The Islamic terror threat to the Horn of Africa

Shaul Shay

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Somalia’s Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic group, Al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen, is making a "comeback", regaining ground and strength. The group has been pushed out of major cities and its leader, Ahmed Godane, had been killed in US air strike in September 2014. Despite these losses, Al Shabaab, led by Ahmed Diriye (Abu Obeida), has managed to adjust to the new reality and the group has adopted a new strategy against the African Union forces and the Somali government and regained control of swaths of countryside in the south and center of Somalia. Al Shabaab has also rebuilt its ability to conduct mass-casualty spectacular attacks in Mogadishu and the October 14, 2017, suicide attack was the deadliest of the Somalian civil war.

The Al Shabaab terror attacks in Somalia

The bombing of the intelligence headquarters and the parliament’s headquarters.

Two car bomb blasts rocked Somalia’s capital on, February 23, 2018, followed by gunfire. At least 18 people had been killed and more than 20 injured. The explosions came a day after Somalia’s interior minister warned of an explosives-laden vehicle somewhere in the capital. The first blast, apparently caused by a suicide car bomber, occurred near Somalia’s intelligence headquarters and the second blast occurred near parliament’s headquarters, where security forces were engaged with gunmen thought to be trying to attack the presidential palace.

Deadly attack on Police Academy

A suicide bomber disguised as a police officer killed at least 18 people and wounded another 20 officers at a police academy in Somalia’s capital on December 14, 2017. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility and put the toll at 27 dead. "It was martyrdom operation, in which the mujahedeen targeted the police academy camp," a statement posted on a pro-Shabaab website read.

bomber walked into the academy undetected and joined a line of officers before he detonated the explosives under his sportswear.  

The "October 14, massacre"

At least 512 people were killed, 312 people were wounded and 62 people remain missing, on October 14, 2018, in a massive truck bombing on a busy Mogadishu street in the country's worst-ever terror attack.

Two vehicles were involved in the attack, a Toyota Noah minivan and a much larger truck carrying around 350kg of explosives. The target for both vehicles was the airport compound in Mogadishu, where most embassies and the headquarters of the African Union peacekeeping force, AMISOM, are located.

The smaller car bomb was supposed to open the heavily defended main gate to the compound to open the way for the bigger car bomb. The minivan was stopped by at a checkpoint several hundred meters short of its target and the driver detained. This car bomb later detonated, possibly set off by remote control or by security officials, without causing casualties.

The bigger truck bomb was detonated at a busy crossroads at about a kilometer from the Medina Gate when it reached a checkpoint where security guards became suspicious. The explosion ignited a fuel truck nearby which caused a massive fireball. It has been impossible to identify the type of truck from the wreckage.

The suicide bomber was a former soldier in Somalia's army whose home town was raided by local troops and US special forces two months earlier in a controversial operation in which 10 civilians were killed. Investigators believe the attack in Mogadishu may in part have been motivated by a desire for revenge for the US-led operation in August 2017.

The bombing was reported on media outlets linked to Al-Shabaab but the group has not claimed responsibility for the attack.

Mukhtar Robow, former Al-Shabaab deputy leader and one of the founding member of the group, condemned the explosion and called the attack "barbaric" and "a massive tragedy." "Those who are behind this, whose fingerprints are on this, must refrain from shedding the blood of Muslims. You are not going to go to paradise by killing innocents."

The October 28, bombing

Two car bombs killed at least 17 people in Somalia’s capital Mogadishu on October 28, 2017. A car bomb was rammed into a hotel, Nasahablod Two, about 600 meters from the presidential palace, and then armed militants stormed the building. A few minutes later another car bomb exploded near the former parliament house nearby.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility: “We targeted ministers and security officials who were inside the hotel. We are fighting inside,” Abdiasis Abu Musab, the group’s military operations spokesman, told Reuters. He added that the hotel belonged to Somalia’s internal security minister, Mohamed Abukar Islow.
The response of the Somali government

The Somali government took urgent measures to confront the Al-Shabaab terror campaign. The president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, declared three days of national mourning and joined thousands of people who responded to a plea by hospitals to donate blood for the wounded. On October 29, 2017, it sacked the chief of police and head of the national intelligence agency.

