

ISIS IN PUNTLAND

COUNTERTERRORISM, HUMANITARIAN SITUATION
& THE STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY

April 2025



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
Interpol	International Criminal Police Organization
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PDRC	Puntland Development and Research Center
PMPF	Puntland Maritime Police Force
UN-OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

List of Abbreviations	02
Executive Summary	04
Introduction	05
Objectives of the Study	05
Study Methodology	05
ISIS in Puntland	06
• ISIS’s Entry and Early Alliances	06
• Increased Footprint	06
• Competition with Al-Shabaab	07
• Tactical Adaptation	08
• Foreign Fighters	08
• ISIS’ Recruitment Strategy	10
The Hilaac Operation: Military Strategy & Community Mobilization	11
• Why now?	11
• Phases of the Campaign	11
• Operation Hilaac and Progress Thus Far	13
• Public Support to the Ongoing Military Campaign	14
Humanitarian Situation: Displacement & Resource Scarcity	14
• Fears of Retaliation	16
Conclusions	17
Recommendations	
• Counterterrorism Measures	18
• Community Resilience Initiatives	18
• Post-Liberation Stabilization Efforts	19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bari region of Puntland, Somalia, has become a critical battleground in the fight against terrorism, particularly due to the rise of the Islamic State in Somalia (ISIS-Somalia). Since 2015, ISIS has exploited weak governance, political instability, and socio-economic vulnerabilities to establish a stronghold in the resource-rich and strategically vital Cal Miskaad Mountains. The group's presence has disrupted local economies, exacerbated humanitarian crises, and posed significant security threats. In response, the Puntland government launched Operation Hilaac in December 2024, a military campaign aimed at dismantling ISIS's infrastructure and restoring stability. This report examines ISIS's rise, the ongoing counterterrorism efforts, and the resulting humanitarian challenges while providing recommendations for long-term stability. Initiated by Puntland Development and Research Center (PDRC), the study aimed to: analyze the factors enabling ISIS's entrenchment in Puntland, evaluate the effectiveness of Operation Hilaac and its impact on security and communities, assess the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, and propose actionable recommendations to address security gaps, humanitarian needs, and post-liberation stabilization. The study mainly used qualitative data particularly interviews and focus group discussions with government officials, military officers, local elders, business owners, displaced persons, and humanitarian workers. The geographical scope of the study included Cal Miskaad Mountains, Bosaso, Qandala, Iskushuban, and other districts in the Bari region.

The key findings were: **a)** ISIS's Rise and Tactics which included exploiting governance gaps, clan tensions, and economic hardship to establish control, heavy reliance on foreign fighters, coerced recruitment, and extortion to sustain operations and engagement in violent competition with Al-Shabaab, culminating in ISIS's territorial dominance by 2023: **b)** Operation Hilaac: The study revealed that this entailed Phased military campaign (Phases I-III) successfully reclaimed 95% of ISIS-held territories by March 2025, combined ground assaults, airstrikes, and community mobilization, bolstered by local intelligence and diaspora support all of which have led to heavy remaining challenges remain, including guerrilla tactics, landmines, and potential ISIS regrouping. There is a serious humanitarian crisis where over 10,500 displaced persons face severe shortages of shelter, healthcare, and food, 94% lack adequate shelter; 81% lack healthcare access; 69% require urgent financial aid, Displaced pastoralists and urban migrants were found to be among the most vulnerable. It was also noted that communities contributed livestock, humanitarian aid, and intelligence, demonstrating strong backing for the operation. Lastly, the anti-foreigner sentiment emerged as an unintended consequence, requiring government intervention to mitigate xenophobia.

The study recommended counterterrorism measures such as the establishment of permanent military bases in Cal Miskaad and Cal Madow mountains, enhancement of intelligence-sharing with international partners (e.g., AFRICOM, Interpol), and strengthening border and coastal security to prevent foreign fighter infiltration. In terms of community resilience, the study recommended expanding vocational training and rehabilitation programs for youth and ex-combatants and implementing grassroots policing and early-warning systems to foster trust between communities and security forces. On post-liberation stabilisation, the study recommended prioritizing infrastructure development (roads, schools, healthcare) and economic revitalization (fisheries, agriculture, frankincense trade), accelerating demining efforts and providing emergency relief to displaced populations, restoring inclusive governance, and promoting community reconciliation.

Conclusively, while Operation Hilaac has made significant strides in degrading ISIS's capabilities, sustained efforts are needed to address residual threats, humanitarian needs, and underlying socio-economic grievances. A holistic approach integrating security, development, and reconciliation is essential to ensure long-term stability in Puntland. The report underscores the importance of international collaboration and community engagement to consolidate gains and prevent extremist resurgence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bari region of Puntland, Somalia, has emerged as a critical battleground in the global fight against terrorism. Since 2015, the Islamic State in Somalia (ISIS-Somalia) has exploited the absence of government institutions and basic public services in the remote and mountainous areas of Al-Miskat to establish a stronghold in the resource-rich and strategically vital area. This report synthesizes findings from field research, government assessments, and reputable external analysis to examine ISIS's rise, the Puntland government's 2024- 2025 military operation (Hilaac/Thunder Operation), and the resultant humanitarian crisis. It underscores the interplay of security, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors shaping this issue. The report also presents recommendations for long-term stability.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought to examine the conditions facilitating ISIS's consolidation in Puntland, critically assess the efficacy of Operation Hilaac and its implications for security and local populations, evaluate the conflict's humanitarian repercussions, and propose actionable measures to mitigate security vulnerabilities, analyse the humanitarian environment, and ensure stabilization in the post-liberation context.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

This report adopts a qualitative research methodology to evaluate the impact of Puntland's anti-ISIS operations in the Bari region. The study comprehensively explains the conflict's human and social ramifications by analyzing firsthand data, expert insights, and documented reports by the Puntland Government and Humanitarian Organizations such as UN-OCHA(United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). This approach was chosen to illuminate the complexities beyond statistical data, providing nuanced perspectives on the lived experiences of affected communities.

