

What's next for the fight against al-Shabaab?

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For nearly two decades, Somali forces have been fighting al-Shabaab. Islamist insurgents continue to control large swathes of central and southern Somalia and continue to wage deadly attacks on the Somali capital, Mogadishu, and in neighboring Kenya. The Somali government has attempted to leverage clan influence on the local population in areas vulnerable to al-Shabaab influence. However, long-held rivalries put a halt to the security operation earlier in 2023 and continue to fuel inter-clan fighting in 2024. In Kenya, security forces have tried to curb the militant group's activity by deploying forces to Somalia and closing its border with Somalia in October 2011. However, violence involving the group began to rise again in July 2024, making August the most active month for al-Shabaab in Kenya. Al-Shabaab attacks on security forces in both countries attempt to circumvent moves by counter-insurgency operations. Moreover, the group has capitalized on the local and international disputes that have caused rifts between the forces fighting against it.

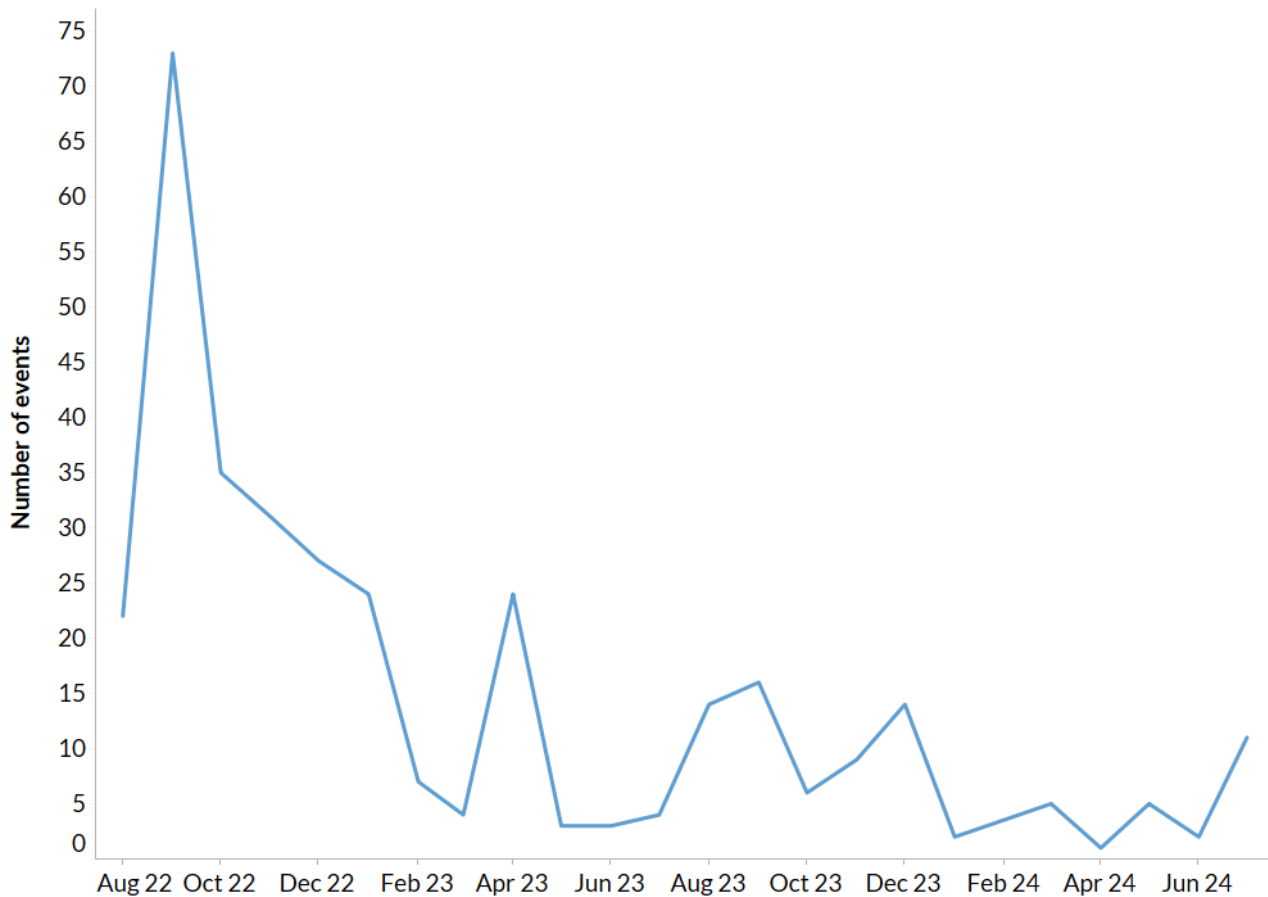
Over the years, several regional and international partners, including the United States, Ethiopia, and the African Union, have assisted the Somali government in spearheading counter-insurgency efforts and rebuilding its security forces. The AU-led Transition Mission in Somalia — called ATMIS, and formerly AMISOM¹ ATMIS was established in April 2022 to replace the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which was established in January 2007. See [African Union Mission in Somalia, 'AMISOM Background,' accessed on 27 August 2024](#) — is scheduled to end its mission in December 2024 and will be replaced by a multinational force. ATMIS, which consists of security forces from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi, and Kenya, plays a key role in the counter-insurgency operation in Somalia as part of its wider mandate to hand security responsibilities over to the Somali government. Regional tensions, including the recent disputes involving Ethiopia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Egypt, may endanger the ATMIS transition and leave Somalia increasingly exposed to al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab exploits local disputes to deter security forces in Somalia

