Somalia: Violence in Mogadishu and developments since 2012

- How much violence is there in Mogadishu?
- Who is behind the violence and who are the victims?
- To what extent are civilians affected by the violence?
- What have been the developments since 2012?

Introduction

This query response contains two parts. The first part provides an overview of violence and the number of people killed in Mogadishu in 2019. Special attention is given to attacks on civilians committed by the Islamist organisation al-Shabaab.[1] The second part of the response provides a brief overview of the developments in the violence since 2012.

Source material

The response is largely based on information from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and open sources, but also on information and knowledge that Landinfo has obtained through its own work. The security conditions in Mogadishu have been a central topic for Landinfo's work for many years (see e.g. Landinfo 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2017 and 2018), and we have visited the city almost every year since 2012.[2] On these trips, we have met with a large number of sources, including many local resource persons who have their home in Mogadishu.[3]

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[1] Al-Shabaab was formally founded in August 2006 as a cross-clan militia for the sharia courts who took control of Mogadishu in June of the same year (Hansen 2013, p. 36). The Islamic Courts Union was dissolved in December 2006 when Ethiopian forces intervened in support of Somalia's internationally recognised authorities. Al-Shabaab continued the fight against the authorities and their supporters and gradually emerged as an independent organisation (Hansen 2013, p. 57).

[2] Landinfo last visited Mogadishu in February 2019. A planned trip in 2020 could not be made due to the corona pandemic.

[3] Many representatives of international organisations in Mogadishu have a non-Somali background and stay exclusively in the airport area, which is physically separated from the rest of the city. Landinfo's experience indicates that such sources are second-hand sources at best and that their representation of conditions in Mogadishu often is less nuanced than the picture presented by local sources.

Estimates and indications

There are no institutions in Somalia that register and keep statistics on killings and other violent incidents. The organisation Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) collects information about violent incidents in Somalia from media and local organisations and stores the information in a database. The database is openly available and is continuously updated. ACLED (2020) provides information on where in Somalia the violent incidents took place. This makes it possible to extract information for Mogadishu. ACLED also provides information on actors, of events and numbers killed.

According to ACLED (n.d.), the database only includes politically motivated violence. However, many of the violent incidents registered in the database have been committed by unknown perpetrators. Landinfo considers that there is not necessarily a basis to conclude that violence is politically motivated in cases where the perpetrators are unknown. Therefore, Landinfo believes that the database also contains violent incidents that are not necessarily politically motivated.

The degree to which local media and organisations and thus ACLED detect violent incidents in Somalia probably varies over time and in general. In Landinfo's assessment, serious violent incidents in Mogadishu are normally detected. This assessment is based not only on the fact that there are more organisations and media located here than in other places in Somalia, all of which are concerned with staying updated on security conditions in the city, but also on what has come up in conversations with local resource persons over the years. However, it cannot be excluded that there is a number of unregistered cases concerning the years before 2012, when the security situation in Mogadishu was at times characterised by intense fighting and consequently lower presence and less freedom of movement for organisations, media and others.

Each registration in ACLED is not necessarily based on more than one source, and ACLED does not verify the information (ACLED, email 2015). This is problematic because sources can sometimes provide inaccurate information. Nevertheless, given the challenges associated with information gathering and the fact that there is no complete overview of violent incidents in Somalia, Landinfo considers that ACLED's information provides a good indication of the number of people killed in Mogadishu, who was behind the violence and who the victims were. Although ACLED provides exact figures and these figures are reproduced in this response, the figures must be viewed as estimates.

Violent incidents and fatalities in 2019

ACLED (2020) registered a total of 629 violent incidents and 738 people killed in Mogadishu in 2019.[4] The number of people killed includes both civilian[5] and military victims, including perpetrators. ACLED does not distinguish between civilian and military deaths but has registered 257 of the incidents (approximately 40 per cent) as attacks on civilians (see Table 1).[6] According to ACLED, these attacks resulted in 349 deaths. It is reasonable to assume that these were mainly civilians.