Data was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consisted of 40 key informant interviews with individuals from diverse sectors, including government officials, military generals, district mayors, police commissioners, humanitarian relief workers, displaced individuals, host communities, business representatives, and civil society members. Furthermore, five focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, and field observations were executed to evaluate the impact and its effects on the local community. Secondary data was acquired from reports, official governmental declarations, and humanitarian evaluations of the conflict.

A purposeful sample method guaranteed that respondents reflected essential stakeholders and impacted communities. Participants were chosen based on their direct engagement in or experience with the conflict, encompassing many districts, including Bosaso, Carmo, Qandala, Iskushuban, Balidhidin, and adjacent villages.

Thematic analysis was used in the qualitative data to identify recurring patterns and critical impact areas, including security, displacement, and economic ramifications. Ethical considerations were rigorously

upheld, ensuring informed consent from all participants and strict confidentiality to protect their identities. Researchers adhered to the highest standards of neutrality and objectivity in data collection and reporting. However, the study faced significant challenges, including limited access to conflict zones due to security threats and participants' hesitancy to disclose sensitive information. The findings rely on qualitative narratives, which may lead to varying interpretations among different stakeholders.

4. ISIS IN PUNTLAND

ISIS's Entry and Early Alliances

Puntland has historically faced security challenges from Al-Ittihad militant groups in 1992-93 piracy and clan conflicts. Consequently, in 2006, Al-Shabaab established a presence in Cal Madow mountains in Puntland, embedding itself within local clan structures. Since October 2015, the emergence of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) – in Puntland led by the local Sheikh Abdulkadir Mumin has significantly reshaped Puntland's political and security dynamics. The group established itself in Timirshe village in the Balidhidin district of Bari region, initially struggling to gain ideological traction among locals. However, familial connections and pragmatic alliances with existing anti-government militias enabled ISIS to secure a foothold. A local elder described this period:

“At first, Mumin’s group spoke about religious reforms, but soon they started demanding money and allegiance. Those who refused were targeted.”

By leveraging clan tensions and offering financial incentives, ISIS-Somalia has expanded rapidly, establishing bases in the Cal Miskaad Mountains and extending its operations to key economic centres such as Bosaso.

The lack of robust governance in remote, off-tarmac areas has resulted in the absence of basic social services and discontent that has enabled ISIS to establish and maintain a foothold in the Cal Miskaad Mountains. The authorities in Puntland face challenges due to limited security presence, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient economic programs in these areas, facilitating ISIS's unimpeded operations. Without effective law enforcement, the group has managed to extort local businesses, recruit fighters, and exert control over communities.

Increased Footprint

Military analysts interviewed indicate that the period between 2021 and 2023 represented the apex of ISIS activity in Puntland, characterized by an influx of international terrorists and substantial military growth concentrated in the Bari region.

This escalation occurred amidst significant political instability within Puntland, primarily driven by contested state and federal elections. Heightened political polarization intensified existing divisions between the incumbent administration and opposition factions, ultimately triggering armed clashes in key urban centres, notably Bosaso in 2021 and Garowe in 2023.

Moreover, the escalation of the Las'anod conflict involving Somaliland placed further strain on Puntland's security capabilities; thereby leaving major urban areas and critical border points vulnerable. This shift notably compromised counterterrorism operations, particularly in Bari region, where ISIS



had already secured strategic footholds.

Analysts underscore that ISIS effectively capitalized on this period of political and security instability, by exploiting community frustrations and benefiting from the overstretched security infrastructure. The group's military resurgence enabled territorial expansion and fortification of strongholds, significantly complicating Puntland's security environment and presenting enduring challenges to regional stability.

Competition with Al-Shabaab

ISIS (initially composed of Al-Shabaab defectors) primarily operates in the Cal Miskaad of Bari region, while Al-Shabaab maintains a presence in the Cal Madow Mountains along the Golis range in Sanaag and Bari of Puntland State. Despite ideological divergences, Al-Shabaab perceived ISIS as a competing force challenging its control over resources and military presence in Puntland. Therefore, they decided to neutralize the ISIS group as early as possible.

Since 2015, persistent conflicts have unfolded between ISIS and Al-Shabaab, involving direct military confrontations in the Cal Miskaad mountainous of Bari and covert assassinations in Bosaso, as each group vied to eliminate the other and secure exclusive control over extortion-based revenue from local businesses. Al-Shabaab's repeated attempts to eradicate ISIS ultimately proved unsuccessful, culminating in a significant military defeat in 2023. Following this defeat, ISIS secured control and influence of strategic locations, forcing Al-Shabaab to retreat to its previous bases in Cal Madow, Golis Mountain Range, where the group remains militarily and financially weakened.

Nonetheless, Al-Shabaab continues to pose a substantial security and economic threat, especially impacting residents, traders, and businesses in Bosaso. The ongoing presence of both terrorist groups highlights the geographical importance of Bari for both its terrain and resources, and as such the high level of threat that these groups pose to the region.