While initially successful in dislodging the militant group from its strongholds in Somalia's Hirshabelle and Galmudug states, [political squabbles](#), [internecine fighting](#), and [widespread corruption](#) have contributed to reversing the gains made by the Somali National Army since launching a counter-insurgency campaign in 2022 (*see graph below*). Central Somalia is a hotbed of infighting within the government camp. These disputes often involve the distribution of resources between governing authorities and impact the mobilization of clan-based militias — which often operate at the behest of local notables — as [a row between authorities in Hirshabelle state and Hiiraan regional authorities](#) in April 2023 illustrates. The dispute led to the withdrawal of security forces in Caad, Shabeelow, Camaara, Masagaway, Xinlabi, and Badaweyne villages in Mudug and Galgaduud regions and delayed the expansion of the counter-insurgency campaign to Jubaland and the Southwest states.

Territorial gains by Somali government forces

1 August 2022 - 30 August 2024



Taking advantage of these local tensions, al-Shabaab has targeted state officials to sway their support. In the early months of the operation, local and federal officials attempted to co-opt clan leaders to support the government's operation against al-Shabaab by visiting the frontlines to show their support. [Attacks by al-Shabaab militants on local officials](#) aim to either retaliate against those backing the counter-insurgency or intimidate others to deter additional support. Since the beginning of the government operation in August 2022, 55% of these attacks have taken place in Hiiraan region in Hirshabelle state, Gedo region in Jubaland, and Lower Shabelle region of Southwest state, where al-Shabaab has influence and is contesting to regain control.

In the meantime, al-Shabaab has also continued to launch remote attacks against security forces both in areas where the militants are facing off with the counter-insurgency but also to deter further expansion. The insurgents use remote explosions to inflict a high number of casualties and access the security bases to loot weapons without the resistance of security forces. ACLED data show that both before and after the beginning of an operation, the majority of al-Shabaab's attacks against security forces were recorded in Lower Shabelle, Banadir, and Bay regions where the army has yet to begin its counter-insurgency operations (*see graph below*). Two IED attacks by al-Shabaab militants in August 2024 targeted security forces near Aawdiinle village in Bay region and at a checkpoint in Rob-Da'ay neighborhood in Mogadishu, Banadir region. Al-Shabaab wants to control the main supply routes linking the Lower Shabelle, Bay, and Banadir regions to collect money the group considers as taxes from civilians and commercial vehicles.

