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Ma'awisley:

A double-edged sword in the fight
against al-Shabaab

Introduction

One of the most significant recent developments in the prolonged struggle against al-Shabaab in Somalia has been the success of military operations led by the Somali National Armed Forces and allied self-defence militias known as *Ma'awisley*.¹ *Ma'awisley*—named after the colourful sarong many members wear—were provoked into action by various grievances towards al-Shabaab, including high taxation, forcible child recruitment and continued intimidation.² The offensive, which started in mid-2022, has led to significant swathes of territory in central Somalia being recovered. This is the first time in almost a decade that al-Shabaab has faced military pressure sufficient to threaten its hold on the country's rural areas.³

So far, *Ma'awisley* militias have emerged primarily in the states of Hirshabelle (east of the Shabelle River) and Galmudug. This area, designated as phase one of operations, has been the focus of the offensive to date. Only two phase one districts—Galgareeri and Eelbur in Galgaduud region of Galmudug state—remain under al-Shabaab's control,⁴ with the group dislodged from almost all the territories where *Ma'awisley* militias have been formed.⁵ The formation and role of *Ma'awisley* from these territories may, however, have serious implications in terms of wider security sector reform; implementation of a revitalized National Security Architecture; securing the gains made in newly recovered territories; as well as, more broadly, state-level political settlement dynamics. This prompts the critical question of what is to become of *Ma'awisley* from these territories when the military offensive moves on to other parts of the country.

This policy brief analyses the political-security challenges posed by *Ma'awisley*, before turning to the policy options around demobilization and integration of the militias.

1. Security-political challenges posed by the emergence of *Ma'awisley*

The emergence of *Ma'awisley* has contributed to several security-political challenges, outlined below. Thus far, the modicum of control over *Ma'awisley* exercised by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and clan notables, as

- 1 Mary Harper, 'Somalia's men in sarongs taking on al-Shabab militants', BBC News, 3 November 2022. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-63486013.
- 2 Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, 'Protection or predation? Understanding the behavior of community-created self-defence militias during civil wars', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33/3 (2022).
- 3 Paul D. Williams and Afyare Elmi, 'Security Sector Reform in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities', Heritage Institute, January 2023, 2. <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/security-sector-reform-somalia-challenges-and-opportunities>.
- 4 SDC Policy Forum Discussion, 'Current Operations: Lessons Learnt, Opportunities, and Challenges', Mogadishu, May 2023.
- 5 International Crisis Group, 'Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab', Africa Briefing no. 187, March 2023. www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b187-sustaining-gains-somalias-offensive-against-al-shabaab#:~:text=In%20conjunction%20with%20clan%20militias,in%20the%20fifteen%2Dyear%20war.

well as the existence of a common enemy in the shape of al-Shabaab, has prevented such challenges becoming acute. The effectiveness of these factors is, however, diminishing. Moreover, the demands of militia members are only likely to increase, while, conversely, the support they receive from their clans will eventually tire.⁶ As such, it is imperative that the FGS puts a coherent plan in place for the future of *Ma'awisley*.

Robbery and theft: A commonly expressed fear is that *Ma'awisley* will become yet another source of insecurity, with the FGS incapable of effectively dealing with them. In particular, the country's recent history of inter- and intra-clan conflict has provoked apprehension among some about the formation of clan-based militias.⁷ While the worst of these fears are yet to materialize, there have been instances of everyday insecurity generated by *Ma'awisley*, the most common being robbery and/or property theft, often through illegal checkpoints.

Competition over resources: The removal of al-Shabaab as the de facto ruling power, accompanied by the deployment of clan militias, may provoke or exacerbate challenges related to resource access in the recovered areas. In some cases, clans/sub-clans may have been engaged in long-running disputes over territory and wells. Neighbouring clans may also be involved in boundary disputes, which become inflamed at particular moments. With al-Shabaab now removed from the equation, these disputes are beginning to re-emerge. In other instances, al-Shabaab's disregard for customary clan–territory relations has created new fault-lines that may erupt into future conflict.

Ma'awisley and changing state-level political settlement dynamics: Another challenge posed by the emergence of *Ma'awisley* militias is competition over power, with clans/communities whose participation was hampered by al-Shabaab's rule now likely to demand a redistribution of the power and resources currently concentrated in regional and state capitals. Additionally, the presence of armed clan militias, subject to minimal oversight, creates opportunities for political entrepreneurs to utilize them in pursuit of personal ambitions. As an influential politician and *Ma'awisley* organizer from Hirshabelle puts it, 'every unhappy politician will now have a ready armed force'.⁸

Weapons proliferation: Another potential challenge is the increase in the number of weapons possessed by *Ma'awisley* members. This is primarily due to armament contributions by clans, which have not only bought the ubiquitous AK-47, but larger weapons such as *technicals*—machine guns and other heavy weapons mounted on pickup trucks. While it was necessary to arm *Ma'awisley* in order to create an effective fighting force against al-Shabaab, further quantities of unregulated weapons in a country already awash with arms should be a concern.

