

# Why Victories in Battle Have Not Yet Finished the War Against al-Shabaab

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Since 2007, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has been fighting a violent campaign to reclaim territory held by jihadist militants known as al-Shabaab. Military successes, including the liberation of a number of Somali cities from the insurgent group's control, have generated considerable optimism that al-Shabaab is on the decline.

Indeed, the view that Somalia and its international partners are 'winning' and that al-Shabaab is 'on the brink of defeat' has been doing the rounds among pundits and politicians for years.<sup>1</sup> Analysts have claimed that al-Shabaab is 'fighting for its survival', resembling a 'wounded leopard' that has become 'weak' and 'desperate'.<sup>2</sup> Others describe the group as 'a pale shadow' of the organisation it once was, with its rank-and-file membership 'decimated' by African Union (AU) forces and drone strikes by the United States.<sup>3</sup> Former Somali prime minister Abdi Farah Shirdon has declared al-Shabaab to have been 'militarily defeated and reduced to a shrinking guerrilla force on the brink of extermination', a claim reiterated by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who insists the group 'is already defeated'.<sup>4</sup> Even US President Barack Obama has cited the battle against al-Shabaab as a model of success for his relatively light-footprint approach to counter-terrorism.<sup>5</sup>

These optimistic appraisals are not entirely without merit. Over the past five years, AMISOM forces, together with the Somali National Army (SNA),

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have expanded their territorial presence across Somalia, consolidating their grip on Mogadishu and expanding their control outside the capital. Fighting alongside Kenyan and Ethiopian forces, which were integrated into the mission in 2012 and 2014 respectively, AMISOM has liberated a number of major urban centres, including Baidoa, Kismayo and al-Shabaab's former stronghold of Barawe, and have also recaptured much of the territory along the Kenya–Somalia and Ethiopia–Somalia borders.

But victories in battle have not yet finished the war. The rhetoric surrounding claims that Somalia represents a 'major success story and a potential model for the resolution of other conflicts on the continent', as one senior US State Department official put it, is belied by the persistent presence of al-Shabaab throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> In 2016 alone, the group has laid siege to hotels and restaurants in the heart of Mogadishu, killed Somali political leaders and carried out a bomb attack on a commercial airliner, and has mounted daring raids on a number of AMISOM and SNA bases.<sup>7</sup> This violence comes on the heels of continued cross-border attacks, including last year's massacre of 147 innocent students and administrators at Garissa University College in northeast Kenya.<sup>8</sup> Are AMISOM and SNA forces really winning in Somalia?

### **AMISOM and peacekeeping**

Many positive assessments of Somalia's recovery assume that the AMISOM deployment is a peacekeeping mission. This is a characterisation that is actively cultivated by politicians and diplomats, with AU soldiers regularly described as peacekeepers in press statements, and the larger contingent dubbed 'an active, regional peacekeeping mission' in AMISOM media materials.

But peacekeeping is defined by three principles – consent of the warring parties, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of a mission's mandate – all of which AMISOM violates.<sup>9</sup> Al-Shabaab does not consent to the mission's presence; the deployment is explicitly pro-government; and offensive combat operations have been a regular feature of AMISOM's struggle against al-Shabaab.

Nor is AMISOM a peace-enforcement mission. While such operations do call for the threat or use of force to compel warring parties to end their

fighting, they are characterised by defensive military postures that aim to de-escalate tensions between combatants.<sup>10</sup> As AU doctrine explains, 'the aim of [a peace-enforcement operation] will not be the defeat or destruction of factions or belligerents, but rather to compel, coerce and persuade the parties to comply with a particular course of action'.<sup>11</sup> AMISOM, by contrast, has adopted aggressive military postures, proactively sought out al-Shabaab militants and initiated attacks against al-Shabaab bases.

The reality is that AMISOM is engaged in a counter-insurgency operation – a 'comprehensive civilian and military effort designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes'.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish its objectives, AMISOM must not only liberate territory from al-Shabaab control and secure the civilian population against insurgent violence, but must also work tirelessly to build popular support for the Somali government, provide humanitarian relief to the Somali population and assist with institutional-development programmes that will set the stage for effective governance over the long term.