The group's attacks are not limited to security forces as it often targets civilians indiscriminately. On 2 August, al-Shabaab militants conducted a suicide bombing and gun attack in Banadir region. The attack happened at Beach View Hotel, which is located on the popular Lido beach in Mogadishu, and killed at least 32 people.² [Al Jazeera, 'At least 32 killed in al-Shabab beach attack in Somalia's capital Mogadishu,' 4 August 2024](#) In 2024, ACLED records 127 events of violence targeting civilians perpetrated by al-Shabaab, with 187 reported fatalities. Al-Shabaab militants target civilians who support the government and refuse to follow al-Shabaab's demands.

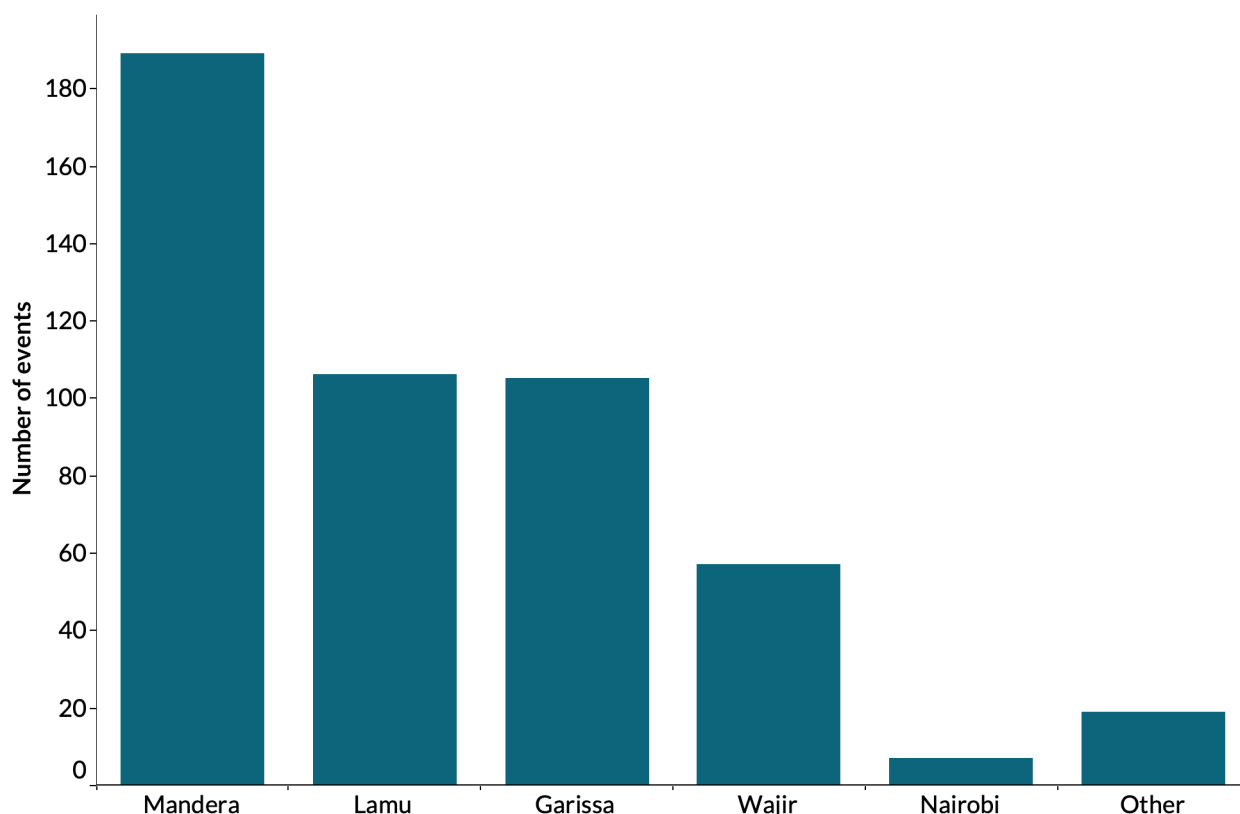
The militant group's increasing threat in Kenya