6 'Clan donations will be exhausted and people will get tired, and the needs of *Ma'awisley* will increase.' Interview with *Ma'awisley* leader from Galmudug, Dhusamareb, March 2023.

7 Abdi I. Samatar, 'Somalia's strategy for the war against al-Shabaab will condemn the country to perpetual hell', *Daily Maverick*, 6 November 2022. www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-11-06-somalias-strategy-for-the-war-against-al-shabaab-will-condemn-the-country-to-perpetual-hell/.

8 Interview with government official and *Ma'awisley* organizer, Mogadishu, March 2023.

2. Concerns regarding Ma'awisley integration

There is a general consensus among stakeholders that the security-political challenges posed by *Ma'awisley* can only be resolved by integrating militia members into the regular security apparatus. Moreover, most stakeholders, including the FGS and *Ma'awisley* organizers/leaders, are convinced that integrating militia members is also the just thing to do given the sacrifices they have made in the fight against al-Shabaab. Nevertheless, as outlined below, policy-makers will need to address a number of concerns if integration of the *Ma'awisley* is to be successfully pursued.

Managing the numbers of armed forces: While ascertaining the exact numbers of militia members in the midst of ongoing military operations is undoubtedly difficult, it is nevertheless vital information when it comes to planning for the future of *Ma'awisley*. There is no official registration process for joining *Ma'awisley*, although the study's research indicates there are about 8,000–10,000 members across Hirshabelle and Galmudug—a not insignificant figure in relation to the number of security personnel at a federal and state level, as well as the overall planned numbers envisaged in agreements between the FGS and Federal Member States.⁹

Affordability: Integrating *Ma'awisley* into the armed forces will have a financial impact, increasing the share of the federal budget spent on security and defence. The total federal budget for 2023 is USD 950.7 million, of which USD 667.3 million (70 per cent) comes from external donors, with the remainder generated domestically.¹⁰ The defence and security sector receives USD 197.1 million—although this represents 20 per cent of the total budget, it is mostly financed through domestic revenue. Amid this context of extremely limited revenue, the prospect of integrating *Ma'awisley* members appears very challenging.

Differences in perspectives on integration: Thus far, there has been a lack of clarity from the FGS on how integration will be undertaken. In essence, there are two potential approaches: firstly, a more deliberate integration process involving releasing *Ma'awisley* members from active duty, then retraining them according to the demands of whichever branch of the armed forces they are to join; or, secondly, simply re-hatting *Ma'awisley* as regular armed forces and giving them salaries, without integrating them into the existing security architecture. Either approach has advantages and limitations, which would need to be carefully weighed.

Timing: The FGS needs to provide clarity on when *Ma'awisley* will be integrated into the regular armed forces. It appears most stakeholders implicitly assume integration will take place at one of two moments linked to the military defeat of al-Shabaab.¹¹ For some FGS officials, defeating al-Shabaab means not only dislodging the group from the central Somali territories designated under phase one of the military offensive, but also South West State and Jubaland in southern Somalia. Hence, their view is that integration should take place after

9 These agreements include those set out in the National Security Architecture of 2017, as well as the updated version produced by the Baidoa National Consultative Council meeting held in March 2023.

10 Barsan Associates, 'A review of Somalia's 2023 budget: Continued dependency on external support', January 2023, <https://barsan.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/A-review-of-Somalias-2023-annual-budget-1-7.pdf>; Williams and Elmi, 'Security Sector Reform'.

11 SDC Policy Forum Discussion, 'Force Integration, Financial Impact, Affordability & Sustainability,' Dhusamareb, Galmudug, May 2023.

the completion of phase two of operations. Others, however, recognize that such a plan may not be feasible, and are insistent a blueprint for integration should not be delayed.¹²

Managing the distribution and clan composition of the Somali National Army: Beyond how and when to integrate *Ma'awisley*, several concerns remain regarding the potential impact on the composition, distribution, command structure and financial sustainability of the national armed forces. Given the federal structure currently being institutionalized across the country and the recent history of clan politicization, caution should be exercised, as these aspects will affect the politics of distribution, as well as command-and-control.

3. Recommendations

Below, based on the study's findings, are a number of recommendations towards implementing a coherent strategy for the demobilization and reintegration of *Ma'awisley*. Should this be carried out successfully, it would represent a major step towards stabilizing the recaptured territories and consolidating the military gains made in central Somalia.

Dialogue and reconciliation on a state-level political settlement: The following recommendations presuppose a degree of reconciliation and understanding between the communities/clans living in Hirshabelle and Galmudug. Without a (re)negotiation of state-level political settlements, it will be difficult to garner consensus on the way forward for *Ma'awisley*. This is especially urgent in Hirshebelle.

