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No End in Sight for the al-Shabaab Threat to Somalia

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Abstract: There has been no turning point in the fight against al-Shabaab. The Somali group, affiliated with al-Qa`ida, has not been weakened in the past year as a terrorist force. Even though airstrikes have killed hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters, the group still has significant capability to carry out terrorist attacks. One reason for its resilience is its promotion of operatives with proven track records in military operations to senior positions. Another is its ability to finance its fighters. According to U.N. monitors, the group's taxation system has grown in sophistication and reach to the point where al-Shabaab is now likely running a budget surplus.

The Somali militant group al-Shabaab has never claimed responsibility for the truck bomb that obliterated Mogadishu's K5 junction on October 14, 2017, killing 587 people and wounding more than 300. The group's silence is likely self-protective; the government immediately blamed al-Shabaab for the attack,¹ and many ordinary Somalis did, too, sparking rare open protests against the militants that were attended by thousands of people.

The mood of the crowds was angry, and Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" attempted to channel that anger. "We are telling [Al-Shabaab] that from now on, we are all soldiers and will come to you," he declared to one rally. "We will no longer tolerate a Somali boy being killed and a Somali girl being killed."² During visits to neighboring countries, the president reiterated his threats to attack al-Shabaab, vowing to defeat the group within two years if their leaders rejected peace.³ But a year later, al-Shabaab appears to be paying no heed to the protests or Farmajo's vow. The group quickly claimed responsibility on November 9, 2018, when three bombs exploded outside a Mogadishu hotel, killing more than 50 people.⁴ The previous month, the group said it was behind an attack on an European Union convoy in the capital that left two civilians dead,⁵ an explosion in Kenya's Mandera County that killed two teachers,⁶ and a suicide bombing at a Baidoa restaurant that claimed at least 20 lives. The group also publicly executed five men it accused of spying for the Somali government, Kenya, the United States, or the United Kingdom.⁷

The bombings and killings underscore how al-Shabaab and the forces arrayed against it—the Somali government, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and various international forces trying to train and/or support Somali army troops—remain locked in a stalemate.⁸ Al-Shabaab lacks the strength to defeat AMISOM on the ground or compel the countries involved to withdraw their troops. But the forces backing the government are unable to destroy al-Shabaab or stop it from carrying out lethal attacks that damage efforts to stabilize Somalia and let its people finally live in peace, free from terrorism.

The latest report of the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, released in November 2018, acknowledges the group's continued potency. Despite an escalation in U.S. airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab leaders and groups of fighters, it stated "there has been no significant degradation of the group's capability to carry out asymmetric attacks in Somalia."⁹ The most recent U.S. State Department's annual country reports on terrorism stated that "[in 2017] al-Shabaab ... retained safe haven, access to recruits and resources, and de facto control over large parts of Somalia through which it moves freely."¹⁰ For years, analysts have predicted al-Shabaab was about to vanish or go into steep decline. But as 2018 draws to a close, the long-awaited turning point in the struggle against the militants is still nowhere in sight.

New Faces in Senior Leadership

In addition to mounting devastating terrorist attacks, al-Shabaab has experienced significant military successes in the past few years. The men credited for those successes were promoted in the early months of 2018, placing the group in position to achieve more battlefield victories. Abukar Ali Adan was appointed to a position near the apex of al-Shabaab's power structure, either as a senior advisor or deputy leader to emir Abu Ubaidah, while Moallim Osman was put in charge of the *Jabhat*, the group's army.¹¹

Abukar Ali Adan has spent several years as al-Shabaab's military chief (a position he retains) and was also the previous leader of the *Jabhat*. He first came to prominence outside Somalia in January 2018, when the U.S. State Department designated him as a terrorist. But he has been involved with Somalia's Islamist militants since the early 2000s, when he was a businessman who helped to finance the Islamic Courts Union, the body that briefly seized control of Mogadishu in 2006 with help from al-Shabaab's future leaders. Originally from Somalia's Hiran region, Ali Adan served as the al-Shabaab governor in Somalia's Lower Juba region in 2009 before getting involved with the *Jabhat* the following year.¹²