Civilians are also affected in connection with attacks on military targets, but it is unclear how many civilians are amongst the 385 who, according to ACLED, were killed in connection with attacks on military targets. The civilians are not direct targets in these cases but are affected as a result of having been "in the wrong place at the wrong time".

Table 1: Registered violent incidents in Mogadishu in 2019

Target of attack	Registered violent incidents	Registered number killed
Civilians	257	349
Military	337	385
Other[7]	35	4
Total	**629**	**738**

The table has been prepared by Landinfo based on data from ACLED (2020).

Attacks against military targets

As shown in Table 1, over half of the registered violent incidents in Mogadishu in 2019 were aimed at military targets. These incidents include attacks on

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[4] ACLED (2020) registered 2,519 incidents 4,031 people killed throughout Somalia in 2019. About 90 per cent of the violence took place in southern Somalia, where the power struggle between the authorities and al-Shabaab mainly plays out.

[5] The term "civilian" stands in contrast to "military" and refers here to unarmed persons who are neither members of armed groups nor participate in hostilities.

[6] Attacks on civilians includes incidents that ACLED categorises as "violence against civilians" and "remote violence" that affects civilians.

[7] "Other" includes incidents that ACLED categorises as "protests/riots" and "strategic development". The latter category includes arrests and averted or failed attacks.

government forces[8] and their allies[9] from al-Shabaab and unknown perpetrators, as well as exchanges of fire between government forces. According to ACLED, the latter typically occurred between government forces from different clans due to, among other things, conflicts over land.

According to ACLED (2020), al-Shabaab is assumed to have been involved in about half of the attacks directed at military targets (164 incidents with 266 people killed). Most of these attacks took place in Daynile and other suburbs and took the form of shootings or grenade attacks against individual members and smaller groups of government forces. The largest al-Shabaab attack in 2019 took place using a truck born suicide bomb on 28 December and was directed at a column of government forces and Turks[10] at the checkpoint "X-Control Afgooye" (Al Jazeera 2019b; Nor, Razek & Said-Moorhouse 2019).[11] According to ACLED (2020), the attack claimed the lives of over 80 people, including many civilians (see below).

Attacks against civilian targets

According to ACLED (2020), the majority of attacks on civilians in 2019 were committed by unknown perpetrators (see Table 2). These attacks mainly took the form of shootings at government officials, shop owners, bus drivers and other individuals. Because the perpetrators are unknown, the motives also remain unknown. According to Landinfo's sources, such attacks are often financially motivated or arise as a result of private conflicts (Landinfo 2018, p. 8). Al-Shabaab may be behind one or more of these attacks.

According to ACLED (2020), one fifth of the attacks against civilians in Mogadishu in 2019 were committed by government forces. These attacks typically took the form of shootings at checkpoints as a result of misunderstandings or attempts at extortion. Checkpoints are very common in Mogadishu and consist of a physical roadblock or obstacle that forces vehicles to stop. Vehicles that do not stop risk being shot at. The actual checking at the checkpoints vary, and it is a well-known phenomenon that government forces who operate such posts extort money from travellers (see i.a. Webersik, Hansen & Egal 2018). This is also something Landinfo has observed itself.

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[8] Government forces includes all armed actors associated with the authorities in the city, including the army and the police. The forces are often clan-based.

[9] The authorities are supported by forces from the African Union (AMISOM), but other countries also have forces in the city.

[10] Turkey is one of the Somali authorities' closest allies and has invested heavily in Mogadishu.

[11] X-Control Afgoye is located at the crossroads where Afgoye Road, the main road from the neighbouring city of Afgoye, intersects with Industrial Road (Jidka Warshadaha). The checkpoint is manned by government forces, who are tasked with checking vehicles and other travellers entering Mogadishu. The soldiers also demand fees from travellers (Landinfo's own observations).

