

AFRICA

The Keys to Countering Al-Shabaab's Resurgence: Policy Options for the US and Regional Partners

SEPTEMBER 1, 2023

Al-Shabaab's resurgence in the past year is evidenced by the group's continued attacks on targets ranging from tourists and government officials at beachside hotels, to African Union (AU) soldiers at military bases, to ambushes and assassinations of Somali soldiers and politicians. At the same time, al-Shabaab is no longer actively recruiting [foreign fighters](#) from Western countries (they proved to be too "attention-seeking" and were a distraction for the group). Moreover, neither al-Shabaab nor its "neighbor," al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, are currently conducting major attacks in the West. Al-Shabaab has, therefore, to some extent, fallen off the radar of the global counter-terrorism community.

The latest al-Shabaab attacks indicate that the U.S. must recommit to Somalia to bolster the AU and other regional and international forces that are supporting Somali government forces. The U.S. has always had a counter-terrorism focus when dealing with al-Shabaab. However, the U.S. commitment is questionable because it has become a political-tinged issue. President Donald Trump, for example, suddenly and with little explanation withdrew U.S. troops after the results of the 2020 election were announced against his favor. While new President Joe Biden ultimately decided to send troops back to Somalia, their long-term presence is not guaranteed and, in any event, a military-oriented response to al-Shabaab has for more than a decade proven to be no elixir either. A more holistic approach that emphasizes reducing corruption and serving the population could be more sustainable alongside consistent—but perhaps more targeted—military approaches that, for example, target al-Shabaab when it attempts to expand territory or conduct barracks raids.

U.S. attention towards Africa is likely, if anything, to shift increasingly to West Africa, where [coups](#), including most recently in Niger, are jeopardizing the counter-insurgency struggle in the region if not also providing openings for Russian Wagner Group troops to enter the security space. Elsewhere on the continent, Wagner's presence has been anything but productive. Nevertheless, the only way to ensure al-Shabaab's ongoing offensives are curtailed is for the U.S. to reassess its counter-terrorism priorities and strengthen the current strategy in Somalia and the East African region and not become overly distracted by concerns in other regions.

The East African Regional Picture

While West Africa's ongoing turmoil is caused by coups and ineffectual counter-insurgency campaigns, East Africa is currently experiencing instability of a somewhat different nature well beyond Somalia's own troubles. Ethiopia began a two-year civil war in November 2020 that only ended in a [tenuous ceasefire](#) in November 2022. Sudan, meanwhile, picked up where Ethiopia left off and fell into a fratricidal civil war between two military factions in April 2023, which continues to the present.

Beyond intra-state conflicts, Uganda is suffering from cross-border operations by the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP). In mid-June, ISCAP [massacred](#) more than 40 students at a Ugandan school that was just across the border from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where ISCAP has bases. Al-Shabaab's recent surge in attacks, therefore, only adds to the insecurity in East Africa.

Among al-Shabaab's most notable attacks since May have been:

- [Capturing](#) a base in Buulo Mareer, Somalia, and killing 54 Ugandan soldiers on June 4 before Ugandan reinforcements finally recaptured the base;
- [Sieging](#) a newly renovated beachside hotel and restaurant that often hosts Somali politicians and international visitors on June 9 and killing six civilians;
- Conducting tandem suicide bombings at an Ethiopian military base in Gedo, Somalia, which injured four Ethiopian soldiers on June 21 after having conducted [another suicide bombing](#) on May 14 that killed five people and wounded 11 others, including the Gedo governor.

In addition, al-Shabaab's leader, known as Abu Ubaidah, has increasingly [appeared in the group's videos](#) to provide motivational speeches to the group's fighters before major operations. As an indication of al-Shabaab's confidence in its territories, the group released a video in May of Abu Ubaidah leading a "jihad conference" with around 100 "delegates," who were religious scholars and traditional elders loyal to the group. In the video, Abu Ubaidah condemned foreign interference in Somalia, especially from the U.S. While the video may have been "propaganda," it still demonstrated the extent to which Abu Ubaidah can engage civilian populations in Somalia and the fact that al-Shabaab is comfortable enough to place large amounts of fighters and supporters together without concern about air strikes or other intelligence undermining the group and its leaders.

The U.S. does not necessarily have the troops or resources to deal with all threats and instability in East Africa. It can, however, engage in diplomacy and with international organizations, such as the UN or African Union (AU), to reduce tensions in Ethiopia and Sudan. In Somalia, U.S. troops and intelligence officers, including through aerial surveillance, can monitor al-Shabaab's offensive and forewarn regional militaries in Somalia about al-Shabaab's movements. However, by supporting the Somali government by reducing corruption and providing services to these more remote regions, the U.S. in tandem with the Somalis would make it significantly less likely that the population would be receptive to al-Shabaab messaging and infiltration. This, in turn, could reduce the need down the road for a more militarized approach.

