



Limitations of Security Sector Reform in Countering Al-Shabaab in Somalia

Daisy Muibu, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, The University of Alabama



International partners, particularly the United States needs to adopt a more comprehensive overhaul to its approach in the region. This means recognizing that a militarized solution to the conflict is not feasible. Conducting airstrikes and training government forces can boast some tactical successes, but this approach is ultimately insufficient to strategically alter the trajectory of the conflict which currently favors al-Shabaab. A negotiated settlement to the broader conflict between governing actors should be the priority.

Daisy Muibu, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
University of Alabama

Over the past few years, al-Shabaab's insurgency in Somalia has gained strength despite the significant amount of foreign assistance dedicated to security sector reform (SSR) in the country. An al-Qaeda branch, al-Shabaab's strength has varied over time, but ultimately the group has remained remarkably resilient to increased military pressure leveraged against it since 2007. Despite some tactical successes against insurgent group, the conflict in Somalia remains, at best, at a stalemate since 2016, while al-Shabaab has proved capable of expanding its activities. Notably, the group's activities have increased 33% since 2019, and over 2020 alone al-Shabaab conducted at least 30 suicide attacks.

The group has also expanded its operational reach and tempo in northeastern Kenya and northern Somalia. Beyond its attacks, al-Shabaab's growing strength is also evident in its recent territorial gains, its ability to collect taxes and adjudicate matters in government-controlled territories, and its governance structures that rival and undermine the legitimacy of state institutions. In light of the recent political impasse around the 2021 elections, not to mention the United States' military repositioning and Ethiopia's troop drawdown – due to conflict in Tigray –, security force assistance efforts, if they continue as they have, will be insufficient at strategically altering the course of al-Shabaab's insurgency.

Three reasons explain why SSR efforts have failed to break through the current stalemate in the conflict with al-Shabaab. First, SSR efforts have been uncoordinated, resulting in domestic forces that lack cohesion, are institutionally under-developed and that are unprepared for the successful transfer of security responsibilities from the African Union Mission

in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping forces. Since 2008, foreign military assistance to Somalia has substantially increased. However, due to the fractious political dynamic of the nation, such assistance has resulted in the creation of numerous Somali security forces. Most of this assistance has been directed to the federal government in Mogadishu for the development of the Somali National Army (SNA), but some security donors have bypassed the authority of the FGS to directly assist local forces existing at the federal member state (FMS) level.

Consequently, several different forces exist at the federal and member state level, each with their own loyalties, capabilities, and priorities. This has not only exacerbated tensions between the FGS and FMS, it has also undermined efforts to develop cohesive and collaborative security forces across the nation. In fact, rivalries and clashes between various security forces/units are not uncommon. For instance, firefights broke out in the Gedo region over 2020 between forces loyal to the federal government, on one side, and the Jubbaland regional state's security forces, on the other, resulting in fatalities and the displacement of thousands. In Mogadishu, the Eritrean-trained National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) and various military units have been known to clash, while similar rivalries and battles exist between military units and within NISA itself.

Beyond these rivalries, the SNA, which has received significant donor assistance, remains unprofessional and can best be described as “a collection of former militia” with clan loyalties that supersede force cohesion. Accordingly, the SNA can easily fracture as evidenced by the recent dangerous political impasse over the elections where units abandoned base/defected and retreated to their clan strongholds. Admittedly, the SNA does have elite and capable units such as the US-trained Danab and the Turkish-supported Gorgor unit, as well as a military police unit known as Haram'aad. But none of these units are well-placed for the successful transfer of security responsibilities nor do they operate entirely impartially. For instance, forces like NISA, Gorgor, and Haram'aad were used by the federal government against opposition parties in February 2021. Given these rivalries and the lack of force cohesion, AMISOM's withdrawal in December 2021 is wishful thinking.

Second, there is an asymmetry of interests between international donors and local political elites; while the former are concerned with counterterrorism and the development of militaries, the latter are more concerned with securing their local power bases and fending off political opponents. Moreover, though residents' expectations for security and governance in much of southern Somalia are largely unknown, recent works in localities like Kismayo and Baidoa reveal that residents care about local forces' preparedness to address threats posed by groups like al-Shabaab, as well as the extent to which security actors are representative of local clans. Consequently, prioritizing security assistance to the SNA and other federal forces means that national forces tend to be deployed to regions where they lack local ties to be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of locals, not to mention the reported corruption within the central government which undermines efforts to transfer funding to regional actors.

This leads to the third and key reason why SSR efforts have been unsuccessful; such efforts have not been part of a viable strategy aimed at resolving the broader political crisis in Somalia. Though the international community has focused almost single-mindedly on countering al-Shabaab, the conflict in Somalia is fundamentally local. Underlying the political impasse that currently exists between the federal government and regional FMS, as well as the challenges around force cohesion and security force rivalry is the unaddressed political tensions that brought about the country's descent into civil war in the late 80s and early 90s. The absence of meaningful reconciliation between clans has meant that political frameworks meant to solve political tensions have suffered from chronic distrust and poor implementation. Al-Shabaab benefits from this situation. Not only does the group's origins trace back to civil conflict in Somalia, al-Shabaab has also become “domesticated” – i.e., it controls territory, governs, and exploits local political grievances to undermine the legitimacy of the state and expand its influence.

Accordingly, political reconciliation is needed for SSR to actually work. This involves a genuine reconciliation of the political tensions that exist between the FGS and FMS and the clan dynamics that underlie the existing political impasse. To effectively combat al-Shabaab and build more cooperative forces, Somalia as a state needs to be more politically consolidated. Therefore, foreign military assistance needs to be a part of a broader viable political settlement to conflict. International partners, particularly the United States needs to adopt a more comprehensive overhaul to its approach in the region. This means recognizing that a militarized solution to the conflict is not feasible. Conducting airstrikes and training government forces can boast some tactical successes, but this approach is ultimately insufficient to strategically alter the trajectory of the conflict which currently favors al-Shabaab. A negotiated settlement to the broader conflict between governing actors should be the priority.

Photo by

1st Page - Abukar Albadri

2nd Page - Carl Montgomery

© June 2021. All rights reserved by Orion Policy Institute Publications.

Orion Policy Institute is an independent non-profit think tank based in Washington D.C.

1050 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 500,
Washington, DC 20036
orionpolicy.org