The distinction between peacekeeping, peace enforcement and counter-insurgency is not merely a matter of semantics. These operations vary tremendously in the levels of impartiality with which they treat warring parties, in the intensity of combat they encounter, and in the military, economic and political capabilities they require to succeed. If AMISOM is a counter-insurgency operation, it must be staffed, equipped and trained like one.

Unfortunately, existing assessments of AMISOM's capabilities have identified a range of vulnerabilities that threaten the deployment's core objectives: the mission is significantly undermanned, lacks the resources and force enablers needed to counter al-Shabaab, and does not possess the logistical capacity required to sustain combat operations over the long term.<sup>13</sup> The challenge that confronts AMISOM is decidedly more complex and dangerous than a peacekeeping mission, but the force is not adequately equipped to accomplish its objectives. Consequently, while important progress has been made in the battle for Somalia, there are inherent limits to AMISOM's ability to continue taking the fight to al-Shabaab on both the military and political fronts.

### **Territorial losses and military weakness**

A second assumption underlying optimistic assessments of the security situation in Somalia is the notion that al-Shabaab's territorial losses are indicative of its military weakness. Analysts point out that territory enables insurgents to establish political control over local populations and build operational capacity. Since al-Shabaab has been pushed out of many of Somalia's major cities, the group must lack the military capacity to win battles against its opponents.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that al-Shabaab has ceded several urban areas, and it is also true that the group cannot compete with the superior military capabilities enjoyed by the counter-insurgents. But many of al-Shabaab's territorial setbacks were the result less of military defeats than of the group's decision to strategically withdraw. Indeed, al-Shabaab has not typically fought large-scale battles to hold on to cities. This is because it has adopted a long view of its armed struggle, prioritising the preservation of its military capacity over territorial control – a choice often made by insurgent organisations. By trading territory for time, the group has been able to preserve the core of its fighting force while retaining its operational tempo.

Al-Shabaab's objective is to pin down counter-insurgent forces on multiple fronts, lengthen supply lines and impose asymmetrical costs. Rather than engage in set-piece battles, it attacks supply convoys, cuts off liberated cities and raids enemy bases. AMISOM and the SNA have struggled to counter these tactics, not least due to their lack of air platforms and the threat posed by al-Shabaab ambush teams. Logistical challenges have also proven to be a recurrent problem for the counter-insurgent force, which has struggled to sustain offensive combat operations over the long term.<sup>15</sup> As AMISOM and SNA troops have taken up static positions in Somalia's major cities, al-Shabaab has been free to operate throughout the countryside and to attack at times and in places of its choosing.

Consider, for example, recent attacks on AMISOM bases in Leego, Janaale and El Adde. In each of these cases, al-Shabaab exploited its mobility to rapidly concentrate its forces and overwhelm enemy positions. It took AMISOM reinforcements over 48 hours to respond to the Leego attack despite being stationed just 30 kilometres away. Reportedly, the delay was

at least partly a function of concerns that al-Shabaab fighters would ambush incoming troops.<sup>16</sup> In Janaale, al-Shabaab destroyed bridges to make it more difficult for AMISOM troops to escape and for reinforcements to respond. Lacking air assets and medical-evacuation platforms, the besieged AMISOM contingent took heavy casualties, with at least 37 soldiers killed.<sup>17</sup> This story was repeated during the attack on El Adde: despite a drawn-out firefight lasting several hours, neither reinforcements nor air support arrived to relieve the embattled AMISOM troops. As many as 141 Kenyan soldiers were killed in what was one of the worst military losses of life for the Kenyan Defence Forces since 1963.<sup>18</sup>

It is also not clear that surrendering urban territory has greatly affected al-Shabaab's ability to control local populations. The group continues to extort local businesses, threaten civilians and tax goods and trade in cities that are nominally under AMISOM and SNA control.<sup>19</sup> In fact, an October 2014 report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea concluded that, at that time, al-Shabaab was generating *more* revenue from the illegal charcoal trade than it did when it controlled Kismayo, a port city that served as the central hub for the group's charcoal exports before it was liberated by AMISOM in September 2012.<sup>20</sup>

While al-Shabaab aspires to rule over all of Somalia's territory in the long term, its leadership understands that time is on its side. By avoiding large-scale confrontations, al-Shabaab can force AMISOM and the SNA to disproportionately expend men and resources while ensuring the core of the group lives to fight another day.

