



Updated November 6, 2017

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 historical anti-Ethiopian sentiment among Somalis for recruits and support, including among the Somali diaspora in the United States and Europe. Ethiopia intervened in Somalia in 2006 to oust the council's nascent government. Al Shabaab 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. It has killed thousands of Somali civilians.

While Al Shabaab has primarily focused on its agenda in Somalia, it has also threatened the countries contributing troops to AMISOM and successfully conducted deadly terrorist attacks in Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda. Its activity in Kenya has increased since Kenya's 2011 military intervention in Somalia against the group. Al Shabaab attacks have killed hundreds in Kenya. The group's April 2015 assault on a university in northeast Kenya, which killed at least 147 people, was Kenya's deadliest terrorist attack since the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing by Al Qaeda.

Al Shabaab's ability to recruit abroad, including among U.S. citizens, has been of concern to U.S. policymakers. Its ties with other terrorist groups, most notably Al Qaeda (AQ) and its Yemen affiliate, and its threats against international targets also elevate its profile among extremist groups in Africa. Reports suggest that some foreign fighters may have deserted or left for other jihadist theaters in recent years. Others, including Kenyan recruits, may be trained in Somalia and deployed for attacks elsewhere in East Africa.

Leadership

Al Shabaab's former 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 and Al Shabaab member Omar Hammami was among Godane's 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 leaders to leave the group or surrender to local authorities in exchange for amnesty. Some additional defections have occurred since his death. Al Shabaab announced Ahmed Diriye (aka Abu Ubaidah), one of Godane's inner circle, as his successor and reaffirmed their allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al

Zawahiri. Al Shabaab's leadership have maintained allegiance to Al Qaeda despite defections by small factions of fighters to the Islamic State (IS/ISIS).

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 some Somali foot soldiers 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. Its April 2015 attack on a university in the northeast town of Garissa reportedly targeted non-Muslims specifically. The U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia has stated that Al Shabaab has "both the capability to carry out another such attack and a self-proclaimed motive with regard to targeting countries contributing troops to AMISOM." Al Shabaab uses a variety of propaganda tools to spread its message, including social media, online forum posts, and an English and Swahili magazine, *Gaidi Mtaani* ("Terrorist on the Street"). In some areas of Somalia, Al Shabaab capitalizes on grievances and distrust of the government and fills local governance roles, providing services and resolving disputes.

Areas of Operation

While Al Shabaab's 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. Reported attempts to attack Ethiopia have been, to date, unsuccessful. Regional militaries' offensives in 2011-2012 pushed the group from Mogadishu and other major southern cities and ports, and subsequent offensives against the group 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 the capital and other 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 reclaimed areas and along 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. A small Al Shabaab faction in the Somali state of Puntland led by Abdulqadir Mumin broke away in late 2015 and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Attacks Against U.S. Interests

Al Shabaab leaders have issued threats against U.S. and Western targets in East Africa and called for strikes against the United States. In 2015, the group released a video encouraging attacks in Kenya and abroad, 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. The July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda, killed more than 70 people, including one American. In total, more than ten U.S. citizens have been killed in attacks in East Africa. More than 50 U.S. citizens were in Nairobi’s upscale Westgate Mall when Al Shabaab attacked it in September 2013. Six were injured. In October 2017, Al Shabaab carried out a bombing in Mogadishu that killed over 350 people, including three Somali Americans.

U.S. officials cited Ahmed Godane’s oversight of “plots targeting Westerners, including U.S. persons in East Africa,” in acknowledging the strike against him, which was described responding to an “imminent threat” to U.S. interests in the region. U.S. forces have, since 2016, engaged in “advise, assist, and accompany” missions with Somali and regional forces in Somalia. The tempo of U.S. air strikes there, sometimes premised on protecting U.S. military advisors, has increased in recent years. In March, President Trump expanded U.S. military operations in the country, authorizing offensive air strikes and designating parts of Somalia as an “area of active hostilities.” A U.S. Navy SEAL who died in May was the first U.S. combat death in Somalia since the early 1990s.

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 recruited Americans—some of Somali descent—and citizens of other Western countries. The Somali government has offered amnesty to Al Shabaab members who turn themselves in and renounce violence. In mid-2017, the United States removed a \$5 million bounty for former Al Shabaab deputy leader Mukhtar Robow Abu Mansur, who has since defected to the Somali government. Recruitment in Kenya remains a serious concern.

While Al Shabaab’s loss of Mogadishu and other strategic port cities deprived it of valuable revenue sources, the group continues to profit from road checkpoints in areas under its control and from taxation on sugar and livestock. It also taxed charcoal production in southern Somalia despite a U.N. embargo on the Somali charcoal trade, though activity in this sector has declined in recent years. 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.

Al Shabaab is capable of large-scale raids and increasingly complex vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In early 2016, an Al Shabaab suicide bomber onboard a Somali airliner detonated a bomb concealed in a laptop computer. (It detonated before the plane reached cruising altitude and did not destroy the aircraft.)

Relationship with Al Qaeda

In a late 2016, the Obama Administration described Al Shabaab as an “associated force” of Al Qaeda, in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. Some of Al Shabaab’s founding members fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and senior AQ operatives in East Africa, including Fazul Mohammed—the now-dead mastermind of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania—have been associated with the group. After multiple expressions of allegiance to Al Qaeda in Al Shabaab’s early years, the groups announced formal alliance in 2012. While Al Shabaab’s leaders appear to broadly share Al Qaeda’s transnational agenda, Al Shabaab operates independently. It maintains ties with other AQ affiliates, notably Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

There was concern in 2015 that Al Shabaab might shift allegiance to the Islamic State. Its leadership, however, rejected calls from some factions to align with the group and launched a deadly crackdown against IS supporters.

Outlook

While Al Shabaab has been weakened by AMISOM operations and international air strikes, it remains a major threat in Somalia and the broader region. In 2016, the U.N. Monitoring Group contended it was unclear “what long-term impact the ongoing policy of targeting the Al-Shabaab leadership will have on degrading the group’s capabilities.” The Somali government faces serious challenges in extending its authority, and its security forces appear unable to secure territory without AMISOM support. AMISOM forces have suffered heavy losses in recent years as a result of assaults on their forward bases.

Al Shabaab’s operational reach beyond Somalia remains a significant concern to many. The group has demonstrated resilience and flexibility in its operational evolution and, while internal disputes and military strikes may weaken it, Al Shabaab’s defeat does not appear imminent. A challenge for U.S. policymakers is calibrating the response—determining how the United States, directly or through partners, can most effectively counter the group without playing into its narratives and fueling radicalization

For more information, see CRS Report IF10155, *Somalia*.

Figure 1. Al Shabaab Logo and Imagery



Source: U.S. Government Open Source Center

Lauren Ploch Blanchard,
Katherine Z. Terrell, Fellow in African Affairs

IF10170

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.