

Resurgent, Reinvented or Simply Resilient? The Growing Threat of al-Shabaab in Somalia

Michael Jonsson and Daniel Torbjörnsson

Since the 2011 offensive that dislodged al-Shabaab from southern Somalia, the group has slowly but surely recovered its offensive capability, carrying out a string of deadly attacks against military forces and civilians alike. With the on-going closure of the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya – home to more than 250 000 Somali refugees – and prospects for a withdrawal of the African Union peacekeeping force on the horizon, the security situation in Somalia could deteriorate significantly. Unless decisive action is taken by the Somali federal government, the African Union and their international supporters, hard-won progress in Somalia could be unraveled, affecting the entire Horn of Africa.

Al-Shabaab is currently the most pressing threat facing the state of Somalia. The Somali federal government is backed by 22,000 troops from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and reinforced by US intelligence, special operations and drone strikes. This should leave it well-positioned to beat back al-Shabaab, yet to date counter-terrorism efforts are making limited progress. Since 2014, the security situation in Somalia has shown ominous signs of deterioration. Al-Shabaab has repeatedly carried out “complex” terrorist attacks against civilian targets, as well as brazen large-scale attacks against AMISOM outposts. The organisation has also demonstrated resilience, withstanding losses of senior leaders and military blows without notably losing operational capacity.

The conflict in Somalia is thus reaching a strategic crossroads, with potential for a major deterioration in security within the next two years. This may still be avoided, but it would require a more offensive force posture by AMISOM, swifter progress in rebuilding Somali security forces, and reliable, long-term external support in both the financial and military realm. If not, al-Shabaab may be on the road to victory, simply by virtue of not being defeated.

The Resurgence of al-Shabaab

Since withdrawing from Mogadishu in August 2011 under military pressure from an offensive by AMISOM, the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and their allied local militias, al-Shabaab has suffered a series of military and territorial setbacks. In September 2012 the group lost the port city of Kismayo, which at the time was al-Shabaab’s primary source of income. The group also lost control of territory bordering Kenya and Ethiopia. Simultaneously,

al-Shabaab was riven by internal divisions, resulting in an extensive purge by the internal security organisation *Amniyat* of mainly prominent foreign fighters. This included the killing of Omar Hammami, who was previously an influential propagandist for foreign fighters within al-Shabaab. Dissident Somali commanders, such as Mukhtar Robow, were also expelled from the group. By 2014, this infighting had been largely settled, but not before causing lasting damage to al-Shabaab’s appeal to foreign fighters.

Al-Shabaab is currently led by Ahmad Omar (aka Abu Ubayda). Omar succeeded Ahmed Godane (aka Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr) after he was killed in a U.S. drone strike on 1 September 2014. During 2015, at least three senior al-Shabaab commanders – including two heads of *Amniyat* – were killed in drone strikes, some of which were reportedly targeted using mobile phone tracking. Partly motivated by the perils of electronic communication, decision-making has since been decentralised. Presumably a choice of necessity, this nonetheless increases the risk of fractionalisation of the group.

In spite of this, since 2013 al-Shabaab has become increasingly lethal on and off the battle-field. In 2014 alone, the organisation was involved in 860 violent incidents, with more than 2000 people killed, by one count. While the number of incidents decreased in 2015, high-casualty attacks remained at historically high levels. In April 2016, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud stated that al-Shabaab is resurgent. According to prominent analyst Matthew Bryden, this is the result of a strategic reinvention which the group undertook following its set-backs in 2011-2013.



A Reinvented al-Shabaab Strategy

Notably pragmatic, al-Shabaab employs a strategy that combines high-profile operations against civilian targets, classic guerrilla warfare and surprise mass attacks on vulnerable AMISOM positions. The attacks against civilians seek to exhaust external support for Somalia, often targeting hotels frequented by SFG and foreign government officials. Four major attacks were conducted during the first half of 2015 and two more in June 2016 alone. In December 2014, an infiltration attack also targeted Mogadishu International Airport. This tactic is aimed at making Somalia seem too dangerous for international non-military actors.

The guerrilla warfare represents not so much an adoption of a new tactic by al-Shabaab as a return to its 2007-2008 guerrilla roots. It is seemingly drawing on lessons learnt in the failed and costly “Ramadan Offensive” in Mogadishu in 2010, when al-Shabaab attempted regular warfare but suffered badly. Current attacks employ classic guerrilla tactics, favouring improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes on convoys and patrols, hit-and-run-attacks, the use of snipers and the assassination of individual officials from the SFG, AMISOM or their allied militias. The UN Monitoring Group noted in 2015 that when challenged militarily, al-Shabaab seemingly prefers to “retreat into the

countryside and subsequently cut off supply routes to the reclaimed areas.” This strategy serves to isolate AMISOM positions, which become dangerous and difficult to resupply.

