



Updated January 16, 2020

Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab (aka *Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidin*, or Mujahidin Youth Movement) is an insurgent and terrorist group that emerged in the mid-2000s amid a vacuum of state authority in Somalia. The group evolved out of a militant wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which took control of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, in 2006. Neighboring Ethiopia, which backed Somalia's nascent transitional government, intervened militarily to oust the UIC. Al Shabaab used historical anti-Ethiopian sentiment among Somalis to attract recruits and support, including among the diaspora in the United States.

Al Shabaab held much of south-central Somalia, including Mogadishu, from the late 2000s until the U.N.-authorized African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) gained momentum against the insurgency in 2011-2012. Despite its territorial losses and the formation of a new federal government in Mogadishu in 2012, Al Shabaab has retained control or influence over large areas of the country. See also CRS Report IF10155, *Somalia*.

The Threat

Al Shabaab has waged an asymmetric campaign against the Somali government, AMISOM, and foreign targets in Somalia. By conservative estimates, it has killed over 4,000 civilians since 2010. Its deadliest attack to date, an October 2017 truck bombing in Mogadishu, killed more than 500 people. While the group has focused primarily on Somalia, it also threatens the countries participating in AMISOM and has conducted attacks in Uganda, Djibouti, and Kenya.

The group's activity in Kenya, where it has killed hundreds, has increased since Kenya's 2011 military intervention in Somalia (Kenya joined AMISOM in 2012). Al Shabaab's assault on a university in northeast Kenya in 2015, which killed at least 147 people, was the deadliest terrorist attack in the country since the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing by Al Qaeda (AQ). Attacks on international targets in Kenya have raised Al Shabaab's profile, notably the 2013 Westgate Mall siege and the 2019 assault on the DusitD2 hotel complex in Nairobi. On January 5, 2020, Al Shabaab killed a U.S. soldier and two U.S. contractors during a raid on Manda Bay Airfield, a Kenyan military facility used by the U.S. military near the Somali border.

Al Shabaab's recruitment abroad, including among U.S. citizens, has concerned U.S. officials. The group's ties with other major terrorist organizations, most notably Al Qaeda and its Yemen affiliate, as well as its demonstrated capacity to strike international targets in East Africa, elevate its prominence among extremist groups on the continent.

Leadership

Ahmed Diriye (aka Abu Ubaidah), a Somali national, has led Al Shabaab since 2014, when he succeeded Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike. Godane's predecessor was killed in a 2008 U.S. missile strike.

Infighting arose under Godane, who had consolidated power by assassinating rivals in the organization, reportedly including American jihadist Omar Hammami in 2013. Some prominent commanders left the group or surrendered to local authorities in exchange for amnesty during this time. Diriye, who was part of Godane's inner circle, has maintained allegiance to Al Qaeda, amid defections by a small number of fighters to the Islamic State (IS/ISIS).

Relationship with Al Qaeda

Some of Al Shabaab's founding members trained with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and senior AQ operatives in East Africa, including Fazul Mohammed—the late mastermind of the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania—have been associated with the group. After expressions of allegiance to Al Qaeda in Al Shabaab's early years, the groups announced a formal affiliation in 2012.

While Al Shabaab's leaders appear to broadly share Al Qaeda's transnational agenda, the group appears to operate independently. It maintains ties with other AQ affiliates, particularly Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

In 2015, some Al Shabaab members pressed for the group to shift allegiance to the Islamic State. Al Shabaab leadership rejected the proposal and launched a deadly crackdown against IS supporters. A small IS faction in northern Somalia survived the purge and has persisted, but Al Shabaab remains the dominant group.

Objectives

Al Shabaab broadly ascribes to a 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 global jihad.

The group has justified attacks outside Somalia as retaliation against countries conducting military operations in Somalia and as retribution for alleged abuses against Muslims. Al Shabaab described its attacks on Manda Bay Airfield and the DusitD2 complex in Kenya as consistent with AQ directives to target U.S. and Israeli interests, while also referring to the airfield as one of the "launch pads for the American crusade against Islam in the region." Al Shabaab's activities in Kenya more broadly appear focused on sowing internal dissent and fomenting a domestic insurgency. Non-Muslims have been specifically targeted in some of the group's attacks in Kenya.

Area of Operations and Capabilities

Operations by AMISOM and neighboring countries pushed Al Shabaab from Mogadishu and other urban centers and ports between 2011 and 2014. Al Shabaab's area of territorial control has remained largely unchanged since 2015, when AMISOM ceased major offensive operations, although the nascent Somali army—with AMISOM support—has recovered some new areas in the past year. Al

Shabaab maintains the ability to conduct frequent attacks in the capital and other areas beyond its control. AMISOM and Somali forces have struggled to provide security along their supply routes and for civilians in reclaimed areas.