According to ACLED (2020), the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the killing of a government official in Mogadishu in 2019. IS' activity in Mogadishu is minimal and both the government and al-Shabaab fight the organisation.[12]

Table 2: Registered attacks on civilians in Mogadishu in 2019

Perpetrators	Registered attacks	Registered killed
Unknown	104	108
Al-Shabaab	96	195
Government forces	56	45
The Islamic State (IS)	1	1
Total	**257**	**349**

The table has been prepared by Landinfo based on data from ACLED (2020).

Al-Shabaab attacks against civilians

According to ACLED (2020), al-Shabaab was behind about two fifths of attacks on civilians in Mogadishu in 2019. This figure includes both attacks that al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for and attacks that al-Shabaab is suspected of being behind without claiming responsibility.

Al-Shabaab's attacks on civilians mainly took the form of shootings at government officials (ACLED here also includes members of government forces who were off duty at the time they were attacked), clan leaders and businesspeople. Many of those killed were intended for a role as election delegates/candidates[13] or had such a role during the election in 2016.

According to source A, a local resource person and head of security for an organisation in Mogadishu, low-ranking government officials are not a priority target for al-Shabaab. The source supports this by pointing out that high-ranking government officials need protection, while low-ranking government officials live all over Mogadishu – even in the Afgoye area outside Mogadishu – and commute to and from work every day. The source explains this by pointing out that al-Shabaab has limited resources but also that the organisation uses low-ranking government officials as informants. This is in line with previously obtained

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[12] IS' presence in Somalia is mainly limited to the Bari region in northern Somalia (Landinfo 2020; Lead Inspector General 2020, p. 19 and 21).

[13] The parliamentary and presidential elections were supposed to take place in 2020 but were postponed until 2021 due to the corona pandemic (Hassan 2020).

information regarding local employees in AMISOM, the UN and other international organisations who support the authorities (Landinfo 2015, p. 2).

The motives behind the killings of businesspeople are unclear, but it has long been a known phenomenon that al-Shabaab demands protection money ("tax") from businesspeople and hotels in Mogadishu, especially in the Bakara area (Landinfo 2018, p. 9; Abshir, Abdirahman & Stogdon 2020, p. 4-5; Makori 2020).[14] Collection and payment is usually done by mobile phone and without physical interaction with al-Shabaab, but people who refuse to pay risk violent reactions. Some of the al-Shabaab attacks may be linked to this activity (source A, meeting in Mogadishu 2019).

Al-Shabaab has also conducted several attacks on government institutions and other places where government officials stay in 2019. This includes select hotels and restaurants where ministers, parliamentarians and other high-ranking government officials live and meet. For example, in February 2019, al-Shabaab attacked Maka al-Mukarama Hotel, which is a popular hotel amongst government officials (BBC 2019a; Nor 2019), and in March 2019 they attacked the Ministry of Public Works and Reconstruction (Maruf & Hassan 2019). Such institutions and places are primarily located in central parts of Mogadishu. The al-Shabaab attacks typically start with a suicide vehicle born suicide bomb, followed by a handful of shooters, often wearing government uniforms and bomb belts/vests, storming the area and shooting as many people as they can before being themselves killed by government forces or before blowing themselves up.

In July 2019, al-Shabaab attacked the mayor's office with a suicide bomber (BBC 2019b). The woman who wore the bomb worked for the authorities. The attack clearly shows that al-Shabaab is able to infiltrate the authorities and attack even well-protected targets (Harun 2019).[15] Many of the sources that Landinfo met with in Mogadishu over the years point to this ability, but, as source B (meeting in Mogadishu 2019) recently emphasised, the organisation cannot operate freely and openly in the city because the authorities' security forces are looking for them.[16]

Al-Shabaab sometimes bombards targets in Mogadishu with mortars. ACLED has registered a total of six mortar attacks in 2019. Three of these are registered as al-Shabaab attacks, one of which targeted the airport area, where the UN and the

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[14] It is unclear how extensive this activity is.

