



IH Advocacy Brief
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BAIDOA AT A CROSSROADS

Preventing a Political Struggle from
Becoming a Protracted Urban War

   independencehouse

Baidoa at a Crossroads

Preventing a Political Struggle from Becoming a Protracted Urban War

Repeated fighting in Baidoa is pushing Somalia's South West State toward a deeper and potentially protracted conflict. Since August, forces loyal to former state president Abdiiaziz Hassan Mohamed "Laftagareen" have mounted three major incursions into the city, clashing with federal and regional forces defending the administration of Sheikh Adan Mohamed Nur "Adan Madobe". The fighting has wounded hundreds, damaged homes and health facilities, disrupted livelihoods and imposed further hardship on a population already affected by displacement, drought and al-Shabaab violence.

The confrontation is principally a struggle over political legitimacy and control of South West State—not simply another al-Shabaab offensive. Laftagareen's camp rejects his removal in March 2026 and describes the subsequent regional transition as an unconstitutional federal takeover. Mogadishu and the Adan Madobe administration maintain that Laftagareen's mandate had expired, that his March re-election was unlawful and that his remaining forces are attempting to overthrow a legitimate administration by violence.

Federal and regional authorities also allege that Laftagareen-aligned forces have fought alongside al-Shabaab. His camp denies the allegation. Independent reporting confirms that al-Shabaab attacked government positions around Baidoa during at least one major opposition assault, but available public evidence does not establish a formal alliance or unified command.

A narrow opportunity remains to prevent recurring incursions from becoming sustained urban or inter-clan warfare. A mediation delegation has begun consultations with both political camps, but their positions remain far apart. All sides should accept an immediate cessation of hostilities, protect civilians and medical services, and enter negotiations over political representation and the future of opposition forces. International partners should support—not displace—a credible Somali-led mediation process.

An Unresolved Political Settlement

The origins of the Baidoa crisis extend beyond the immediate fighting.

Laftagareen was elected president of South West State in December 2018 after federal and Ethiopian forces arrested his leading opponent, former al-Shabaab commander Mukhtar Robow. The arrest triggered protests and a violent security response in which at least eleven people were reported killed. Laftagareen won the subsequent election, but federal intervention and Robow's exclusion left lasting doubts about the process.

The present crisis contains a striking reversal. Laftagareen, who benefited from federal intervention in 2018, now accuses Mogadishu of using similar methods to install Adan Madobe.

Laftagareen's original mandate was widely understood to have expired in December 2022. The regional parliament extended its own term and his tenure, provoking opposition protests and armed clashes in Baidoa. A reconciliation conference reduced tensions, but it did not produce a durable consensus on the state's electoral timetable or the rules governing political succession.

The dispute became entangled with Somalia's broader constitutional crisis. On 4 March 2026, the federal parliament approved a new constitution, which President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud signed four days later. Federal authorities describe the document and its direct-election model as progress toward democratic government. Laftagareen and other opponents argue that the changes lacked sufficient agreement from federal member states, altered the balance of federal power and extended the life of incumbent federal institutions.

On 17 March, Laftagareen's administration suspended cooperation with Mogadishu. It accused the Federal Government of arming competing forces and attempting to remove the South West leadership. Federal authorities responded by declaring Laftagareen's mandate expired.

On 28 March, the sitting South West parliament re-elected Laftagareen for another five-year term in a rapidly organised indirect vote. Mogadishu rejected the process as illegal. Two days later, federal forces entered Baidoa. Most forces loyal to Laftagareen stood down or withdrew, while Ethiopian troops serving under the African Union mission did not intervene on his behalf. Laftagareen announced his resignation and left the city.

The takeover changed who controlled Baidoa, but it did not resolve the political dispute or dismantle the armed structures loyal to the former administration.

Federal and regional authorities subsequently conducted direct elections for the South West parliament and district councils across thirteen districts in Bay, Bakool and Lower Shabelle. Opposition organisations boycotted the vote and alleged manipulation. The new parliament elected Adan Madobe president on 10 June.

These competing processes produced two incompatible narratives. One side considers Laftagareen an ousted former leader directing an armed rebellion. The other continues to regard him as South West's legitimate president and Adan Madobe as the beneficiary of a federal military intervention.

Neither account, by itself, offers a path out of the crisis.

From Political Dispute to Urban Combat

Forces loyal to Laftagareen did not disband following their withdrawal from Baidoa. They remained active outside the city and retained sufficient organisation to launch repeated attacks.

On 30 May, Laftagareen-aligned fighters entered parts of Baidoa shortly before newly selected regional legislators were due to be sworn in. The fighting was brief, but local and international reports placed the number of combatants killed between six and eight.

The confrontation escalated sharply on 17 August. The assault began with explosions near a military base east of Baidoa, followed by heavy fighting around another base in

Boonkay. Opposition forces entered the city and displaced the new administration's forces from several areas for approximately six hours before being pushed out.

Médecins Sans Frontières recorded 94 wounded people, including 29 women and 20 children, and four deaths. Bay Regional Hospital, which reportedly had only forty beds, was forced to erect an emergency tent and struggled with shortages of essential medicines.