The government has turned to bolstering regional and international cooperation to confront the terror group and the Somali President paid visits to Uganda, Ethiopia and Djibouti to that end. Somali media has reported that Ethiopia had deployed more forces, some 1,000 heavily armed soldiers, in the Gedo province. The deployment was part of Somali-Ethiopian cooperation and a precursor to an imminent attack against Al-Shabaab positions there.

ISIS in Somalia

In December 2017, ISIS has posted what is thought to be the first video from affiliated fighters in Somalia. The video posted online on Christmas Day called on ISIS-affiliated fighters in Somalia to 'hunt down' what it called drunk nonbelievers over the holiday season.

Somalia has a small but growing presence of ISIS fighters. Almost two years ago, ISIS fighters in Libya released a video showing two fighters calling for Al-Shabaab fighters to join ISIS's new franchise in Somalia. The video was titled 'A message to our brothers in Somalia', with the scripted speech relayed by both an English fighter and another Somali speaker. On October 23, 2016, Abdul Qadir Mu'min, one of Al-Shabaab's religious leaders, along with small group of his followers, have pledged allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. UN report raised concerns that the Bari region in Puntland could become a potential haven for foreign ISIS fighters as the extremists are driven out of their strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The numbers of ISIS fighters in Somalia could grow as ISIS fighters flee Syria and Iraq.

While the faction is expanding, its fighters appear to be poorly paid or not paid at all. Unmarried fighters receive no salary, while married militants receive $50 per month plus $10-$20 per child, depending on the age. The salary payments were between $3,000 and $9,000 per month, allowing IS leaders "to fund its insurgency on a limited budget." UN monitors said the faction will likely face frequent defections from poorly paid fighters, a problem that also affects Al-Shabaab.

ISIS terror attacks in Somalia

The group captured Qandala, a small port town in Puntland's Bari region, in October 2016, declaring it the seat of the Islamic Caliphate in Somalia. Puntland security forces backed by US military advisers, pushed them out of Qandala, two months later.

In February 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for a gun attack on a hotel in Bosaso, a port city in Puntland, in which several hotel security guards and militants were killed.
On May 24, 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in northern Somalia. A lone bomber blew himself up at a police checkpoint in Puntland, killing five people and injuring 12 others. A statement published on ISIS’s Amaq News Agency claimed responsibility for the attack, which it said was carried out by one of its fighters.

The "comeback" of Al-Shabaab

There are several main reasons for the "comeback" of Al-Shabaab. The first is the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Ethiopia, the second reason; African Union (AU) has announced plans to withdraw the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) starting in 2018, the third reason financial resources of Al Shabaab and finally, the ongoing competition between Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Ethiopia

Estimates of the size of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) range from 140,000 to 200,000. Some 8,000 soldiers were deployed in Somalia. Ethiopia’s military provides more than 4,000 to the AMISOM force. They make up the third largest contingent, and they are all still in Somalia. Ethiopia had another force with 4,000 soldiers that operated outside of but in tandem with AMISOM, providing crucial assistance.

The Ethiopian troops that were not part of AMISOM were suddenly withdrawn to Ethiopia a few days after the Ethiopian government declared a six-month emergency on October 9, 2016.

Ethiopia has pulled its forces out of the towns of Halgan, El-Ali, and Mahas in the Hiran region of south-central Somalia and Tiyeglow, in the southwestern Bakool region. Al-Shabaab wasted no time, and within hours its fighters had seized control of those towns where they raised their black flags. There are several explanations for the Ethiopian decision:

Ethiopia declared the state of emergency after weeks of anti-government protests and riots during which at least 50 people were killed in a stampede and more than 2,000 demonstrators were temporarily detained. The demonstrations were initially triggered by anger over a development scheme for the capital Addis Ababa but then broadened into demonstrations against political restrictions. Addis Ababa denies the latest troops’ withdrawal has anything to do with events back home.