While Al Shabaab's loss of Mogadishu and other strategic port cities initially restricted its revenue, the group now levies "taxes" covering "all aspects of the Somali economy," per U.N. reporting. It generates significant revenue from checkpoints in areas under its control and taxes local charcoal production despite a U.N. embargo on the Somali charcoal trade. Al Shabaab extorts businesses in government areas, including the capital. Foreign donations also contribute to its financing. The United States and others have sanctioned several Kenyan clerics, for example, who reportedly raise funds and recruit for the group. The United States also has prosecuted several U.S. citizens for fundraising on Al Shabaab's behalf.

The State Department estimates that Al Shabaab has 7,000 to 9,000 members. The group capitalizes on grievances and distrust of the government in parts of Somalia and fills local governance roles, providing basic services and resolving disputes. It also forcibly recruits fighters, including children. Al Shabaab uses various propaganda tools to spread its message in multiple languages. In Kenya, the group plays on narratives of collective punishment by the Kenyan government against Muslims, among other themes. Kenyan nationals of non-Somali descent led the DusitD2 attack, highlighting Al Shabaab's expanding Kenyan ranks.

Al Shabaab is capable of large-scale raids in Somalia and complex vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In 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.) U.N. experts report that Al Shabaab now manufactures its own explosives; the U.N. Security Council imposed a ban on the transfer of explosive precursors to Somalia in late 2019.

Threats Against U.S. Targets

Al Shabaab has threatened U.S. and Western targets in East Africa and called for attacks against the United States. The Obama Administration described the U.S. strike on Godane as responding to an "imminent threat," citing his oversight of "plots targeting Westerners, including U.S. persons in East Africa." The group has killed at least 10 U.S. citizens in the region. Six U.S. citizens were injured in the 2013 Westgate Mall attack; over 50 were reportedly on site at the time. A 2015 Al Shabaab video encouraged terrorist attacks in Kenya and abroad, naming several shopping malls in Europe and the United States as potential targets, but the group has yet to claim an attack on U.S. territory.

The U.S. Response

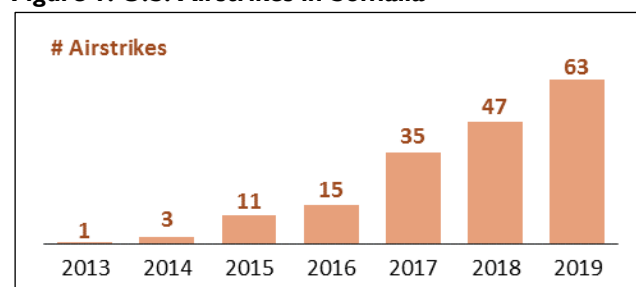
The United States named Al Shabaab a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2008 and has designated over two dozen related persons for sanctions, either as Specially Designated Global Terrorists or under Executive Order 13536, related to Somalia. The United States has provided assistance to AMISOM and the Somali security forces for over a decade, and has supported counter-radicalization programs in the region. U.S. forces in Somalia—estimated at 500 in 2019—have engaged in "advise, assist, and accompany" missions

with Somali and AMISOM forces since 2016. Two U.S. service members have been killed during such operations.

In late 2016, the Obama Administration publicly named Al Shabaab an "associated force" of Al Qaeda in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (P.L. 107-40). U.S. airstrikes in Somalia were limited until 2015, when President Obama broadened the justification for U.S. military action in the country—previously "to counter Al Qaeda and associated elements of Al Shabaab"—to cover support for Somali, AMISOM, and U.S. forces operating there. The tempo of U.S. air strikes has continued to rise since then.

President Trump changed the rules of engagement for U.S. military operations in Somalia in early 2017, authorizing offensive air strikes and designating parts of the country as an "area of active hostilities." U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) reported 63 airstrikes in Somalia in 2019. Three months prior to the Manda Bay attack, Al Shabaab launched an unsuccessful assault on an airfield used by the U.S. military in central Somalia.

Figure 1. U.S. Airstrikes in Somalia



Source: CRS. Data compiled from DOD and AFRICOM statements.

Outlook

Al Shabaab continues to pose a serious threat in Somalia and neighboring countries, despite the presence of roughly 20,000 AU troops in Somalia and increased U.S. air strikes. The U.N. Panel of Experts on Somalia reports that airstrikes have contributed to "keeping the group off-balance and preventing the massing of large numbers of fighters," but assesses that they have little impact on the group's ability to launch asymmetric attacks across Somalia. AFRICOM argues that strikes create "organizational confusion" and keep the group from being "a threat to the U.S. homeland."

The Somali federal government, weakened by infighting and corruption, still struggles to extend its authority in the country. Its security forces remain under development and unable to hold territory without the support of AMISOM, whose notional exit in 2021 remains subject to debate. Donor fatigue may lead some to press for its withdrawal. Meanwhile, as U.S. policymakers weigh global priorities for U.S. military deployments, it is unclear how long the increased operational tempo in Somalia will continue. Concerns about civilian casualties in U.S. operations remain a factor in U.S. debates over whether and how the United States can help Somalia pursue a sustainable response to the threat.

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IF10170

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