

Return of Old Leader Presents New Opportunities in Somalia

by [Ido Levy \(/experts/ido-levy\)](/experts/ido-levy)

May 26, 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ido Levy \(/experts/ido-levy\)](/experts/ido-levy)

Ido Levy is an associate fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy focusing on counterterrorism and military operations, particularly relating to jihadist groups.



Brief Analysis

The Biden administration should be encouraged by the incoming president's ties to the UAE and apparent openness to bolstering the counterterrorism fight and normalizing with Israel.

On May 15, the members of the Federal Parliament of Somalia gathered to elect Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as president, five years after he served in that office from 2012 to 2017. He will replace Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, aka “Farmajo,” who defeated him in the 2017 election.

Hassan Sheikh takes over at a particularly difficult time. The election was plagued by Farmajo’s obstructionism and political misuse of security forces, as well as reports of massive vote buying across the board. Meanwhile, the Somali National Army, state government forces, clan militias, and the al-Qaeda affiliate Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedin are still fighting for control of the country—indeed, the uptick in political and military clashes since 2020 has given al-Shabab space to grow stronger.

Fortunately, Hassan Sheikh’s return gives the Biden administration new opportunities to deepen its partnership with Mogadishu and further U.S. interests in the region. Given Somalia’s strategic position on the Gulf of Aden, the country has been a nexus for arms trafficking and militant activity affecting both the Middle East and Africa. Al-Shabab is al-Qaeda’s largest and best-funded affiliate, with the UN recently estimating that it has as many as 12,000 fighters and revenue of up to \$10 million per month. The Islamic State’s affiliate in Somalia is gradually building strength as well. The Somali government is an indispensable partner in fighting such actors. Additionally, the new president could be receptive to normalizing relations with Israel, a major objective for the Biden administration.

A Calamitous Election Cycle

Although Farmajo rose to power with high hopes in 2017, his tenure became increasingly authoritarian and friendly to bad actors in recent years. Despite his term expiring on February 8, 2021, he refused to allow

elections for months, holding out as long as possible to buy time and consolidate support.

Farmajo's use of force has been problematic as well. In early 2020, he deployed 700 Turkish-trained Somali troops to the Gedo region in the hope of compelling political support there, leading to fierce clashes with Jubaland state forces. He also sent troops to subdue the formerly government-allied Sufi militia Ahlu Sunna wal-Jamaa (ASWJ) in Galmudug state. Meanwhile, the only entity still actively fighting al-Shabab—the U.S.-built **Danab Brigade** (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2045967>), Somalia's premier special operations forces unit—lost its operational tempo following the Trump administration's withdrawal of U.S. troops in January 2021. Three months later, government and opposition forces clashed in Mogadishu, causing the displacement of 60,000-100,000 people. And in October—without U.S. forces present to veto the action—Farmajo ordered Danab troops and other army units to suppress an ASWJ stronghold in the town of Guriel, where fighting continues intermittently.

Failing to secure his political survival by force, Farmajo—like many of the thirty-eight other presidential candidates—turned to wealthy foreign sponsors such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the hope of buying his way to victory. Both of these countries had sent millions to contenders in the 2017 election, and they increased their contributions to an estimated \$50-100 million each in the current cycle. These may look like eye-watering sums in one of the world's poorest countries, but they were deemed necessary because Somalia has now normalized competitive vote buying for its 329 preselected parliamentary electors. In effect, each presidential vote cost between \$100,000-300,000 up front, plus the promise of an extra \$200,000 or more if the candidate won. Farmajo threw in his lot with Qatar and sought further financial and military support via good relations with Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Turkey, while Hassan Sheikh had Emirati backing along with some support from Egypt and Kenya.

Amid this fierce political and military infighting, al-Shabab consolidated its territories in the south, increased in strength, developed an ever-more-sophisticated taxation system, and provided crucial services—particularly dispute settlement—more efficiently than the government. The group also continues to threaten and occasionally plot attacks against U.S. targets, and may try to carry them out if it begins to feel more secure in its position.

