



# Fake Fight: The Quiet Jihadist Takeover of Somalia

By Matt Bryden



On 26 October 2021, I was convicted of espionage by a Somali court and sentenced to five years in prison. The court also ruled that Sahan Research, a thinktank I co-founded and now advise, will be banned in perpetuity from Somalia. Fortunately, I wasn't present at the time or I would have been manacled, taken away to a cell and probably prevented from writing this article on my well-worn MacBook. But then, I wasn't meant to be present in court, let alone arrested and incarcerated: I'd been declared *persona non grata* and banned from entering Somalia three years earlier.

Relatively speaking, I was let off fairly easy. Somalis who cross the ruling cabal in the presidential palace, Villa Somalia, generally fare much worse. Since Mohamed Abdillahi Farmaajo took office as president in 2017, 12 journalists have been killed in Somalia, and in 2021 alone, dozens have been arrested, making the country one of the most dangerous places for media professionals across the globe. Prominent opposition politicians, including two former presidents, have been the targets of assassination attempts staged by government forces. Another has been detained since 2018 without charge or appearance before a court. The disappearance and alleged murder of a young female intelligence officer at the hands of her superiors ignited a national scandal that the government has aggressively quashed.

The shoddy episode of judicial theatre that resulted in my conviction was never about espionage,

national security or any of the other charges put forward by the prosecution. It certainly wasn't about justice. And it wasn't even about me. Like so many other things about the Somali Federal Government (FGS) headed by President Farmaajo, it was an exercise in smoke and mirrors: a way of distracting, deflecting, and deterring anyone who might dare to question, or even contradict, Villa Somalia's grotesque version of the "truth".

For a start, there was virtually no attempt to create even the illusion of due process. The Attorney General filed charges with the Banaadir regional court, which has no jurisdiction to try cases involving federal crimes - crimes against the state - but which proved conveniently amenable to guidance from the presidency. Indictments were announced by press release and no summons were issued. When Sahan's lawyer presented himself at the first hearing, he was asked to leave on the grounds that the court had already appointed defence counsel and his presence would only complicate things. The charges proffered by the prosecution alleged espionage and the revelation of state secrets, but in public the government insisted that Sahan published only lies - an assertion entirely at odds with the charge of revealing national secrets. Were we guilty of telling the truth (and too much of it) or lying? The government didn't seem able to make up its mind. Either way, no evidence was presented in support of the charges, no witnesses were put forward, and no one ever bothered to record statements from the defendants. It was, in the truest sense of the term, a "show trial".

### **State Capture, Farmaajo Style**

The first lines in the script of this courtroom drama had been inked three years earlier during the lead up to elections in Somalia's South West State (SWS), where a charismatic former Al-Shabaab leader, Mukhtar Roobow, had decided to run for president. Villa Somalia had thrown its weight behind a rival politician, Abdiaziz Laftagareen, and was incensed by Roobow's candidacy: not because of his former jihadist affiliation, but because he commanded significant local support and would likely prove to be a strong and independent state leader. Farmaajo's administration was in the early stages of a plan to dismantle Somalia's nascent federal architecture and centralise all power in Mogadishu. To pursue that aim, he needed weak, pliable proxies in charge of each of Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS). Villa Somalia made no secret of its opinion that Roobow didn't fit the profile.

Farmaajo's inner circle, led by his intelligence chief, Fahad Yasin, decided to nip Roobow's ambitions in the bud through a simple, brutish ruse: they convinced the commander of the Ethiopian AMISOM contingent in SWS to invite all presidential candidates to a security briefing on 13 December 2018 where Roobow was forcibly abducted and transferred to the custody of Fahad's bureau: the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in Mogadishu. He has since remained in NISA custody without charge or appearance before a court.

Roobow's arrest triggered street protests for three days, which the police quelled with deadly force, killing 15 demonstrators, including a member of the state parliament. Some 300 more were arrested and detained without charge beyond the constitutional 48-hour limit. Baidoa's police force was largely trained and paid for by international donors through a UN-supervised programme, for which Sahan served as third-party monitor. The police crackdown was widely reported in the media and by various monitoring groups, including Sahan, contributing to a decision by three of the programme's donors to suspend their support. The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG), a highly respected South African lawyer and diplomat named Nicholas Haysom, also expressed his concerns in the context of the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Programme, which governs support to security forces. Three days later the FGS declared him persona non grata (which, legally speaking, it cannot do to UN officials), and he was recalled from his post by UN headquarters.

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Haysom's expulsion achieved precisely what the FGS leadership had hoped it would: a chilling effect on much of the remaining diplomatic community in Mogadishu. If the SRSG could be sacked simply for doing his job, who else could possibly stand up to Villa Somalia and prevail? FGS officials, especially those involved in the security sector, from the president's doltish National Security Advisor (NSA) all the way on down to dubiously qualified 'technocrats' in the Ministries of Internal Security and Defence (even those whose salaries were paid for by their donor counterparts) took the lesson to heart: browbeating and tantrums became their default behaviour in encounters with foreign colleagues.