Countering an Emboldened Al-Shabaab

Although there are ongoing national, regional, and international operations to contain and eventually eliminate al-Shabaab, there are ways the U.S. leadership can enhance the current initiatives' effectiveness to prevent the al-Shabaab resurgence even beyond strictly military and developmental approaches. Other approaches can also help turn back the tide on the group's hold over territory.

Strategic Communications

First, the U.S. should encourage all partners in Somalia to honestly assess the situation and admit faults so as to learn from, and improve upon, the current strategy. In other cases in Africa, such as Nigeria, the government continuously provided false information about the battle against Boko Haram, including claiming its leader, Abubakar Shekau, was [killed in battle](#) multiple times only to see Shekau return and taunt the government in videos each time. Likewise, the Nigerian government initially denied the Chibok schoolgirls had been abducted by Shekau's fighters in 2014 only to see Shekau emerge in a split-screen video with more than 200 of the schoolgirls to claim they were now his "slaves." Further, the Nigerian officials, including the president, frequently claimed the group was on its "last legs" or "technically defeated" only to see the group conduct brazen raids of military barracks and occupy territory shortly afterward. This in the long-term ends up undermining the credibility of the government and the war effort overall.

In the Somali case, the government and African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) have been [slow to acknowledge](#) successful al-Shabaab attacks, which risks providing al-Shabaab's sophisticated media apparatus with the "first word" in creating the narratives surrounding attacks. More broadly, the Somali government's claims have in some cases been inaccurate, which, like the Nigeria case, undermines the government's credibility. For example, It appears that Somali government officials' claims of killing 30 al-Shabaab fighters and ["repulsing"](#) the other fighters were exaggerated when referring to an al-Shabaab raid on a base manned by Eritrean-trained Somali troops in May. Al-Shabaab's own photographs and videos, in contrast, provided [stronger evidence](#) of Somali troops fleeing the base and significant weapons being pilfered from it. If the Somali government loses the trust of the population, it will accordingly lose legitimacy, which in the long run is crucial in its battle to regain sovereignty over the country's territories that are now under al-Shabaab's control.

Increased Humanitarian Aid to Displaced and At-Risk Persons

Second, the international community, and especially the U.S. and Türkiye, train Somali special forces and new recruits, while regional troops from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Burundi, and Kenya are all involved in combatting al-Shabaab. However, UN Secretary-General António Guterres still suggests that ["massive international support"](#) is needed for Somalia. This is

because the Somali government faces the dual crisis of combatting al-Shabaab at the same time that it must provide significant humanitarian support for displaced persons. While dealing with al-Shabaab has proven to be difficult enough, when humanitarian aid for the population falls short, it only offers al-Shabaab a chance to step in where the state is lacking and become the de-facto government.

The Somali government is planning to imminently relaunch an [offensive in southern Somalia](#) to recapture al-Shabaab territories. If the offensive is successful, the government will newly be in control of territories that had been administered for years by al-Shabaab. The cash-strapped Somali government has benefitted from international aid, but it remains unclear if current aid allocations are sufficient to cover what the government will need to provide services in newly recaptured territories. If the Somali military does not have support from the government to adequately provide services in these areas, it will weaken the government's mandate and ultimately assist al-Shabaab if, or when, it attempts to launch counter-attacks to retake the southern Somali towns.

Regional Strategy

Lastly, the regional forces in Somalia must better coordinate their counter-insurgency efforts. Too often the Ugandans, Kenyans, and Ethiopia man their own bases but do not communicate or launch offensives with their regional counterparts. Further, U.S. intelligence can help identify large-scale al-Shabaab movements that precede attempts to capture bases. While the U.S. is hesitant to conduct air strikes in Somalia against al-Shabaab foot soldiers—as opposed to designated terrorist leaders, including [Islamic State's Somali fighters](#)—increasing aerial surveillance and intelligence sharing would still be a needed improvement.

In order to better coordinate a regional strategy, the U.S. must not ignore the political turbulence in West Africa, but it cannot become too embroiled in that region to lose sight of the progress, despite continuing challenges, in East Africa. Indeed, the Somali government has experienced a democratic transition and is committed to the fight against al-Shabaab. It still requires regional and international support, but with a renewed U.S. commitment and greater coordination with the AQ forces and neighboring countries, the hope is that al-Shabaab's

territorial gains can be rolled back and the Somali government can eventually lead the counter-insurgency campaign independently.

Conclusion

The U.S. is fortunate to have multiple regional partners playing a role in combatting al-Shabaab militarily. While reducing or making its military footprint more targeted in Somalia, the U.S. can continue to work with and support these partners. At the same time, if anything, the U.S. priority should be committing to a long-term presence in the country and partnering with Somalia's own government to reduce its corruption and better serve the population, which in the long term will lead to the dwindling of al-Shabaab's attraction and greater commitment from the population to the state and Somalia's—not al-Shabaab's—prosperity.

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.