[15] Al-Shabaab uses various methods to infiltrate the authorities, including paying and/or pressuring government officials for information or other services (Harun 2019; Landinfo 2015). Source B (meeting in Mogadishu 2019) also points out that there are people who support al-Shabaab and prefer them to the internationally recognised authorities.

[16] Some sources say that al-Shabaab is "everywhere" (see e.g. the Finnish Immigration Service 2020). In Landinfo's assessment such accounts reflect the fear many people feel because it is uncertain who has ties to the organisation, but does not necessarily reflect the facts on the ground. No one knows how many operators, informants and sympathisers the organisation has in Mogadishu. Source C (meeting in Mogadishu 2017), a local resource person with knowledge of how al-Shabaab operates, explained in this context that al-Shabaab does not need many people to exert influence, because most people fear them and therefore do as they say.

African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) have their main bases and many embassies are located (Maruf 2019b; AMISOM 2019).[17] These mortar attacks are usually conducted by al-Shabaab unloading mortars from minibuses on the outskirts of Mogadishu, firing a few shells, typically at the presidential palace Villa Somalia or the international bases at the airport, and then leaving the area before the government forces have time to react (Landinfo 2017, p. 8-9). The shelling is often imprecise and consequently also hit random civilians.

The local sources Landinfo has met with over the years express awareness of which hotels and restaurants are associated with the authorities and therefore are potential targets for al-Shabaab.[18] However, not all car bombs necessarily reach their intended destination e.g. because they are stopped at a checkpoint. An example of this probably took place in July 2019, when a car bomb exploded after having been turned away at a checkpoint (Maruf 2019a).[19] Consequently, the high number of checkpoints in the city may ironically have made it less predictable where car bombs will explode.[20]

The civilian population is generally not a target for al-Shabaab

The sources Landinfo has met with in Mogadishu are unanimous in that the general civilian population is not a target for al-Shabaab (Warner & Chapin 2018, p. 28-30; Landinfo 2018, p. 9; Landinfo 2017, p. 7-8). This is supported by ACLED (2020), which indicates that over 60 per cent of al-Shabaab attacks in 2019 were directed at military targets.

Although the civilian population is not a direct target of attacks, al-Shabaab pays little attention to random passers-by when they attack. For example, on 4 February 2019 al-Shabaab detonated a car bomb at a government office near a market in the Hamar Weyne district (Al Jazeera 2019a; Nor & Adeoye 2019). During the abovementioned attack in February 2019 against the Maka al-Mukarama Hotel, which is located along the main road of the same name in the centre of Mogadishu, the attackers were unable to enter the hotel but entrenched themselves

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[17] According to ACLED, the other two al-Shabaab attacks were directed at government forces, while the remaining three mortar attacks were registered as being committed by unknown perpetrators (one against government forces and two against Villa Somalia).

[18] This awareness is typically expressed by the fact that Landinfo's meetings with local sources in Mogadishu often occur in such places, and the sources unsolicitedly point out that most people avoid the place because it is a potential target for al-Shabaab. Hotels and restaurants used by government officials typically stand out in the cityscape through increased security measures (Landinfo's own observations). Some of them appear as outright "fortresses" with various types of physical barriers, watchtowers and checkpoints. Several of these places have been attacked repeatedly. For example, the abovementioned Maka al-Mukarama Hotel was also attacked in March 2015 (Reuters 2015).

[19] The truck bomb in October 2017 probably did not reach its intended target, the airport area where the UN, AMISOM and other international supporters of the authorities are located, because government forces became suspicious of it (Landinfo 2018, p. 8-9; Warner & Chapin 2018, p. 21-22).

[20] The number of government-controlled checkpoints in Mogadishu has increased significantly over the years Landinfo has visited the city.

in nearby buildings and fought against government forces for almost 24 hours before being killed themselves. Al-Shabaab detonated three car bombs during the attack. A number of buildings in the area were destroyed and many civilians were killed (BBC 2019a; Nor 2019).