Having fulfilled its obligation as a third-party monitor to report on police brutality, Sahan also felt compelled to flag a much broader strategic concern: Villa Somalia's intensifying efforts to weaken Somalia's FMS and to dismantle the federal structures mandated by the Provisional Constitution - especially FMS police forces. Few observers realised that the police crackdown in Baidoa had not been led by the SWS state police, but by a few dozen federal police officers operating under direct orders from Mogadishu. On 17 December 2018, following an interview I gave to the Washington Post about how Roobow's arrest was symptomatic of Villa Somalia's centralist, authoritarian tendencies, Sahan was banned from Somalia and I was declared persona non grata.

Villa Somalia was not to be deterred by a little bad publicity: in August 2019, the FGS attempted to hijack elections in Jubaland, unsuccessfully financing rival candidates and ultimately declaring the re-election of state president Ahmed Madoobe null-and-void. Later the same month, in collusion with Villa Somalia, the Ethiopian army secretly attempted to airlift several hundred commandos from Baidoa to Kismayo, with a view to ousting Madoobe from office. This ended in a tense standoff between Ethiopian and Kenyan troops at Kismayo airport that could have easily ended in armed clashes between the two erstwhile allies. While Madoobe, with the support of AMISOM's Kenyan contingent, continued to dig in and defend his seat, Villa Somalia deployed troops to Jubaland's northern Gedo region, wresting most of it from Madoobe's control (with Ethiopian help) and arresting Jubaland's Minister of Internal Security.

Galmudug's election was stolen in February 2020 and Hirshabelle's followed suit in November the same year. In both cases, federal financing backed by the deployment of loyalist, Turkish-trained special forces and paramilitary police helped to ensure that Villa Somalia's candidates emerged victorious. But, as in SWS, these were hollow victories: weak, proxy leaders proved unable to consolidate their wins and largely incapable of exercising state authority, ceding territory to Al-Shabaab. Through its electoral machinations, Villa Somalia had succeeded in exerting greater and greater control over less and less of the country.

### **Somalia's Security Sector: Reinforcing Failure**

While Villa Somalia's brazen theft of elections and suppression of dissent served to weaken the autonomy of the FMS and enfeeble the federal checks and balances built into the Provisional Constitution, the deployment of security forces for the same purposes illustrated another, equally troubling development: the FGS had abandoned the fight against Somalia's single greatest security threat - Al-Shabaab.

On paper, Somalia's 2017 National Security Architecture and New Policing Model assign primary

responsibility for domestic security, including counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, to the FMS. But in May 2018, the FGS issued a new Somalia Transition Plan (STP), effectively tearing up those previous agreements and clawing back all security functions to the federal level. Under the STP, Villa Somalia systematically obstructed security assistance to the FMS and funnelled resources almost exclusively to the alarmingly dysfunctional federal forces.

The STP also made promises upon which it utterly failed to deliver – with just two exceptions: Mogadishu stadium and the Jaalle Siyaad military training academy were both ceremonially transferred from AMISOM’s control to the Somali authorities. These accomplishments were, to be generous, ‘low-hanging fruit’.

More importantly, the STP promised to secure the main supply routes (MSRs) between Mogadishu and three strategic towns in neighbouring FMS: Baidoa, Baraawe and Beledweyne. At the time of writing, this pledge had spectacularly failed. For example, Leego, in Lower Shabelle region, lies just a little more than 100 kilometres from the capital and was specifically cited in the STP as a key objective in opening the road to Baidoa. Leego is also a vital Al-Shabaab financial hub, collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars each month in road taxes. More than two years since the STP was first announced, no operation has ever been staged to seize it and the road to Baidoa remains, for government purposes, closed.

In 2019, a much-vaunted offensive to clear Al-Shabaab from Lower Shabelle region and open the MSR to Baraawe, nicknamed Operation Badbaado, ultimately fizzled out and was quietly abandoned. The offensive’s greatest achievement was the recapture, in early 2020, of Janaale, which had been abandoned after Al-Shabaab overran a Ugandan Forward Operating Base there in 2015. But between Mogadishu and Janaale, Operation Badbaado succeeded only in establishing a string of disconnected outposts, isolated from one another by large rural spaces controlled by the jihadists. The MSR to Baraawe remained closed.

The STP’s pledge to open the MSR from Mogadishu to Beledweyne was especially poignant. Until 2017, the section of road between the capital and Jowhar had been safe to travel, but less than a year after Farmaajo took office, it had become too hazardous for non-military traffic, forcing government officials, aid workers and civilians to make the 90-kilometre journey by air. In May-June 2021, Somalia’s boyish Chief of Defence Forces, General Odowaa Yusuf Rageh, personally led a flurry of aimless and uncoordinated raids into Middle Shabelle. The gesture amounted to little more than a series of chaotic skirmishes, producing nothing but unnecessary casualties and bad blood between the Somali National Army (SNA) and AMISOM, which claimed that Odowaa had failed to coordinate his amateurish expedition with the AU Force Headquarters. The road to Jowhar remained effectively impassable, as did the stretch between Jowhar and Beledweyne.

## **Shielding Al-Shabaab**

Whereas the shambolic state of the federal security forces might be explained by a combination of incompetence, inexperience, and a mediocre monarchy, the unchallenged expansion of Al-Shabaab’s influence on Farmaajo’s watch suggests a far more sinister explanation: tacit collusion between Villa Somalia and its putative adversaries. Indeed, the jihadists are possibly the only authority in Somalia that the FGS hasn’t chosen to pick a fight with.