The expenses of Ethiopian forces outside of AMISOM, were covered by the Ethiopian budget and the unrest was making it more expensive for Ethiopia to have its non-AMISOM troops in Somalia, as its foreign direct investment has been hit and its foreign exchange reserves are decreasing.

“We are pulling out because for a long time our country has shouldered a heavy financial burden having troops in Somalia and it is time the international community took over,” said Getachew Reda, Ethiopia’s communications affairs minister.

The Ethiopian government felt it didn’t have the diplomatic support it should have and that its efforts hadn’t been recognized.
AMISOM

AMISOM has grown from an initial deployment of 1,500 Ugandan soldiers in 2007 to a multi-national African force of over 21,000 soldiers, with troops from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Uganda. Sierra Leone withdrew its battalion of troops in early 2015.

The international community payed each country in AMISOM $1,028 (990 Euros) per month for each soldier. Countries are free to choose how much of that each soldier receives, while the United Nations Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) covers all logistics and associated costs.

The European Union, AMISOM’s largest donor which had fully funded the mission, announced in mid-2016, it would cut its financing by 20 percent to enable it to channel more resources to the Sahel and Chad Basin, which are also facing escalating violence. This budget slash led to a deficit in AMISOM’s administrative budget and the loss of about 165 US dollars for each soldier per month. This unsettled the troops and affected their morale.23

Under an agreement between the African Union and the U.N. Security Council the number of all African peacekeepers in Somalia will be reduced by 1,000 before the end of 2017.24 Uganda, the largest contributor of troops (6000 troops), has begun withdrawing dozens of its troops from Somalia. Some 281 troops will leave Somalia by December 31, 2017.25

The African Union plans to withdraw all its 22,000 forces from Somalia by the end of 2020, The African Union (AU) has announced plans to withdraw AMISOM completely by the end of 2020, saying security responsibilities would be gradually transferred to Somalia’s military, starting in 2018.

Aeronautics Aerostar UAVs in Service of AMISOM

On February 26, 2018, the US formally handed over an unmanned aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) system to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The system comprises three Israeli-made Aeronautics Aerostar tactical unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and is contractor-owned and operated under a one-year contract that began in September 2017.26

The surveillance system was donated in response to a request from Ambassador Francisco Madeira, Special Representative of the African Union Commission Chairperson for Somalia, and aims at increasing security along the main supply routes used by AMISOM for its logistics operations, as well as to strengthen its force protection during convoy movements and offensive operations.27

AMISOM has received training implemented through AFRICOM from US and UK military subject-matter experts on the techniques and tactics to properly request ISR from this aerial platform. Based on this training, AMISOM has created an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance cell to manage the tasking and analysis of the raw data provided by the US contractor-owned and operated system.28
Al Shabaab’s financial resources

The inability of the Somali government and the international community to effectively block al-Shabaab’s financing. The group’s revenue comes mainly from the illegal production and export of charcoal and sugar, taxes on residents and extortion of businesses, hijacking of humanitarian aid, ransom from kidnappings, and contributions from sympathizers through informal money transfers.²⁹

Al-Shabaab generates millions of dollars of revenues through a coordinated trading cycle built upon the export of charcoal, which in turn finances the import of sugar, much of which is subsequently smuggled across as contraband into neighboring countries, particularly Kenya. Shipping companies deliver sugar to ports in Somalia and collect charcoal for the return journeys. Bank accounts in the Gulf States where the profits of this trade are deposited can be used to launder voluntary contributions to Al-Shabaab through fraudulent invoicing, overvaluing of import proceeds and undervaluing of exports. This trade cycle is dominated by networks of prominent Somali businessmen operating mainly between Somalia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, notably Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.³⁰

Al Shabaab – ISIS Competition

The leadership of ISIS in the Middle East has made overtures to Al-Shabaab, encouraging the group to switch allegiance. But Al-Shabaab’s chiefs have rejected the advances and the group’s intelligence agency, known as the Amniyat, have conducted brutal purges of fighters suspected of loyalty to ISIS. ISIS lags behind Al-Shabaab, Somalia’s main Islamist group, in terms of size and influence in the country but Al-Shabaab’s leadership has to present significant achievements in order to be more attractive than ISIS is.