Outside Somalia, Kenya has been the most affected by al-Shabaab attacks. Political violence involving al-Shabaab began to increase along Kenya's northeastern region in 2011 after the Kenya Defense Force began to deploy in Somalia to fight the group. At the beginning of al-Shabaab's expansion in Kenya, the militant group was described as a Somali issue since it operated in the northeastern region, where a Somali community lives. Within a short period, al-Shabaab attacks expanded toward the coastal region, mostly toward Mombasa and Lamu, areas likewise populated by Muslim communities. In October 2011, Kenya closed its border with Somalia and launched security operations in Juba Valley.³[Voice of America, 'Kenya Says Somalia Border Reopening Delayed After Attacks,' 6 July 2023](#); [Deutsche Welle, 'War on the Border,' 18 October 2011](#); [Mary Wambui, 'War on terror: 12 years since Somalia incursion, is Kenya safe?' Daily Nation, 14 August 2023](#)

Al-Shabaab has conducted many attacks across multiple counties, including the capital Nairobi. The first event involving al-Shabaab in Kenya was recorded in 2008. Since then, ACLED records 832 political violence events resulting in at least 2,235 reported fatalities. 2023 saw the highest number of events involving al-Shabaab — 122 events — with no signs of abating in 2024. Al-Shabaab's operations along the Kenya-Somalia border significantly [increased](#) in the summer of 2023 as it was pushed out of its stronghold areas in central Somalia by the Somali army. In 2023, most al-Shabaab activities in Kenya involved clashes between al-Shabaab and security forces, remote attacks on security forces and civilians, and targeted violence against civilians in public gathering areas. The most frequent remote violence attacks using car bombs and other IEDs mostly happened in three counties: Mandera, Lamu, and Garissa. In general, most of the events involving al-Shabaab since 2018 were recorded in Mandera, Lamu, Garissa, Wajir, and Nairobi (*see graph below*).

Political violence involving al-Shabaab in Kenya

1 January 2018 - 30 August 2024



Kenyan security forces have attempted to target al-Shabaab by using advanced weapons and engaging with the local community to identify al-Shabaab militants,⁴[The East African, ‘Kenya scales up fight against Al Shabaab militants,’ 16 February 2024](#); [Andrew Wasike, ‘Kenyan forces kill 6 Al-Shabaab terrorists in counter-terror operation,’ Anadolu Agency, 2 May 2024](#); [The East African, ‘Kenya to use advanced artillery to end Al Shabaab IED attacks,’ 22 June 2023](#) but they are struggling to flush out al-Shabaab since there are no known al-Shabaab hideouts and positions. In Kenya’s northeast, al-Shabaab recruits many youth through various techniques, including capitalizing on their discontent with historical socio-political marginalization.⁵[Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, ‘The Jihad in Kenya: Understanding Al-Shabaab Recruitment and Terrorist Activity inside Kenya—in Their Own Words,’ African Security, 8 March 2019, pp. 3-61](#) The group has also developed methods of bypassing security checkpoints and striking Kenyan security targets. For example, ACLED records at least two attacks in Mandera where militants attacked security forces with IEDs concealed in donkey carts, which are used by locals for fetching water and firewood. In August alone, ACLED records 14 various kinds of attacks against security forces conducted by al-Shabaab. Moreover, in August, the group conducted its first attack in Marsabit county — located on the border with Ethiopia — since 2020. This was the third attack in the county since the militants started operating in Kenya.

The phasing out of ATMIS and the new international coalition in Somalia

Al-Shabaab’s cross-border threat has required a coordinated response. In June 2024, the Somali government asked the UN Security Council to postpone the withdrawal of ATMIS troops, which was scheduled for the end of the year, citing its dispute with Ethiopia as one of the reasons for the extension.⁶[United nations, ‘Security Council Extends Authorization of African Union Transition Mission in Somalia until 31 December, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2478 \(2024\),’ 15 August 2024](#); [Aljazeera, ‘Somalia asks peacekeepers to slow withdrawal, fears armed group resurgence,’ 20 June 2024](#) It also demanded all Ethiopian troops leave the country by the end of the year for violating Somalia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁷[Giulia Paravicini, ‘Somalia to expel Ethiopian troops unless Somaliland port deal scrapped, official says,’ Reuters, 3 June 2024](#); [Hiiraan Online, ‘Somalia declares Ethiopia not an ally amid sovereignty violations,’ 1 June 2024](#); [Garowe Online, ‘Egypt Takes the Lead in New Somalia Peacekeeping Mission,’ 8 August 2024](#) Tensions between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa escalated in January 2024 after the signing of [a memorandum of understanding \(MoU\) between Ethiopia and Somaliland](#) that provides sea access to Ethiopia in exchange for its recognition of Somaliland statehood.