Unlike Al-Shabaab, whose governance relied on structured taxation (zakat) and selective intimidation tactics, ISIS implemented arbitrary and excessive taxation alongside extreme measures such as targeted killings and burning of businesses. These aggressive methods resulted in severe economic disruptions, inciting widespread fear among local communities and destabilizing the regional economy.

A local businessman recounted:

“For the businesses that Al-Shabaab demanded 1,000 US dollars; ISIS on the other side demands 100,000. If you refused, they would kill you or burn your store.”



This predatory system crippled Bosaso's economy, driving businesses to bankruptcy and prompting relative displacement. ISIS's ability to control financial resources allowed it to sustain operations, recruit fighters, and expand its operational reach.

Tactical Adaptation

After consolidating its authority in Puntland's Bari region, ISIS adjusted its approach towards local communities and businesses. Previously known for its harsh tactics, the group began engaging with local leaders to improve its image, address grievances, and promote a new narrative. This shift was designed to foster local support by halting killings and bombings while emphasizing tax collection and discouraging collaboration with adversaries. The tactical adaptation aimed at prolonging its presence by reducing immediate resistance from communities already exhausted by violence and economic hardship.

However, military and intelligence experts interpret this shift as a calculated strategy rather than a genuine policy change. They outline three distinct phases in ISIS's operational plan for Puntland:

1. **Establishment Phase** - Securing a territorial and financial base through harsh taxation and eliminating rival groups.
2. **Consolidation Phase (ongoing)** - Strengthening military capacity, mobilizing resources, recruiting fighters, and fostering alliances under the guise of community engagement.
3. **Expansion Phase (disrupted)** - Seeking full control over the resource-rich Bari region, a plan effectively halted by the large-scale Puntland government military campaign launched in December 2024, and the preceded local community engagement.

Foreign Fighters

A notable characteristic of ISIS-Somalia is its reliance on foreign fighters from primarily Morocco, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, South Africa, Iraq and Syria. One of the key drivers behind this reliance on foreign recruits lies in the group's evolution after military defeats in Iraq and Syria. Unlike other jihadist factions, ISIS-Somalia is not merely an offshoot but an extension of the core Islamic State network. Following the collapse of its territorial control in the Middle East—first in Iraq in 2017 and then in Syria in 2019—ISIS sought alternative operational bases. As they needed to regroup and rebuild their capabilities, Somalia emerged as a natural choice providing a fragmented security environment and a history of transnational militant activity. Rather than cultivating a broad Somali support base, ISIS-Somalia positioned itself as a regrouping hub for foreign jihadists, reinforcing its international character rather than integrating into local insurgent dynamics.

The group's preference for foreign fighters over local recruits stems from deep-seated distrust. Somali militants, embedded within clan networks and strong social ties, pose a risk of defection or infiltration by government intelligence agencies. The group has learned from past experiences that local recruits are often unreliable, susceptible to external pressures, and prone to betrayal. By contrast, foreign fighters—particularly those with no kinship ties in Somalia—are more isolated, dependent on ISIS for survival, and therefore less likely to abandon the cause. This calculation has made them the preferred choice for ISIS leadership.

Puntland—particularly Bosaso—hosts a substantial migrant labour force, providing a steady pool of potential recruits for extremist groups. This demographic includes individuals who have resided in Somalia for years, possess familiarity with the local language and socio-political dynamics, and, in many cases, are already radicalized or sympathetic to extremist ideologies. Among these foreigners—predominantly Ethiopians and Arabs—are often deemed more reliable than Somalis for



ISIS's operational needs. Their lack of deep clan affiliations and social obligations reduces the likelihood of defection, while their outsider status fosters dependency on the group for survival.

According to the Puntland Ministry of Interior, the region's registered refugee and asylum-seeker population is as follows:

Total in Puntland: 15,794 individuals

- Asylum seekers: 11,681 (primarily Ethiopians)
- Refugees: 4,112 (including Yemenis and Syrians)

Within Bosaso alone:

- Registered asylum seekers: 8,481 individuals (primarily Ethiopians)
- Registered refugees: 3,712 individuals

Furthermore, Bosaso is home to an estimated 104,808 internally displaced persons (IDPs) across 17,468 households, adding another layer of complexity to the region's demographic and security landscape.

Beyond serving as foot soldiers, foreign fighters provide ISIS-Somalia with critical technical and operational expertise. Many have prior combat experience from conflicts in their home countries, making them effective field commanders and trainers. Others contribute specialized skills in logistics, construction, and weapons maintenance—capabilities that ISIS has strategically leveraged to sustain its military and operational infrastructure. Unlike Somali recruits, who often have alternative means of economic survival, foreign fighters typically have no viable options outside the group, further cementing their loyalty.

However, despite these short-term advantages, ISIS-Somalia's dependence on foreign fighters has exposed significant vulnerabilities. Unlike al-Shabaab, which maintains deep clan-based support networks, ISIS's foreign-heavy composition isolates it from Somali communities. Lacking local backing, the group struggles to embed itself within Puntland's social fabric, making it more susceptible to intelligence leaks and targeted military operations. This weakness has been starkly revealed by the ongoing Hilaac offensive, where Puntland's forces, aided by local intelligence, have effectively tracked and dismantled ISIS cells with relative ease.

