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The Role and Evolution of al-Shabaab in Somalia

Lillia Cavallaro and Sehej Sethi
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Foreword

The emergence of al-Shabaab as a dominant insurgent group in Somalia reflects the complex interplay of political instability, socio-economic challenges, and global jihadist ideology. Since its establishment, al-Shabaab has evolved from a small militant faction into one of the most resilient terrorist organisations in East Africa. With ideological ties to Al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab has leveraged local grievances, regional instability, and international support networks to expand its influence and sustain its operations. Despite significant efforts by the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) (formerly AMISON) and international partners, the group continues to pose a critical threat to the security and stability of the region.

The first part of the report discusses the history of al-Shabaab, how it took over Somalia, and its larger ties with Al-Qaeda. After discussing the history of al-Shabaab, the report goes in-depth about the geopolitical situation, which extends beyond Somalia, destabilising neighbouring countries like Kenya and Ethiopia through cross-border attacks and economic disruption.

The third section of the report examines international interventions led by organisations such as the United Nations, in addition to those undertaken by the United States and European nations. The report describes the role of different countries in depth and how this intervention is both necessary and effective in improving the situation in Somalia.

The last section discusses the larger implications of Al-Shabaab's presence. A multifaceted approach addressing governance deficits, economic development, and inclusive political processes, alongside sustained military and diplomatic efforts, is essential for long-term stability in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa. By understanding the drivers of Al-Shabaab's resilience, this study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to combating extremism in Somalia and why it matters in this day and age.

History of al-Shabaab

Since the overthrow of military dictator Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia has been embroiled in continuous chaos, severely stifling any meaningful efforts toward peace or stability in the country (Wise, 2011). The Somali Civil War, which erupted due to widespread discontent with Barre's oppressive regime, created a power vacuum that many factions sought to exploit. Among these groups was the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which emerged as a significant player amid the turmoil. Formed by a coalition of Sharia Courts associated with the Abgaal Hawiye Clan, the ICU played a pivotal role in restoring a degree of order in a nation long ravaged by violence and lawlessness, enforcing a system based on strict interpretations of Sharia law.

Within this turbulent context, al-Shabaab, or "The Youth," emerged as a militia group closely affiliated with the ICU. Initially a minor faction within the ICU's framework, al-Shabaab quickly expanded to become Somalia's largest and most formidable Islamic-nationalist guerrilla army. This ascendance was enabled by the group's effective military strategies, which allowed it to assert control over territories and enforce its interpretations of Sharia law. The rise of al-Shabaab garnered the attention of neighbouring Ethiopia, a predominantly Christian nation alarmed by the ICU's influence in Mogadishu and southern Somalia. Ethiopia felt particularly threatened by the ICU's increasing calls for jihad against perceived foreign aggressors. In response to this threat, Ethiopian military forces were deployed into Somalia on December 24, 2006, utilising troops, artillery, and air support in a rapid advance toward Mogadishu. This military action compelled ICU leaders to flee and inadvertently created another power vacuum, allowing al-Shabaab to solidify its influence and utilise guerrilla tactics more effectively.

As al-Shabaab evolved, it began to fill the void left by the ICU and ingrain itself within the local population, becoming a significant political entity as well as a potent military force. The group's ability to provide a semblance of order and governance in certain areas contributed to its attraction among disillusioned citizens seeking stability and safety. Over time, al-Shabaab has expanded its influence considerably, growing in size and financial resources. The group engages in a range of illicit activities, including piracy, human trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, which collectively generate an estimated annual income of around $100

million. Reports from the U.S. Treasury Department indicate that approximately a quarter of these funds are allocated for procuring weapons and explosives, clearly demonstrating the group's commitment to maintaining and enhancing its military capabilities (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Furthermore, the ongoing civil conflict in Ethiopia has presented al-Shabaab with additional opportunities to extend its reach. In mid-2022, the group launched a notable offensive toward Ethiopia's eastern border, although this advance was ultimately repelled. This event underscored the persistent threat al-Shabaab poses not only to Somalia but to the region more broadly. The group's fundamental mission revolves around dismantling the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), expelling foreign entities, and establishing a "Greater Somalia" that unites all ethnic Somalis under a strict interpretation of Islamic law (Marchal, 2019). Alongside these objectives, al-Shabaab has sought to fortify its ties with Al-Qaeda, declaring allegiance in 2012 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This alliance is perceived as a strategic move aimed at gaining greater legitimacy on a global scale, enhancing operational support, and tapping into a more substantial recruitment and fundraising network.

