As ATMIS Looks to Withdraw, the Risk of Large-Scale al-Shabaab Success in Southern Somalia is High

Colin Robinson

In March this year, the African Union (AU) expeditionary force in southern Somalia—which started off as AMISOM but is now the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—reached its 17th year. The mission will end on 31 December 2024, and be replaced by a new African Union Stabilisation and Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). United Nations Security Council approval will have to be given this month to meet the changeover deadline. Yet the new force is unlikely to significantly degrade the long-term threat al-Shabaab poses. al-Shabaab is stronger than generally perceived, and may be in a position to achieve significant, large-scales successes.

Perhaps the greatest reason why the AU mission has failed to sustainably improve security in southern Somalia is the fundamental difference between its liberal approach to peacebuilding and the environment it seeks to change. Liberal peacebuilding prioritizes the creation of democratic states with strong institutions. Yet Somalis have little genuinely liberal history. Clans have fought with each other over water and grazing for hundreds of years. The civil war began in 1987-88; thus, sustained peace - and prosperity for anyone but a privileged few - is beyond the reach of living memory. Over the past 35 years, power-brokers have struggled, primarily, for survival, power, and profit. By prioritizing progress or peace, they would risk ceding power to other strongmen (as one Somali scholar put more bluntly.) While governments in southern Somalia may have liberal trappings, many power-brokers have little interest in creating any kind of liberal political entity.

In an environment rife with clan loyalties, al-Shabaab often inspires more commitment from its fighters than the government inspires in theirs. As a result, the internationally sponsored southern Somali governments–the Federal Government and the regional Federal Member States–were at risk of collapse if a new AU follow-on mission did not eventuate. Since a new mission is now almost certain, the risk is somewhat mitigated. Yet considering that the new mission will likely operate much as its predecessor did, the southern Somali governments might fall to al-Shabaab even with various African troop contingents still present.

The AU mission in Somalia has been through 18 years of grinding counterinsurgency operations. It fought 4 years of brutal urban warfare in Mogadishu from 2007-11, in which Ugandan and Burundian soldiers displayed immense courage. Since then, it has been stretched to try to hold a series of somewhat isolated towns. Mogadishu covered about 130 square kilometres; the southern Somalia area in total is over 300,000 square kilometres. From 2012-15, the road distances for supply convoys stretched from the scores of kilometres inside Mogadishu, to over 400 kilometres to far-flung points like Luuq on the Ethiopian-Somali border. Al-Shabaab has launched several very successful attacks on isolated bases, notably at Bulo Mareer in May 2023.

Creating a strong, militarily effective Somali army was a prerequisite to allow the AU force to withdraw. But deep political divides, often made worse by the role clan ties play in Somali military affairs, have prevented the formation of a unified army. At its core, counterinsurgency is not a military- or police-led enterprise; rather, it is "80% political" and civilian-led. The loyalties and beliefs of the civilian population are crucial. Counterinsurgents compete against the insurgents to win the people's adherence; protect them from attack; and convince them that their side will win.

Published by International Peace Institute (IPI). This is the Author Accepted Manuscript issued with: Creative Commons Attribution License (CC:BY 4.0).
The published version is available online at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2024/12/as-atmis-looks-to-withdraw-the-risk-of-large-scale-al-shabaab-success-in-southern-somalia-is-high/.
Please refer to any applicable publisher terms of use.

But to do this, unity in government is needed. Divides within the internationally recognized government have historically been very problematic in similar campaigns – in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq – and the same kind of problems are present in Somalia. Individuals' survival, power, and profit have generally been much more important than unifying together against the enemy. Even if all the other many technical and supply problems were solved, politics easily makes, or in this case breaks, state armed forces.

Patience on the part of the AU, external supporters, and troop contributors has not been infinite. Frustrated at the lack of unified Somali action, the AU started a withdrawal process started in the second half of 2017. ATMIS is now planned to exit by December 31, 2024. Discussions have been under way for months on a successor force. It now appears that the force may number 11,900 personnel, holding a series of about 14 forward bases, mostly crucial airfields. It appears that this is likely to result in a reduction of some 700 personnel from the currently mandated 12,626. Significant numbers of Ugandan troops will be included; Uganda has always played a leading role in the force, since 2007. The defence pact between Somalia and Egypt also theoretically anticipates that up to 5,000 Egyptian troops might join the renamed AU force, with more deployed in the south bilaterally. But Egyptian forces are likely to be more a drag than an asset, as they have a very poor combat record, as the continuing troubles in the Sinai attest.

There has not been the sustained level of trust needed to unify Somali forces, and different external supporters have been pulling in different directions for different aims. While Ethiopian water brinkmanship with Egypt over the GERD dam in Ethiopia has been a long-running, latent, regional tension, as disagreements have mounted, it could also further fracture Somali aims. Two successive Somali Presidential administrations have taken actions which would empower themselves yet disempower other factions. Meanwhile al-Shabaab continues to find and exploit loopholes. If government authorities prioritize factional survival and power, strengthening the state drops down the priority list. If factions will not unify, it is hard to believe in and be inspired by the idea of a unified state. All else flows from this, including the degree of interest in building a unified army, as past research has shown.