During the same period, al-Shabaab attacked two government positions on Baidoa's outskirts. The proximity and timing of these attacks led federal and regional officials to accuse al-Shabaab and Laftagareen's forces of coordinating their operations. The attacks occurred in parallel, but independent observers did not establish whether the groups shared planning, command or personnel.

On 3 September, Laftagareen-aligned forces entered Baidoa again and established temporary checkpoints in Cunaay, Ceel Cabdi Shiraay, Al-Faras and Boonkay. Bay Regional Hospital received 71 wounded people, including 15 women and twelve children. One death was recorded.

The third major confrontation began early on 28 September. Opposition forces again advanced into several parts of the city, clashing with Somali National Army units and regional forces supporting Adan Madobe.

The International Committee of the Red Cross subsequently reported that four hospitals treated 148 wounded people: 106 at two public hospitals and 42 at private facilities. The ICRC did not distinguish civilians from combatants or provide a death toll. Initial local reports placed the number killed between ten and 29, but these figures remain unverified.

The fighting also interfered directly with healthcare. MSF reported that a health facility was seriously damaged, a healthcare worker was killed and an ambulance was looted. Two medical workers supporting MSF teams were robbed, with one injured. Roads to hospitals were blocked, preventing some wounded people from reaching treatment.

Laftagareen's office described the incursion as a security operation to restore South West's legitimate authority. It accused opposing forces of occupying Baidoa and alleged that airstrikes had hit civilian areas. These allegations have not been independently verified.

The Adan Madobe administration imposed a night-time curfew following the fighting. Such measures may be justified by immediate security needs, but restrictions should be necessary, proportionate, time-bound and implemented without discrimination. They must not prevent medical emergencies, humanitarian relief, journalism or movement by people seeking safety.

The Disputed Role of Al-Shabaab

The relationship between the political opposition and al-Shabaab is the most consequential unresolved factual question in the conflict.

Government officials say they recovered the bodies of al-Shabaab fighters and captured suspected members after the August fighting. They describe the opposition and the militant group as operational partners. Laftagareen's representatives firmly deny the accusation and say the terrorist label is intended to delegitimise political resistance to an unconstitutional administration.

The available evidence supports three different propositions, which should not be collapsed into one.

First, al-Shabaab has an established presence in Bay region and regularly attacks government and regional forces. ACLED recorded more than 75 al-Shabaab attacks in Bay between the installation of the new administration in June and 28 August.

Second, al-Shabaab carried out attacks at approximately the same time as at least one major Laftagareen-aligned offensive. This parallel activity may have stretched government forces and benefited both armed challengers.

Third, it remains possible that local commanders engaged in tactical coordination or deconfliction. But publicly available evidence is insufficient to establish a formal alliance, shared political project or unified chain of command.

This distinction matters. If credible evidence of collaboration exists, authorities should disclose it and pursue those responsible through lawful investigations. But treating all political opponents or communities associated with the former administration as al-Shabaab risks arbitrary detention, collective punishment and further radicalisation. It could also foreclose dialogue with actors whose grievances are political and negotiable.

Regardless of formal coordination, al-Shabaab benefits from the confrontation. Government forces are diverted from counter-insurgency operations; political factions increasingly treat one another as the primary enemy; and security gaps open in rural areas surrounding Baidoa.

Civilians Bearing the Cost

The civilian consequences began before the sustained urban battles.

Political and military escalation in March reportedly displaced approximately 8,461 households—an estimated 50,766 people—on or around 31 March. The majority were women and children. Much of the movement appears to have been precautionary, driven by fear that the federal takeover would produce large-scale fighting.

The recurring confrontations since August have exposed civilians to gunfire, explosions and explosive weapons in populated neighbourhoods. Homes have been struck, health services interrupted and roads closed. The cumulative consequences extend beyond those killed or wounded: lost income, disrupted education, psychological trauma, family separation and reduced access to food, water and medical assistance.

Baidoa is one of Somalia's principal humanitarian centres and already hosts more than half a million people displaced by conflict and climate shocks. Further violence therefore

affects both permanent residents and communities with few financial or social resources to absorb another displacement.

All parties are required to distinguish between civilians and fighters and to take feasible precautions to reduce civilian harm. Medical personnel, facilities and ambulances must be respected and protected. Wounded people must be permitted to obtain treatment without adverse distinction.

Independent investigations are needed into civilian deaths and injuries during each confrontation; damage to homes and healthcare facilities; the killing, robbery and obstruction of medical personnel; the reported looting of an ambulance; alleged air or drone strikes in civilian areas; arbitrary arrests or reprisals; the weapons used in populated neighbourhoods; and any recruitment or use of children.

A Human-Rights Protection Gap

The Baidoa crisis is unfolding during a significant transition in international human-rights engagement with Somalia.

The mandate of the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia, including its human-rights component, is scheduled to end on 31 October 2026. At the same time, uncertainty surrounds the full transfer of security responsibilities to Somali authorities.