However, the relationship between al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda has not been without its strains. While al-Shabaab strives to leverage Al-Qaeda's resources, such as intelligence and tactical support, it simultaneously prioritises maintaining a high level of operational independence. This dynamic reflects the complex interdependencies within the global jihadist movement and highlights al-Shabaab's ambitions to assert itself as a standalone entity capable of local governance and military effectiveness.

In response to the escalating conflict following Ethiopia's invasion, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was deployed to address the security crisis plaguing the region. The mission was intended to implement a comprehensive national security plan and provide training and support to the Transitional Federal Government's security forces. To this end, AMISOM was succeeded by the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) in 2022 to fully transfer security responsibilities from peacekeeping forces to the Somali National Armed Forces. In early 2025, ATMIS transitioned to become the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), marking a shift toward a more

sustainable approach to the challenges posed by al-Shabaab. For example, AUSSOM prioritises training and equipping Somali security forces, enabling them to maintain control of reclaimed areas rather than relying on foreign troops. In Mogadishu, locally trained forces have taken over security duties, reducing dependence on external support. AUSSOM also aims for a structured withdrawal plan that ensures security transitions do not leave power vacuums. For example, after ATMIS forces left key areas in 2024, coordinated handovers to Somali security forces reduced militant resurgence.

While both missions have achieved certain successes, such as reclaiming strategic areas like Mogadishu and Kismayo, thus weakening al-Shabaab's influence, they have not eradicated the group's operational capabilities. Observations indicate that al-Shabaab possesses the tactical ability to temporarily vacate areas in anticipation of an AUSSOM advance, recognising the limitations of UN-sponsored forces in maintaining long-term control.

Despite facing potential internal divisions due to the diverse clan backgrounds of its members, the uptick in attacks orchestrated by al-Shabaab reflects its growing power and regional influence (National Counterterrorism Center, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by ongoing political instability within Somalia and the challenges faced by the FGS in asserting control over the entire nation, creating fertile ground for al-Shabaab to thrive. The group's tactics continue to evolve as it seeks to exploit local grievances and dynamics, which fuels a cycle of violence that complicates prospects for peace and stability in Somalia. As al-Shabaab consolidates its position, the international community remains challenged to devise comprehensive strategies that not only combat the group's militancy but also address the underlying socio-political factors that contribute to its resilience and expansion.

Geopolitical Influence

Al-Shabaab exerts significant geopolitical influence across the Horn of Africa, affecting the security and economic stability of neighbouring countries. This chapter will focus on how the group's activities destabilise bordering Kenya and Ethiopia through persistent insurgency, cross-border attacks, and economic disruptions. Understanding the group's strategies and their broader implications sheds light on the challenges faced by these two nations and underscores the urgency of an effective response to mitigate its impact.

Kenya, sharing a porous border with Somalia, has been one of the countries most affected by al-Shabaab's cross-border operations. The group has carried out numerous high-profile attacks on Kenyan soil, including the Westgate Mall attack in 2013 and the Garissa University College massacre in 2015. These incidents have instilled fear, strained security resources, and caused significant loss of life and property. The insecurity generated by al-Shabaab compels Kenya to maintain a robust military presence in Somalia as part of AUSSOM. However, the mandate of foreign forces is set to end by 2024, raising critical questions about Somalia's and its neighbours' capacity to independently manage al-Shabaab's ongoing threat. The group's strategy of avoiding direct military engagements and instead employing guerrilla warfare tactics, such as roadside bombings and assassinations, further complicates security efforts (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The group's influence has destabilized the broader region, with implications for Ethiopia and other neighbours. Ethiopia remains vigilant against the group's efforts to infiltrate its borders and potentially incite unrest among its Somali-speaking populations. Al-Shabaab's ideological commitment to establishing an Islamist caliphate encompassing the Horn of Africa has raised fears of heightened societal divisions and the erosion of government authority. Neighbouring powers like Kenya and Ethiopia are unlikely to stand by should al-Shabaab gain significant territorial control, indicating the group's geopolitical influence extends well beyond Somalia's borders (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Economically, al-Shabaab's activities have imposed significant costs on Kenya. The group's attacks have severely impacted the country's tourism sector, a vital contributor to Kenya's GDP. High-profile incidents have deterred international

