

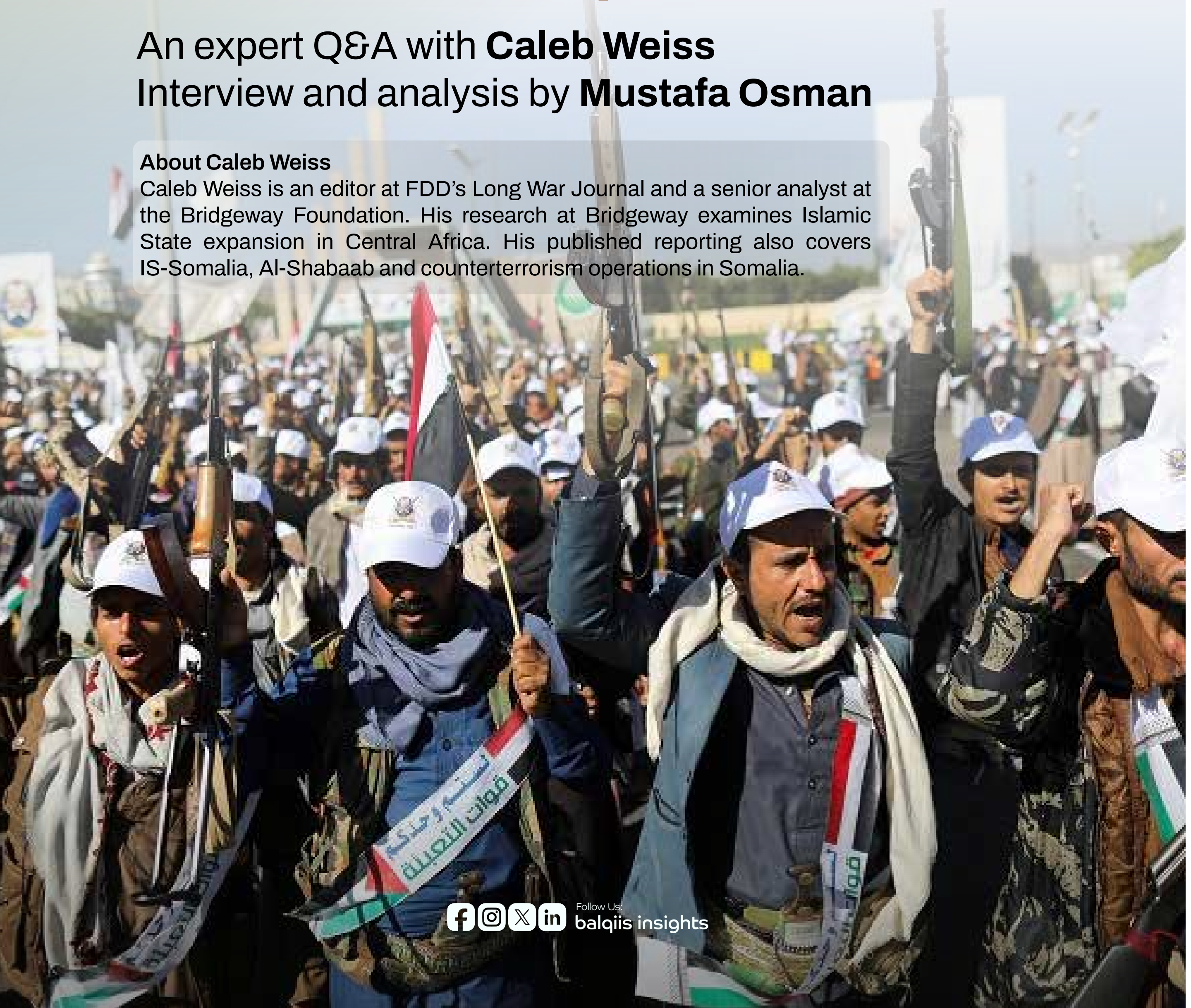


# Militant Networks Across Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen

An expert Q&A with **Caleb Weiss**  
Interview and analysis by **Mustafa Osman**

## About Caleb Weiss

Caleb Weiss is an editor at FDD's Long War Journal and a senior analyst at the Bridgeway Foundation. His research at Bridgeway examines Islamic State expansion in Central Africa. His published reporting also covers IS-Somalia, Al-Shabaab and counterterrorism operations in Somalia.