Al-Shabaab is steadily extending its influence, not only in the interior, but even in territories nominally under some form of government control – including Mogadishu. As Farmaajo entered the latter half of his four-year term, a consensus was emerging that the terror group taxed more efficiently, raised more money, provided greater security, and dispensed higher quality justice than the FGS did. Major businesses in the capital readily acknowledged that they paid taxes to Al-

Shabaab because the government could not shield them from the consequences of disobedience. Some of the country's largest telecoms and financial institutions were found non-compliant with due diligence standards and even minimal anti-money laundering/countering terrorist financing best practices, enabling Al-Shabaab to make routine use of their services – including highly irregular transactions that should have raised red flags. The FGS, for its part, makes little or no effort to enforce its own regulations in this regard. The more Farmaajo's social media legions huff and puff about his government's successes, the more obvious it becomes that the war against Al-Shabaab is being lost.

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While the STP produced one military debacle after another, other FGS security initiatives demonstrated comparatively high levels of capability, competence, and determination in quashing Villa Somalia's enemies: not Al-Shabaab, but rather the political opposition and recalcitrant leaders of insubordinate FMS. For this purpose, Villa Somalia relied not on forces trained, supported, and monitored by Western security partners, but rather upon those established and equipped by its more steadfast political allies: Qatar, Turkey, and Eritrea. In other words, the FGS is fighting two different wars using two very different armies.

The cornerstone of Villa Somalia's parallel security policy was NISA under the direction Fahad Yasin. Having initially served as Farmaajo's Chief of Staff, Fahad was appointed Deputy Director General of NISA in August 2018 and effectively ran the organisation until his official promotion to NISA chief the following year. With financial and technical support from Qatar, Fahad has transformed NISA from a decrepit, thuggish secret police force into a modern, capable intelligence service and the secretive core of Villa Somalia's power. From behind the walls of NISA's sleek, opulent new headquarters, he has overseen the formation of an entirely parallel security establishment.

Some elements of these forces were highly visible. In early 2018, Turkey began training the first batch of army special forces known as *Gorgor* (Eagle); later the same year Ankara expanded its training programme to include a new paramilitary special police unit named *Haram'ad* (Cheetah). Both units have since been equipped with modern weapons, equipment, and armoured vehicles of Turkish manufacture. As their numbers have expanded, Fahad has deftly manoeuvred to bring them discreetly under Villa Somalia's direct control – and NISA's in particular.

In 2019, plans were set in motion for another paramilitary force to be stood up, this time as an integral part of NISA. As many as 7,000 Somali youth were recruited on the promise of training and employment in Qatar, but secretly transferred instead to Eritrea. Those that subsequently returned to Somalia became known as *Duufaan* (Hurricane), while an indeterminate number remained trapped in Eritrea, largely incommunicado, sparking a blistering scandal back in Somalia, where their parents demanded information about their whereabouts and well-being. By some accounts, hundreds, possibly thousands, of these Somali trainees may have been dispatched to fight in Ethiopia in November 2000 against the Tigray People's Liberation Front, but a communications blackout on the conflict zone has made such reports difficult to verify.

Thousands more trainees were enlisted into the *Xoogga Wadaniyiinta* (Popular Forces), a largely unarmed youth militia apparently inspired by the *Gulwadaayaal* (Victory Pioneers) of Siyaad Barre's

ruling party. And perhaps the smallest NISA unit, known as *Ruuxaan* (Ghosts), operates in hit squads, conducting political assassinations mainly in Mogadishu. NISA also possesses two armed units trained and mentored (and quaintly misnamed) by the US government: *Waran* (Spear), which protects NISA facilities and *Gaashaan* (Shield), which serves as a counterterrorism commando unit. But since the Americans keep an eye on them, they don't suit Fahad's purposes.

Fahad's strategy for the use of these politicised units progressively took shape in 2019 during the course of interventions in Jubaland and Galmudug. Following Ahmed Madoobe's re-election in August 2019, and Villa Somalia's humiliating failure to have him ousted by Ethiopian commandos, Fahad formulated a new course of action to destabilise Jubaland and undermine Madoobe's authority. The FGS surged federal forces into Gedo region, whose Marehan clan elites were divided in their loyalties between Madoobe (and his Marehan political appointees) and their kinsman, Farmaajo. Villa Somalia counted on the combination of force and finance to wrest Gedo from Jubaland's tenuous control.

To reinforce the SNA units stationed in Gedo, which were mainly drawn from local Marehan militias, the FGS airlifted a combination of NISA's *Duufaan* and paramilitary *Haram'ad* police from Mogadishu to change the balance of forces on the ground. More importantly, Fahad took direct control of the joint operation, dispatching his trusted NISA deputy, Abdullahi Adan Kulane 'Jiis', himself a member of the Marehan clan, to supervise their operations. Official military and police chains of command were short-circuited.