The motivations and levels of ideological commitment among foreign fighters vary significantly, generally falling into three main categories:

1. **Radicalized Jihadists** – Some foreign recruits arrive in Puntland already indoctrinated with extremist ideologies, actively seeking to fight alongside a jihadist movement. These individuals often have connections to international extremist networks and may bring valuable military experience, ideological training, or logistical expertise.
2. **Economically Motivated Recruits** – Others join ISIS not out of ideological conviction but due to economic desperation. Many are migrants or displaced persons struggling with poverty and unemployment, lured by promises of regular salaries, financial stability, and other material benefits. ISIS exploits their vulnerabilities, integrating them into its ranks as combatants, logistics personnel, or support staff.
3. **Vulnerable and Coerced Recruits** – Some individuals are neither ideologically committed nor financially motivated but are instead recruited through deception, coercion, or outright abduction. This is particularly common among Ethiopian migrants attempting to reach Yemen or Saudi Arabia, as ISIS collaborates with human traffickers to divert them into jihadist-controlled areas, where they are forcibly conscripted.



ISIS' Recruitment Strategy

ISIS's recruitment strategies included coercive tactics, economic incentives, and exploiting vulnerable refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom reside in Puntland's urban centres such as Bosaso:

Covert Infiltration of Refugee and Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Communities:

Refugees and IDPs are already in a state of instability and deprivation, often living in overcrowded, under-resourced conditions. These communities are frequently underserved by both local governments and humanitarian organizations. This situation creates a ripe environment for exploitation, as vulnerable individuals are more likely to be open to offers of support or financial assistance, even if these come with an ulterior motive:

- ISIS operatives embed themselves within vulnerable communities, leveraging their proximity to facilitate radicalization.
- ISIS often focuses on recruiting young people who feel disillusioned, lack economic opportunities, or experience a sense of injustice. This demographic is more prone to being seduced by ideologies promising empowerment, belonging, and revenge against perceived oppressors. In IDP camps, many youths have already faced trauma, displacement, and instability, making them especially vulnerable to radicalization.

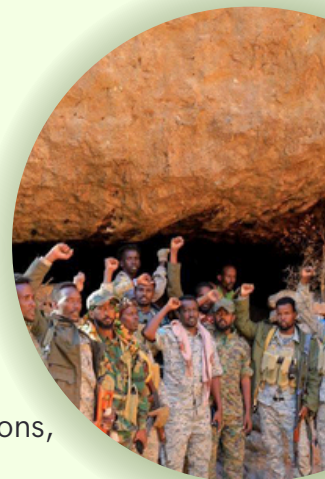
Economic Incentives and Financial Exploitation:

- *Paid Recruitment*: ISIS provides regular monthly compensation, attracting individuals experiencing severe economic hardship and unemployment.
- *Exploitation of Vulnerable People and Investment in Businesses*: The group manipulates vulnerable demographics, including migrants, beggars, women, children, and disabled persons. ISIS also strategically invests in foreign-owned small businesses and retail establishments, using them as fronts to conduct financial transactions, gather intelligence, and coordinate operations.

Forced and Deceptive Recruitment Practices:

- *Labour Exploitation*: Foreign individuals, particularly migrants, are deceived with promises of legitimate employment in sectors like construction and technical maintenance, only to be forcibly conscripted into ISIS ranks for combat or logistical roles.
- *Human Trafficking and Smuggling Networks*: ISIS-linked traffickers target

Ethiopian migrants attempting to transit to the Gulf States, redirecting them to ISIS-controlled territories along Somalia's coastline. Female migrants are especially vulnerable, frequently subjected to forced servitude or coerced marriages to ISIS fighters. In collaboration with local trafficking networks, ISIS also misleads migrants by offering deceptive exit routes from Bosaso. These migrants are then forcibly relocated to ISIS-held coastal areas, where vehicles are repurposed for insurgent operations. This method has intensified following the closure of traditional deportation points and the establishment of Puntland police checkpoints in key locations, such as Shimbiro, Mareero and Buruc.



5. THE HILAAC OPERATION: MILITARY STRATEGY & COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

Why Now?

The Puntland government launched its military campaign against ISIS in December 2024 in response to the group's growing threat. When asked why Puntland authorities had not engaged ISIS earlier, a senior government official explained that intelligence reports had revealed a significant increase in the group's numbers and capabilities in recent years. The militants had expanded their base in Cal Miskaad and were reportedly planning imminent, large-scale attacks on government positions. Intelligence also suggested that ISIS was recruiting and deploying Ethiopian migrants to pave out roads from the mountains leading to the strategic port city of Bosaso.

Beyond the military threat, ISIS's escalating extortion practices had severely impacted businesses in Bosaso, creating an environment of fear and economic hardship. Unlike Al-Shabaab, which imposed a more structured taxation system, ISIS levied arbitrary and excessive demands, crippling businesses and the local economy. Business owners, who had endured years of pressure, increasingly raised alarm over their unsustainable financial burden. Calls for immediate government intervention and protection grew louder, with traders warning that continued inaction would allow ISIS to cement its dominance over Bosaso's commercial sector. The growing security risk, combined with urgent pleas from the business community, compelled Puntland authorities to launch an intensified military campaign against ISIS.

The current military operation against ISIS was launched on the 26th of December 2024. It is a organized operation. On 27 February 2025, President Said Abdullahi Deni announced the completion of Phases I and II of the Hillac Anti- ISIS military operations, and at the same time declared the beginning of Phase III, on the following day 28th February. ***"The main objective is to eliminate terrorism from all over Puntland"***, the president said.... ***these phases will continue until no more terrorists have access in Puntland, and these operations will continue even within the coming Ramadan month"***. He added.



Phases of the Campaign

Puntland's ongoing military campaign against ISIS has garnered widespread support both locally and among the Somali diaspora. Initiated at the end of December 2024, the operation represents the culmination of a comprehensive preparatory phase that included strategic planning, robust force mobilization, and extensive diplomatic outreach.

