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Attack on U.S. Base and EU Trainers in Somalia Underlines al-Shabaab's Resilience; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 19

An attack on a U.S. military base in Somalia has underlined the persistent threat posed by al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa.

On September 30, the militant group stormed a base housing U.S. Special Forces and soldiers from the Somali National Army (SNA) in the town of Baledogle in Lower Shabelle region (Daily Nation, (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Shabaab-attacks-hit-US-base-EU-convoy-Somalia/1066-5292830-wyb13p/index.html>) September 30).

In an attack widely seen to signify the group's growing confidence, the militants first detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) at the gate, before fighters moved in on foot. Reports indicate that a U.S. servicemember suffered injuries in the attack, which took place approximately 110 kilometers northwest of the capital, Mogadishu.

On the same day, a separate group of militants attacked a convoy transporting a team of EU military advisors, who had been training soldiers from the SNA in Mogadishu.

The attackers drove a VBIED into one of the vehicles in the convoy as it was returning from the army headquarters. None of the EU soldiers were injured, but the armored vehicles they were using were damaged.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the two attacks. The group claimed it sent an elite unit of soldiers to raid the heavily fortified base, and that the soldiers engaged the "crusaders" in an intense fight after breaching the perimeter (The Citizen (<https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/news/1840340-5293014-9dqdcj/index.html>) , September 30).

According to reports, the U.S. Special Forces have been using the Baledogle Airfield complex to launch drone attacks against al-Shabaab and more recently, Islamic State (IS). It has also been the training base for commandos in Somalia (Daily Nation, (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Shabaab-attacks-hit-US-base-EU-convoy-Somalia/1066-5292830-wyb13p/index.html>) September 30).

In the last two years, the U.S. military has increasingly used aircraft and drone strikes to target the militants in southern Somalia. In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump issued a declaration that defined southern Somalia as an area of active hostilities, which opened up the territory for airstrikes, the number of which have increased sharply in 2019.

U.S. Africa Command (Africom) has conducted 110 airstrikes since 2017, targeting groups of fighters as well as individual commanders (Standard Digital, (<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001314441/u-s-says-air-strike-killed-35-militants-in-somalia>) February 26).

According to reports, the aim is to reduce al-Shabaab's ability to plan and carry out future attacks, disrupt its leadership networks, and reduce its ability to move within the region (The Star (<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2019-01-07-us-attacks-on-somalias-al-shabaab-increase-under-trump/>) , January 7). Earlier airstrikes killed key leaders including Shaykh Ahmad Abdi Godane. Godane, a co-founder of the Islamist group, died in a strike near the town of Barawe in 2014. Aden Hashi Ayro, the first al-Shabaab leader, was killed in another U.S. airstrike in 2008.

Despite the strikes and the increased onslaught by the SNA and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops, the al-Shabaab threat is far from diminished.

The group has remained the main destabilizing force in the region and the key obstacle to international efforts to reconstruct the Somali state (The African Executive, (<https://africanexecutive.com/article/read/10278>) August 20). It continues to exist as a resilient and tactful force that quickly adapts to new circumstances in Somalia's complex civil war.

With the increasing number of airstrikes, al-Shabaab has responded by avoiding gathering its fighters in large groups. Its fighters have also been moving in small units of three or four people to avoid detection. Gathering in large numbers has been forbidden by al-Shabaab leadership, unless the group is preparing to launch a major attack.

Since its establishment in 2006, the militant organization has maintained a tight grip on most of southern Somalia. In 2011, it lost the capital Mogadishu to AMISOM. The city of Kismayo—a major source of revenue through charcoal trade, taxation, and levies on arms and other illegal imports—was lost the following year.

Al-Shabaab has continued its pattern of violence, however, attacking government installations and buildings in the smaller towns and other areas. The group has assassinated senior government officials and politicians, and kidnapped foreigners, including aid workers. It has employed the use of roadside IEDs, VBIEDs, and suicide bombers to disrupt life in the town and southern Somalia (Daily Nation (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Five-killed-Al-Shabaab-car-bomb-Somalia/1066-5004388-pij95vz/index.html>) , March 1).

Through its insurgency, the militant group is seeking to destabilize and overthrow the Federal Government of Somalia, with the aim of installing a government based on sharia (Islamic law) (The Star (<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018-10-02-three-die-after-somalia-car-bomb-strikes-eu-convoy/>), October 2, 2018).

Beyond these attacks, al-Shabaab continues to implement some forms of taxation, such as the collecting fines. The group is offering judicial services in the areas under its control, as well as in areas still under government administration.

The attack on the U.S. base and the EU trainers are likely to boost the morale of al-Shabaab's fighters and send a key message to the many forces trying to intervene in the war-torn country.

Although al-Shabaab is thought to be in disarray due to the onslaught by AMISOM troops and other forces, the attacks indicate that it can still coordinate attacks and produce reliable intelligence on military movements (Standard Digital (<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001319753/al-shabaab-in-chaos-after-leader-s-killing>), April 6). These developments demonstrate that the group's insurgency in southern Somalia is more resilient and flexible than earlier anticipated, having shifted into a regional force, and exporting its terror activities to neighboring Kenya.

ecoi.net summary:

Article on attacks on foreign military personnel by al-Shabaab insurgent group in the country's southern region



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