The United Nations arms embargo on Somalia

Somalia is under a United Nations-imposed arms embargo for 25 years after the civil war began. The restrictions were loosened in 2007 when the UN Security Council resolved that the embargo would not apply to weapons supplied for use by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). It was further loosened in 2013 to allow the sale of light weapons. President Abdullahi Mohamed has said several times that with light weapons and the restrictions; they cannot defeat Al shabaab which is equally using light weapons. President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has appealed with the international community to lift the embargo to allow the country to purchase heavy weapons to fight Al Shabaab.³¹

The U.S involvement in Somalia

The US involvement in Somalia intensified in the later years of the Obama administration but has increased significantly since Donald Trump became president, with greater latitude given to local commanders to order airstrikes or take part in raids.
The Trump administration and Somalia’s recently elected president announced new military efforts against the group. Earlier this year, the White House granted the US military broader authority to carry out strikes in Somalia against Al Shabaab.³²

In May 2017, a US Navy Seal was killed and two troops wounded in a raid on an al-Shabaab militant compound in Barire, in what was the first US combat death in the African country since the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” disaster. Barire is known as an al-Shabaab stronghold which has been a Launchpad for several major attacks on Mogadishu.³³

The surge in activity comes as the US watches for an influx of fighters from ISIS, which has lost almost all its territory in Iraq and Syria. According to the Pentagon, there are approximately 500 U.S. troops in Somalia, up from 50 in the beginning of the year.³⁴

About 500 Special Forces who make up the battle-tested Danab ("lightning") unit were trained by the United States.³⁵

In December 2017, a State Department official told CNN the US is cutting some military aid to Somalia due to allegations of misuse.³⁶

Somali and US commandos stormed on January 18, 2018, a camp of Al-Shabaab in Jame’o village in Middle Shabelle region. In the overnight raid, the commandos killed at least four of the Al Shabaab fighters and rescued child conscripts. U.S helicopters have supported the raid and later evacuated the young recruits.³⁷

U.S drone attacks

Since the start of 2017, US military has carried out 30 drone strikes in Somalia with 15 of these coming since September 1, 2017. That’s a big increase from last years' 15 anti-Shabaab air strikes in the whole of 2016.³⁸ In November 2017 the US conducted 5 drone strikes:

- On November 3, 2017, the US has conducted a pair of drone strikes against ISIS fighters in Somalia the first time America has struck the ISIS militants in Somalia. The strikes occurred in northeastern Somalia and killed “several terrorists,” the US military’s Africa Command said in a statement.³⁹
- Spokesman Colonel Rob Manning said that US forces had killed 40 Al Shabaab and ISIS militants in a series of five strikes on Somalia between November 9 and 12.
- On November 14, 2017, AFRICOM announced a sixth strike that killed "several" Al Shabaab militants, 97 kilometers northwest of the capital, Mogadishu.
- On November 21, 2017, A U.S. airstrike inside Somalia killed "more than 100" Al-Shabaab militants. The strike occurred 125 miles northwest of the country’s capital of Mogadishu. In a message published by al-Shabaab’s new agency, the group denied AFRICOM’s claim that 100 of their fighters had been killed.⁴⁰
- The United States has launched in November 29, 2017, its first drone strikes against Islamic State group-affiliated fighters in Somalia.⁴¹
- A US airstrike on Christmas Eve 2017, against Al Shabaab in southern Somalia killed 13.⁴²
The Turkish involvement in Somalia

Turkey was the first to support Somalia after the terror attack. On October 16, 2017, a Turkish air ambulance landed at Mogadishu airport to airlift 50 seriously injured people.