### **Terrorism and desperation**

The optimistic view of al-Shabaab's decline also maintains that the group's adoption of terrorist tactics is a sign of desperation. Because terrorism is a 'weapon of the weak', the logic holds, insurgent groups only turn to terrorist tactics when they are desperate to capture headlines and remain relevant. Consequently, al-Shabaab's attacks on soft targets, such as shopping malls and universities, are evidence of weakness, not strength.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Shabaab's massacres of innocent civilians are reprehensible, but they should not be used as a barometer of its military capacity. The group

remains a capable organisation and a dangerous military force, possessing extensive human, material and financial resources. It maintains a force of several thousand active fighters armed with small arms and light weapons, anti-tank weapons, anti-air weapons, field artillery, technicals, landmines and multiple types of improvised explosive devices. These capabilities have enabled the group to retain the capacity to carry out asymmetric attacks, as well as assaults on military bases and personnel.

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Moreover, al-Shabaab's incorporation of terrorist tactics as an extension of its guerrilla and conventional operations is nothing new: this form of violence has characterised the group's attacks for years. Al-Shabaab's use of martyrdom operations dates back to 2006. If anything, there has been a progressive evolution in the group's use of 'hybrid' attacks, in which suicide bombers are used to breach security perimeters that are subsequently exploited by small teams of infantry armed with assault rifles and grenades.<sup>22</sup>

These tactics have proven increasingly effective in attacks on major targets, including the Somali Supreme Court, UN buildings, and AMISOM and SNA bases.

The horrific spectacle of al-Shabaab's international terrorist attacks, such as those on the Westgate Shopping Mall and Garissa University College in Kenya, is also not new. The group conducted its first such operation in July 2010, when it detonated three bombs outside nightclubs in Kampala, Uganda, where crowds had gathered to watch the World Cup. The near-simultaneous explosions left 74 dead and another 70 injured, making it the worst terrorist attack in east Africa since the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than demonstrating desperation, al-Shabaab's use of terrorism highlights the multifaceted threat the group continues to pose. Somalia and its international partners must simultaneously defend liberated cities from attack, counter guerrilla-style hit-and-run tactics and conduct counter-terrorism operations in urban centres. By employing multiple combat tactics simultaneously, al-Shabaab has rendered population protection both tactically demanding and manpower-intensive for counter-insurgent forces.

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As early as autumn 2012, senior US officials were declaring Somalia to be ‘a good news story for the region, for the international community, but most especially for the people of Somalia itself’.<sup>24</sup> There is no denying that Somalia and its international partners have made important progress in their battle against al-Shabaab, but such glowing assessments do not yet square with reality. Al-Shabaab remains capable and dangerous; AMISOM and the SNA are undermanned and under-equipped. Meanwhile, the scale of the humanitarian crisis currently afflicting Somalia is staggering: an estimated one million Somalis are in need of emergency aid; some 3.7m are food-insecure, including over 300,000 acutely malnourished children; roughly 1.1m are internally displaced; and a further 1.2m have become refugees scattered across the Horn of Africa and Yemen.<sup>25</sup> One is hard-pressed to find the ‘good news story’ among these painful realities.

Perhaps the most dangerous assumption of all is the idea that success in Somalia can be measured by recaptured territory or control of city centres. Victories in battle have not yet finished the war because they probably never could – political reform, consensus building and institutional development are necessary prerequisites for peace in the country. Yet at present, exclusionary politics, poor governance and rampant corruption remain characteristic features of the Somali political landscape; the federal government’s original framework for political transition remains years behind schedule; and the persistence of zero-sum politics threatens to empower spoiler networks across south-central Somalia.<sup>26</sup>

Somalia’s leaders and their international partners must come to terms with political and military reality. Until an inclusive political arrangement is established in the country, the authorities in Mogadishu will lack national legitimacy, and efforts to pursue a national mandate will fail. Meanwhile, without significant increases in troop numbers, force enablers, logistics and training, the counter-insurgency campaign against al-Shabaab will continue to stagnate.<sup>27</sup>

This is not an attempt to deny the important progress that has been made in Somalia over the last five years, but it is a call for more realistic net assess-

ments of the political and security challenges that continue to afflict the country. Optimism about Somalia may be well-intentioned, but it is misplaced. It is still too early to claim victory over al-Shabaab.

