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Terrorism in East Africa: Rise of Al-Shabaab and How to Counter It

Executive Summary

- Al-Shabaab was able to capture large territories of central and southern Somalia. It was also able to acquire a variety of arms, ammunition, and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) components, and use them to conduct deadly attacks throughout the entire region of East Africa.

- Al-Shabaab's commander pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2012, and therefore became Al-Qaeda's official branch in East Africa.

- Al-Shabaab's biggest threat to peace in Somalia is their frequent use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), especially vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs), making them the weapon of choice and a modus operandi for the terrorist group.

- Al-Shabaab has the capacity to manufacture their own IEDs and no longer relies on remnants of the Somali civil war.

- Apart from the IEDs, the most significant source of weapons of Al-Shabaab is represented by the illicit arms flow into and within Somalia. Most supplies come from Yemen, Ethiopia, and, most recently Egypt.

- The diversion of weapons to Al-Shabaab also occurs by a direct seizure of military materials from AMISOM peacekeepers, as well as from the Somali government and security forces. Al-Shabaab has refined the art of removing guns off peacekeepers in Somalia.

- The EU needs to consider that any support it provides to Somalia regarding countering Al-Shabaab has to be balanced with the fact that resources are not always accounted for.

- The EU needs to assure that counter-terrorism forces, particularly AMISOM, are paid sufficiently and on time. It should also step up counter-IED training and equipment of these forces.

- The international community should work towards strengthening the federal member states (FMS) of Somalia, which represents a vital threat to Al-Shabaab.

- The UN should add IED components to the sanction regime, monitor, and force that regime. The UN needs to apply regulations on the transfer of IED components into Somalia and treat all movements as lethal material with a potential risk of diversion to Al-Shabaab.

- All the stakeholders should work towards an inclusive program of reconciliation. The international community needs to support Somali government in offering a third way for political dialogue and accommodation with Al-Shabaab. Additionally, developing a holistic conflict resolution strategy is needed in order to respond to the complex and interlinked drivers of the conflict, both nationally and in the East African region.

Keywords

Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, terrorism, Somalia, East Africa, weapons, explosives, conflict resolution, EU, international community

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Terrorism in East Africa:
Rise of Al-Shabaab and How to Counter It

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Al-Shabaab is a militant Islamist group, the East African branch of Al-Qaeda, which has extended its operations beyond the borders of Somalia. It carried out attacks in neighboring countries, namely Kenya and Uganda. The composition of the militants also goes beyond the Somali nationality. Thus, Al-Shabaab can be also defined as an international terrorist organization or movement. Even though the Al-Shabaab tactics have been in recent years increasingly described as guerrilla-style, elements corresponding to the definition of terrorism cannot be denied, whether in the form of specific attacks or psychological influence on the society.

The terrorist organization was able to capture large territories of central and southern Somalia. It was also able to acquire a variety of arms, ammunition, and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) components, and use them to conduct deadly attacks throughout the entire region of East Africa. The main Al-Shabaab's ideological goal is to create an Islamic State in Somalia (not to confuse with "ISIS" in Syria/Iraq). Al-Shabaab's ideological doctrine is similar to other radical islamist groups. It is a Salafist doctrine with the implementation of the strict version of the Sharia law. The ideology of Al-Shabaab was significantly radicalized through pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2012, and with the outcome of internal disputes resulting in the dismissal of politically pragmatic commanders Hassan Dahir Aweys, Mukhtar Roobow, Ibrahim al-Afghani or Ma'alim Burhan.

The current Al-Shabaab leader is Ahmed Umar (also known as Ahmed Diriye or Abu Ubaidah). He is being described as a man in his forties with his origin in the Somali city of Kismayio. Just like his predecessor Ahmed Abdi Godane in the Al-Shabaab chairmanship, Ahmed Umar is a member of the Dir clan whose members live mainly in central and southern Somalia. He was to join the movement already in 2006 and stood alongside Godane during the internal Al-Shabaab purge in 2013.

Somali Civil War and the Rise of Al-Shabaab

Somalia has been an unstable country since the early 90s with an ongoing armed conflict. The situation of a permanent civil war began with the overthrow of dictator Siad Barre in 1991. The Al-Shabaab establishment dates back to 2006 when the so called Islamic Courts Union (ICU) was split. This association was formed as an alternative to the Transitional Federal Parliament of Somalia (TFP) with the supporters including but not limited to Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah group, Eritrea or Libya and Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi. Following the Ethiopian army invasion into Somalia in support of TFP, the ICU leaders were forced to acknowledge both surrender and the new situation that arose in Somalia. As disclosed by the WikiLeaks flashes, this invasion was in turn supported or even initiated by the USA. While one of the ICU leaders Sheikh Sharif Ahmed became the president of Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia later in 2009, the second leader Hassan Dahir Aweys was the president of the separated militant ICU fraction whose members were hiding away and attacking the allied troops of the temporary government and Ethiopia after the ICU fall. This movement adopted Al-Shabaab name and began to get stronger with the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops from Somalia in January 2009. Thus, the TFG lead by Sheikh Sharif Ahmed was their only main opponent to remain at that time.