visitors, leading to declining revenue and job opportunities (UNDP, 2019). Additionally, businesses along Kenya's Somali border suffer frequent disruptions due to insecurity, which hampers trade and deters investment. The group's taxation systems in Somalia further exacerbate the economic strain. In 2020, terrorism-related costs in Kenya were estimated at $7 billion, severely affecting sectors like agriculture and tourism (Munin, 2023). Al-Shabaab's illegal taxation in Somalia, which generates up to $29 million annually, further burdens the economy, deterring investment and destabilizing the region (International Crisis Group, 2022). Additionally, al-Shabaab imposes levies on farmers, traders, and transporters in areas under its control, diverting resources from civilian use to sustain its insurgency. These activities indirectly affect Kenya by disrupting cross-border trade, further deepening the economic challenges faced within the region (Insecurity Insight, 2023).

Additionally, the humanitarian consequences of al-Shabaab's actions in the region are profound. The group's insurgency exacerbates food insecurity in Somalia, which has ripple effects across East Africa. Airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab often result in collateral damage to agricultural infrastructure, disrupting food production and distribution systems. Over five years, approximately 10% of all recorded airstrikes in Somalia caused harm to assets vital for food security (Insecurity Insight, 2023). This collateral damage intensifies hunger and weakens local economies, creating a cycle of vulnerability that extends to neighbouring countries reliant on cross-border agricultural trade. The extent to which Somalia has been hit by hunger has made the country the "hungriest country in the world", based on the 2024 Global Hunger Index. With over half the population not receiving proper nutrition and the third-highest child mortality rate in the world, Somalia has found itself on the brink of famine on several occasions (Concern Worldwide, 2024).

When combined with the forced displacement caused by al-Shabaab's violence, this has caused a refugee crisis in Somalia, with many Somalis seeking refuge in Kenya. The Dadaab refugee complex in Kenya, one of the world's largest, hosts hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees. While offering sanctuary is a humanitarian necessity, the influx of refugees strains Kenya's resources and exacerbates tensions between host communities and displaced populations (International Crisis Group, 2022).

As the 2024 deadline for the withdrawal of foreign troops approaches, the challenges posed by al-Shabaab demand urgent strategic rethinking. Military solutions alone have proven insufficient to achieve long-term stability. One argument proposes that engaging al-Shabaab politically, while fraught with challenges, may provide a pathway to de-escalation. Negotiations could potentially leverage the group's demand for foreign troop withdrawal to secure concessions, such as reducing cross-border operations (International Crisis Group, 2022). However, al-Shabaab's rigid ideology, its ties to al-Qaeda, and its uncompromising political vision present significant obstacles to meaningful dialogue. The establishment of the African Union-led Somali Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM) presents a new dimension to this strategy, as it aims to fill the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of foreign troops while focusing on enhancing Somali-led security and governance. Nevertheless, addressing the root causes of al-Shabaab's resilience, such as governance deficits, poverty, and radicalisation, remains essential for any sustainable solution (UNDP, 2019).

Regional cooperation is essential in countering al-Shabaab's influence. Strengthening partnerships among neighbouring states through intelligence sharing, coordinated military efforts, and joint development initiatives can enhance regional resilience (Munin, 2023). Kenya and Ethiopia, as key stakeholders in Somalia's stability, must continue to collaborate with international partners to address the multifaceted challenges posed by al-Shabaab. Balancing military, political, and economic strategies will be critical to ensuring that the group's influence is curtailed while promoting stability and development in the region. Al-Shabaab's insurgency has far-reaching implications for the security and economic stability of Somalia and its neighbours, particularly Kenya. While military efforts remain crucial, a comprehensive approach that also addresses the structural drivers of conflict, explores opportunities for negotiation, and promotes regional cooperation is vital. Al-Shabaab's ability to adapt militarily and exploit governance gaps makes it a persistent destabilising force, particularly for Somalia and Kenya. Balancing military, political, and economic strategies together will be critical to curbing the group's influence and fostering stability and development in the region.