A pivotal element of this groundwork was the presidential tour conducted in the months preceding the offensive. This initiative aimed to rally local and international backing, consolidate various security forces, and engage political and traditional leaders in regions vulnerable to ISIS infiltration. Between July and December 2024, these mobilization efforts intensified, culminating in a decisive two-month period during which the president temporarily relocated his headquarters to the district of Carmo in the Bari region. This unprecedented decision underscored his hands-on leadership and unwavering commitment to security by facilitating direct community engagement, real-time assessment of military readiness, and enhanced coordination among security forces and regional authorities.

The operation's legitimacy was further reinforced by a surprise ISIS attack in Dharjale village, Isku-Shuban district on December 31st 2024. In this incident, a contingent of foreign fighters—reportedly of both Arab and African descent—executed a coordinated assault targeting high-ranking military and political officials. Their objective was to neutralize key figures overseeing Operation Hilaac and disrupt the offensive before it could gain full momentum. The attack resonated deeply across Puntland and the global Somali community, prompting an immediate and robust surge in public support for the government's military campaign.

Operation Hilaac was launched on December 26th 2024, targeting ISIS strongholds in the Cal Miskaad Mountains. The campaign involved a combination of ground assaults, airstrikes, and special forces operations.

The Puntland government's counterterrorism strategy against ISIS has combined military operations with extensive community engagement efforts. This dual approach aimed not only to reinforce security measures but also to shift local perceptions and prevent ISIS from exploiting community support. A key component of this strategy was raising awareness about the importance of local intelligence cooperation and actively discouraging residents from providing shelter or resources to militants.

Initially, public reluctance and fear of ISIS retaliation hindered community cooperation. However, as military advances gained momentum and the government demonstrated its sustained commitment to eliminating ISIS, local confidence in state security forces began to rise. The visible weakening of ISIS and the government's outreach campaigns encouraged increased material, moral, and intelligence support from communities. Business owners and residents, long burdened by ISIS's brutal extortion, became vocal in their calls for protection and government intervention. This shift in public perception strengthened the campaign against ISIS and reinforced the legitimacy of Puntland's counterterrorism efforts.

By integrating military strategy with community engagement, Puntland has made significant territorial gains while fostering renewed public trust in its ability to combat terrorism and protect civilian livelihoods. This multi-faceted approach serves as a critical lesson in counterinsurgency efforts, emphasizing the importance of balancing security operations with grassroots engagement to dismantle extremist networks effectively.

By the end of February 2025, the government forces had secured from Balidhidin to Dhaasaan which was the largest stronghold of ISIS and the final location where the Togga-Jaceel valley ends. This area accounts for an estimated 95% of the ISIS-controlled areas including ISIS military, administrative and logistical bases. The takeover included multiple villages, modified and standard drones, ammunition, different types of machine guns and other explosive devices; as well as food and medicine. Beginning March 2025 marked the start of phase 3 of the operation which focuses on fighting the remnants of ISIS, security operations in major towns, particularly Bosaso to bring to justice all collaborators.

So far, the operation's success has been attributed to extensive planning, intelligence sharing, international support and community cooperation. A senior Puntland military officer stated:

“For the first time, we see ISIS on the defensive. The public is with us, and that is our greatest strength.”



Operation Hilaac and Progress Thus Far

Since the onset of the offensive, Puntland forces have successfully reclaimed key territories in the Cal Miskaad Mountains and surrounding areas, depriving ISIS of crucial logistical and operational bases. The government's forces have also made significant headway in disrupting ISIS supply routes, which has led to an overall weakening of the group's operational capabilities.

In March 2025, Puntland's Operation Hilaac achieved significant milestones in its campaign against ISIS militants entrenched in the Bari Mountains. In early March (1-10), intelligence and reconnaissance efforts were intensified with a renewed focus on gathering actionable intelligence through enhanced surveillance in known hotspots. During this period, increased monitoring hinted at a potential regrouping among the fragmented ISIS cells, while local security networks detected movements and communications that pointed to a possible consolidation of militant capabilities. Building on this early groundwork, mid-March (11-20) saw a decisive shift toward action: with corroborated intelligence, a series of coordinated targeted raids were mounted against suspected ISIS positions. These operations led to several tactical successes—most notably, the apprehension of key operatives—and were aimed not only at neutralizing personnel but also at disrupting the militants' supply and communication lines, thereby hampering their operational momentum.

As the month progressed into late March (21-31), the focus shifted toward consolidation and comprehensive 'clearing' operations. Ground forces undertook more extensive activities to secure vulnerable areas and eliminate residual militant pockets. Although these sweeping operations achieved notable territorial gains, the irregular and dispersed nature of the militant hideouts indicates that complete clearance remains an ongoing objective. Preliminary assessments from these efforts suggest that while ISIS's ability to organize was significantly hampered, scattered cell remnants and potential sleeper operatives continue to pose a latent threat—one that demands sustained vigilance.

Evaluating the overall impact and operational effectiveness of these efforts reveals several key points. Tactical successes, including the arrests and neutralization of high-value targets, disrupted command and control channels, resulting in a temporary loss of operational coherence among the militant groups. However, the interdiction of supply routes and communication networks has merely introduced additional friction into the groups' logistical framework, which, while reducing their ability to coordinate and mobilize rapidly, also underscores the need for adaptive counterstrategies. Persistent challenges remain, notably the intelligence gaps in remote areas due to difficult terrain and limited surveillance, the inherent difficulty of balancing robust military actions with the need to minimize collateral damage and maintain community trust, and the enemy's continued capability to disperse. These challenges highlight the necessity for ongoing refinement of both tactical and strategic counter-terrorism approaches for the upcoming months of the operation.