Violence in Gedo escalated, and casualties mounted through early 2020, threatening to draw Ethiopian and Kenyan troops into a confrontation on behalf of their local allies. In February 2020, as the situation threatened to deteriorate even further, the US government expressed its concern in a statement to the UN Security Council, describing the deployment of federal forces to Gedo region as an unacceptable "politically motivated offensive" that diverted resources away from the common fight against Al-Shabaab. But of course, that had always been the point.

Indeed, Al-Shabaab was the principal beneficiary of Villa Somalia's hijinks. While federal forces focused on wresting control of Doolow and Buulo Hawa away from Jubaland, they made no move towards Al-Shabaab's nearby base at El Adde, which at least 150 Kenyan soldiers had died defending in 2016, and which has since served as a critical operational and bomb-making hub for the jihadists. Other parts of Gedo region previously under Jubaland control also fell steadily under the influence of the jihadists. Today, Al-Shabaab controls more of Gedo than it had before Farmaajo took office.

Meanwhile, since late 2019, Villa Somalia had been plotting to take full control of Galmudug, dismantling its incumbent administration and engineering a rigged election to install a political proxy as state president the next year. The dynamics in Galmudug were very different from those in Gedo, but the FGS playbook was much the same. Loyalist federal forces were surged into Galmudug to achieve local security dominance and the cash followed in suitcases.

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Roughly 120 troops from the 2nd Battalion, *Gorgor* Commando Brigade were airlifted to the regional capital, Dhuusamareeb, together with about 100 *Haram'ad* paramilitary police and 120 officers from the Banaadir Police Force, who had originally been part of NISA. Their commander, Sadiq Joon, had

previously served as NISA commander in Banaadir. Villa Somalia also tried to involve US-trained and -mentored *Danab* (Lightning) special forces in its conspiracy, but this was quickly detected and shut down.

Like in Gedo, Villa Somalia established a discreet, informal chain of command that reported directly to NISA, with Sadiq Joon directly supervising the SNA and *Haram'ad* operations, in addition to his own Banaadir Police contingent. In parallel, Fahad entrusted a close aide named Ali Wardheere (or Ali 'Yare') with the financial arrangements, which involved bribing local politicians, clan elders, and leaders of the powerful Sufi militia, *Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a* (ASWJ) to acquiesce in the FGS' scheme.

Ironically, the principal threat to Villa Somalia's plans came from then Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, who tried to outmanoeuvre Fahad using his own 'fixers' to influence the Galmudug electoral process - a reckless overreach that ultimately cost him his job. But Fahad prevailed and his chosen flunky, Ahmed Abdi Kariye 'Qoorqoor', was duly installed as Galmudug's president in February 2020

As in Gedo, Farmaajo and Fahad had employed loyalist federal forces to subvert the autonomy of an FMS - not to fight Al-Shabaab, which controlled the entire southern part of Galmudug. On the contrary, by installing a feckless political proxy and dismantling the vehemently anti-Shabaab ASWJ, Fahad prepared the ground for aggressive Al-Shabaab expansion the following year, followed by the most significant offensive by federal forces for over a decade - in support of the jihadists.

### **The Return of Al-Itihaad Al-Islam**

Al-Shabaab was not the only Islamist group to benefit during Farmaajo's term of office. A little-known, like-minded affiliate known as *Al-I'tisaam b'il Kitaab wa Sunna* had also been growing from strength to strength - mainly thanks to the influence of its powerful representative in Villa Somalia: Fahad Yasin. Widely credited with having engineered Farmaajo's 2017 electoral victory, Fahad had initially been rewarded with the post of Chief of Staff at the Presidency, followed by the leadership of NISA. With generous support from Qatar, he was able to refurbish NISA, not only as the most powerful instrument of FGS political authority, but also as a de facto secretariat for Al-I'tisaam.

Al-I'tisaam and Al-Shabaab share a common ancestor: the jihadist movement *Al-Itihaad Al-Islam*, which first revealed itself following the collapse of the Siyaad Barre regime in 1991. Like Al-Qa'ida, Al-Itihaad was an offshoot of the militant Al-Sahwa (Awakening) movement that had been forged in the crucible of the Afghan jihad and which espoused an extreme, intolerant, and explicitly violent version of Islam. Al-Sahwa's hostility to the Saudi establishment saw its proponents, including Osama bin Ladin, imprisoned or exiled. But Bin Ladin was welcomed by the ascendant Islamist government in Sudan in 1991, and he soon found an eager ally in Somalia's Al-Itihaad.

Together, between 1992 and 1994, they strove to confront US military intervention in Somalia. But AIAI's ambitions exceeded the narrow military goals of Al-Qa'ida and, against Bin Ladin's advice, the movement sought to establish an Islamic 'emirate' on Somali territory. Their harsh attempts to pursue this objective found little purchase amongst the Somali population and backfired. Their ideology particularly alienated Somalia's majority Sufi population by blaming Sufism for all the nation's ills, including the collapse of the state. In 1996, following Bin Ladin's expulsion from Sudan and relocation to Afghanistan, a much-deflated AIAI suffered successive defeats at the hands of the Ethiopian military and, in early 1997, made its calamitous last stand in Somalia's southwestern Gedo region.

