

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	638
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	Jamestown Foundation
Titel:	Increased Attacks Suggest al-Shabaab Resurgence; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 16 Issue: 19
Udgivet:	12. oktober 2018
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	20. december 2018

Document #1447332

Jamestown Foundation

Increased Attacks Suggest al-Shabaab Resurgence; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 16 Issue: 19

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October 12, 2018 04:03 PM Age: 1 week

Al-Shabaab's recent attacks in Somalia underline the threat the militant group continues to pose in the country and beyond. Since 2007, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops backed by international partners have waged a military campaign against the terror group, forcing it out of strategic towns, seaports and territories. The AMISOM troops—drawn from Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sierra Leone—have also disrupted the militant group's main sources of revenue, recruitment and arms supply routes. Several of the group's top leaders have also been killed in U.S. drone and airstrikes (Standard Digital (<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001264868/us-says-air-strike-kills-two-militants-in-somalia>), January 4). The military campaign, however, has not succeeded in completely defeating and dismantling the terror group. Neither has it significantly diminished its ability to strike.

Instead, al-Shabaab—considered the deadliest terrorist organization in Africa—has adopted asymmetrical tactics, increasingly employing the use of Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs) and Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) (The Star (https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/04/23/fears-of-more-ieds-after-al-shabaab-steal-fertiliser-from-somalia_c1748275), April 23; Intelligence Briefs (<https://intelligencebriefs.com/al-shabaab-recruits-more-engineers-planning-to-attack-using-improvised-explosive-chemical-device/>), May 24). A series of high-profile attacks since late 2017 and AMISOM's plan to gradually withdraw troops from the war-torn country has only made the threat the group poses more pronounced (Standard Digital, (<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001280938/kdf-troops-begin-gradual-withdrawal-from-war-torn-somalia-after-un-vote>) May 19).

Recent Surge in Attacks

Al-Shabaab has recently staged successful surprise attacks against both AMISOM and the Somali army, a tactic the group has employed with devastating effect over the past several years. The most significant of which took place in 2016, when the group ambushed a Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) camp in the town of El Adde in Somalia. The

official death toll was never confirmed, but local reports indicated it was one of the deadliest attacks against the KDF, with around 100 soldiers killed during the attack (Citizen Digital (<https://citizentv.co.ke/news/high-alert-as-kenya-marks-el-adde-attack-anniversary-188114/>), January 15).

More recently, on September 21, al-Shabaab fighters demonstrated their operational capabilities when they attacked U.S. forces and their partners in the Juba area of Southern Somalia. Somali forces killed two militants during the attack and a subsequent U.S. airstrike killed an additional 18 al-Shabaab fighters (Capital News (<https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2018/09/us-forces-comes-under-attack-in-somalia-kills-18-shabaab-militants/>), September 24). No Somali or U.S. troops were killed during the attack, but one U.S. soldier was killed and four others wounded in a similar style ambush in June.

The militant group detonated a VBIED at the headquarters of Howlwadag District in Mogadishu on September 2, killing at least six people and injuring 10 others. The targeted building is reportedly three kilometers from Villa Somalia, the country's state house. In a brief statement, the militants later said its Mujahideen had carried out the attack of the building in Hodon area of the city (The East African (<http://www.theeastafrikan.co.ke/news/africa/Huge-explosion-rocks-Mogadishu/4552902-4752342-fqh7bi/index.html>), September 10). In a similar style attack on April 2, the group attacked a Ugandan African Union military camp in Bulomer District, about 150 kilometers outside Mogadishu. The militants used a minibus loaded with explosives to gain access to the fortified camp. Although the number of casualties is unclear, some news reports indicated that nearly 59 soldiers and 30 militants had been killed (The Observer (<https://observer.ug/news/headlines/57364-al-shabaab-attack-conflicting-reports-on-updf-casualties.html>), April 3).

In October 2017, more than 500 people were killed in a twin truck bomb blast outside a busy hotel at the K5 intersection in Mogadishu, a busy street with government offices and popular restaurants. Although the group never officially took responsibility, it was blamed for the attack. This attack is considered the deadliest by al-Shabaab since the launch of its insurgency in 2006 (The Star, (https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/02/24/18-killed-in-twin-mogadishu-car-bombs-five-al-shabaab-shot-dead_c1720151) February 24).

These attacks have underscored al-Shabaab's continued ability to operate across a range of territories, including within Mogadishu. Further, the group has demonstrated a shift toward increasingly utilizing IEDs and VBIEDs as well as an ability to attack AMISOM and its partners. Al-Shabaab's resilience sheds further doubts on AMISOM's plan to reduce its troop presence and the implications such a withdrawal would have on the security environment (Pambazuka News (<https://www.pambazuka.org/human-security/amisom-withdrawal-what-it-means-somalia-and-region>), November 23, 2017).