Attacks on military targets also show how little attention al-Shabaab pays to random passers-by when conducting attacks. For example, the previously mentioned attack on X-Control Afgoye in December 2019 took place during the morning rush hour and consequently took the lives of many civilian passers-by, including students on a bus (Nor, Razek & Said-Moorhouse 2019; Al Jazeera 2019b). Following the attack, al-Shabaab apologised that the attack on "apostates" (government forces and Turks) had also killed, injured and destroyed the property of "Muslims" (Al Jazeera 2019b).

Developments since 2012

The security situation in Mogadishu after 2012 cannot be compared to the situation before 2012, when an active front line divided the city in two. Al-Shabaab took control of large parts of Mogadishu after the Ethiopian army withdrew from the city in January 2009[21] but did not manage to conquer the entire city because AMISOM protected the internationally recognised authorities (Hansen 2013, p. 82).[22] Until al-Shabaab abandoned its defensive positions in the city centre in August 2011, the parties' armies fought each other in the middle of the city, among others things with artillery, bulldozers and tanks (Diarra 2011; Dickinson 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010; Ibrahim & Gettleman 2011). In early 2012, al-Shabaab was also pushed out of the city's outskirts. The improvement is clearly reflected in Figure 1 in that the number of fatalities registered by ACLED decreased from about 2,500 in 2010 to about 500 in 2012.[23]

From 2012 to 2019, both the number of registered events and registered fatalities was between 500 and 1,000 annually. The exception is 2017, when almost 1,500 people were killed. This is due to the truck bomb attack on 14 October 2017, which alone killed more than 500 people (BBC 2017; Landinfo 2018).

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[21] Another Islamist organisation, Hizbul Islam, also fought against the authorities in Mogadishu but was incorporated into al-Shabaab in December 2010.

[22] The African Union deployed forces in Mogadishu in March 2007. AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia) was tasked with protecting the internationally recognised authorities in the city.

[23] As already mentioned, registered fatalities in ACLED include both military and civilian victims.

Figure 1: Violence in Mogadishu 2009-2019
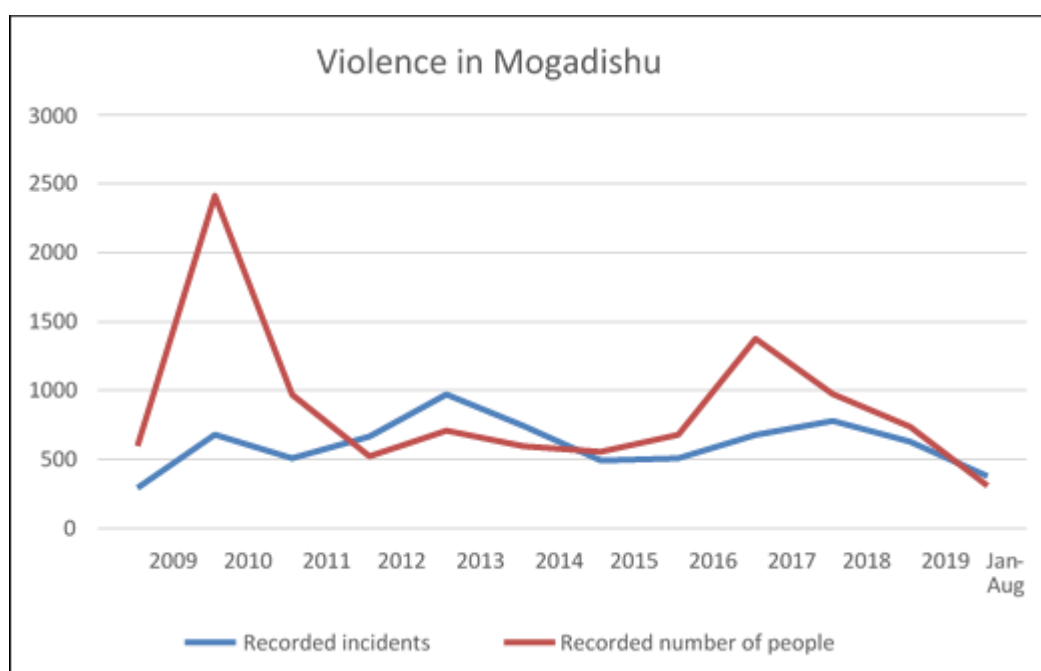
Prepared by Landinfo based on data from ACLED (2020).