Among the young militants who survived Al-Itihaad's final battle and escaped to neighbouring Kenya was Fahad Yasin. Born in 1977 or 1978 (his Somali and Kenyan passports contain different dates of birth and different names), his parents separated when he was young and he was raised by his

mother and his stepfather, receiving a religious education in Mogadishu. When the Barre regime collapsed in 1991, Fahad and his family fled to Kenya as refugees, but he soon returned to Somalia under the wing of his stepfather, who had joined Al-Itihaad. Al-Itihaad's military leader at the time was Hassan Dahir Aweys: an unrepentant extremist with whom Fahad would develop an almost filial relationship over the coming decades. Fahad's stepfather was killed in battle against the Ethiopians in 1997, and when Al-Itihaad's surviving leaders dispersed, the young Fahad found himself adrift.

After a couple of years searching for a new cause, Fahad eventually tried his hand at journalism, blogging for a provocative website called Somalitalk, where he mainly posted political commentary. A supporter of interim president Abdiqasim Salaad Hassam, who notionally held office as head of the then Transitional National Government between 2000 and 2004, Fahad was reportedly discouraged when Abdiqasim was ousted by Ethiopian-backed warlords through a skewed regional 'peace process.' Telling friends that he wanted to study Arabic, he travelled to Yemen, where regional intelligence sources say he enrolled at El Iman University: a sort of international finishing school for jihadists founded by Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, a close spiritual adviser to Osama bin Ladin and a specially designated global terrorist (by both the US and UN) in his own right.

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While Fahad was carving out a career for himself in the aftermath of Al-Itihaad's 1997 defeat, the movement's other alumni had divided into two wings: one, asserting that Somalia was not yet ripe for jihad, pursued political and economic interests, while advancing the core tenets of Al-Sahwa's radical ideology by establishing an underground organisation (*tanzim*) and by preaching (*da'wa*). They called themselves Al-I'tisaam. The other faction, unwilling to abandon the path of jihad, sought out foreign fields of battle on which to hone their beliefs and skills: notably Afghanistan, where they renewed their allegiance to Bin Ladin and Al-Qa'ida. Following America's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, veterans of these foreign battles would return to Somalia - their allegiance to Al-Qa'ida firmly intact - to establish the terror group that eventually became known as Al-Shabaab.

In the late 2000s, as Al-Shabaab emerged from the shadows to become a household name, Fahad Yasin found a job as a correspondent in Somalia for Qatar's Al-Jazeera news network. Not surprisingly, given his jihadist credentials, he enjoyed unique access to Al-Shabaab's senior leaders, apparently having no difficulty in obtaining exclusive interviews with reclusive 'high value individuals' or 'HVI's' whom Western intelligence agencies were desperately seeking to locate and, one way or another, remove from the battlefield.

During the course of his relationship with Al-Jazeera, Fahad apparently forged close ties with Qatar's intelligence services, becoming a valued asset and, ultimately, an agent of influence. By 2011, he was back in the Somali political arena, working in the entourage of President Hassan Sheikh, who was elected to office in 2012. There was not much room in Hassan's administration for Fahad to shine: although no Islamist himself, Hassan's kitchen cabinet was dominated by members of *Dam ul-Jadiid*, an activist offshoot of *Harakaat Al-Islaax* (Somalia's chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood), whose progressive ideals had little in common philosophically with Fahad's conservative, militant upbringing. Moreover, Fahad was politically overshadowed by a close relative, Farah Abdulqadir, who outranked him within the clan hierarchy and served as Hassan Sheikh's closest advisor.

By this time, Fahad had also apparently forged a close relationship with Farmaajo, a dull bureaucrat

from Buffalo, New York, who he lobbied Hassan Sheikh to appoint as prime minister. Farmaajo had previously served a 6-month stint as prime minister under the previous president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. Hassan sagely ignored Fahad's advice, offering him instead the Ministry of Ports and Maritime Transport. By then, Fahad already had his sights set on NISA or, as a consolation prize, the Ministry of Internal Security, and he refused the position on offer. Some members of Hassan Sheikh's entourage, however, aver that a profound clash of ideologies contributed to this parting of the ways.

Fahad returned to Qatar where, around 2014, he was assigned to Al-Jazeera's Centre for Studies, an independent research institution that has earned a reputation for being, *inter alia*, a forum for reflection and exchange between various international Islamist movements. But by 2016 Fahad was back in the maelstrom of Somali politics, this time managing Farmaajo's presidential campaign. Fahad not only shared his candidate's authoritarian instincts, but he also treated Farmaajo like a kinsman, since his late stepfather had also been a member of Farmaajo's Marehan clan. Farmaajo was not an Islamist, but from Fahad's perspective, this rendered his candidate even more useful. During his studies abroad and exposure to members of other Islamist groups, Fahad had apparently internalised a practice more commonly associated with Shi'a Islam: *taqqiya* - the use of deception and dissimulation in defence of the faith, which Sunni jihadists have pragmatically appropriated in recent decades. Farmaajo's secular profile, his ultranationalist populism, and his American passport, complemented by an entourage of technocratic cabinet ministers from the diaspora with Western accents and stylish suits, would help to camouflage Fahad's real ambition: an Islamist coup.

