

HIGHLIGHTS

September saw further armed responses to Villa Somalia's efforts to consolidate control through regional elections. Somali National Army (SNA) reinforcements failed to secure Baidoa, and Hawaadle clan mobilisation against the Hirshabelle State electoral process culminated in deadly unrest in Beledweyne. National election negotiations remained stalled. Al-Shabaab maintained pressure around Mogadishu and in coastal Galmudug as the approaching loss of United States (U.S.) mission funding and possible Ethiopian troop withdrawals narrow the government's military options. Puntland's counter-piracy operations produced the month's clearest security gains, reducing the major commercial vessels held by pirates from five to one; however, the financiers and coastal networks behind the hijackings remain in place. Somaliland President Abdirahman Irro visits the US in a bid to deepen security and economic cooperation.

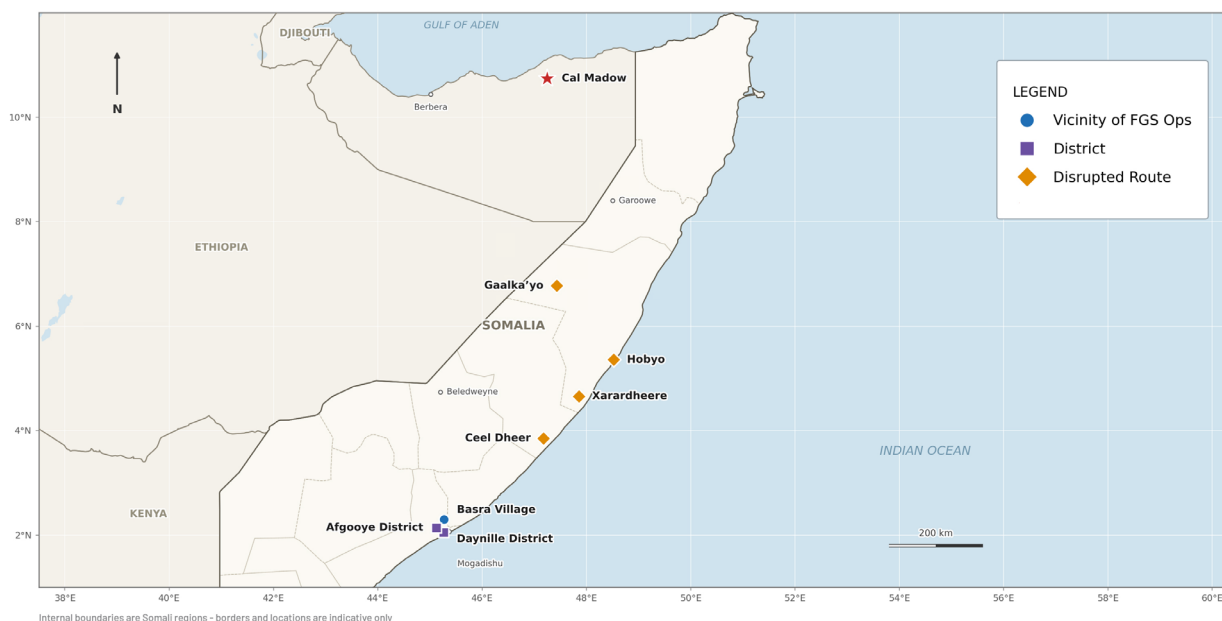
Somalia's security concerns continue to grow

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's promised "final offensive" against Al-Shabaab showed no progress in September. Somali National Army (SNA) and National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) operations on Mogadishu's northern periphery again failed to establish durable control over the village of Basra, continuing to allow Al-Shabaab penetration into Dayniile District. In Galmudug, the group increased its presence around Xarardheere and disrupted roads linking the town to Hobyo, Ceel Dheer and Gaalka'yo, putting further pressure on an already vulnerable government position.

US forces confirmed a strike against an Al-Shabaab weapons storage facility in the Cal Madow mountains, immediately southeast of Boosaaso. The attack extended the Puntland military campaign that has concentrated on the Islamic State in

Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for the past year. Concern over possible al-Shabaab–Houthi cooperation may explain the target selection, as may preparations for an expanded U.S. presence around Bosaso following the recent U.S.–Puntland security cooperation agreement.