Turkey inaugurated its largest foreign military base in the world on September 30, 2017, in Mogadishu, Somalia.\(^{43}\)

Turkey has announced in July 2017 that it finalized the construction of a military base in the Somali capital of Mogadishu, in which Turkish military personnel will train the Somali government troops.\(^{44}\) The base has been approved by the United Nations.\(^{45}\) The first batch of Turkish military personnel arrived to Mogadishu in August 2017 to commence the training program for the Somali national army.

The training camp, whose construction began in March 2015, is located south of Mogadishu occupies 4 square kilometers. It houses three military schools, dormitories and depots. It will have the capacity to train more than 1,500 troops at any one time, by Turkish military officers. Turkey will deploy 200 officers and soldiers as trainers and to provide the compound with security.\(^{46}\)

The complex is Turkey’s first military base in Africa, the largest Turkish military base overseas. The camp will also serve as Turkish military base in Somalia, where Ankara will deploy hundreds of its military to strengthen its presence in the horn of Africa.\(^{47}\)

According to a statement released by the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu, as the embassy hosted an event to mark the anniversary of failed military coup in 15 July 2016, the military base is ready for operation.

Turkey delivers the new, MPT-76, assault rifles, to Somalia to fight al Shabaab. This was revealed in a report by the Turkish news agency Anadolu in November 2017. The Turkish government ordered local defense industry companies to mass produce the country’s first locally designed rifle MPT-76. The MPT-76 rifles have passed 47 NATO tests, and are going to replace the German G-3 rifles used by the Turkish Armed Forces.\(^{48}\)

The UAE involvement in Somalia

The UAE, since 2012, is investing in infrastructure and bolstering the Somalia’s military capabilities. The UAE opened a military training facility in Mogadishu in 2015 to train members of the Somali Armed Forces, and a Dubai-based firm has managed Mogadishu’s Aden Adde International Airport beginning before the government transition. During the massive Mogadishu truck bombing in October 2017, it was widely reported that the UAE promised to treat 100 injured civilians. The country responded by sending a flying hospital and provided additional support to orphaned children through the Emirates Red Crescent.\(^{49}\)
Al Shabaab as regional and global threat

Al-Shabaab group poses a serious threat not only to Somalia’s security but also to that of the African continent and the globe at large.

Al-Shabaab adheres to the same global Islamist ideology as al-Qaeda and has made several public statements pledging allegiance to the group and praising its leaders. In February 2010, the group said, “Jihad in the Horn of Africa must be combined with the international jihad led by the al-Qaeda network.” Al-Shabaab has links with Boko Haram, Al Qaeda of the Maghreb, Al Qaeda of the Arab Peninsula and an extremist group in Tanzania. The group has issued several threats to strike outside Africa, including American and European targets.

Al Shabaab operations in Kenya

Al Shabaab’s destructive presence has not been isolated to Somalia. While the group has planned and conducted attacks throughout much of East Africa. Al Shabaab has intensified attacks in Kenya since it sent troops into Somalia in 2011. Al-Shabaab has also set up a recruiting network in Kenya, including around the port city of Mombasa, which has a large Muslim population.

Al - Shabaab operations in Kenya are designed both to shift Kenyan political opinion toward withdrawing forces from Somalia and to recruit Kenyan Muslims to its ranks. Al Shabaab has actively shifted focus onto Kenya using three main tactics:

Large scale terror attacks in Kenya - the attacks on the Westgate Mall (2013) and Garissa University (2015).

Cross border attacks - Al Shabaab frequently ambushes buses and tourists along the Somali-Kenyan border (the attacks on tourists in the border town of Mandera in October 2016).

“Seize-and-sermon”- operations in Kenya, during which the Al Shabaab fighters seize a town and indoctrinate locals before security forces arrive.

In July 2017, suspected Al-Shabab fighters beheaded nine men in villages near Maleli and killed three police officers in another attack in the area.

On December 20, 2016, President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, which has threatened to pull out of the force over the funding cut, urged the EU to provide more support.