International Intervention

The conflict in Somalia between the Somali government and the al-Shabaab militant group has attracted international attention and a global response to foster peace and reduce human suffering in the region.

Military and Security Interventions

1. African Union (AU) Involvement: The African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) was particularly active and slowly handed over its security duties to the Somali nationals and the police. This withdrawal was planned, and the first phase involved reducing troop levels by 2,000 in June and the other phase by a further 3,000 in December. There are still issues with protecting civilians during this transition.
2. Regional Cooperation: A frontline state-level initiative was also implemented with contingents from Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya to help Somalia fight al-Shabaab. These efforts were part of a comprehensive offensive strategy by the Somali government, including "Operation Black Lion", launched in March 2023. Although "Operation Black Lion" encountered some challenges in 2024, efforts are being made to renew it.
3. Humanitarian Aid and Relief: The humanitarian crisis due to drought, floods, and food insecurity has drawn attention to international aid. The United Nations and other international NGOs have provided emergency assistance to millions of people to tackle malnutrition and prevent famine, but access has been limited in the territories controlled by al-Shabaab. The United Nations has reported that the country is facing a severe food crisis, with about half of the population being affected.

Legal and Human Rights Advocacy

The United Nations and other human rights organisations have condemned violations of international humanitarian law by all the warring parties, including al-Shabaab and the Somali government. Reports of random bombings, sexual abuse, and attacks on civilians have led to calls for justice and change. In October 2024, al-Shabaab militants attacked the Cairo Hotel in Beledweyne, Somalia, resulting in multiple civilian casualties. The assault began with a car bomb

explosion, followed by a 24-hour siege, highlighting the group's continued targeting of civilian-populated areas. Another incident occurred in October of 2024 when Somali intelligence agents abducted journalist Abduqadir Mohamed Nur from his home following Risaala Media Corporation's critical reporting on state security forces. This incident reflects ongoing violations of press freedom and intimidation of journalists in Somalia.

Political instability and local conflicts, for instance, in the Somaliland region of Las Anod, also hinder international stabilisation efforts. Regional powers and the AU have tried to mediate these conflicts, but progress is still slow. The fighting between Somaliland forces and local clan militias in Las Anod has led to thousands of civilian casualties and mass displacement. The UN estimates that over 200,000 people have fled the region since early 2023, making it difficult for humanitarian aid and development programs to take root. The international community's intervention in Somalia involves supporting the military, providing assistance in the form of relief, and building institutions. However, the continuing armed conflict and the worsening humanitarian crisis show how the situation will not easily improve and that continued and concerted action is needed to bring about lasting peace.

Conclusion: How does the situation connect to the US and Europe in today's age?

The conflict with al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has been ongoing for more than two decades, continues to present a myriad of challenges to global security, with significant implications for the United States and Europe. As the leading jihadist organisation in East Africa, al-Shabaab's ambitions extend far beyond Somalia's borders. Their transnational activities, including terrorist attacks, recruitment efforts, and financial networks, underscore a persistent threat that necessitates coordinated international responses.

The Threat to Global Security

Al-Shabaab's ability to execute attacks beyond Somalia is a primary concern for Western nations. Its operations in neighbouring countries like Kenya and Ethiopia

illustrate its capacity to strike internationally, as evidenced by high-profile attacks such as the 2010 bombings in Kampala and the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi. For both the US and European nations, al-Shabaab represents a direct and indirect security threat. The group has explicitly threatened nations contributing to peacekeeping forces in Somalia under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and its successor, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), along with the current African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). The ongoing danger is compounded by the potential for homegrown radicalisation within Somali diaspora communities in the US and Europe. Recruitment efforts by al-Shabaab, targeting disaffected youth in Western nations, have drawn individuals into its ranks, creating concerns about the possibility of these recruits returning to perpetrate attacks on domestic soil.