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**How should analysts understand the relationship between the security crises in Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen? Which connections are supported by evidence, and which remain plausible but unverified?**



Caleb Weiss

Analysts should understand that the various conflicts are intertwined in various ways. For instance, both al-Shabaab (AS) and IS-Somalia have ties to armed groups in Yemen. AS has attempted on many occasions to establish some sort of presence in Ethiopia – an expanded conflict there would only make that easier. IS-Somalia has long used Ethiopia as a transit and logistical hub with Ethiopians being one of the largest foreign components of the group. Ties between AS and AQAP in Yemen, for instance, seem to be supported by evidence, as are ties between AS, IS-Somalia, and the same Yemeni and Somali arms dealers. I personally think the Houthi-AS connection needs more verification on specifics, but it is certainly plausible and not out of the realm of possibility.





What operational, financial or logistical links currently exist between IS-Somalia and Islamic State networks outside Somalia, particularly in Yemen and the wider Middle East?



Caleb Weiss

IS-Somalia has (or had) extensive ties within the Yemeni arms market and likely continues to have some sort of relationship with IS in Yemen. At the height of IS-Somalia (2021-2024), it was also sending lots of money to IS-Yemen, IS in Turkey, and IS Khorasan Province (and likely to Syria, but not sure that has been conclusively proven). Now, since the Puntland offensive against it, my understanding is that it now struggles to maintain the same level of operational capacity it once had in terms of regional and international networks. The UN has also confirmed as much.





**Could an escalation of conflict in Ethiopia benefit IS-Somalia?  
Could it increase weapons availability, open new smuggling routes,  
facilitate recruitment or reduce Ethiopian military pressure on militant  
groups operating in Somalia?**



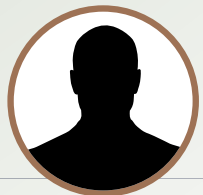
Caleb Weiss

I'm not sure a contained conflict in Tigray would be of much substantive assistance to IS-Somalia, but an expanded conflict in Ethiopia, in which many regions are embroiled, would likely make it easier for IS-Somalia to continue to use Ethiopia as a transit and logistical hub, and likely make it easier to procure weapons and supplies in a growing black market as arms freely flow across the various conflicts. It could also mean more potential recruitment avenues – with Ethiopians being one of the largest foreign components of IS Somalia already. All of this is the same argument for AS, for what it's worth. It also stands to benefit greatly from an expanded Ethiopian conflict, including a greater chance to formally establish itself in the Ogaden. And naturally, if more Ethiopian troops are redeployed away from their positions in Somalia, this of course gives more breathing room for AS to operate and consolidate even more gains.





How has the Yemen conflict changed the regional market for weapons, drones and military technology? Is there credible evidence that armed groups in Somalia are gaining access to systems, components or expertise originating from Yemen?



Caleb Weiss

There is a lot of talk and reports on this obviously, though a lot of the sourcing appears to be anonymous officials from various governments. So I think more needs to be done on this front to definitively confirm, especially as some of the stuff that the Houthis have reportedly transferred to AS (advanced drones, missiles, etc) hasn't been seen on the battlefield. But maybe AS is just waiting for the right opportunity. But the idea that the Houthis and AS would have a relationship is not that surprising. The Houthis and AQAP, AS' brothers in al-Qaeda, have a deepening relationship too.





Do IS-Somalia, Al-Shabaab, Islamic State networks in Yemen, the Houthis and regional trafficking groups cooperate, compete or simply use overlapping smuggling infrastructure? What evidence is needed to distinguish direct coordination from transactional contact?



Caleb Weiss

For IS-Somalia and AS it is more using overlapping networks and infrastructure. For AS and the Houthis, there is possibly something there regarding actual cooperation. IS Somalia and IS Yemen cooperate and IS Somalia once supported the latter. AS and AQAP have a deep relationship. There is also evidence that all these groups also benefited from the same Iran-linked arms network as documented by several independent researchers. As for evidence, particularly for the assertions that the Houthis have transferred advanced weaponry to AS, the use of these said advance weapons on the battlefield would obviously be the greatest evidence.