Ominously, al-Shabaab has also returned to a modus of launching large-scale attacks on military targets, a tactic from which it has largely abstained since it was pushed out of Mogadishu in 2011. Identifying the vulnerability of relatively small and isolated AMISOM detachments, in June 2015 al-Shabaab attacked and overran a base manned by Burundian soldiers in Leego, Lower Shabelle region, reportedly killing up to 70 of 100 soldiers. On 1 September 2015, 19 Ugandan soldiers were killed in an attack on an attachment in Janaale. In January 2016, al-Shabaab overran a Kenyan AMISOM camp at El Adde, killing or capturing between 100 and 200 soldiers and officers. The group also released a propaganda film featuring the leader of its Kenyan foreign fighters. Moreover, in June 2016 al-Shabaab claimed to have killed 43 Ethiopian AMISOM troops in an attack on a military base in Halgan, 300 km north of Mogadishu.

This tactic neutralises the superior fire-power of AMISOM troops while exploiting their weaknesses, including insufficient ammunition, lack of speed in reinforcing attacked positions and insufficient air cover. The attacks – which some analysts believe are inspired by Daesh and its modus operandi – are geared towards forcing troop contributors to withdraw.

That said, this massing of combatants also makes al-Shabaab vulnerable. For instance, on 6 March 2016 U.S. airstrikes on the “Raso” insurgent training camp reportedly killed 150-200 insurgents, who were gathering in preparation for a major attack. A recent U.S. decision to expand the legal scope of the war against al-Qaeda to include al-Shabaab may mean that U.S. air support will be more readily available henceforth. Thus, whilst al-Shabaab may be resurgent and somewhat reinvented, the group is critically reliant on its resilience to persevere in the conflict, since it remains badly outgunned in regular warfare.

The Sources of al-Shabaab’s Resilience

Although al-Shabaab is far from the quasi-state it once was, it remains a comparatively well-organised insurgent group. When it had extensive territorial control, al-Shabaab exercised multi-layered governance, including sharia courts, missionary propagation (*dawa*), tax and revenue collection, and the distribution of religious charity (*zakat*). The

group also adeptly combines military and media efforts, broadcasting messages from al-Shabaab leaders, publicizing the recapture of territory and reporting on insurgent social services. the recapture of territory and reports on insurgent social services.

Coinciding with its territorial retreat in 2011, support from al-Qaeda central also decreased, prompting al-Shabaab to seek out alternative sources of funding. The group can still fund itself – albeit presumably with lower revenue than earlier – by forcibly “taxing” rural residents, but also through illegal cross-border trade and diaspora support.

Moreover, it appears that al-Shabaab has access to a steady flow of willing recruits. Its local recruits largely fit the mould of poor, disaffected young men with few options. A study¹ of 88 al-Shabaab ex-combatants found that approximately two-thirds (65%) joined the group between the ages of 15 and 24. Recruitment was typically a swift process, with almost half (48%) joining within a month of being introduced to the group. Economic and religious motives were the dominant rationales for joining, together explaining why more than three-quarters (77%) of respondents enlisted. There are also persistent reports that the group has attracted into its fold a number of recruits initially trained by the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Somalia, which were meant to reinforce Somali National Army (SNA) forces.

Furthermore, Kenya has announced its intention of closing down the Dadaab refugee camp, which houses an estimated 350 000 Somali refugees. While the shutdown had only begun by the initial deadline of 30 November 2016, there are already reports of al-Shabaab attempting to forcibly recruit Somali returnees. If camp closure and repatriation continues, this could significantly bolster al-Shabaab recruitment.

Given its governance structure, limited funding needs and relatively good ability to recruit, al-Shabaab has the wherewithal to mount an effective insurgency, as illustrated by the increasing number of large-scale attacks recently. Nonetheless, it is scarcely invincible.

Internal Divisions over Daesh

After Daesh claimed its first ever attack in Somalia in late April 2016, there has been intensive debate over whether the group might be able to establish a province in the

1. Abdile, Mahdi and Anneli Botha 2014. Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia. ISS Paper 266. Institute for Security Studies.

country. According to the former head of the Puntland Intelligence Agency, Daesh in Somalia grew from 20-30 men in October 2015 to some 100-150 fighters in May 2016, and received financial support and military supplies from affiliates in Yemen.

Seeking to exploit the lingering bitterness inside al-Shabaab from the purge in 2012-2013, Daesh has issued a series of propaganda videos encouraging East African *jihadis* to join its “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq. However, experts in Nairobi strongly question the prospect of the organisation establishing itself as a potent force inside Somalia, contrasting the single Daesh attack in April to the near-daily attacks by al-Shabaab. Daesh furthermore faces an uphill battle in trying to establish itself as a prominent actor in Somalia due to the complexities of Somali clan politics and to the declining fortunes of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Experts also caution that local politicians may over-emphasise the presence of Daesh in the hope of receiving more international support.

That said, al-Shabaab could be temporarily weakened as insurgent units are diverted to fighting break-away factions. For instance, an abortive attempt to land al-Shabaab fighters by boat in Puntland in March 2016 – with more than 200 killed by local security forces – is believed to have been intended to eliminate the Daesh contingent.