EU's Role and Investments

The EU has been a cornerstone of Somalia's security framework, providing extensive financial aid and deploying missions to train Somali forces. Additionally, its anti-piracy operations and support for African Union peacekeeping missions, now under AUSSOM, African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Africa, have been critical to countering al-Shabaab's influence. However, the group's resilience has led to fatigue among European donors, raising questions about the future of these commitments. A report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point highlighted a pervasive sense of donor fatigue among traditional partners such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These nations have provided humanitarian and security assistance to Somalia for decades, but the enduring resilience of al-Shabaab has led to questions about the long-term impact and sustainability of their support. Conversely, sustained engagement offers a pathway to bolster regional stability and reinforce the EU's global influence. Collaborating with partners like the UK, Turkey, and the UAE can create a more coordinated approach to Somali security. Establishing joint frameworks for diplomacy and military support could maximise the effectiveness of international efforts and minimise the risk of regional players exploiting divisions.

Economic and Strategic Interests

The stability of the Horn of Africa is critical to global trade, particularly through the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's busiest maritime routes. Al-Shabaab's activities, including attempts to disrupt these routes, have direct implications for international commerce. For the US and Europe, these activities threaten strategic interests in the region, particularly those tied to energy resources and counter-piracy initiatives. A notable example is the hijacking of the MV Lila Norfolk, a bulk carrier sailing under the Liberian flag, in January 2024, where the Indian Navy intervened, deploying commandos and drones to rescue 21 crew members.

Moreover, the humanitarian and economic costs associated with the conflict place additional burdens on Western nations, which provide substantial financial and logistical support to Somali security forces and the African Union. The United States, in particular through the U.S. Agency for International Development, has provided over $1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance to Somalia since 2022 to lessen the impact of floods and droughts. Al-Shabaab's persistence undermines development efforts, exacerbating poverty and migration flows that impact European borders and strain resources.

International Military and Diplomatic Efforts

Western nations have adopted a dual approach to countering al-Shabaab: direct military intervention and bolstering regional security forces. For instance, the US has conducted targeted drone strikes against al-Shabaab leaders and redeployed troops to Somalia to support counterterrorism operations. Similarly, European countries, often through NATO and the EU, provide training and financial aid to regional forces. While these measures have disrupted al-Shabaab's operations, the group's resilience highlights the limits of military solutions. Al-Shabaab's guerrilla tactics, territorial control, and ability to exploit governance gaps suggest that addressing the underlying socio-economic and political issues in Somalia is crucial to long-term stability.

The Migration Link

Instability in Somalia, fueled by al-Shabaab's activities, contributes significantly to migration flows toward Europe. Refugees fleeing conflict often seek asylum in European countries, straining resources and fueling political debates over immigration. This dynamic underscores the interconnectedness of security and humanitarian issues, with al-Shabaab's impact felt far beyond Somalia's borders.

Policy Implications and the Way Forward

For the US and Europe, addressing the al-Shabaab threat requires a holistic approach that combines security, development, and diplomacy. Continued support for Somali governance structures and security forces is essential, as is addressing the root causes of extremism through education, economic opportunities, and inclusive political processes. International collaboration remains vital, as unilateral efforts are unlikely to succeed against a transnational threat. Partnerships with regional actors to bolster intelligence-sharing and coordinated counterterrorism strategies are critical components of an effective response. At the same time, Western nations must remain vigilant about the potential for domestic radicalisation and ensure that measures targeting al-Shabaab's financial and cyber networks are robust and adaptive.

If the EU reduces its involvement, the consequences could be dire. A weakened Somali government might lead to a resurgence of al-Shabaab and other extremist groups, threatening the Red Sea trade routes crucial to European economic interests. Moreover, an unstable Somalia could exacerbate migration flows into Europe, further straining immigration systems and fueling political polarisation within EU member states. By strengthening partnerships, aligning international efforts, and maintaining its strategic investments, the EU can help mitigate the al-Shabaab threat and safeguard its interests in the Horn of Africa.

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