Develop a policy framework that allows for both the demobilization and integration of Ma'awisley units: The general opinion expressed by FGS officials and *Ma'awisley* organizers/members is that the only viable way forward is to integrate *Ma'awisley* into the armed forces. While this report does not necessarily disagree, the emphasis should be on demobilization and reintegration into civilian life, rather than simply integration, as it is likely that many *Ma'awisley* members will not meet the requirements for joining the armed forces, and integration of all such forces would be unaffordable. Reintegration into civilian life may prove challenging in light of expectations that all *Ma'awisley* members will be allowed to join the armed forces, with many *Ma'awisley* members simply unable to return to their civilian lives.¹³ Demobilization and reintegration should therefore begin immediately, with the FGS potentially required to invest time and money to find creative solutions. Moreover, integration should be more than simply re-hatting *Ma'awisley* members and providing them with salaries, which risks long-term problems related to the composition, distribution, command structure and financial sustainability of the armed forces.

Demobilize and reintegrate after phase one of operations: Two particularly important considerations should be weighed in deciding when to regularize *Ma'awisley* militias: firstly, the present and potential impact of *Ma'awisley* on

12 Many of those holding this position are the people more intimately involved with *Ma'awisley* and based in the regions.

13 As a traditional elder from Middle Shabelle observed: 'They should be integrated into the armed forces because they have suffered, got wounded, and some died. They have lost a lot of time. Their goal is to liberate their country, to make a future for themselves, and to become part of the governing system. That they should go back to their goats and camels is not the reason they came.' Interview with traditional elder from Middle Shabelle, Jowhar, March 2023.

security-political conditions, and, secondly, the feasibility of demobilization amid the ongoing offensive against al-Shabaab. The completion of phase one of operations—meaning the military defeat of al-Shabaab in most of Hirshabelle and Galmudug—will provide a small window of opportunity where, with effective planning, it may be possible to demobilize and integrate *Ma'awisley*. As such, the FGS should immediately begin planning the processes needed to bring this about. One approach would be to demobilize in phases, with some *Ma'awisley* remaining in the field while others undergo training and reintegration.

Establish official bodies to manage integration and demobilization processes: Currently, there is a lack of any official body that can address questions about how the FGS plans to integrate *Ma'awisley* into the armed forces. As such, it would be strongly worthwhile establishing official bodies/committees tasked with studying and planning for the demobilization and reintegration of *Ma'awisley*. This may mean reactivating dormant committees such as the National Integration Commission (*Gudiga isku Dhafka Ciidamada*), which has previously worked on integrating the armed forces.¹⁴

Integrate *Ma'awisley* into state-level security forces: Thus far, only clans resident in Hirshabelle and Galmudug have been mobilized for *Ma'awisley*. It is therefore possible to avoid aggravating the composition, distribution and command structure of the national armed forces by integrating most, if not all, *Ma'awisley* into state-level forces—mainly police and Darwish. Since the plan is to utilize *Ma'awisley* as holding forces in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, it makes sense to integrate militia members into the security personnel of these states. Moreover, since in the short term the demobilization of *Ma'awisley* is not going to be accompanied by disarmament, some militia members could act as reserves to be called on as necessary, partly addressing concerns about affordability.

Mobilize financial resources: The demobilization and reintegration of *Ma'awisley* will be financially costly at a time when government resources are stretched to the limit. Nevertheless, delaying it presents severe risks. Consequently, the FGS should initiate efforts to collect the necessary funds, appealing both to domestic constituents and the international community. Having already exerted influence over and through clans to organize *Ma'awisley*, the FGS could similarly mobilize the Somali business community, as well as clans among which *Ma'awisley* have organized, to contribute financially to their integration. Even so, there is a limit to the financial resources the FGS can generate domestically, meaning the donor community may have to contribute. This, though, should only be done if a sustainable pathway can be agreed for the FGS to take on the long-term funding of forces.

Create management and accountability mechanisms for *Ma'awisley* weapons: The overall disarmament of *Ma'awisley* is probably neither feasible nor advisable at present, as it would effectively involve disarming specific clans. Moreover, even if al-Shabaab is dislodged from central Somalia, it will not have been defeated. Nevertheless, it is important that mechanisms for managing armaments, particularly powerful weapons like *technicals*, are created. This could be done by utilizing notables and representatives from the clans *Ma'awisley* are drawn from, with weapons placed under the auspices of individuals who can be relied upon to manage them.

Establish a robust government-owned defectors programme: This recommendation does not specifically address the integration of *Ma'awisley*, but the important issue of al-Shabaab defectors. Based on the study's findings,

¹⁴ This committee has, apparently, been somewhat successful in integrating the 21st and 43rd sectors of the Somali National Army. Interview with government official, Mogadishu, March 2023.

there has not been the anticipated level of defections from al-Shabaab. There are various reasons for this, including the fact that central Somalia is not al-Shabaab's stronghold, and the possibility that group members have not yet concluded the military defeats suffered so far amount to a serious long-term threat. The level of defections may increase dramatically, however, if military operations advance into al-Shabaab's southern Somalia stronghold. In anticipation of this possibility, the FGS should financially and procedurally strengthen its defectors programme.

Credits

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