Rebuilding the Somali Security Forces

Part of the reason why al-Shabaab has proven so difficult to defeat is the enduring weakness of the Somali state. While the SNA is making progress, it is far from ready to face down al-Shabaab on its own. In April 2016, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said that the government must choose between giving its soldiers wages or weapons. According to Foreign Minister Abdusalam Omer, stability is a top priority for the Somali government, but its weakness makes achieving this “like building a plane and flying it at the same time”.

The Somali security forces formally have 22 000 troops, but according to a recent UN report, “hierarchy has systematically inflated their troop numbers in order to secure greater funding for salaries and rations”. Analysts fear that the SNA in fact constitutes as little as 10,000 troops. The SNA is also low on arms, vehicles and bases, which inevitably impacts upon morale and operational capacity. Even when urban centres are liberated by AMISOM troops, the SNA has been unable to secure the area.

International support in rebuilding the SNA has made some progress, however. The relative success of the U.S.-trained SNA rapid reaction force (*Gashan*, “The Shield”) and special operations brigade (*Danab*, “Thunder”) illustrates the potential for building effective Somali forces. The European Union Training Mission (EUTM) – which has been training SNA troops since 2010 – has recently shifted its focus from individual training to mentoring and creating a light infantry brigade with soldiers from different Somali regions. However, the mission has long been hampered by lack of equipment and weaponry, as well as lopsided recruitment of trainees.

Wavering International Support

Financially, Western states have in effect been paying the wages of Somali government troops, whereas the European Union recently cut the monthly stipends it pays to AMISOM soldiers. Furthermore, AMISOM is currently ill-equipped to fill the security vacuum left by the feeble Somali security forces. According to media reports, for the past year AMISOM forces have largely been confined to barracks. While al-Shabaab is resurgent, AMISOM has begun eyeing the exit. The African Union (AU) will start handing over responsibility for security in 2018 and aims to withdraw AMISOM by the end of 2020.

Furthermore, there are signs that the resilience of al-Shabaab means that time is working in its favour, as the resolve of troop contributors to AMISOM is wavering. For instance, in Uganda there is growing opposition to participation in AMISOM, amid a reduction in national defence expenditure. Likewise, Kenya has threatened to withdraw its troops unless donors provide sufficient funding to AMISOM. Burundi and Ethiopia are both facing domestic challenges, while Ethiopia has begun to withdraw parts of its contingent from Somalia, allowing al-Shabaab to fill the void left behind. While Ethiopian authorities claim that lack of funding from the international community is the reason behind the withdrawal, the widespread protests and subsequent state of emergency in Ethiopia at present have presumably also played a role.

Adapting Counterinsurgency Responses

While claims on the extent to which al-Shabaab is resurgent or has reinvented itself may overstate the case, the insurgent group is decidedly resilient. It has survived territorial setbacks since 2011, bitter in-fighting in 2012-2013,

the death of its leader Godane in 2014, and continued military intervention by several neighbouring states until now. Notably, its pragmatic strategy makes it a constant threat to stability in Somalia, and a formidable challenge to SNA and AMISOM. That said, it cannot, now or in the foreseeable future, hope to militarily defeat the coalition currently lined up to combat it.

Consequently, the dynamic of the Somali conflict will be decided by the counterinsurgency strategy chosen and, ultimately, whether viable Somali security forces can be constructed while the country still enjoys robust foreign support. First, improved close air support to AMISOM troops could decisively shift the battle-field dynamic, and in particular thwart its lethal mass attacks on bases. Second, a more offensive force posture, including actively targeting key units of al-Shabaab, is crucial to taking back the strategic initiative and denying the group time to plan attacks. Third, given the weakness of SNA, the timeline of AMISOM arguably needs to be extended, even if much-needed troop increases remain elusive. From the EU side, long-term financial backing to AMISOM, continued contributions to SNA wage payments and addressing the chronic shortage of equipment to EUTM trainees are needed.

The divisions within al-Shabaab could also be exploited. Since the group is typically repressive towards its fighters, programmes welcoming defectors in return for intelligence collaboration and using their stories to counter al-Shabaab propaganda have great potential. Incipient initiatives of this nature exist, but could be improved and expanded. Likewise, undermining al-Shabaab’s relations with some clans could be possible, especially as clan militias have begun revolting against the group’s demands for zakat payments. Lastly, given the reality of a weak SNA operating in parallel to a diverse set of clan militias, security sector reforms (SSR) departing from these realities on the ground are probably needed.

If decisive steps are not taken, however, the current conflict dynamic will persist, with al-Shabaab attacking AMISOM troops in the expectation that they will eventually withdraw, leaving the feeble SFG ripe for the taking. Progress towards building a semblance of a functioning Somali state has been made, but it may ultimately prove too little, too late.

Mikael Jonsson, Senior analyst
Daniel Torbjörnsson, Analyst