Moallim Osman's involvement in al-Shabaab goes back to the 1990s and the group's predecessor organization—al-Itihad. He gained new prominence after one of al-Shabaab's biggest victories, the assault on a Kenyan military base near the town of El Adde in January 2016. Osman was the architect and commander of the attack,¹³ in which al-Shabaab forces stormed and overran the base, killing more than 140 Kenyan soldiers and seizing weapons and other materiel that the fleeing soldiers left behind.

How the promotions will affect al-Shabaab's internal power dynamics remains to be seen. Al-Shabaab already had one deputy leader, Mahad Warsame Qaley (better known as Mahad Karate), who lost a leadership contest to Ubaidah in September 2014, a few days after a U.S. missile attack killed the group's longest-serving emir, Ahmed Godane.¹⁴ Karate reportedly sulked for months after the contest but has continued to run the Amniyat, al-Shabaab's intelligence and suicide bombing unit. Generally speaking, there have been fewer frictions within the group's top ranks under Abu Ubaidah compared to when Godane was in charge. Two sources who spoke to the authors for the book *Inside Al-Shabaab*—one an Islamic scholar, one a key aide to a former al-Shabaab deputy emir—say Ubaidah is a smart politician and administrator who tries to build consensus; the scholar said he is good at *itisal fardi*, or "man management."¹⁵ That may prevent the kind of tensions among al-Shabaab leaders that characterized Godane's reign, tensions that led Godane to order the killings of several top rivals in 2012 and 2013.¹⁶

Military Capabilities

The last three years of Godane's reign saw al-Shabaab lose most of the territory it captured and ruled during its peak years of 2008-2010. A joint offensive by AMISOM and Somali government troops forced the group to retreat from all the major towns and cities it held—Mogadishu, Baidoa, Beledweyne, Afgoye, Kismayo, and Barawe, among others—as well as swaths of the countryside.

But in 2015, around the time Ali Adan became military chief, al-Shabaab halted its opponents' momentum, in part by targeting the remote military bases set up to help the government maintain control of newly captured areas. The first attack in this campaign, against a base manned by Burundian soldiers in the village of Leego, set the pattern. The attack began like many of al-Shabaab's hotel attacks, with a car bomb. But instead of sending in four or five gunmen to wreak havoc before committing suicide, the group deployed scores of well-armed fighters, directing intense gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades at the soldiers. Within a short time, the Burundians were

overwhelmed. Al-Shabaab fighters killed more than 50 of them; the rest fled, enabling al-Shabaab to capture the base and steal all the military supplies. The fighters then withdrew before AMISOM could exact revenge.¹⁷

Al-Shabaab has used this general plan of attack at least a dozen times since then, with varying results. The most destructive assault to date was the one on Kenyan forces at El Adde. In that case, Kenya tried to deny the extent of its losses, but its efforts were undermined by an al-Shabaab propaganda video.¹⁸ The video, recorded as the attack took place, shows fighters dressed in green fatigues and orange headscarves advancing on the base through fields and firing their way past the base's makeshift walls. In one particularly gruesome scene, an al-Shabaab fighter shoots dead a Kenyan soldier who is emerging from a disabled tank with his hands halfway in the air. At the end, dozens of blood-splattered bodies lie on the ground.

Somali military and intelligence sources have provided information that outlines how al-Shabaab prepares for the assaults:¹⁹

When a target is picked, al-Shabaab scouts conduct surveillance of the base and prepare an outline of possible weak spots. The group's intelligence also tries to secure the cooperation of insiders. In the case of El Adde, al-Shabaab made contact with a contingent of 20 Somali troops who were stationed at the base. A former al-Shabaab member who took part in the attack says the troops provided information about the base; in exchange, al-Shabaab gave them a warning that allowed them to leave the base one day before the attack.²⁰

Once the intelligence is gathered, military commanders within al-Shabaab decide what the attack will require in terms of men and weaponry. Among other things, the commanders have to devise a plan on how fighters can move without being detected by the ever-present U.S. drones overhead. The plan must then be approved by the proper leaders in the al-Shabaab hierarchy.