Shifting Tactics and Operations

Al-Shabaab's primary target is the government, which the militant group is fighting to overthrow and replace with their own government ruled by Sharia (Islamic law). This overarching goal explains why the group attacks the military, government offices and officials. The recent series of attacks has underscored their increasing and effective use of VBIEDs. Meanwhile, al-Shabaab has shifted its tactics to strike and inflict damage on public places and installations, with the intention of swaying public opinion in its favor (Daily Nation (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Understanding-AlShabaab-1056-2011484-nrdg23/index.html>), September 28, 2013).

At the moment, the insurgents control large swathes of territory in Southern Somalia, where its leaders implement a harsh version of Sharia. Recently, the group has seemingly thrived during times of hardship like recent droughts and floods as they have presented the group with a chance to build a better relationship with local communities. Al-Shabaab has provided services such as canals and waterways and distributed food relief in areas hit by drought.

It has moved to other regions of Somalia, launching attacks in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Although the government refuted the claims, the group said it had killed 61 soldiers in an attack on a military base in June 2017 (Tesfanews (<https://www.tesfanews.net/heavy-loses-shabab-puntland-military-base/>), June 8, 2017). Beyond Somalia, al-Shabaab maintains a presence in other countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and more recently Mozambique. Reports suggest that it has been forming partnerships with other militant groups in these countries to expand its activities (Daily Nation, (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Shabaab-remains-major-threat-to-Kenya/1056-4769954-lv9lr8z/index.html>) September 21).

In Kenya, al-Shabaab is believed to have established bases in Boni Forest in the coastal region of Lamu. Its presence is the subject of a security operation known as Operation Linda Boni. In Mozambique, it is believed to have links with Ansar al-Sunna, a new militant group that recently launched attacks in the northern province of Cabo Delgado (see Militant Leadership Monitor (<https://jamestown.org/brief/leaders-of-mozambican-militant-group-revealed/>), October 4; Defence Web, (http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52051:iss-is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique&catid=3:Civil%20Security&Itemid=113) June 14).

AMISOM Withdrawal

Despite the increasing attacks, AMISOM troops are set to gradually withdraw from the war-torn country under a UN and African Union-backed process. In July this year, the UN Security Council authorized AMISOM's further stay in Somalia until May 2019.

Initially, the force was supposed to start downsizing by October this year, but the council delayed the process. At the same time, the UN body declared that the start of the downsizing would not be further delayed past February next year. With the

departure, Somali security institutions are expected to fully take over from the AMISOM troops by 2021 (The East African, (<http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/UN-delays-drawdown-of-Somalia-peacekeeping-force/4552902-4689210-f96du2/index.html>) July 30).

President Abdullahi Mohammed "Farmojo" has exuded confidence, saying that his forces are able to defeat al-Shabaab. The president has promised to use the same tactics that forced the group out of Mogadishu, including military force as well as negotiations with those who have accepted his amnesty offer (AMISOM News, (<http://amisom-au.org/2017/04/president-farmaajo-vows-to-defeat-al-shabaab-and-secure-somalia/>) April 13, 2017; African News (<http://www.africanews.com/2018/03/03/amisom-troops-to-be-withdrawn-from-somalia/>), March 3).

The looming withdrawal, however, is causing some apprehension within security circles in Somalia and the neighboring countries. Experts and analysts fear the Somali security institutions are ill-prepared to take over from AMISOM troops as they depart. With no significant challenge, al-Shabaab would seize the opportunity to rebuild its operational capabilities and take control of more territory (African News (<http://www.africanews.com/2018/05/07/it-is-not-yet-time-to-withdraw-from-somalia-amisom-commander-warns/>), May 7).

The group's recent spate of successful attacks despite the presence of AMISOM troops has lent credence to this view. They have also exposed the feebleness of the government security institution, which remains weak despite years of investment by the international community. Despite benefitting from actors like the European Union, United States and Turkey, the military still lacks the proper training, coordination, discipline, ownership and equipment.

Conclusion

Although AMISOM has succeeded in disrupting al-Shabaab activities in many of the areas it previously controlled, the group remains a lethal force with the ability to stage surprise attacks. Recently, it has displayed this ability by launching attacks against the AMISOM troops, Somali military and public places. The group's recent successes have proved contrary to recent opinions that it was seriously weakened and on the verge of defeat.

As AMISOM troops prepare to depart from the country, it is evident that a new strategy is needed to contain the group when forces eventually depart. Without a new and effective strategy, there is a risk of al-Shabaab re-taking control of the country. Given the current state of the Somalia security institutions, this cannot be achieved without the presence of AMISOM.

ecoi.net summary:

Article on increasing number of attacks by al-Shabaab against international and Somali armed forces



Country:

Somalia

Source:

Jamestown Foundation (</en/source/11281.html>)

Original link:

<https://jamestown.org/program/increased-attacks-suggest-al-shabaab-resurgence/> (<http://jamestown.org/program/increased-attacks-suggest-al-shabaab-resurgence/>)

Document type:

Special or Analytical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 October 2018

Document ID:

1447332 (former ID [368960](/en/document/368960) (</en/document/368960>))

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

