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## Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab (aka *Harakat Shabaab al Mujahidin*, or Mujahidin Youth Movement) is an insurgent and terrorist group that evolved out of a militant wing of Somalia's Council of Islamic Courts in the mid-2000s. In its formative years, Al Shabaab drew on historic anti-Ethiopian sentiment among Somalis for recruits and support, including among the Somali diaspora in the United States and Europe. The group held significant territory in south-central Somalia, including the capital, Mogadishu, in the late 2000s, until the U.N.-authorized African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) gained momentum against the insurgency through a series of military offensives in 2011-2012. Al Shabaab continues to wage an asymmetric campaign against the Somali government, AMISOM, and international targets in Somalia. Thousands of Somali civilians have been killed in those attacks.

While Al Shabaab has primarily focused on its agenda in Somalia, it has threatened the countries contributing troops to AMISOM and successfully conducted deadly terrorist attacks in Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda. Al Shabaab activity in Kenya has increased significantly in recent years; more than 600 people have been killed in its attacks there since 2012. The group's April 2, 2015, assault on a university in northeast Kenya, which killed at least 147 people, was the deadliest terrorist attack in the country since the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing by Al Qaeda.

Al Shabaab's ability to recruit abroad and the presence of foreign fighters, among them U.S. citizens, in Somalia have been of significant concern to U.S. policymakers. Its ties with other terrorist groups, most notably Al Qaeda, and its threats against international targets also elevate its profile among extremist groups on the continent. Some of its foreign fighters have reportedly deserted in recent years, either out of disillusion with its military losses or because of internal dissent. Reports suggest some fighters may have left for other jihadist theaters, while others, including Kenyan recruits, may be trained in Somalia and then deployed to conduct attacks elsewhere in East Africa.

### Leadership

Al Shabaab's emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane (aka Abu Zubeyr), was killed in a U.S. airstrike on September 1, 2014. His predecessor, Aden Hashi Ayro, was killed in a 2008 U.S. missile strike. The group suffered infighting in its senior ranks under Godane, who consolidated power by neutralizing his rivals within the movement in 2012-2013. American jihadist Omar Hammami was among his most vocal critics before the Al Shabaab leader reportedly had him killed in 2013. Godane's highly centralized leadership style and strategic approach led several prominent Shabaab figures to leave the group or surrender to local authorities. Some additional defections have occurred since Godane's

death. Al Shabaab announced Ahmed Umar (aka Abu Ubaidah), a member of Godane's inner circle, as Godane's successor days after his death, and reaffirmed the group's allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri. Some analysts suggest that Kenyan members of the group play an increasing role in decision-making. As of April 2015, there have been no public indications that Al Shabaab is prepared to shift its allegiance toward the self-described Islamic State organization based in Iraq and Syria, although some Shabaab defectors have told media outlets that the group's ties with Al Qaeda leaders have atrophied.

### Objectives

Al Shabaab broadly ascribes to an irredentist and religiously driven vision of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia under an Islamist government. Its leaders have also repeatedly expressed their commitment to the global jihad movement, although there is some question as to how committed the group's Somali footsoldiers are to this aspect of its agenda. The group has justified its attacks outside Somalia as retaliation for participation in, or support for, AMISOM and/or as retribution for alleged abuses against Muslims in Somalia and the broader region. Its operations in Kenya appear focused on sowing internal dissent and fear, and on fomenting a domestic insurgency. Al Shabaab uses a variety of propaganda tools to spread its message, including social media, posts online in Jihadist forums, and a magazine, *Gaidi Mtaani* ("Terrorist on the Street"), with English and Swahili articles.

### Areas of Operation

While Al Shabaab's primary base of operations remains in Somalia, it has increasingly conducted attacks in Kenya since 2011, and has demonstrated an ability to strike targets in Uganda and Djibouti as well. Regional military offensives in 2011-2012 pushed Al Shabaab out of Mogadishu and other major southern cities and ports, and more recent offensives against the group have reclaimed additional key towns, including the port city of Barawe, a key militant base until October 2014. Al Shabaab maintains the ability to conduct attacks in these areas, however, and continues to control territory in some rural parts of south-central Somalia. AMISOM and the Somali forces have struggled to provide security in liberated areas and along main supply routes. Al Shabaab is also operational in parts of northern Somalia and reportedly maintains cells and/or relationships with affiliated groups in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The U.N. Panel of Experts on Somalia suggests that regional military pressure has made the group more "operationally audacious" and more focused expanding its reach beyond Somalia. Its April 2, 2015, attack on a university in the northeast town of Garissa reportedly targeted non-Muslims specifically.