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Year 2009 was a significant milestone for Al-Shabaab for several reasons. Withdrawal of the Ethiopian army significantly strengthened Al-Shabaab's power and allowed their influence to be spread even into the southern Somali areas near the Kenyan border. The Kenyan government became obviously concerned about this as Al-Shabaab was undoubtedly linked to international jihadist organizations and unstable Somalia was considered threat to the stability in Kenya. Kenya strongly pushed for a buffer zone to be made in Jubaland province alongside the Kenyan border which would protect it from Somali instability and Al-Shabaab militants. Therefore, Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) launched Operation Linda Nchi and entered Somalia in 2011. In 2012, KDF forces integrated into African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is battling Al-Shabaab up to this day.

Al-Shabaab's Finance

Al-Shabaab relies on several financial sources. The most significant source of Al-Shabaab's income is taxes collected by the movement both on the controlled territory as well as on the land, which is under the official control of the Somali government. Yet, this territory is also under specific Al-Shabaab influence. Al-Shabaab extorts payments mainly from local entrepreneurs in exchange for protection provision. The taxes that Al-Shabaab imposes seem to vary over time.

In the context of the world jihadist groups, Al-Shabaab's financial sources are quite limited. Al-Shabaab was cut off from the profitable coast and gradually expelled from major Somali cities, including Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Baidoa. Direct external assistance to Al-Shabaab is not of significant concern at the present day. While Eritrea allegedly provided financial aid to Al-Shabaab from 2006 to 2011, additional external support was mostly associated with the early years of the group.

Al-Shabaab's Weaponry

1. Manufacture and Use of IEDs

Al-Shabaab's biggest threat to peace in Somalia is their frequent use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), especially vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs). Al-Shabaab's attacks in recent years increasingly rely on IEDs and VBIEDs, making them the weapon of choice and a *modus operandi* for the terrorist group. Their widespread use of these weapons poses critical security challenges as it continues to tear through Somalia, propelling violence in the country by over 30% each year to reach unprecedented levels today. Now, with a strong foothold in Somalia, Al-Shabaab's unabated violence makes them one of Africa's deadliest terrorist organizations.

Looking at the recent history of Al-Shabaab, the turning point that solidified their spot as one of Africa's most insidious terror groups was their 2017 bombing of Mogadishu. On October 14, 2017, Somalia suffered its worst terrorist attack in decades when two truck bombs exploded in Mogadishu, killing at least 587 people and wounding hundreds more. No terrorist organization has claimed responsibility as of today—which is unusual for these kinds of attacks—but the details of the bombing suggest it was the work of Al-Shabaab. Disturbingly, Al-Shabaab does not rely solely on imports or battlefield captures. The Mogadishu bombing highlighted the group's increasing explosives capabilities, showcasing their ability to manufacture IEDs using explosive materials, its mixtures, and explosive precursors (United Nations, 2020).

Al-Shabaab has the capacity to manufacture their own IEDs and no longer relies on remnants of the Somali civil war. Despite the use of increasingly sophisticated technology with footprints of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) expertise, Al-Shabaab's IEDs are still of

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relatively poor quality and construction (Muibu & Nickels, 2017). IEDs recovered from Somalia feature crude triggers, such as "pressure plates rigged with metal sheets separated by pieces of paper, pressure plates using saw blades, and bombs rigged with salvaged rocker switches like those found in a house to turn the lights on and off (Muibu & Nickels, 2017)." Even with their lack of sophistication, there has been a steep increase in IED attacks in Somalia. According to Muibu and Nickels, Al-Shabaab carried out 395 IED attacks in Somalia in 2016, which was almost 11 times more than in 2010 and nearly twice more than in 2015.

The recent trend of manufacture of home-made explosives means that the group may now have access to far more readily available inputs for the construction of such devices (United Nations, 2019). The October 2017 bombings in Mogadishu were a turning point and a warning as well of what can Al-Shabaab really does. The attack, however, also revealed Al-Shabaab's vulnerability. Killing too many civilians in a single attack will definitely hurt Al-Shabaab in the eyes of the Somali public. Had it occur again in the future, the group's position in a future political negotiation would be severely hindered.