As for the local Islamic State affiliate, it continues to build strength from its enclave in the Galgala Mountains despite facing pressure from the more functional U.S.-backed Puntland Security Force (PSF). In fact, the group is increasingly becoming an important logistical node between the Islamic State's core "provinces" in Iraq and Syria and those in West and Central Africa.

Window for Renewed Cooperation

Farmajo's ouster gives Washington new opportunities to pursue common interests on several fronts. President Biden already seized on this by redeploying U.S. troops to Somalia shortly after Hassan Sheikh's victory. As described in detail by the author in a companion article (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3496403-redeploying-us-troops-to-somalia-is-the-right-move/>), this is an important step that will reinvigorate the fight against al-Shabab by making the Danab Brigade effective again. Indeed, it was the **deliberate insulation of Danab** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-over-horizon-counterterrorism-eliminate-premier-security-force-assistance>) from political misuse and the unit's close relations with U.S. personnel that set it apart from the rest of the Somali army and enabled its effective offensive action against al-Shabab. In contrast, Somalia's aforementioned Turkish-trained commando unit, called Gorgor, is skilled but lacks the separate command-and-control system that would prevent its misuse, leading to its regular deployment for political gain (e.g., the 2020 Gedo incident).

Accordingly, U.S. officials should go further and urge President Hassan Sheikh's incoming administration—which has weaker ties to Turkey—to integrate Gorgor under Danab's command-and-control architecture. Washington

should also redouble efforts to enlarge Danab to 3,000 members, up from its current strength of less than 1,000.

The change in government also makes expanding the Abraham Accords to Somalia a more distinct possibility. Israel has much to offer Somalia on the counterterrorism and economic fronts, while Hassan Sheikh's strong ties with the UAE—an original signatory of the accords—can facilitate channels of communication with Jerusalem. The United States could play the role of a middleman here. Guarantees of further U.S. economic and military aid, coupled with various Emirati and Israeli benefits, would go a long way toward securing normalization. According to a senior official who served during Hassan Sheikh's first tenure, the president met with then-prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and was likely planning another high-level meeting before losing his 2017 reelection bid. After the latest vote, a Somali diplomat close to Hassan Sheikh told the *Times of Israel*, "The group that is against normalization with Israel is out." The time is therefore ripe for President Biden to work with Israel, Somalia, and the UAE to expand the Abraham Accords.

The United States should also deepen its partnership with the autonomous Puntland region, whose strategic port of Bosaso has easy access to the Bab al-Mandab Strait and Gulf of Aden. Due to its location, Puntland is a major economic center for Somalia—and a hub for smuggling from the Arabian Peninsula, which helps fuel widespread conflicts. It is also home base for the local Islamic State affiliate. More favorably, Puntland president Said Abdullahi Deni has close ties with the UAE, and the Emiratis hold significant economic interests of their own in the region. He is also an ally to Hassan Sheikh, having served as the president's minister of planning during his previous term.

Such factors give the United States a window to build on its existing military support to the PSF by encouraging greater security and intelligence coordination between Puntland and Mogadishu, with the aim of combatting the Islamic State and smuggling. Puntland would also be an important area of concentration for economic investment in any Somali normalization arrangement with Israel.

Finally, as Hassan Sheikh consolidates his presidency, the United States should assure him that it is ready to work with him in pursuit of common interests. The swift congratulatory visit by U.S. Africa Command head Gen. Stephen Townsend was an important confidence-building measure as American forces prepare to reengage in the country. Washington should also take care to avoid any statements that might antagonize Mogadishu during this sensitive period.

Ido Levy is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. He would like to thank Abdi Yusuf for contributing valuable insights to this article. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[How Religion and Money Shape Russian Soft Power in Syria](#)

May 26, 2022

◆
Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/how-religion-and-money-shape-russian-soft-power-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Mapping Russian Soft Power: How Coastal Syrians Engage with Russia

May 26, 2022

◆
Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/mapping-russian-soft-power-how-coastal-syrians-engage-russia)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Rebuilding Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Marriage of Convenience

May 26, 2022

◆
Jalal Selmi

(/policy-analysis/rebuilding-israeli-turkish-relations-marriage-convenience)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)