If the plan gets a green light, al-Shabaab's various units begin working in concert for the attack. The explosions unit prepares bombs and readies the appointed suicide attackers. Al-Shabaab medics usually set up a hospital between 20 and 30 miles away from the target. The men who will assault the base tend to be brought in from different regions by truck, though not directly to the base itself. Usually, they meet at points some distance away and walk toward the target during nighttime, which is always about 12 hours long in equatorial Somalia.

If the base is overrun, fighters seize weapons, ammunition, trucks, and other useful items, then leave within a few hours to avoid retaliatory airstrikes. The vehicles are taken by al-Shabaab's transport department for repair and repurposing. Weapons and explosives are usually taken by the military and logistics department. Prisoners tend to be taken by al-Shabaab's intelligence service, the feared Amniyat, for interrogation.

Al-Shabaab's recent attack on a Ugandan military base in Bulobula, a town on the southern Somali coast, shows the continued extent of al-Shabaab's resources and planning abilities. The April 1, 2018, attack began with suicide bombers blowing up two trucks filled with explosives on the perimeter of the base. Then, as an estimated 100 fighters stormed the base, a bomb-laden mini-bus exploded outside another AMISOM base in nearby Golweyn village. Al-Shabaab fighters also launched simultaneous, smaller attacks on AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) positions nearby, evidently to prevent those soldiers from supporting the forces in Bulobula.²¹

The April 1 attack on the AMISOM bases did not pay off. All the assaults were repulsed, and Somali officials in Lower Shabelle said they collected the bodies of 53 militants. Al-Shabaab said it killed 59 Ugandan soldiers, but Somali security officials said the Ugandan death toll was closer to 20.²² However, the fact that al-Shabaab could launch such a complex attack highlighted its significant capabilities and the danger it continues to pose.



A Somali military officer runs to secure the scene of a suicide car bombing near Somalia's presidential palace in Mogadishu, Somalia, on July 7, 2018. (Reuters/Feisal Omar)

Finances

Al-Shabaab can afford these kinds of operations because of a highly effective domestic fund-raising system. U.N. monitors stated the situation plainly in their November 2018 report, explaining their investigation found "the militant group generates *more than enough revenue to sustain its insurgency*."²³ (Italics added for emphasis.) The report noted al-Shabaab's use of a network of checkpoints on roads across southern and central Somalia—employing "mafia-style" tactics of violence and intimidation where needed—which it stated functions as a shadow government even in areas it does not directly control, collecting taxes on agricultural produce, livestock sales, charcoal exports, goods in transport, and vehicles using the roads.²⁴

Al-Shabaab taxation is nothing new: the group generated millions of dollars per year from its control of port cities like Kismayo and Barawe during its peak years, and even took slices of the multi-million ransom payments Somali pirates used to receive.²⁵ Since then, however, the reach and sophistication of the group's taxation system has grown to the point where in the assessment of the U.N. monitors, it is more organized than those of the federal government or the federal member states. One al-Shabaab defector told the monitors that a single checkpoint on the road to Baidoa in the Bay region generates \$30,000 per day for the al-Shabaab coffers, or about \$10 million per year.²⁶ The U.N. monitors did not hazard a guess on the group's total annual income, but it is not hard to imagine the number being in the mid-tens of millions.

