

Islamic State recruiting among irregular immigrants in Somalia: mass deportations in Puntland

by

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The federal state of Puntland, Somalia, has begun a mass deportation of foreigners after gaining certainty that large numbers of irregular immigrants stuck in the region joined the local branch of the Islamic State (ISIS). The terrorist organization has grown significantly stronger recently to become an important coordination hub for other ISIS affiliates in Africa.

Puntland in northern Somalia launched an offensive against the local branch of the Islamic State (Islamic State in Somalia, ISS) which had become an increasingly important center for the global terrorist organization in recent years. In addition to Operation Hillaac¹, Garowe also cracked down on foreign migrants staying illegally on the territory of the federal state. The move was triggered by evidence that part of the reason for the significant growth of ISS membership (from 2-300 two years ago to almost 1,000 today) was the large number of foreigners joining the organization².

Authorities started to deport foreigners *en masse*: on 29 January, around 1,000 undocumented Ethiopian citizens were expelled³ and taken to the Somali-Ethiopian border after a two-day detention. Although Puntland was heavily criticized by Ethiopia, Somali security sources estimate that the organization has between 500 and 700 members⁴, with Ethiopian Oromos representing the largest number of foreigners among them. The Oromo are leaving Ethiopia largely because of the poor security and economic situation in the country. Because they are culturally and religiously close to Somalis (intermarriage is common in Ethiopia), the ISS can recruit members from their group more easily. A smaller number of nationals from other countries, including Yemenis, Moroccans, Syrians, Tanzanians, and Sudanese also joined: several of them reach Puntland via Ethiopia. In March 2024, six Moroccan citizens were sentenced to death⁵ for joining the terrorist organization. “They came to Somalia to support Isis (IS) and destroy and shed blood,” said Col Ali Ibrahim Osman, deputy chairman of the court hearing the case.

Telecom companies in the region were also instructed to deactivate⁶ SIM cards for people without identity documents. The authorities are also seeking to cut off the Somali branch’s financial resources, as one of the reasons for its growing influence is the role it plays in the distribution of funds intended for terrorism. The situation in Puntland is therefore another example of the interconnections between irregular immigration and terrorism.

Officials in the region confirmed that without the deportation of undocumented foreigners, it is nearly impossible to prevent the infiltration of armed organizations. Many people join ISS not for ideological reasons but for financial ones: the region is an important transit area for illegal migration from East Africa to the Gulf states, but crossing the Gulf of Aden costs serious money and many seek to raise funds by joining the terrorist organization. Tens of thousands of irregular migrants cross northern Somalia every year in search of a better life, but many are unable to raise the money needed for the sea crossing. Although international media reports extensively on the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean, there are also a lot of casualties⁷ among people who attempt to cross illegally the waters of the Horn of Africa. Death rates are also high on land where armed groups, wild animals, exhaustion, and dehydration take their toll.

The Somali branch of ISIS emerged in the second half of 2015. Initially, it was joined by former members of the al-Shabaab terrorist organization, and it was seen as a lesser threat compared to the al-Shabab loyal to al-Qaeda. By the end of 2024, however, the organization had grown significantly stronger: according to UN sources, it is now responsible for Islamic State-affiliated

groups not only in Somalia, but in the entire East African region, including sub-groups in Mozambique and Congo. This has made it necessary to take comprehensive military action against it. Although Puntland security forces captured several of their bases since December 2024, government troops also suffered heavy losses, and many experts fear that Garowe will be unable to sustain the consolidation of the organization's hideout in the rugged, vast 'Al-Mishqat mountains.

¹ "Inside Puntland's Largest Counter-Terrorism Offensive: Operation Hillaac". *Mustaqbal Media* 07 December 2024.

<https://mustaqbalmedia.net/en/inside-puntlands-largest-counter-terrorism-offensive-operation-hillaac/>.

² Jeff Seldin, "Foreign fighters flocking to Islamic State in Somalia". *Voice of America News*, 20 November 2024.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/foreign-fighters-flocking-to-islamic-state-in-somalia/7871573.html>.

³ Puntland dismisses claims of targeting Ethiopians in mass deportation operation. *Hiraan*, 1 February 2025.

https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Feb/200059/puntland_denies_targeting_ethiopian_oromo_in_ongoing_deportati_on_operation.aspx?utm_source=hiiraan&utm_medium=SomaliNewsUpdateFront&fbclid=IwY2xjawIONxpleHRuA2FlbQIxmAAABHQrRHMAYNMHtZQvus9YvYmUs3gcCeInV2B0_7-iJASLwgl4masH5_5HcYQ_aem_dTXsEP4QufknxGng549UMw.

⁴ Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia: A Growing Global Terror Concern". *CTC Sentinel* 17(8), September 2024. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/islamic-state-somalia-a-growing-global-terror-concern/>.

⁵ Gloria Aradi, "Moroccan IS fighters sentenced to death in Somalia". *BBC News*, 1 March 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68444127>.

⁶ Mohammed Yusuf, "Puntland blocks illegal entry of foreigners in IS crackdown". *Voice of America News*, 28 January 2025. <https://www.voanews.com/a/puntland-blocks-illegal-entry-of-foreigners-in-is-crackdown/7953395.html>.

⁷ "Over 180 migrants dead or missing in latest tragedy off Yemen, UN agency reports". *UN News*, 11 June 2024.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/06/1150936>.