The US Embassy announced that it will support a further year for the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) to drawdown and liquidate its support effort for the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). However, this offers Somalia little relief from the approaching funding cutoff for logistical support to AU forces. Normal UNSOS operations can now continue through 31 December 2026. Unless replacement financing is secured, AUSSOM will enter 2027 with vastly reduced support while Somali forces would struggle to fill any void.



Renewed conflict in Ethiopia following the launch of the Alliance for Survival rebel coalition could deepen Somalia's challenges. At the end of the month, reports spread that up to 3,000 Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) personnel may be recalled from Somalia in the coming weeks to support Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's campaign against Ethiopian opposition forces. Although these could come from bilaterally deployed ENDF units rather than AUSSOM units, any rapid withdrawal would leave little time for the SNA to arrange replacements in Jubaland, South West and Hirshabelle States.

The fight for Baidoa intensifies

Additional SNA deployments, including Türkiye-trained Gorgor units, failed to dislodge forces loyal to former South West State President Abdiaziz Laftagareen from the outskirts of Baidoa. The opposition's assault on 28 September was its third major attack on the city in less than two months. Fighters have repeatedly entered and temporarily held districts of the city for several hours, attacked SNA compounds, and then withdrawn back to the surrounding countryside. Several SNA brigade commanders have been killed in these assaults, including another brigade commander from the 60th Division this month.

The 28 September attack included an explosive drone strike on Hotel RB, which is partly owned by contested South West State President Adan Madoobe and hosts government officials. This is the first reported use of an explosive drone against federal personnel or their political allies in southern Somalia. It suggests possible technical or operational assistance from Al-Shabaab, although the source of the weapon and the identity of its operators remain unconfirmed. The conflict has given Laftagareen's forces an incentive to seek such assistance. Sustained cooperation would expand Al-Shabaab's access to local armed networks in South West State, but also in Mogadishu and its environs.

Turkish aircraft, including F-16 fighters and drones based in Mogadishu, continued to strike opposition positions outside Baidoa. However, Somali ground forces have been unable to exploit these attacks to secure the city's approaches. The persistent fighting and new warnings from the opposition to avoid government strongholds has resulted in new waves of civilian displacement.

Madoobe's authority in Buurhakaba has also weakened. The local Elaay sub-clan of the Rahanweyn clan initially supported Laftagareen's removal, but discontent with his successor has prompted several Elay security leaders to join the opposition. The loss of Buurhakaba would give Laftagareen's forces greater control over the route linking Baidoa to Mogadishu and make Madoobe's administration still more dependent on outside military protection and resupply.

On 3 September, an explosion at General Mahad Shub's home in Doolow, Gedo, raised concern that Villa Somalia was leveraging Turkish air strikes capabilities against political opponents well beyond Baidoa. Shub survived with injuries and accused NISA Director Mahad Salad of organising an assassination attempt. Other accounts implicated Speaker Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur 'Jama' and Turkish personnel. Shub and local residents reported aircraft overhead, although the weapon and responsibility for the attack remain unverified. Nonetheless, condemnations of Türkiye's support for President Hassan Sheikh have continued to grow.

Unrest intensifies in Hiiraan over Hirshabelle elections

Hawaadle clan resistance to the Hirshabelle electoral process became increasingly organised and armed during September. Operating from Buulo Burte, Ugaas Yusuf Ugaas Hassan Ugaas Khalif raised resources and recruited fighters, culminating in a show of force involving hundreds of armed men and dozens of weapon-mounted vehicles. Calls for an autonomous "Hiiraan State" gained support among leaders who regard Hirshabelle's administration as dominated by the Abgaal and its electoral process as controlled from Mogadishu.

These grievances have been sharpened by the Hawaadle's losses during the Ma'awiisley campaign against Al-Shabaab and the subsequent marginalisation of leaders who organised it. Former NISA chief Sanbaloolshe emerged as a principal organiser of resistance to Ali Gudlaawe's return as Hirshabelle president. Villa Somalia's endorsement of the incumbent reinforced the perception that the election would ratify a choice already made in Mogadishu. Armed networks central to the anti-Shabaab campaign are consequently being mobilised against federal authorities, weakening the relationships on which government operations in Hiiraan depend.