The money allows the group to pay for its insurgency expenses, including the purchase of guns and explosives, as well as bribes to officials. "Indeed, al-Shabaab is likely generating a significant budgetary surplus; money is not a limiting factor in its ability to wage its insurgency," according to the U.N. monitors, who are now investigating what al-Shabaab does with its excess revenue.²⁷

U.S. Airstrikes

The United States has about 500 military personnel in Somalia,²⁸ tasked with training Somali troops so the army can eventually defend the government and the people. But its main counter-insurgent activity in Somalia continues to be airstrikes. Through December 5, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) had conducted at least 38 airstrikes in Somalia during 2018, killing more than 240 militants.²⁹ AFRICOM described some of the airstrikes as “self-defense” measures for U.S. soldiers or partner forces;³⁰ at least three others were called in to destroy vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.³¹

U.S. airstrikes, whether from drones, sea-fired missiles, or warplanes, have killed many of al-Shabaab’s top leaders over the years and cost the group hundreds, if not thousands of trained fighters. Somali security officials have long noted the group’s leaders constantly travel to avoid easy detection, and more recently have begun to disperse its militias³² in an effort to avoid catastrophic losses of the kind that happened in November 2017, when a single U.S. airstrike killed more than 100 militants gathered at a camp.³³

Outlook

Airstrikes are not going to make a lasting difference without a successful ground strategy. Attacks like the one on El Adde have forced AMISOM and the SNA to abandon some of their forward bases, allowing al-Shabaab to retake areas it lost several years ago. The November 2018 U.N. monitors’ report says the group is currently in direct control of territory along the Juba valley in southern Somalia, centered around the towns of Jilib, Jamame, Bu’ale, and Sakow, and in coastal areas around Harardhere and El Dher in central Somalia. The report also says al-Shabaab has a growing presence in the Golis Mountains of Puntland.³⁴

Speaking during a May 2017 conference on Somalia in London, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni addressed this problem. “Our concept of counter-insurgency is to have mobile forces to hit the enemy and zonal forces to ensure that the enemy does not re-infest the area,” he told dignitaries who attended the conference, including Somali President Farmajo. “It should be the Somali Army to provide these zonal forces.”³⁵

But the government, as always, is struggling to exert real power over security or political affairs in Somalia, crippled by corruption, clan rivalries, and a lack of funding. When President Farmajo promised to defeat al-Shabaab, Somali government troops and AMISOM were nowhere near ready to launch a large-scale offensive. In fact, an operational readiness assessment conducted by the government in 2017 found the SNA to be in no shape for counterinsurgency operations. The report said the majority of registered soldiers did not regularly report for duty, and said some 30 percent of SNA soldiers did not have any weapons. Many of those who were armed got the weapons from their clans.³⁶

AMISOM, which has protected Somalia’s fragile governments for more than a decade, appears uninclined to take the initiative against al-Shabaab. For the past three years, the countries contributing troops to the force—Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti—have warned at various times they will soon pull out their men,³⁷ an act that would leave the Somali government and people to defend themselves. The SNA’s weakness and the unenticing prospect of an al-Shabaab takeover have rendered those warnings hollow, and the United Nations Security Council has extended AMISOM’s mandate through May 31, 2019—although it also slightly reduced the force’s maximum troop strength to 20,626.³⁸

In November 2018, AMISOM, Somali, and A.U. representatives met in Addis Ababa and drew up a new timetable for the mission. The “concept of operations” document envisions Somalia holding one-man one-vote elections in 2021, followed by a gradual transfer of security responsibilities from AMISOM to Somali government forces.³⁹ That timetable suggests AMISOM will stay active in Somalia for at least another four years—and could easily stay longer if Somalia proves unable to organize nationwide elections.

The lone positive development from the October 14, 2017, Mogadishu truck bomb was that it inspired the creation of a Somali army unit named after the day of the attack. Inaugurated in July 2018, the October 14th battalion was placed under the command of the Somali defense ministry. The following month, the battalion seized the port town of Marka from al-Shabaab, and have held it for three months, although al-Shabaab fighters remain on the outskirts.⁴⁰ It is one of the few places where Somali government forces have ever experienced tangible success against the militants. **CTC**

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