According to ACLED, the number of registered violent incidents and fatalities has not increased in line with the significant population growth that has taken place in Mogadishu since 2012. When al-Shabaab was pushed out of the city in 2011/2012, there were probably only a few hundred thousand people in the city.[24] This view is supported by Landinfo's own observations when driving around Mogadishu in February 2012.[25] Parts of the city were almost deserted at this time. A population survey from 2014, conducted by Somali authorities with support from among others the United Nations Population Fund, estimated 1.65 million inhabitants (UNFPA 2014, p. 31). This growth is also supported by Landinfo's

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[24] There are no reliable figures on how many people live in Mogadishu. The French Somalia expert Roland Marchal (2002, p. 5) estimated that in the early 2000s, about 1 million people lived in the city. At the end of 2008, it was estimated that 2/3 of the population had fled Mogadishu (Human Rights Watch 2008, p. 5). In the first months after the Ethiopians withdrew in early 2009 and the security situation temporarily improved, UNHCR estimated that more than 65,000 people returned to the city (UNHCR 2010). This means that Mogadishu had around half a million inhabitants before the city became a war zone for fighting between al-Shabaab and AMISOM after 2009. As of May 2010, UNHCR estimated that 250,000 people had fled the fighting in the city (UNHCR 2010). Despite the fierce fighting, severe droughts in large parts of southern Somalia caused many people to migrate to Mogadishu in search of food, water and humanitarian aid. UNHCR estimated that up to 100,000 internally displaced people moved to the city in June and July 2011 (UNHCR 2011).

[25] Landinfo had a number of meetings in various parts of the city and also took the opportunity to drive around the different districts (the only districts we did not drive through at the time were Daynile, Heliwa and Karan, which at that time were still partly under al-Shabaab's control).

later observations of a city with a bustling street life of people, traffic, construction and trade.

The general picture that Landinfo's sources have conveyed in terms of who is behind the violence, who the victims are and to what extent civilians are affected has been more or less the same since 2012 (see i.a. Landinfo 2012a; Landinfo 2012b; Landinfo 2013; Landinfo 2018; Landinfo 2019). Although al-Shabaab no longer has an open presence in Mogadishu, the organisation continues to conduct attacks in the city. The attacks are mainly directed at the authorities and their supporters, both military and civilian, including select places where they stay. The civilian population in general is not a target of attacks, but the organisation pays little attention to random passers-by when they attack. Unknown perpetrators and government forces are also committing violence in the city.

The violence affects the inhabitants, but daily life continues

Over the years, Landinfo has taken the opportunity to ask various local sources about how the violence, and especially the bombings, affect them, their families and other people living in Mogadishu. According to the sources, this is obviously something that worries them, but which they can do little about.

The many security forces and checkpoints in the city are a constant reminder that attacks can happen at any time. According to some sources, the feeling that an attack is imminent often increases the longer it has been since the previous major attack.

When an attack occurs, people try to find out if someone they know was in the area and was affected. According to the sources, most people have a mobile phone and many are active on social media, both in order to share and obtain updated information about attacks and other security issues. The sources emphasise that attacks not only result in fatalities, but also many wounded and next of kin being left behind. These individuals may be affected by an attack for a long time, but for most people, daily life continues as normal shortly after an attack.

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Source B, local resource person, meeting in Mogadishu on 12 February 2019

Source C, local resource person, meeting in Mogadishu on 28 September 2017

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