In February 2017, through a combination of shrewd electioneering and injections of cash from Doha, Fahad helped steer Farmaajo to victory and was rewarded with the post of Chief of Staff at the Presidency. Having finally ascended to the apex of national power, Fahad wasted no time in impelling the appointment of former Al-Itihaad militants - now re-branded as Al-I'tisaam - to key positions, both formal and informal, in government. Since the FGS had virtually no revenue and Fahad held Qatar's purse strings, Farmaajo acquiesced to his recommendations.

Over the next few years, Fahad succeeded in placing dozens of erstwhile jihadists in key positions throughout the federal administration and security services. Among them were the Deputy Chief of Staff at the Presidency, the Minister of Agriculture, a state minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, the State Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Finance, and at least five senior officials at NISA: a Chief of Staff, Deputy DG, and the directors of Cybersecurity, Counterintelligence, and Foreign Intelligence (subsequently appointed Deputy Ambassador to Qatar). Other members of the group served unofficially, both inside and outside Somalia, as promoters, couriers, financiers, online activists, and informal emissaries.

At the same time, Fahad began mobilising Al-I'tisaam networks across the region, including a powerful lobby of Salafi imams and businessmen in neighbouring Kenya. Many of these religious leaders were based in the largely Somali-inhabited enclave of Eastleigh in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, and had been active supporters of Al-Itihaad in the 1990s. Congregating mainly at a prominent mosque on 6th street, they held regular fund raisers for the jihadists and some of their most prominent activists were killed or captured fighting alongside Al-Itihaad in Somalia.

In October 2017, an Al-Shabaab suicide bombing in Mogadishu left more than five hundred people dead and thousands wounded. The disaster prompted an outpouring of sympathy and support from Somali communities worldwide, including the well-established and increasingly influential Salafi constituency in Kenya that had previously invested in Al-Itihaad. A high-level delegation was dispatched from Nairobi to Mogadishu to deliver their contribution for victims of the bombing.

Fahad seized upon the arrival of such prominent Kenyan-Somali imams and Al-Itihaad alumni for his

own, ulterior motives: since the late 2000s, relations between Al-Itihaad's two main successors – Al-I'tisaam and Al-Shabaab – had been strained nearly to the breaking point by public spats and mutual betrayal. Fahad saw not just an opportunity for reconciliation, but also to establish himself as an Islamist kingpin, and reportedly arranged a meeting between them. The initial encounter was successful, and a follow-up conference was convened in early 2018 in Kismayo.

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According to Somali media reports at the time, the meetings produced plans for the two groups to infiltrate Somali government institutions on a large scale, especially the security sector and judiciary. Al-Shabaab sought the integration of Al-Shabaab forces into FGS security forces, together with their weapons, and the departure of AMISOM. As an interim measure, they proposed that forces from Turkey and other Muslim countries could be deployed to supervise the process of integration. A committee was duly established to oversee the recruitment of former militants for training and insertion into the SNA and NISA.

The meetings also supported the establishment of 'Popular Defence Forces' (*Ciidanka Difaaca Shacbiga ah*), or PDF, to absorb urban youth and low-level Al-Shabaab fighters. Upon completion of training, these units would initially reinforce security at Villa Somalia and then gradually be expanded across in Mogadishu. However, the PDF never officially got off the ground and was eventually subsumed by Villa Somalia's *Xoogga Wadaniyiinta* youth militia.

Beyond these security arrangements, Fahad briefed the participants that he had arranged an agreement between the FGS and an Islamic university in Kenya, bankrolled by Qatar, to train the Somali judiciary and Ulema (Islamic scholars). Not coincidentally, the university's chancellor was a prominent Salafi scholar, businessman and former spokesman for Al-Itihaad.

Fahad's aspirations for the consolidation of Al-Itihaad's alumni under the umbrella of the FGS were gaining momentum. But in November 2019, he overplayed his hand, triggering a backlash from Somali Sufis. Somalis have traditionally followed the Shafi'i school of Islamic law, guided by several dominant Sufi *turuuq*, or sects. Despite the aggressive encroachment of exogenous Salafi movements, many Somalis still treasure their Sufi beliefs and practices. Fahad had invited to Mogadishu Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal, a prominent Kenyan cleric and businessman whom many consider to be Al-I'tisaam's spiritual guide. The purpose of Umal's visit was to donate some US\$330,000 that he and his followers had raised for victims of flooding in Hiiraan region, and Fahad planned a lavish ceremony in his honour.

No one disputed the worthiness of the cause for which Sheikh Umal had raised the funds, but the high-profile reception planned for him by Villa Somalia did not sit well with Somali Sufis, who seized the moment to protest what they perceived as an alliance between Villa Somalia and Al-I'tisaam. The militant Sufi ASWJ interpreted Villa Somalia's public embrace of a prominent Salafi imam as confirmation of Al-I'tisaam's status as the *de facto* ruling party in Villa Somalia and, by extension, as undeclared custodian of the state religion. Sheikh Abdulqadir Soomow, a leader of the ASWJ and spokesman for the national Ulema Council, angrily charged Umal with inciting hatred against Sufis and their beliefs, promoting the rise of the "Kharijites" (a pejorative term for extremists like Al-Shabaab), and of "killing many people with his words." Umal defended himself against the allegations, but his visit was hastily downgraded to a low-key affair, hosted in a hotel conference

room near Mogadishu's airport.