These developments underscore Puntland's commitment to eradicating extremist elements and restoring stability to the region. Despite these significant victories, the battle against ISIS is far from over. While ISIS has been driven out of many areas, the group remains a persistent threat in the region, with reports of guerrilla-style tactics and the use of technology in their warfare (drones) combined with the landmines and ambushes targeting military and civilian infrastructure. Additionally, Al-Shabaab, though weakened in Puntland, continues to pose a dual threat to the region's stability.

As the offensive progresses, the Puntland administration must focus on ensuring that the liberated territories do not fall back under insurgent control. This requires robust security measures, post-liberation stabilization, and addressing the socio-political grievances that have fueled extremist recruitment.



Public Support to the Ongoing Military Campaign

Puntland's ongoing military campaign against the ISIS militants has garnered overwhelming public support from diverse segments of society, both within the region and among the global Somali diaspora.

The Dharjale attack sent shockwaves across Puntland and the Somali diaspora, catalyzing a surge in public support for the government's military initiative. The gravity of the attack, particularly the involvement of foreign jihadists, reinforced the perception that Puntland faced an existential security threat, necessitating a collective and decisive response. This urgency galvanized various societal groups into action, leading to a multifaceted grassroots mobilization effort supporting the military campaign.

Urban communities swiftly organized humanitarian aid efforts, with women's groups, youth organizations, and neighbourhood committees mobilizing resources to support frontline troops. These efforts included the preparation of food supplies, the collection of medical aid, and the provision of non-food essentials. Small businesses and restaurants contributed meals and beverages for military personnel, while medical professionals volunteered their expertise to treat injured soldiers. The Somali diaspora played a critical role in bolstering the campaign, launching fundraising campaigns to provide Puntland's forces with medical equipment, protective gear, and financial assistance. Given Puntland's limited medical infrastructure, business leaders and diaspora communities facilitated emergency medical evacuations, arranging chartered flights for severely wounded soldiers requiring advanced treatment abroad.

Rural communities also demonstrated significant support by donating livestock to sustain frontline operations. In keeping with cultural traditions of aiding warriors, villages across Puntland contributed camels and goats, which were delivered directly to the troops. This practice reflected a deeply ingrained sense of communal solidarity and collective responsibility for national defence. Beyond material and logistical support, Puntland's communities actively participated in security and intelligence-gathering efforts.

Neighbourhood watch groups heightened their vigilance, contributing to the identification and apprehension of numerous ISIS operatives, including fighters attempting to infiltrate towns disguised as civilians. This grassroots involvement was instrumental in enhancing the effectiveness of the campaign, reinforcing the notion that countering ISIS required a united societal response.

According to the details provided in the report issued by the Ministry of Interior on its official social media pages on February 2nd, the first phase of the livestock support provided Puntland government forces with 2,664 sheep/goats and 10 camels.¹ As reported on March 1st, the second phase allowed the government to take over 6,944 sheep/goats as well as 170 camels from the communities.² Since then, livestock donations have continued to rise, reflecting sustained public commitment to the operation and a collective determination to strengthen Puntland's security efforts.



¹ Karkaar Region: 350 sheep/goats and 5 camels; Nugaal Region: 1,264 sheep/goats; Mudug Region: 380 sheep/goats; Haylaan Region: 370 sheep/goats and 5 camels; Bari Region: 300 sheep/goats.

² Karkaar Region: 1,550 sheep/goats and 25 camels; Raasacasayr Region: 430 sheep/goats and 22 camels; Sanaag Region: 730 sheep/goats; Nugaal Region: 832 sheep/goats and 31 camels; Mudug Region: 2,532 sheep/goats and 62 camels; Haylaan Region: 370 sheep/goats and 5 camels; Bari Region: 870 sheep/goats and 30 camels.

Despite the widespread public backing, the surge in hostility toward ISIS—particularly foreign jihadists—led to unintended consequences. In the aftermath of the Dharjale attack, anti-foreigner sentiment escalated, resulting in forced evictions of migrants in urban centres. These evictions sparked both local and international concerns regarding potential human rights violations and the risks associated with collective punishment. Recognizing the dangers of xenophobic retaliation, Puntland’s government swiftly intervened through televised addresses and social media statements, urging the public to exercise restraint. Officials emphasized the importance of distinguishing between terrorist operatives and innocent foreign residents warning against vigilantism that could undermine the integrity of the military campaign. Religious scholars and civil society leaders reinforced this message, playing a crucial role in de-escalating tensions and preventing further mass expulsions.

As Operation Hilaac progresses, sustained community engagement remains critical in maintaining the military campaign momentum. While military action is central to the campaign, the collective contributions of civilians—ranging from humanitarian aid and financial support to intelligence-sharing and grassroots security initiatives—have reinforced the legitimacy of the government’s efforts and strengthened Puntland’s resilience against the ISIS threat. At the same time, addressing the humanitarian and social complexities arising from the conflict remains essential for ensuring long-term stability. Preventing unintended harm to civilian populations, maintaining public morale, and fostering post-conflict recovery efforts will be key determinants of Puntland’s ability to secure lasting peace and security in the region.

5. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION: DISPLACEMENT AND RESOURCE SCARCITY

Following the Puntland government's initiation of operations against ISIS, officials have urged residents in areas controlled by the group to evacuate, warning of an impending conflict and aiming to minimize civilian casualties. Many individuals took this warning seriously and relocated to safer areas. However, ISIS actively thwarted these efforts, threatening those who attempted to leave in compliance with the government’s directive. As a result, an unclear number of residents, primarily pastoralists, frankincense and my harvesters, and rural villagers, were forcibly displaced from their homes due to the operation. They became scattered across six districts in the Bari region, Bosaso, Carmo, Qandala, Balidhidin, Uffeyn, and Iskushuban, as well as the remote villages within these districts. Many fled to urban centers such as Bosaso, while others sought refuge in makeshift camps in remote areas. These once-stable communities were uprooted, leaving members in desperate and intense search for shelter and survival.

Displaced residents from Iskushuban District described their ordeal:

“We left everything behind—our homes, livestock, trade. Now we have nothing but uncertainty.”

The UN-OCHA Rapid Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment conducted in January 2025 reveals a grave humanitarian crisis in Qandala District. A staggering 94% of displaced populations lack adequate shelter, leaving countless individuals vulnerable to harsh conditions. Healthcare services are alarmingly insufficient, with a shortfall affecting 81% of the population, further exacerbating the suffering of vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. Additionally, 69% of those surveyed urgently require financial assistance, illustrating the severe economic devastation caused by the ongoing conflict.

These findings underscore an urgent need for immediate intervention; any delays in action will only exacerbate the crisis, leading to preventable deaths and long-term instability. Humanitarian agencies and authorities must prioritize swift response efforts without hesitation. Notably, all evaluated sites (100%) indicated that households affected have yet to receive essential humanitarian aid, including vital food and cash support. The lack of assistance has placed thousands of people in extreme vulnerability. Without prompt action, the consequences of hunger, illness, and continued suffering will inevitably prevail. According to Abdulkadir Mohamud Musse from the Somali Red Crescent Organization:

“The displaced population we assessed exceeds 10,500 individuals and urgently needs assistance. Many areas remain completely inaccessible due to landmines planted by ISIS. During the assessment, I led a team accompanied by military personnel and specialized in mine detection units for our safety. Without immediate intervention, the situation could escalate into a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The conditions are extreme—it's the dry season, and a severe drought is already affecting the region. Pastoralists have no access to water or food, and those who have fled from towns and villages urgently require critical support and resettlement. This is a dire emergency”

This mass displacement forced people to abandon their livestock, ancestral lands, incense, and myrrh trade, and small businesses, stripping them of their livelihoods and stability. The nomadic communities suffered the most, as those who managed to flee with their animals intact sought refuge in Iskushuban and

Balidhidin. According to Muse Ali Muse, the Mayor of Iskushuban District, an estimated 2,000 to 3,500¹ nomadic families arrived in these districts. However, with the dry season at its peak, their livestock were already weak and unfamiliar with the region's water sources. Having never settled in these areas before, they faced extreme hardships—far worse than those displaced in urban centres—struggling for survival in a hostile and unforgiving environment. They urgently need humanitarian aid, including water supplies, food, and all essential services for displaced populations. Without immediate intervention, their suffering will only intensify.



Fears of Retaliation

Despite significant progress, ISIS continues to pose a severe and persistent threat to regional stability and civilian safety. Even if ISIS's organizational capabilities are diminished, the potential for retaliatory attacks against returning civilians and displaced communities remains high. Addressing this threat necessitates a sustained and comprehensive security strategy to ensure civilian safety and regional stability.

Mayor Muse Ali Muse of Iskushuban District emphasized the urgency of fully neutralizing ISIS to prevent retaliatory threats highlighting the necessity of establishing military outposts in ISIS's known refuge such as the Cal Miskaad Mountains.

General Qalyare, one of the commanders leading the Hilaac Operation, further underscored the strategic imperative of positioning military bases in key locations. He advocated for the deployment of rapid-response patrol units to remote and vulnerable areas, complemented by increased security surveillance to prevent insurgent resurgence. Furthermore, General Qalyare highlighted the need for stringent monitoring of borders and coastal entry points to prevent infiltration by foreign fighters.

¹ Muse Ali Muse, Mayor of Iskushuban District.

The Commander of the Iskushuban District Police, Ali Abdirahman Mohamud. Stressed that **"beyond military efforts, enhanced intelligence and community policing and engagement are vital for long-term security. Utilizing local informants and advanced surveillance systems will help monitor potential hideouts and insurgent movements"**. He further encouraged local communities to report threats safely to enhance early warning mechanisms with village security and relocation plans being established to protect civilians. Finally, he believes that to curb and check further ISIS reinforcements, Puntland authorities must monitor border crossings and coastal areas, preventing foreign fighters from re-entering the region.

Moreover, the lingering threat posed by unexploded ordnance and landmines placed by ISIS fighters remains a critical humanitarian concern. General Qalyare noted the extensive risk these explosives represent, calling for immediate action to secure and clear affected areas, thereby ensuring the safe return of displaced populations and reducing the risk of further casualties.

Ultimately, sustained and comprehensive action remains imperative to fully dismantle ISIS capabilities, safeguard civilians, and support long-term stability and peace in the region.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This report has thoroughly examined the multifaceted security, political, and humanitarian crises currently confronting Puntland's Bari region, with particular emphasis on the destabilizing impact of the Islamic State in Somalia (ISIS-Somalia). The rapid expansion and entrenchment of ISIS-Somalia, particularly in strategic regions such as the Cal Miskaad Mountains and the economic hub of Bosaso, illustrate the vulnerabilities created by weak governance, economic hardship, and entrenched political polarization. ISIS's presence and activities significantly disrupted local economic stability, exacerbated humanitarian crises, and undermined public safety, particularly through predatory taxation, forced displacement, and violence.