Kenya has begun closing the Dadaab refugee camp, which increases the risk that hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees will be sent back to Somalia. The closure may thus benefit Al-Shabaab. The large number of refugees allows an opportunity for the group either to recruit or forcefully conscript new soldiers. For refugees without an income in Somalia, the prospect of a monthly salary can make joining the organization attractive.
Al-Shabaab aims to drive out the AMISOM peacekeepers, topple Somalia’s Western-backed government and to establish an Islamic emirate ruled by a strict version of Shariah law. It regularly targets the AMISOM forces and the security forces and officials from within the relatively weak UN-backed government. Bystanders are regularly killed or wounded by its indiscriminate bombing attacks.

Though largely confined to the countryside since withdrawing from Mogadishu six years ago, Al-Shabaab has repeatedly taken over small towns, as well as inflicting significant losses on AMISOM and Somali troops.

An Islamic State faction in Somalia has grown significantly over the past year, carrying out attacks in Puntland and receiving some funding from Syria and Iraq. The faction loyal to Sheikh Abdulqader Mumin was targeted by US drone strikes in January 2018.

The Somali president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, who took power in February 2017, had vowed to rid the country of al-Shabaab and the US military has increased drone strikes and other efforts this year against al-Shabaab. In response, Al-Shabaab earlier this year vowed to increase its attacks.

A 22,000-strong multinational African Union force in Somalia (AMISOM) is expected to withdraw its forces and hand over the country’s security to the Somali military by the end of 2020. Somalia’s security forces are supposed to be taking on the responsibility as the African Union force prepares to withdraw, but the “October terror campaign” indicates that the Somali forces may not be able to hold the gains made by the African Union troops that deprived al-Shabaab of large territories.

The Al-Shabaab’s new strategy does not pose a threat to Somalia alone, but it goes beyond the borders to target the stability of the Horn of Africa. This therefore demands that regional and international forces offer more support to the Somali government and ensure their own trade and economic interests in the region.
Notes

4 Abdi Guled, Suicide bomber kills 18 at Somalia police academy, A. P. December 14, 2017.
6 Abdi Guled, Suicide bomber kills 18 at Somalia police academy, A. P. December 14, 2017.
8 Jason Burke, Somalia bombing may have been revenge for botched US-led operation, The Guardian, October 17, 2017.
10 Jason Burke, Somalia bombing may have been revenge for botched US-led operation, The Guardian, October 17, 2017.
12 Mukhtar Ali Robow is a former Al-Shabaab deputy leader and spokesman surrendered to Somali authorities in August 2016. Robow left Al-Shabaab in 2013 after falling out with its leader Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed a year later, in September 2014, in a US drone strike.
14 Bomb blasts kills 17 in Mogadishu, TRT, October 28, 2017.
17 ISIS fanatics in Somalia call on supporters to take advantage of people’s ‘drunkenness’ and ‘hunt down’ nonbelievers in holiday attacks, Mail Online, December 26, 2017.
18 ISIS fanatics in Somalia call on supporters to take advantage of people’s ‘drunkenness’ and ‘hunt down’ nonbelievers in holiday attacks, Mail Online, December 26, 2017.
22 Conor Gaffey, ISIS claims Somali suicide attacks as it vies with Al Shabaab recognition, Newsweek, May 24, 2017.
31 Turkey delivers new assault rifles to Somalia to fight al Shabaab insurgency, Africa News net, November 2, 2017.
33 Jason Burke, Somalia bombing may have been revenge for botched US-led operation, The Guardian, October 17, 2017.
35 Turkish Base Key to Building Strong Somali Army, VOA, October 3, 2017.
41 ISIS fanatics in Somalia call on supporters to take advantage of people’s 'drunkenness' and 'hunt down' nonbelievers in holiday attacks, Mail Online, December 26, 2017.
44 Somalia: Turkey completes the construction of military base in Mogadishu, Garowe Online, July 15, 2017.
45 Somalia: Turkey completes the construction of military base in Mogadishu, Garowe Online, July 15, 2017.
46 Why is Turkey launching a new military training camp in Somalia? TRT, April 15, 2017.
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