Foreign diplomats and security experts raised their concern over the withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces, which include around 3,000 troops within ATMIS and between 5,000 and 7,000 troops deployed in the country through bilateral agreements.⁸[Mohamed Olad Hassan, ‘Somalia: Ethiopian troops cannot be in AUSSOM, unless Somaliland deal nixed,’ Voice of America, 23 August 2024](#); [Giulia Paravicini, ‘Somalia to expel Ethiopian troops unless Somaliland port deal scrapped, official says,’ Reuters, 3 June 2024](#); [Sheriff Bojang Jnr, ‘Somalia’s threat to expel Ethiopian troops spurs escalating tension,’ The Africa Report, 4 June 2024](#); [Mogadishu 24, ‘Can Somalia Survive the ATMIS Withdrawal?’ 10 June 2024](#) Their involvement in combating al-Shabaab in Somalia has been extensive since 2006 when the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) deployed in Somalia to fight the Islamic Courts Union. As government operations have not significantly weakened al-Shabaab, a security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces may allow the militants to regain control of several areas from the government — particularly the airstrips and airports currently guarded by ATMIS forces.

In the wake of the diplomatic row with Ethiopia, the Somali government has strengthened its diplomatic ties with Eritrea, Egypt, and Turkey through multiple military cooperation agreements aimed at bolstering its military capabilities and securing its maritime borders. Ethiopia and Egypt have strained relations due to Ethiopia’s construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River. The Egyptian government has expressed its willingness to support Somalia⁹[Aljazeera, ‘Egypt’s el-Sisi says Cairo will not allow any threat to Somalia,’ 21 January 2024](#); [Somali Gurdian, ‘Egyptian troops to join new AU mission in Somalia as Mogadishu plans to](#)

expel Ethiopian forces,' 7 August 2024 and began delivering military equipment to Somalia on 27 August.¹⁰Abdi Sheikh and Giulia Paravicini, 'Egypt sends arms to Somalia following security deal, sources say,' Reuters, 29 August 2024

The move away from Ethiopian support toward welcoming Egyptian forces has stirred tensions within Somalia. Jubaland and Southwest states are opposed to the complete withdrawal of Ethiopian forces because most of the ENDF's troops are stationed in these states.¹¹Garowe Online, 'SouthWest State Refutes distortion on Ethiopian Troop Withdrawal from Somalia,' 2 June 2024; Hiiraan, 'Jubaland and South West oppose Ethiopian troop withdrawal from Somalia,' 3 June 2024 Specifically, the Gedo regional authorities in Jubaland state are against the deployment of Egyptian forces as they're of the opinion that Egypt's interest in Somalia is due to its strained relations with Ethiopia over GERD and not because it wishes to fight al-Shabaab.¹²Horn Observer, 'Somalia's Gedo Regional Authorities Vow to Fight Egyptian Forces If They Deploy in Their Region,' 18 August 2024 The Ethiopian government and the Gedo regional authorities have been close allies since 1997 when the ENDF worked with militias from Gedo to push back an Islamic group called al-Ittihad al-Islamiya.¹³Mohamed Olad Hassan, 'Somalia: Ethiopian troops cannot be in AUSSOM, unless Somaliland deal nixed,' Voice of America, 23 August 2024

In response to Somalia's exclusion, the Ethiopian government said that it "cannot stand idle while other actors are taking measures to destabilize the region," stressing al-Shabaab's threat to its national security.¹⁴The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 'Press Statement on the Current Situation in the Horn of Africa,' 28 August 2024; Mohamed Olad Hassan, 'Somalia: Ethiopian troops cannot be in AUSSOM, unless Somaliland deal nixed,' Voice of America, 23 August 2024 In the meantime, al-Shabaab has used the MoU as a strategy to recruit new members, calling on Somali people to defend and protect their land from Ethiopia and other foreigners. This conflict over the MoU adds another element to the fight against al-Shabaab by creating another layer of tension in the Horn of Africa.