

Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Foreign Terrorist Organizations: al-Shabaab

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aka The Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin; al-Shabab; Shabaab; the Youth; Mujahidin al-Shabaab Movement; Mujahideen Youth Movement; Mujahidin Youth Movement

Description: Al-Shabaab was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on March 18, 2008. Al-Shabaab was the militant wing of the former Somali Islamic Courts Council that took over parts of southern Somalia during the second half of 2006. Since the end of 2006, al-Shabaab and associated militias have undertaken a violent insurgency using guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics against the transitional governments of Somalia.

Al-Shabaab is an official al-Qa'ida (AQ) affiliate and has ties to other AQ affiliates, including al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. The group's leader is Ahmed Diriye aka Ahmed Umar aka Abu Ubaidah.

Al-Shabaab is composed of Somali recruits and foreign terrorist fighters. Since 2011, al-Shabaab has seen its military capacity reduced due to the efforts of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali forces, and clashes within the group itself. Despite al-Shabaab's loss of urban centers since 2012, the group has maintained its hold on large sections of rural areas throughout Somalia and has conducted attacks in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti.

Activities: Al-Shabaab has used intimidation and violence to exploit divisions in Somalia and undermine the Somali government, recruit new fighters, extort funding from local populations, and kill activists working to bring about peace through political dialogue. The group has claimed responsibility for several high profile bombings and shootings throughout Somalia targeting AMISOM troops and Somali officials. Al-Shabaab has assassinated numerous civil society figures, government officials, journalists, international aid workers, and members of non-governmental organizations.

Al-Shabaab was responsible for the July 11, 2010, suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda – its first attack outside of Somalia. The attack, which took place during the World Cup, killed 76 people, including one U.S. citizen. Al-Shabaab was blamed for the 2011 kidnapping of international aid workers from the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. Both hostages were eventually freed in 2013. In

September 2013, al-Shabaab again expanded its area of operations when it staged a significant attack against the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya. The multi-day siege resulted in the deaths of at least 65 civilians, including foreign nationals from 13 countries and six soldiers and police officers; hundreds of others were injured. In April 2015, al-Shabaab carried out a raid with small arms and grenades on Kenya's Garissa University College that left 148 people dead.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for one of the deadliest attacks against AMISOM troops in Somalia in January 2016. Using a vehicle-borne IED and small arms fire, al-Shabaab massed against a Kenyan AMISOM base and killed more than 100 soldiers. In February, al-Shabaab attempted to down Daallo Airlines Flight 321 with 74 passengers on board. Only the suicide bomber was killed and the plane made an emergency landing in Mogadishu shortly after take-off due to an explosion that created a large hole in the fuselage near the wing. In August, al-Shabaab claimed a double suicide bombing in Galkayo, Somalia, that killed at least 20 people. Al-Shabaab carried out a series of raids in northeast Kenya in October, including one attack that killed at least 12 people at a guesthouse in Mandera, and in November, the group claimed responsibility for a car bombing targeting an army convoy near Parliament in Mogadishu that killed at least two soldiers and injured another five.

Al-Shabaab continued a steady pace of attacks in 2017. In January, a car bomb killed 39 people in a busy section of Mogadishu. A similar attack in the capital killed over a dozen people on March 13, and approximately 20 people were killed in a car bomb and shooting at a hotel and adjacent restaurant in June. On October 14, although the group didn't claim responsibility, it is believed that al-Shabaab conducted a double truck bombing in a Mogadishu intersection with heavy vehicle and pedestrian traffic that killed over 500 people and injured 300 others.

Strength: Al-Shabaab is estimated to have between 7,000 and 9,000 members.

Location/Area of Operation: Al-Shabaab has lost full control of major urban centers in Somalia. In September 2012, the group lost control of Kismayo, a vital port it used to obtain supplies and funding through taxes. In October 2014, al-Shabaab lost another strategic port in Baraawe to AMISOM and Somali troops. Despite these losses, throughout 2016 and 2017, al-Shabaab continued to control large swaths of rural areas in the middle and lower Juba regions, as well as the Gedo, Bakol, Bay, and Shabelle regions. The group also maintained its presence in northern Somalia along the Golis Mountains and within Puntland's larger urban areas, and launched several attacks against targets in the border regions of Kenya.

Funding and External Aid: While al-Shabaab has seen its income diminish due to the loss of the strategic port cities of Baraawe, Kismayo, and Merka, it still receives enough income to launch attacks throughout Somalia, including against AMISOM bases and other civilian targets. Al-Shabaab obtains funds through illegal charcoal production and exports, taxation of local populations and businesses, and via remittances and other money transfers from the Somali diaspora (although these funds are not always intended to support al-Shabaab members).