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Al-Shabaab Recaptures Key Town, While Mogadishu Struggles to Regain the Upper Hand

Crisis Group expert Omar Mahmood reports on Al-Shabaab's capture of the strategic town of Moqokori and its broader implications



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On 7 July, the Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab took control of the town of Moqokori in the Hiraan region of Hirshabelle state in central Somalia, the culmination of the group's two-month campaign in the area. The town's fall represents a considerable blow to Mogadishu and allied clan militias, which drove Al-Shabaab out of Moqokori during a 2022-23 offensive. That offensive had raised hopes about the government's capacity to recapture territory claimed by the insurgents.

The loss of Moqokori is important for two main reasons. Its strategic location at the intersection of multiple roads in eastern Hiraan provides Al-Shabaab a staging ground for further incursions into government-controlled territory. Also, the town's population is mostly from the Hawadle clan, which initiated the 2022-23 offensive, as part of a clan-based self-defence group known as *macawisley*. The Hawadle militia was the strongest in the group and Al-Shabaab's success on its home turf signals the militants' ability to wear down even those most staunchly opposed to it.

As for how it happened, the insurgents surprised members of the Somali National Army and local militias with a suicide attack using a vehicle-borne explosive device, before overwhelming the town with gunmen and forcing the defenders to flee. By the afternoon of 7 July, Al-Shabaab had **posted** online photos of militants in the town and a statement claiming they killed over 40 soldiers, though that body count is difficult to verify.

Government forces also continue to suffer from challenges that have dogged them for years – weak logistics, insufficient training and poor leadership. The African Union peacekeeping mission (AUSSOM), which plays a key role in Somalia’s fight against Al-Shabaab, is also distracted as it undergoes a transition and suffers from **a lack of funding**.

For all the government’s challenges, Al-Shabaab has not enjoyed entirely smooth sailing. The militants have at times faced stiff opposition from the national army and militias, supported by mainly Turkish-supplied drones. The government remains in control of major cities, with Al-Shabaab’s gains confined largely to rural areas where it is well entrenched.

But there is no question that the insurgents are gaining momentum while the federal government is struggling to maintain the external support it needs to regain the upper hand. AUSSOM lacks a clear funding mechanism and major donors – including the U.S. and EU – are frustrated with the country’s persistent failure to resolve political rifts. While Mogadishu remains secure, unless something changes, Al-Shabaab’s recent advances in Hirshabelle will not be its last.

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