The confrontation turned deadly on 30 September, when government forces reportedly fired live ammunition to disperse election protesters in Beledweyne. Villa Somalia reportedly offered former Hiiraan governor and Ma'awiisley leader Ali Jeyte the vice-presidential position on Gudlaawe's ticket, alongside other incentives, to contain the crisis, and Ugaas Yusuf could be reconsidering his position to avoid violence on the scale seen in Baidoa. An agreement could draw some leaders away from the opposition, but continued support would depend on the influence it gives the Hawaadle over Hirshabelle's administration. The reported killing of protesters makes a settlement confined to appointments harder to defend within the clan.

National political fragmentation growing risk

Negotiations between Villa Somalia and the Somalia Future Council (SFC) made no progress in September. Federal Government President Hassan Sheikh travelled to New York for the United Nations (UN) General Assembly seeking to project normalcy and control as regional electoral disputes generated further armed opposition at home. His effort to strengthen his position through allied state administrations is committing federal troops to conflicts that erode local support and leave fewer forces available for operations against Al-Shabaab.

Puntland and Jubaland called for the reimposition of the UN arms embargo, accusing Villa Somalia of using newly acquired weapons against political opponents. Puntland also issued a statement describing growing demands among residents for full independence (similar to Somaliland's path). Giving these demands official recognition sends a clear signal to the international community. The SFC warned that the continuing deadlock was accelerating the country's political fragmentation and increasing the prospect of a wider security crisis.

The fighting in Baidoa and mobilisation in Hiiraan show how disputed regional elections are drawing previously allied armed groups into conflict with federal forces. A prolonged national impasse could create similar incentives for opposition figures in Mogadishu to seek military leverage, including tactical cooperation with Al-Shabaab. That possibility remains unsubstantiated, but the apparent willingness to consider such arrangements in South West State illustrates the opportunities the electoral crisis is creating for the insurgency.

Puntland operations disrupt piracy

Pirates held five major commercial vessels at the beginning of September: Sward, Honour 25, Eureka, Asana and Sibü 1, formerly Seamull. Sward was released on 11 September after a reported ransom payment of \$1.7 million, although the amount remains unconfirmed. This was comparable in scale to the alleged \$2.5 million payment for Lutuf's August release.

In the second half of September, Puntland stepped up operations against the coastal supply and staging networks sustaining the remaining hijackings. On 25 September, the Puntland Maritime Police Force recovered Sibü 1 after roughly five weeks in captivity, with all 20 crew reported safe. Initial claims of large numbers of arrests were followed by inconsistent custody figures and reports that some detainees escaped. The tanker was already under U.S. sanctions for alleged involvement in Iranian petroleum sanctions evasion.

Puntland forces also recovered Honour 25 on 29 September after more than five months in captivity. Pirates had reportedly



Source: *The Maritime Executive* / PMPF

killed five crew members and wounded four others before the operation was completed. Puntland announced that 16 suspected pirates had been detained, with others still at large. The tanker carried approximately 18,500 barrels of oil. Its recovery deprives the captors of a prospective multimillion-dollar ransom after months of expenditure on guards, supplies and shore support. The detainees could provide information on the financiers and intermediaries who expected a share of the proceeds.

Possibly in response to this growing security pressure, Eureka's captors reportedly released its 12 crew and abandoned the vessel on 29–30 September. Some fuel had reportedly already been removed and sold, allowing the pirates to recover part of their investment as ransom prospects diminished. Asana was the last major commercial vessel still held at month's end. Maritime reporting placed it in Galmudug waters, where its captors may be seeking alternative arrangements for supplies and protection. Puntland's intervention sharply reduced the number of captive vessels and raised the cost of holding them along its coast. Its effect on the networks financing and protecting pirate operations remains uncertain. Ransom proceeds already collected could fund new hijackings, and Asana's movement into Galmudug suggests that some groups can relocate beyond Puntland's reach. Sustaining September's gains will depend on apprehending the co-ordinators and financiers of piracy networks and extending coastal enforcement through cooperation with Galmudug.