A serious clash between Sufis and Salafis had been avoided, but the episode foreshadowed a much bloodier reckoning between ASWJ and Villa Somalia less than two years later.

### **Farmaajo's Extension, Fahad's Second Term**

In February 2021, having successfully stolen the elections in SWS, Hirshabelle and Galmudug, Farmaajo plotted another coup: stealing his own re-election. Despite having had four years to prepare the ground for federal elections, the *Nabad iyo Nolol* ('Peace and Life') government reached the end of its term - by design - utterly unprepared. For more than three years, Farmaajo had promised Somalis and international partners alike that he would deliver one-person one-vote (OPOV) elections for the next parliament, which would in turn elect the next president.

OPOV had always been a pipe dream, albeit one that Western diplomats enthusiastically subscribed to and, in many cases, oversold to their respective capitals. Not only did insecurity prohibit such an exercise and the federal government manifestly lacked the capacity to pull it off, but even more problematic was the fact that with less than one year remaining in Farmaajo's term, there was no consensus between political stakeholders, including the FMS and the political opposition, on the electoral model that Villa Somalia was proposing.

Moreover, rushing into a hastily concocted, profoundly contested electoral process would be extremely dangerous: by scrapping the longstanding "4.5 formula" of clan-based power sharing, it would create winners and losers across the country. No one had bothered to do the math about which clan constituencies stood to win or lose most, or by how much. The risk of large parts of the population rejecting the electoral results, either because they distrusted an opaque process or because they felt unfairly deprived of representation, was extremely high.

The cabal in Villa Somalia was well aware of these considerations and was counting on the collapse of electoral preparations to buy them a term extension of at least two years to deliver on their OPOV commitment. But when they finally showed their hand and tabled the proposed extension in parliament in early April 2021, the opposition was infuriated and fighting erupted in the streets of Mogadishu. More than a hundred thousand people were displaced by the fighting, as the army fragmented along clan lines and opposition forces swiftly gained the upper hand. Faced by the prospect of being evicted from the presidency at gunpoint, Farmaajo reluctantly abandoned the scheme.

Seven months later, Farmaajo is nevertheless comfortably ensconced in Villa Somalia and Fahad's plan to hijack the election is inching forward through iterative bargaining over excruciatingly esoteric electoral procedures. Although an "election" of some kind will almost certainly take place before Farmaajo reaches the benchmark of his coveted two-year extension, there is a clear and present danger that the Islamist ecosystem nurtured by Fahad Yasin will return to power in Villa Somalia - whether under Farmaajo's leadership or another candidate of Fahad's choosing.

### **The Talibanisation of Somalia**

Any continuity of Fahad's influence in Villa Somalia, with or without Farmaajo, would be disastrous for Somalia. It is increasingly clear what Fahad, his party and his patrons intend for the country: a process of staged negotiations between the federal government and Al-Shabaab, facilitated largely by Qatar and culminating in the 'Talibanisation' of Somalia. Notwithstanding the significant cultural and ideological differences between the Taliban and Al-Itihaad, the cynical abandonment of Somali aspirations for some form of liberal democracy in favour of an autocratic, absolutist theocracy would

be no less treacherous or traumatic than it was for Kabul.

For several years, Qatar has been promoting the notion of dialogue between the FGS and Al-Shabaab as a way of winding down the insurgency. This would likely entail the opening of an Al-Shabaab office in Qatar, some preliminary proximity talks between the parties, followed by eventual face-to-face negotiations. Many Western governments are keenly interested in this possibility: the fight against Al-Shabaab will soon enter its third decade and the jihadists are stronger than ever. As every security analyst is taught, the dismantling of insurgencies and terrorist groups inevitably involves some form of negotiation. Force alone cannot prevail.

Villa Somalia has disingenuously reinforced that argument under Farmaajo's leadership, not by trying to fight and failing, but by not really trying at all. The FGS has spent the past four years waging a war on federalism, on political pluralism and on democratic norms, but not on Al-Shabaab. The largest single offensive military operation undertaken since 2017 was an all-out assault against ASWJ, at Guri'el in Galmudug region in October 2021 that left at least 120 people dead and hundreds more wounded. Al-Shabaab's nearby stronghold at Eel Buur, to the southeast, was, as ever, left in peace.

Guri'el was arguably the bloodiest battle in Somalia since Kenyan troops were overrun at El Adde, only it wasn't waged against the jihadists. On the contrary, Al-I'tisaam clerics rushed to defend the government's onslaught against Al-Shabaab's sworn Sufi enemies: Sheikh Bashir Salaad, Al-I'tisaam's senior cleric in Mogadishu and Chairman of the Ulema Council, equivocally equated ASWJ with Al-Shabaab, while Fahad's old mentor, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys (under comfortable "house arrest" in Villa Somalia) praised Al-Shabaab for being monotheists, in contrast with ASWJ's "polytheist idolaters".