2. Illicit Arms Trafficking into Somalia

Apart from the IEDs, the most significant source of weapons of Al-Shabaab is represented by the illicit arms flow into and within Somalia. In terms of international actors, both state and non-state, most supplies come from Yemen, Ethiopia, and, most recently Egypt. The region of Puntland in northeastern Somalia represents a vital gateway for illicit arms smuggled into Somalia. A considerable portion of smuggled weapons eventually ends up in the hands of Al-Shabaab. Technically, weapons should be supplied through Mogadishu and the central government, but various donors have circumvented that process and supplied weapons directly to the Somali member states outside of Mogadishu. In some cases the supply occurs directly to militias and the Federal Government is then unable to report the supply, resulting in a violation of the arms embargo.

3. Diversion from AMISOM Peacekeepers

"When a peacekeeping base gets overrun, the raid and its death toll is the headline. But somebody also needs to track how many guns, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition rounds, vehicles, uniforms, and IDs are seized and used in subsequent attacks," said Paul Williams, an expert on security threats at George Washington University (Reinl, 2019).

Indeed, the diversion of weapons to Al-Shabaab also occurs by a direct seizure of military materials, such as military vehicles, anti-aircraft guns, and large quantities of ammunition. In the past, Al-Shabaab was able to overrun the military bases of Kenyan, Ugandan, Ethiopian, and Burundian troops, which are part of AMISOM. During the raids, the group always captured significant quantities of weaponry and ammunition. While AMISOM is officially a peacekeeping mission, its true nature is actually a combat mission, as it is engaging in a fight with Al-Shabaab.

Eric Berman, the director of Small Arms Survey, stressed that "counterinsurgency missions are deployed in difficult areas against tough opponents ... armed groups are becoming stronger as a result of the lethal material they claim from peacekeepers who are ostensibly there to defeat them" (Reinl, 2019). Indeed, Somalia has seen few gains by AMISOM in recent years. AMISOM has appeared to disengage on the ground, and Al-Shabaab continues to secure a lot of material from the mission. One could even suggest that Al-Shabaab has refined the art of removing guns off peacekeepers in Somalia.

4. Diversion from the Somali Government and Security Forces

Arms allocated to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Somali National Army (SNA) continue to end up in the hands of Al-Shabaab and other unauthorized recipients. The partial lifting of the arms embargo has allowed for a steady flow of small arms and light weapons intended to help the FGS combat Al-Shabaab. However, many of these arms have been distributed by government employees into the hands of arms dealers and then sold in the black market. It is estimated that at least 35% of the weapons circulating in the arms market were directly diverted from the FGS in the past and that the data probably has not changed that much as of today.

The United Nations (UN) experts represented by the Monitoring Group and later the Panel of Experts have focused a lot on the FGS diversion of weapons over the years and the FGS as a source of weapons to Al-Shabaab. In 2018, for instance, the Monitoring Group spoke to ten arms dealers in Mogadishu, who described a common practice among arms dealers of recruiting individuals to store weapons at safe-houses, both within the city and on its outskirts (United Nations, 2018). Additionally, senior ranking officials within the security forces expressly referred to the involvement of the former Deputy Chief of Defense Forces, Abdullahi Ali Anod, in the large-scale diversion of weapons imported by the FGS (United Nations, 2018).

Recommendations

The Czech Republic alone cannot have much impact on countering terrorism in Somalia. On the other hand, international organizations such as the European Union (EU) or the UN are really the key stakeholders who have major influence in East Africa and Somalia in particular. Therefore, the following set of recommendations is addressed primarily to the EU, bearing in mind the Czech Republic's membership in the union. The EU, together with the United Kingdom and the United States, is also a key donor in Somalia. The donors need to consider that any support they provide has to be balanced with the fact that resources are not always accounted for.

- **Assure that counter-terrorism forces are paid sufficiently and on time.**

Paying soldiers more and boosting their morale could go a long way to stopping light hands in weapons depots (Reinl, 2019). This relates to both AMISOM and SNA soldiers. One also needs to keep in mind that the motivational factor for joining Al-Shabaab is often financial. Al-Shabaab managed to recruit in Kenyan slums or refugee camps, for instance, where the religious motivation didn't play a significant role. If SNA can succeed against Al-Shabaab in the long run, its financing must be stable and guaranteed. AMISOM salaries cannot be delayed so often. The EU needs to understand the importance of AMISOM's presence and ensure sustainable and timely financing.

- **Strengthen the federal member states (FMS).**

Strengthening the FMS of Somalia represents a vital threat to Al-Shabaab, although such a move would never gain significant support from the FGS (Barnes, 2016). Supporting the Puntland administration can be a good example, as Puntland's territory is the base of both the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) and the Somali pirates. The FGS does not have any influence over Puntland, although Puntland wants to be involved in future political settlements as part of Somalia.