## Attacks against U.S. interests

Al Shabaab leaders have issued repeated threats against U.S. and Western targets in Somalia and beyond, and have called for strikes against the United States. In February 2015, the group released a video advocating attacks in Kenya and abroad, and naming several shopping malls in Europe and the United States as potential targets, including Minnesota’s Mall of America. Al Shabaab threats have led the State Department to issue travel warnings and tighten security at U.S. embassies in East Africa. Two Sudanese citizens who were involved in the January 2008 murder of a U.S. diplomat in Sudan are believed to be among Al Shabaab’s ranks. The group’s July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda, killed more than 70 people, including one American. No Americans were killed in Al Shabaab’s September 2013 assault on the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, but that incident and subsequent attacks have underscored the serious threat to Western citizens in Kenya. In confirming the U.S. strike that killed Godane, Obama Administration officials cited his oversight of “plots targeting Westerners, including U.S. persons in East Africa” and suggested that the strike was conducted in response to an “imminent threat” to U.S. interests in the region. U.S. officials have confirmed several successful strikes against terrorist targets in Somalia in early 2015.

## Size, Financing, and Capabilities

The State Department has estimated Al Shabaab to have several thousand members, including a few hundred foreign fighters. The group has successfully recruited Americans, some but not all of Somali descent, and citizens of other Western countries. Allied clan militias may augment Al Shabaab’s strength in parts of south-central Somalia. The Somali government has offered amnesty to Al Shabaab members who turn themselves in and renounce violence. In March 2015, at Somalia’s request, the United States removed a \$3 million bounty under the State Department’s Rewards for Justice program for the group’s former intelligence chief after he surrendered to Somali authorities. Increasing recruitment in Kenya is a serious concern.

While Al Shabaab’s loss of Mogadishu and other strategic port cities deprived the group of valuable revenue sources, the group continues to profit from taxation and road checkpoints in areas under its control. It also reportedly continues to tax charcoal production in southern Somalia, despite a U.N. embargo on the Somali charcoal trade. Foreign donations contribute to its financing; the United States and others have sought to sanction several Kenyan clerics, for example, who are alleged to raise funds and recruit for the group. The United States has prosecuted several U.S. citizens for fundraising on behalf of the group.

## Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates

The Obama Administration characterizes Al Shabaab as Al Qaeda’s largest affiliate in Africa and considers elements of the group to be associated with Al Qaeda in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF,

P.L. 107-40). Some of Al Shabaab’s founding members fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and senior Al Qaeda operatives in East Africa, including Fazul Mohammed, mastermind of the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, have been associated with the group. After multiple public expressions of allegiance by Al Shabaab to Al Qaeda, the two entities announced their formal alliance in February 2012. The practical effect of the merger is unclear—while Al Shabaab’s leaders appear broadly to share Al Qaeda’s transnational agenda, the group operates largely independently. It maintains ties with other AQ affiliates, most notably Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in nearby Yemen. Some observers have expressed concern that Al Shabaab may seek closer ties with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (aka ISIS or ISIL). Others contend that Al Shabaab may view the Islamic State as a rival for recruits and resources, and that its relationship with AQAP would discourage an alliance with the Islamic State.

## Outlook

While Al Shabaab has, by many accounts, been greatly weakened by AMISOM gains and international air strikes, the group remains a major threat in East Africa. The Somali government faces significant challenges in extending its authority beyond Mogadishu, and its nascent security forces are unable to secure territory without AMISOM support. Al Shabaab has progressively extended its operational reach beyond Somalia, and appears increasingly focused on trying to manipulate local grievances in Kenya. The group has demonstrated resilience and flexibility in its operational evolution and, while internal disputes and lethal external action may weaken Al Shabaab, its defeat does not appear imminent. The challenge for U.S. policymakers is calibrating the appropriate response—determining how, through regional partners or directly, the United States can most effectively counter the group without playing into its narratives and fueling radicalization.

**Figure 1. Al Shabaab Logo and Imagery**



Source: U.S. Government Open Source Center

For more information, see CRS Report R43245, *The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya: In Brief*, CRS Report IF10155, *Somalia*, and CRS Report R42967, *U.S.-Kenya Relations: Current Political and Security Issues*.

**Lauren Ploch Blanchard**, lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640