Such sectarian hyperbole also helps to explain why Villa Somalia has been loath to share external support, and especially security assistance, with the FMS. Jubaland and Puntland would, for certain, have put such resources to good use combating Al-Shabaab. Even the other FMS, despite their political affiliations with the FGS, would have found it hard to prevent locally recruited Daraawiish forces from taking the fight to Al-Shabaab on their home turf. Even Galmudug's own Daraawiish, operating essentially as a community defence force, engaged in several pitched battles against Al-Shabaab in the months prior to Guri'el- without the support of the FGS. Villa Somalia declines to devolve combat capabilities to the FMS, not - as FGS leaders like to repeat - simply because they might turn against Mogadishu, but because they would almost certainly employ them against Al-Shabaab.

By the same token, Farmaajo's deliberate failure to advance the constitutional review process, and stunting of the development of a functional federation, as well as forsaking of any pretext of an electoral system, all serve to strengthen Al-Shabaab's hand at a future bargaining table. Prior agreement between the FGS and FMS on these vital issues, enshrining them in a completed constitution and complementary legislation, would leave little space to accommodate Al-Shabaab's demands. Entering a dialogue with these matters unresolved would award Al-Shabaab carte blanche to re-negotiate all aspects of the state building process.

Bringing Al-Shabaab into government would also solve another wicked problem that many Western governments feel strongly about: AMISOM. Integrating jihadist fighters into the Somali security sector would obviate the need for an international peace enforcement operation. Bilateral train-and-equip missions for Somali security forces might continue far into the future, but the enormous cost and commitment required to sustain the AU mission would finally come to an end.

Since the late 2000s, relations between Al-Itihaad's two main successors - Al-I'tisaam and Al-Shabaab - had been strained nearly to the breaking point by public spats and mutual betrayal. Fahad saw not just an opportunity for reconciliation, but also to establish himself as an Islamist kingpin

As long as Fahad holds the reins of power in Villa Somalia, negotiations with Al-Shabaab would consign Somalia to one-party rule under a reunified Al-Itihaad: a post-jihadist state in the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan on the Gulf of Aden. That might sit well with some donor nations, but it is far less clear how it would be received by the Somali population. Although many have adopted Salafi beliefs and practices in the private and social spheres, the prospect of a totalitarian political system underpinned by ideological intolerance and policed by religious zealots is another proposition entirely.

Even more importantly, from the callow perspective of those who advocate stability as an end in itself, is whether such a dispensation would in fact bring enduring stability to Somalia and the region. None of Somalia's neighbours is likely to be at ease sharing borders with a post-jihadist government that espouses radically different geopolitical perspectives and priorities. The level of discomfort would likely be even higher in those nations that host well-established chapters of Al-I'tisaam, chiefly Kenya and Ethiopia.

More distant foreign powers would likely share such concerns: the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are all deeply hostile to Islamist political movements and especially to those that carry Al-Sahwa's DNA. Cosy relations between Mogadishu, Doha, and Ankara would only heighten apprehension in Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Cairo - at least as long as the two camps remain strategic competitors across north Africa and much of the Middle East.

### **Conviction Not for Crime, but for Heresy**

I'm not entirely sure what my FGS accusers were hoping to achieve, but life has changed little since I became a convicted felon. I'm still at liberty, my assets haven't been frozen, and I face no travel ban. My family hasn't spurned me, and I've been allowed to keep my old job. My colleagues and friends are sympathetic, and I've gained a few new ones on social media. The support and solidarity I've received from unexpected quarters has given me a small taste of that special kind of sympathy usually reserved for political prisoners — mercifully without actually having to go to prison.

If prosecution was intended to muzzle me or my colleagues, it has clearly backfired: the preceding pages offer a foretaste of the story that Villa Somalia had hoped would never be told. None of this information constitutes a national secret or is otherwise protected by law. Much of it has already been reported - albeit in disparate, disconnected fragments - by reputable Somali and international media houses. Few politically conscious Somalis, whether they support or oppose the FGS, will find any of it new or surprising. As an analyst, my only crime has been to arrange these pixels of information into what I hope is a consistent and compelling portrait: to organise the facts and present them in a way that is relevant to policy makers, both Somali and foreign, and that helps to ensure that decisions on the way forward - especially with respect to engaging Al-Shabaab — are based on evidence and reason - not sloth and expediency.

Like any other members of my audience, the current leaders of Somalia's federal government - whether they hold those positions legitimately or not — may choose not to read what I have written. They may read it and disagree, and they might even decide to respond. They may try to sue me, under applicable laws and in an independent court. But to concoct a show trial, to lay charges without evidence or right of reply, and to convict me in absentia and ultra vires? These are the

hallmarks of a totalitarian regime with a hidden agenda.

Such intrigues say far more about the cabal currently squatting in Villa Somalia than they do about me or the organisation I work with. And they appear to confirm, no doubt inadvertently, the conclusions I have reached in this article: that Somalia's state building process has been hijacked by an ideological faction well practised in the arts of deceit and dissimulation - *taqqiya*.

The only threat to Somalia's national security at issue here is the one that Farmaajo, Fahad, their accomplices and enablers collectively pose to the nation's future: a creeping coup orchestrated by an absolutist clique that brooks no dissent or opposition, and whose dystopian theological worldview construes the truth, when it is inconvenient or inconsistent with their narrative, to be not simply a crime, but heresy.

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