

International Efforts to Counter Al-Shabaab

Written by David H. Shinn

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DAVID H. SHINN, FEB 20 2012

Since the al-Shabaab (The Youth) took control of most of south and central Somalia in 2007, no Somali force or coalition of forces has developed the capacity to counter the al-Qaeda affiliated organization. Militias under the control of Somali warlords were largely a spent force before al-Shabaab seized much of Somalia. The international community has trained a significant number of Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces, but they have not yet achieved the numbers, tenacity and ability on their own to challenge al-Shabaab. It does not help that periodically they are not paid, a problem that recurred recently for some of them. The decentralized Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama'a (ASWJ) forces, a political grouping based on adherence to traditional Islamic practice, have prevailed in several battles with al-Shabaab but have not demonstrated the capacity to challenge it across Somalia.

As a result, foreign military forces, often with the assistance of allied Somali troops, have taken on the task of trying to dislodge al-Shabaab from south and central Somalia. Several thousand Ethiopian troops entered Somalia at the end of 2006 to repulse the Islamic Courts militias, which had taken control of Mogadishu and were moving towards Baidoa, a remaining TFG stronghold in central Somalia. The Ethiopian troops stopped the advance and succeeded in pushing the Islamic Courts out of Mogadishu. Ethiopian forces then remained in Mogadishu until they returned to Ethiopia in January 2009. In the meantime, the most extreme elements of the Islamic Courts created al-Shabaab and seized control of most of south and central Somalia and eventually most of Mogadishu.

Early in 2007, the African Union authorized the establishment of a peacekeeping mission in Mogadishu. Designed to replace the Ethiopian forces, the initially modest force of Ugandans and Burundians was slow to build up its numbers, which partly explained why Ethiopian troops remained so long in Mogadishu. Somalia and Ethiopia are traditional enemies; al-Shabaab successfully used the Ethiopian military presence in Somalia as a rallying cry to attract support within Somalia and from the Somali diaspora.

The African Union force, known as AMISOM, now totals about 10,000 Ugandan and Burundian troops and was joined recently by a small contingent from Djibouti. In 2011, AMISOM removed al-Shabaab from all of Mogadishu and early in 2012 began efforts to take positions on the outskirts of the city. Al-Shabaab insisted that it made a tactical withdrawal from Mogadishu and subsequently responded by stepping up suicide bombings inside the capital, where security remains fragile. AMISOM forces are not engaged elsewhere in Somalia.

Kenya had plans for sending troops into Somalia going back at least two years. The series of kidnappings inside Kenya by persons (not necessarily affiliated with al-Shabaab) who took them to al-Shabaab-held territory in Somalia provided the excuse to launch its October 2011 attack. By most accounts, there was little consultation by Kenya with anyone on the decision to move into Somalia. The United States said that it was not informed of the decision to invade. The reports from the TFG were conflicting, some saying there had been consultation and others denying any consultation.

From the beginning, the stated goal of the Kenyan intervention has been confusing. Early in the campaign, it was to seize the port of Kismayu from al-Shabaab and create a buffer zone inside Somalia along the Kenya-Somalia border. As the military effort bogged down, partly due to the onset of the rainy season, the Kenyan government said little about its military goals or progress. Early in 2012, Kenya requested that its forces become part of the AMISOM operation, adding that it wants to complete the job of smashing the al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda networks in Somalia.

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The Kenya Defense Forces spokesperson added that Kenya will only get out of Somalia after it regains the status of a normal nation. In the meantime, there have been several al-Shabaab inspired terrorist attacks inside Kenya and there are indications that increasing elements of Kenya's Muslim minority are being radicalized. A former leader of the Kenyan Muslim Youth Center now claims that it represents al-Shabaab in Kenya.

More than four months have passed since Kenyan forces entered Somalia. They have not taken Kismayu and continue to experience al-Shabaab attacks in the relatively small area that they control. The objectives of the intervention remain unclear, at least to those who are outside Kenya's leadership. A recent analysis by the International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded that Kenya is unlikely to heed any calls for a troop pullout; it has invested too much, and pride is at stake. The ICG added that "there is a real prospect Kenya will find itself with undependable allies, enmeshed in a protracted counter-insurgency campaign against a resilient and experienced enemy."

Ethiopian forces, following their 2009 departure from Mogadishu, periodically crossed the lengthy Ethiopian-Somali border into Somalia to hit al-Shabaab targets of opportunity. They escalated this activity late in 2011 when a larger Ethiopian force, together with TFG troops, crossed into Somalia to pursue al-Shabaab. Early in 2012, the Ethiopian and TFG forces seized from al-Shabaab the important trading center of Beledweyne, which is located about fifty kilometers from the Ethiopian border. There are persistent rumors that Ethiopia plans to attack other al-Shabaab positions in Somalia. So far, this has not happened and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi says he intends to pull the Ethiopian force out of Somalia.

The United States and several European countries have provided financial support to the AMISOM force and trained and financed TFG troops. Since early in 2007, U.S. missiles and aircraft have hit more than half dozen al-Shabaab targets inside Somalia and U.S. special forces have conducted several attacks against al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda leaders. The United States also maintains drone intelligence surveillance of Somalia from installations in Ethiopia, Djibouti, and the Seychelles.

While foreign forces in Somalia that oppose al-Shabaab can help degrade its capacity, they cannot defeat al-Shabaab any more than al-Shabaab and its foreign jihadis can defeat the forces aligned against them. There will be no military solution in Somalia, only a political one reached by Somalis.

Foreign troop involvement by AMISOM, Kenya, and Ethiopia coupled with drone surveillance provided by the United States can probably permit the TFG or its successor to remain in control of Mogadishu indefinitely. This combined effort can also squeeze al-Shabaab on the fringes of territory that it controls. But this is not a long-term solution and these forces will eventually object to the cost of the operation, causing it eventually to come to an end.

The recent discussion of a pincers movement against al-Shabaab by Kenyan, Ethiopian, and AMISOM forces, a significant increase in the number of AMISOM troops, and a naval blockade of the Somali coast by African countries engaged in Somalia (only Kenya has a navy) are as fanciful as al-Shabaab's claims that it can govern Somalia and create an Islamic caliphate.

Somalis need to devote their energy to identifying a moderate alternative to al-Shabaab that has widespread support among the Somali people. If this means they talk with nationalist elements of al-Shabaab that is their business. While I am not convinced there are any moderates in the al-Shabaab leadership, it is not up to foreigners to drive this process. Somalis talk to each other all the time irrespective of ideology. There has been contact between elements of the TFG and certain al-Shabaab leaders. If they can reach some accommodation, so be it. Al-Shabaab's formal merger with al-Qaeda in February 2012 has complicated this dialogue but may also lead to a wider split in the organization than already exists and eventually facilitate discussion.

Al-Shabaab is its own worst enemy. The foreign jihadi leadership and increasing use of draconian tactics such as suicide bombings are turning growing numbers of Somalis against it. At some point, Somalis will expel the foreign jihadis in al-Shabaab just as they will ask all foreign troops to leave the country.

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***David Shinn** is an adjunct professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He blogs at <http://davidshinn.blogspot.com/>*

About the author:

Dr. David Shinn has taught African Affairs in the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University since 2001. He previously served for 37 years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including as an ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. He is the co-author of *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (2012) and the *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (2013).