In response, the Puntland administration initiated Operation Hilaac in December 2024, a decisive military campaign targeting ISIS's operational strongholds. This operation, marked by comprehensive planning, international intelligence collaboration, targeted airstrikes, and effective ground operations, has yielded substantial territorial and tactical successes.

However, despite the government's commendable military advancements and extensive community mobilization efforts, ISIS, alongside a weakened but persistent Al-Shabaab presence, continues to represent a significant ongoing security threat. The battle against terrorism in Puntland remains incomplete, demanding sustained, multifaceted approaches to ensure long-term stability and peace.

The humanitarian situation in Puntland remains dire, exacerbated by forced displacement of civilians due to ongoing military operations. These displaced populations suffer from severe shortages of basic necessities such as shelter, healthcare, water, and economic stability. Humanitarian assessments underscore the urgency of addressing these critical needs to avoid further escalation of suffering. Importantly, Puntland's liberation of ISIS-controlled areas presents significant opportunities beyond security restoration. The region's abundant natural resources— including minerals, gold, frankincense, myrrh, fisheries, and fertile agricultural land— as well as tourist areas offer substantial potential for transformative economic growth. By strategically harnessing these resources, Puntland can facilitate substantial economic revitalization, promote regional stability, and lay the foundation for sustainable development across liberated districts and beyond.



7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Counterterrorism Measures

- **Establishment of Strategic Military Bases:** Puntland security forces should, in coordination with international partners, establish permanent military outposts in the Cal Miskaad and Calmadow mountain ranges. These installations will enable rapid response and surveillance capabilities to deter insurgent regrouping, ensuring territorial gains remain secure and preventing re-infiltration by ISIS.
- **Intelligence and Surveillance Enhancement:** Enhanced intelligence-sharing frameworks involving Puntland security agencies, international organizations such as Interpol, and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) must be formalized. Intelligence integration with local communities and diaspora networks is also essential to strengthen real-time situational awareness, enabling proactive disruption of terrorist activities.
- **Border and Coastal Security:** Puntland authorities, particularly the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) and local law enforcement agencies must enhance surveillance and control of maritime borders and land entry points. International support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) could strengthen these capabilities, preventing foreign jihadists and contraband from infiltrating Puntland's coastline.
- **Legal and Financial Countermeasures:** Strengthen and enforce counterterrorism legislation and financial monitoring systems to disrupt terrorist financing and operational capabilities. Strengthen collaboration with telecommunication and financial institutions to monitor, freeze, and deny access to financial services for terrorist-affiliated entities.
- **Puntland and Ethiopia should negotiate and implement a legally binding border control agreement to systematically reduce irregular cross-border migration.** The agreement should include measurable objectives, such as a reduction in illegal entries over two years and should outline explicit protocols for enforcement and joint monitoring.
- **Puntland should enhance its immigration management system including collaboration with Somaliland over border control and security.** Puntland should establish a comprehensive, standardized registration procedure within the next 12 months. This system must be designed to accurately document the entry and residency status of immigrants, with performance reviews scheduled biannually to assess data accuracy, registration completeness, and overall system efficacy.

Community Resilience Initiatives

- **Community Engagement and Rehabilitation Programs:** Civil society organizations, and international NGOs, should expand vocational training, educational opportunities, and rehabilitation initiatives targeting disenfranchised youth, former militants, and vulnerable populations. Reintegration programs must address socio-economic vulnerabilities driving radicalization, incorporating psychological counselling and community reconciliation activities.
- **Strengthening Local Security and Early-Warning Systems:** Puntland's local authorities, in collaboration with grassroots organizations, NGOs, and community leaders, should establish village-level early-warning and response systems. Training sessions on security awareness, emergency protocols, and conflict mitigation techniques led by local and international actors will significantly enhance community resilience.

- **Grassroots Policing and Trust Building:** Authorities must strengthen trust between communities and security forces through regular dialogues, transparent communication, and community-inclusive policing practices. The establishment of local peace committees and neighbourhood watch programs, supported by local leadership and international partners, will contribute to maintaining security gains.
- **Rehabilitation and Reintegration:** Initiate comprehensive rehabilitation programs for ex-combatants and vulnerable populations, integrating psychological support, economic empowerment, and reconciliation initiatives facilitated by local and international partners.

Post-Liberation Stabilization Efforts

- **Infrastructure Development:** Prioritize construction and rehabilitation of critical infrastructure, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, police stations, and water resources.
- **Economic Revitalization:** Assess the priorities and needs of the communities to develop evidence-based development programs for the sectors of agriculture, fisheries, and frankincense.
- **Livelihood and Employment Programs:** Create sustainable jobs and support entrepreneurship for youth, displaced populations, and ex-combatants through targeted vocational training and economic incentives to mitigate extremist appeal.
- **Humanitarian Relief and Protection:** Ensure secure humanitarian corridors and scale up emergency relief efforts including food, water, shelter, and healthcare, particularly focusing on vulnerable groups such as women and children.
- **Demining and Explosive Ordnance Disposal:** Accelerate landmine and unexploded ordnance clearance with assistance from specialized international agencies to allow safe civilian resettlement.
- **Governance and Community Reconciliation:** Restore inclusive and responsive local governance structures and facilitate reconciliation programs between former combatants and affected communities. Reintegrate displaced populations by reconstructing housing, essential services, and promoting communal reconciliation processes.