The size of the Somali National Army (SNA) has significantly expanded since late 2022. Its field forces today are a patchwork of at least three parts: long-standing clan-animated militias from before 2018 who receive uniforms, weapons, funding and recognition as "Somali National Army brigades;" newer brigades of somewhat the same nature which have appeared from 2022; and foreign-funded higher-grade infantry, better trained by the United States and Turkey.

The first part, the roughly 13 pre-existing clan brigades, can each be estimated at about 1,000 strong. The pre-existing brigades generally had to be funded from Somali resources, though in South West State the United Kingdom also pays stipends. There are now also at least eight new clan brigades plus a pair of new battalions earmarked for special forces training. While the United Arab Emirates promised to pay 15,000 new personnel for two years in early February 2023, the number that eventually graduated from training appears to have been either 12,000 or 13,000. After heavy fighting, and, in view of the constant threat of payment/records irregularities, the size of the new clan-centric forces may now be roughly nine to ten thousand. Like the six original brigades formed in 2008-09, they hail mostly from the central Somali Hawiye clan-family.

In addition and very separately, there are the two foreign client special forces. These are forces which have been created with their funders' national security aims very clearly in view. The first, created with United States (US) counter-terrorist priorities very much in mind, was the US Danab (Brigade 16, now possibly over 2600 strong). Then Turkey began to create Gorgor (now two brigades, Brigades 17 and 18). Instead of poor or no training, recruits for these units drill under overall US or Turkish supervision. They are given good amounts of support, pay, and medical care, all backed by US or Turkish financing. However, the strength of these forces is contingent on these two foreign governments continuing their support. Similar US-supported special forces in Afghanistan were overused, worn out, and eventually destroyed as the US withdrew.

The divides that have impaired the centralized Somali armed force date back decades, to the beginning of the civil war in 1987-88. Two years ago, however, the military situation began to change significantly. Rural clans, angered by intolerable oppression, began to rise to push back Al-Shabaab. Initially this took place separately from the majority of the severely ineffective SNA clan brigades. This first series of clan offensives in central Somalia from late 2022 were driven by one of the most important clan-families in Somalia, the Hawiye, and their closely associated kin the Hawaadle. For some time, outside observers have asked how these gains can be made enduring, and extended to other areas. Yet this risks overstating the strength of the southern Somali governments.

Recent analyses have judged that al-Shabaab may have some military advantages heading into the next 12 months or so. But it may even be much stronger than has been generally accepted. It has made several significant gains. The al-Shabaab shadow state and taxation apparatus remains very strong, if not growing. There is a clear risk that al-Shabaab may be able to openly seize much more territory, into Mogadishu itself. The primary reason for this is political, alongside the growing reach and attraction of the al-Shabaab alternative.

Al-Shabaab's persistent strength has raised interest in negotiations with the group, including among donors. But after the 2022 offensives began, President Hassan Sheikh Mohammed declared "total war" against them, the prospect of genuine negotiations dropped. Even if admitted into a negotiated coalition government, al-Shabaab's unity of purpose might well prove too strong for divided, shifting government-aligned factions, and it might seize total power for itself alone.

The new AU force in 2025 and beyond will have to defend politicians who are not invested in the creation of a unified state or, by extension, a unified and effective army. It is always possible that the politicians in Mogadishu might come to greater agreement. But if this does not occur, there is reason to believe that al-Shabaab might seize much of the urban areas and even pin a remaining international presence back against the sea, forcing a physical defence of the Mogadishu International Airport complex. Given al-Shabaab's continuing covert hold on urban areas, such a collapse of government forces may even be possible even in the presence of the smaller AU follow-on force. Fears of a large-scale collapse in and around Mogadishu have been made public before, in 2021. When comparable US forces withdrew from Afghanistan and Iraq, both armies suffered similar large-scale collapses.

'For the purposes of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Accepted Author Manuscript version arising from this submission.'

https://intranet.cranfield.ac.uk/RI/Documents/CU-RIO-POL-19.0%20Institutional%20Rights%20Retention%20Policy.pdf



https://dspace.org/

As ATMIS looks to withdraw, the risk of large-scale al-Shabaab success in southern Somalia is high

Robinson, Colin D.

2024-12-10
The International Peace Institute
https://theglobalobservatory.org/2024/12/as-atmis-looks-to-withdraw-the-risk-of-large-scale-al-shabaab-success-in-southern-somalia-is-high/
Robinson CD. (2024) As ATMIS looks to withdraw, the risk of large-scale al-Shabaab success in southern Somalia is high. Global Observatory, Available online 10 December 2024

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/