Addressing the UN Human Rights Council, Mahamane Cissé-Gouro, Director of OHCHR's Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division, warned that Somalia's transition must not create a human-rights protection gap. He identified civilian protection, accountability and civic space as priorities amid al-Shabaab attacks, counter-terrorism operations, political tensions and armed confrontations.

The host-country agreement signed by OHCHR and the Federal Government on 6 May, together with Human Rights Council Resolution 60/28, offers a framework for continued monitoring, technical assistance and capacity building. But the agreement still requires

formal acceptance, adequate resources and genuine cooperation from Somali authorities.

Somalia's National Independent Human Rights Commission could also play an important role. Its effectiveness will depend on operational independence, secure funding, access to conflict-affected areas and the ability to publish findings without political interference.

Baidoa should become an early test of the emerging framework. OHCHR and the national commission should seek access, preserve information on alleged violations and support independent investigations before evidence is lost.

A Narrow Opening for Mediation

An initial mediation effort is under way. On 1 October, a six-member delegation led by former federal parliamentary speaker Mohamed Mursal Sheikh Abdirahman arrived in Baidoa after previously meeting Laftagareen in Nairobi. The delegation has begun consultations with Adan Madobe, traditional elders and political representatives. Its access to both camps offers a potentially valuable channel, but their positions remain far apart. Laftagareen reportedly wants Adan Madobe to step aside before substantive negotiations, while some opposition figures have rejected earlier reports that a ceasefire was reached.

Mediators should avoid making agreement on South West State's final leadership a precondition for de-escalation. Their immediate priority should be a verifiable cessation of hostilities, an end to armed incursions and offensive operations, and the withdrawal or separation of forces from populated neighbourhoods. The parties should guarantee access to hospitals and humanitarian services, protect people from politically motivated detention or retaliation, and establish direct communication between commanders. A joint mechanism involving trusted elders and independent observers could document violations and help prevent disputed incidents from triggering further fighting.

Once immediate safeguards are functioning, negotiations can address the harder questions of political recognition, electoral grievances, representation and the future of

opposition forces. Possible arrangements could include monitored cantonment, integration into lawful security institutions, demobilisation or civilian reintegration. Separating urgent civilian-protection measures from the final constitutional settlement offers the best prospect of stopping the violence without requiring either camp to abandon its political position before talks begin.

Building an Off-Ramp

The Federal Government should publicly support an immediate cessation of hostilities and direct negotiations. It should avoid offensive operations in populated areas while mediation is active, disclose credible evidence supporting allegations of opposition collaboration with al-Shabaab and prevent national security institutions from being used for retaliation or collective punishment. It should also permit independent human-rights, humanitarian and media access and investigate civilian casualties and alleged attacks on healthcare.

The Adan Madobe administration should keep the curfew proportionate, time-bound and subject to regular review, while exempting emergency, humanitarian, medical and legitimate journalistic movement. It should invite credible traditional leaders, women's organisations, youth representatives and civil society into the peace process, protect communities perceived to support Laftagareen from reprisals, and cooperate with independent casualty documentation.

Laftagareen and commanders aligned with him should halt armed incursions into Baidoa and attacks from civilian areas. They should commit publicly not to coordinate with al-Shabaab or permit the group to exploit their positions, provide mediators with information about their commanders and forces, and enter negotiations on monitored cantonment, integration, demobilisation or civilian reintegration. They should guarantee humanitarian access and end any recruitment or use of children.

Somali political, traditional and religious leaders should support a mediation structure accepted by both camps, press the parties to agree on security measures before debating

final political status and reject inflammatory clan mobilisation. Women, displaced communities and civil society should participate meaningfully in negotiations.

OHCHR, the United Nations and international partners should ensure that the closure of UNTMIS does not interrupt human-rights monitoring in Baidoa. They should resource OHCHR's future presence and Somalia's independent human-rights commission, support hospitals and local protection organisations, and condition security assistance on compliance with civilian-protection safeguards. They should avoid political support or arms transfers that encourage either camp to pursue military victory.

A Closing Window

Neither camp appears capable of achieving an uncontested political settlement through force.

Laftagareen-aligned forces have demonstrated that they can penetrate and destabilise Baidoa, but not that they can hold or govern it. Federal and regional forces can retake the city, but they have not eliminated the armed opposition or resolved its political constituency's grievances. This balance creates both danger and opportunity.

Without an enforceable cessation of hostilities, each new confrontation is likely to be deadlier and more destructive. Continued mobilisation could transform a leadership dispute into an inter-clan conflict, while al-Shabaab exploits the fragmentation surrounding the city.

A negotiated process will not quickly settle the competing constitutional claims. It can, however, separate forces, preserve humanitarian access, prevent retaliation and create space for political talks.

The window for such an off-ramp remains open. After three major battles in six weeks, it is narrowing rapidly.



About IH

Independence House is a think tank, non-governmental organization based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Its core mandate is the protection and promotion of civil and political rights, freedom of expression and advancement of democracy in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. It provides the platform for like-minded individuals and organizations to build synergies towards the realization of our common goals. Through research, investigations, public forums and regular publications.

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