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- **Add IED components to the sanction regime, monitor, and force that regime.**

The UN is not making changes on its own, and its decisions are dictated by the international community and the Security Council (SC). Therefore, some of the recommendations provided by the Panel of Experts or the Monitoring Group regarding Somalia are thrown out to balance the reporting to please the five permanent members ("P5") of the SC. SC is the most powerful organ of the UN because of its ability to impose legally binding measures. Although they are legally binding, enforcement and implementation is often a problem.

The UN needs to apply regulations on the transfer of IED components into Somalia and treat all movements as lethal material with a potential risk of diversion to Al-Shabaab. For those items that will be approved to reach Somalia, the UN should conduct risk assessments to ensure that these components do not end up in the wrong hands. Conducting verification checks on these types of supplies is essential, and violations need to be addressed.

Regarding the current arms embargo, the Somali government's utmost interest is to lift the restrictions. However, in practical terms, the embargo does not prevent the FGS from obtaining weapons. The embargo is 50% symbolic. In other words—if they want weapons, they can get them anyways.

- **Step up counter-IED training and equipment of security forces in Somalia.**

Those include AMISOM, SNA, and other Somali security forces. UNSEMG also recommended providing additional training to AMISOM and the SNA on weapons seizures and management (United Nations, 2015).

- **Push for political dialogue and program of reconciliation.**

All the stakeholders should work towards an inclusive program of reconciliation. The international community needs to support FGS in offering a third way for political dialogue and accommodation with Al-Shabaab. Several years ago, when the ISS prompted divisions within Al-Shabaab, the group faced an ideological and tactical turning point. With ISS being the more extreme alternative, unacceptable for most Al-Shabaab members, the divisions that ISS prompted were worth nothing as the FGS couldn't offer a third way. Without a concerted program of reconciliation at all levels, the FMS and their clan militias are still likely to fight one another, as well as Al-Shabaab itself (Barnes, 2016).

- **Create a holistic conflict resolution strategy.**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, developing a holistic conflict resolution strategy is needed in order to respond to the complex and interlinked drivers of the conflict, both nationally and in the East African region.

Conclusions and the Way Forward

The conflict in Somalia is primarily an ideological war, in which Al-Shabaab buys people's patronage. The solution for such a conflict, therefore, cannot be military. Although omitted in the Recommendations section, the analysts, experts, and academia also have to step up their efforts, as one critical piece of knowledge is still missing. While analyzing various aspects of Al-Shabaab functioning (weapons, ideology, finance, leadership, history, tactics, etc.), perhaps the most flagrant question remains blurred: 'Who is Al-Shabaab?' Not 'what', but 'who'. A full mapping is critically needed in order to identify those elements of Al-Shabaab, who are more politically-minded and ideologically moderate so that one could buy their patronage.

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One doesn't need to go far to see an excellent example. Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former chair of the Islamic Courts Union (Al-Shabaab's predecessor), later served as president of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia between 2009 and 2012. Under his leadership, the TFG succeeded in driving out Al-Shabaab from Mogadishu and its surroundings, establishing security, peace, and reconciliation through the difficult transitional period (Dagne, 2011). Additionally, radicalization in the case of Al-Shabaab is, in most cases, not really about deep religious beliefs. It is instead a matter of survival, in which socio-economic reasons play a crucial role. Of course, there are elements of Al-Shabaab that one cannot negotiate with. However, it is believed that this is not a very large group of people.

Regarding the regulation of illicit arms trade, the FGS needs to enhance its accountability measures and extend its services. The international community should support these efforts, as well as the efforts of the FMS. The UN, for example, recognizes only the FGS, and not the governments of Somaliland or Puntland, complicating the question of how the UN arms embargo applies to the latter two regions (Carlson, 2016). Strengthening Puntland, for instance, is critical for driving out Al-Shabaab, combating the ISS, reducing the piracy, and controlling the arms flow from Yemen. Strong FMS will also require the FGS to accept that it cannot dominate the FMS, but rather seek for a genuine political deal with them. If an agreement between the FGS and FMS is achieved, the international community will then need to support the idea of peace talks between the reconciled Somali authorities and Al-Shabaab. In line with this, continued military pressure by AMISOM troops and its allies would incentivize Al-Shabaab's leadership to negotiate an end to the civil war.

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List of abbreviations

AQAP — Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AMISOM — African Union Mission in Somalia

EU — European Union

FGS — Federal Government of Somalia

FMS—Federal Member States

ICU — Islamic Courts Union

IED — Improvised Explosive Device

ISS — Islamic State in Somalia

KDF — Kenya Defense Forces

SC — United Nations Security Council

SNA — Somali National Army

TFG — Transitional Federal Government

UN — United Nations

VBIED — Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device

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