and volatile combination.

Broadly, exploring violence in Puntland and Somaliland is a reminder of the tensions which exist between the central government and these more autonomous entities in the north. These tensions will be difficult to resolve: precisely how federal government relations with Somaliland in particular (the more independent of the two entities) will be settled is not yet clear. Figure 6 below illustrates the variation in civilian targeting over time. Contrary to received wisdom, the north of Somalia witnesses considerable levels of violence against civilians in spite of its reduced level of involvement in the overarching civil war.

**Figure 6 illustrates the variation in civilian targeting in Somalia over time. Contrary to received wisdom, the north of Somalia witnesses considerable levels of violence against civilians in spite of its reduced involvement in the overarching civil war.**

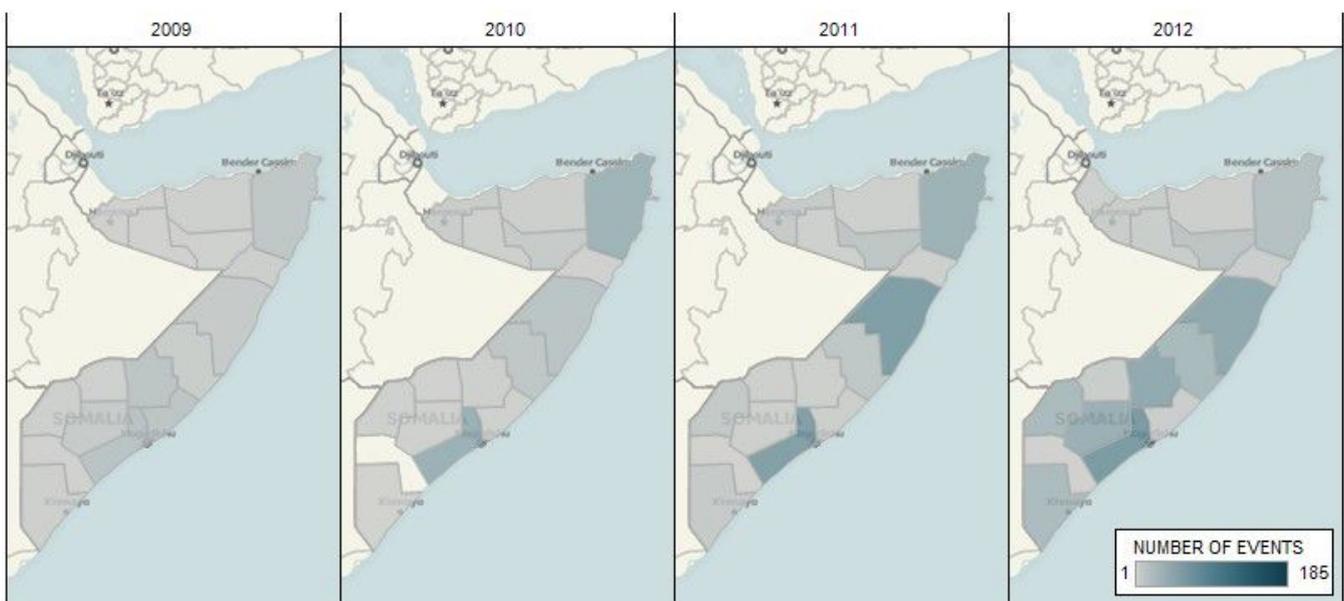


Figure 6: Violence against Civilians, by Region, Somalia, 2009 - 2012.