SOMALILAND

Irro visits US, pitches deeper security and economic cooperation



On September 5, 2026, Somaliland President Abdirahman Irro undertook an informal working visit to the United States to lobby for deeper bilateral cooperation in key sectors. Irro engaged a number of US government departments, attended a Middle East and African security affairs summit (MEAD), met Senator Ted Cruz, and appeared at rally of supporters outside the UN Headquarters.

Officially, the US State Department maintains an unchanged policy - recently reaffirming its commitment to a unified “One Somalia” framework. However, the view in Washington is not monolithic and there are signs of a modest elite opinion

shift that favours Hargeisa. This shifting sentiment was underscored by an influential Council on Foreign Relations commentary in *Foreign Policy* magazine explicitly advocating for formal U.S. recognition.

Historically, the US did at certain point mull recognition merits—most notably by coordinating a review with the United Kingdom in 2012 before shelving the initiative. Still, there is significant bipartisan respect for Somaliland’s democratic state-building and enduring internal stability.

As Houthi advances in southern Yemen alter the security landscape around the Bab el-Mandeb, Somaliland’s strategic coastline is gaining critical attention. Formal American validation would serve as a definitive geopolitical gamechanger, unlocking international recognition far more effectively than Israel’s December 2025 declaration. An official nod from Washington would provide the necessary political cover for amenable states across Africa and Europe to follow suit.

Yet, Hargeisa correctly assesses that Washington is too distracted by competing global crises to change its official stance in the immediate term. Furthermore, the US remains highly cautious about complicating its strategic relationships with Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—the three regional powers most vociferously opposed to an independent Somaliland.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase pressure on the Federal Government of Somalia to reach a national electoral agreement.**

International partners should press Villa Somalia to make substantive concessions on the electoral timetable, rules and oversight arrangements, and resume negotiations with the Somalia Future Council without conditioning talks on completion of state elections. Coordinated diplomacy should be backed by clear consequences for continued obstruction, including reconsideration of discretionary political and financial support. Growing political violence and fragmentation are making a settlement harder to secure. Prolonged exclusion could also encourage opposition groups to seek tactical cooperation with al-Shabaab, giving the insurgency further opportunities to exploit the electoral crisis. These risks warrant more sustained international engagement and greater pressure on the presidency to compromise.

- **Help the opposition develop a common, workable negotiating position.** Support coordination between the Somalia Future Council, regional administrations and other opposition groups on electoral arrangements and any proposed transition. Technical assistance should clarify the legal basis, duration and limits of transitional institutions. Engagement should also press opposition leaders to reject cooperation with al-Shabaab and keep political negotiations open as armed confrontations spread.

- **Support locally led ceasefires and political dialogue in South West State and Hirshabelle.** International partners should support separate negotiating forums convened by locally credible elders and independent mediators, with direct participation by regional authorities, opposition leaders, and the commanders needed to implement ceasefires. Federal authorities

should participate where their forces or decisions are involved, but should not control representation, chair proceedings or make de-escalation conditional on acceptance of disputed electoral outcomes. Initial agreements should address civilian protection, force deployments and restraint around contested towns. Negotiations on regional leadership and electoral arrangements should proceed without treating Villa Somalia's preferred candidates as the accepted outcome.

- **Strengthen international oversight of externally supplied weapons and air operations.** Türkiye and other security partners should seek an independent investigation of the attack on General Mahad Shub's home in Doolow and credible accounting for strikes around Baidoa. Assistance agreements should provide for scrutiny of targeting decisions and suspension of support to units found to be using supplied capabilities unlawfully against political opponents. Unresolved allegations of foreign involvement in such attacks are already damaging confidence in international security assistance.

- **Consolidate Puntland's piracy gains through investigations and cooperation with Galmudug.** Support secure custody and prosecution of suspects, including investigation of reported escapes, and use evidence from recovered vessels and detainees to identify co-ordinators, financiers, suppliers and ransom beneficiaries. Asana's reported movement into Galmudug requires cooperation with coastal authorities and communities beyond Puntland's jurisdiction. Maritime assistance should strengthen the capacity to disrupt these networks and prevent pirate groups from rebuilding operations with ransom proceeds already collected.