## Notes

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- html; and Abdi Sheikh and Feisal Omar, 'Al-Shabaab Militants Attack Somali Army Base, Says Dozens Dead', Reuters, 15 January 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-attacks-idUSKCN0UT0BT>.
- <sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman, Isma'il Kushkush and Rukmini Callimachi, 'Somali Militants Kill 147 at Kenyan University', *New York Times*, 2 April 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/world/africa/garissa-university-college-shooting-in-kenya.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines* (New York: United Nations, 2008), p. 31.
- <sup>10</sup> See Barry Posen, 'Urban Operations: Tactical Realities and Strategic Ambiguities', in Michael Desch (ed.), *Soldiers in Cities: Military Operations on Urban Terrain* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 159; and Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 6.
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- <sup>12</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Counterinsurgency', JP 3-24, 22 November 2013, p. ix, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_24.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_24.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Noel Anderson, 'Peacekeepers Fighting a Counterinsurgency Campaign: A Net Assessment of the African Union Mission in Somalia', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 11, 2014, pp. 936–58.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Bergen and Schuster, 'A Weakened Al-Shabaab Lashes Out'; Bueno de Mesquita, 'Al-Shabaab is Fighting for its Survival'; and Rotberg, 'A Wounded Leopard'.
- <sup>15</sup> See 'Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Joint AU–UN Benchmarking Exercise and the Review of the African Union Mission in Somalia', PSC/PR/2.(CCCXCIX), 10 October 2013, paragraphs 7 and 13, <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-rpt-399-amisom-09-10-2013.pdf>; and 'Somalia: Amisom Faces Logistical, Technical Challenges, Mutende Says', All Africa, 14 August 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408150618.html>. A communiqué from the AU Peace and Security Council suggests that the most recent AU–UN Joint Benchmarking Exercise, which has not yet been released to the public, also identified gaps in the provision of logistical support to front-line AMISOM and SNA troops. See 'Communiqué of the 521st Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Joint AU–UN Mission in Somalia', PSC/PR/COMM.(DXXI), 30 June 2015, paragraph 12, <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-521-somalia-comm-30-6-2015.pdf>.
- <sup>16</sup> Harun Maruf, 'Al-Shabab Attacks Expose AMISOM Weaknesses', *Voice of America*, 1 July 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/al-shabab-attacks-expose-amisom-weaknesses/2845768.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, 'Military Sources: Al-Shabaab Attack

- in Somalia Kills Dozens of AU Troops', CNN, 3 September 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/03/africa/somalia-al-shabaab-attack>.
- 18 Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre', CNN, 31 May 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/31/africa/kenya-soldiers-el-adde-massacre>. Official death tolls remain unknown, as neither the AU nor AMISOM's troop-contributing countries release fatality records. On this issue, see Paul D. Williams, 'Special Report: How Many Fatalities Has the African Union Mission in Somalia Suffered?', *Global Observatory*, 10 September 2015, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/09/amisom-african-union-somalia-peacekeeping>.
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- 22 For a discussion of this evolution, see Matt Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), pp. 7–11.
- 23 Xan Rice, 'Uganda Bomb Blasts Kill at Least 74', *Guardian*, 12 July 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/12/uganda-kampala-bombs-explosions-attacks>.
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- 26 For a detailed overview of the challenges which afflict Somalia's political transition, see Matt Bryden and Tres Thomas, 'Somalia's Troubled Transition: Vision 2016 Revisited', *Sahan*, May 2015. On the threat of spoiler groups, see 'Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea', S/2015/801, 19 October 2015, pp. 10–14, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2015\\_801.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_801.pdf). On the persistence of non-state armed actors and the challenges they pose to institutional development and security-sector reform more generally, see Ken Menkhaus, 'Non-State

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- <sup>27</sup> On the military capabilities needed for a successful counter-insurgency campaign in Somalia, see Anderson, 'Peacekeepers Fighting a

Counterinsurgency Campaign'. On the major challenges confronting an AMISOM exit strategy, see Paul D. Williams and Abdirashid Hashi, *Exit Strategy Challenges for the AU Mission in Somalia* (Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 2016).

