

Militias and Insurgency in Somalia

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Brief Analysis

PolicyWatch #1593 is the first in a two-part series discussing trends in Somalia. This piece focuses on the country's growing insurgency, while [PolicyWatch #1594](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3132>) addresses peacebuilding efforts and Somalia's ties to terrorism.

During her recent tour of Africa, U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton held a press conference with Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, president of Somalia's transitional federal government (TFG). Her statements mark a major public commitment by the Obama administration to support Sharif's flagging government against the country's armed opposition groups, some of which are tied to al-Qaeda and threaten security across the greater Horn of Africa.

Transitional Federal Government

The TFG was created by an internationally supported peace process in Kenya in 2004. Before the TFG could negotiate its arrival in Mogadishu, a civil society-supported amalgam of various Islamic and tribal interests united to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). After fifteen years of rule by unpopular, clan-based warlords, the ICU temporarily brought security and hope to the war-ravaged capital city. The ICU, however, was an unwieldy creation. Under the influence of hardline Islamists, ICU militia extended control over most of southern Somalia, surrounded the TFG's rear base in Baidoa, and threatened to extend its holy war to Ethiopia. In response, Ethiopian forces invaded southern Somalia in December 2006, defeated the ICU, and installed the TFG in Mogadishu. This dispersed, but did not destroy, ICU forces across southern Somalia. They reemerged in many forms, notably the Hizb al-Islamiyah and Harakat al-Shabab groups, which slowly reinfiltated Mogadishu in piecemeal fashion. The militias engaged in classic guerilla tactics to intimidate, harass, and wear down their opponents. Over time, they imported sophisticated attack methods into Somalia, including the use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings.

Even with Ethiopia's military support, the TFG was unable to defeat the insurgents and became hampered by leadership conflicts and clan-based schisms over power-sharing. In January 2009, the first TFG president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, was replaced by Sheikh Sharif -- a more moderate Islamist leader of the ICU -- in a move to split opposition forces and dilute the armed opposition. Nonetheless, the TFG remains a paper tiger. The parliament rarely meets, and many of its members have fled Mogadishu out of fear for personal security. TFG is unable to deliver desperately needed social services and has no civil service to speak of -- cabinet ministers are often the only TFG ministry staff. Force protection for the TFG is provided primarily by 5,000 Ugandan and Burundian troops that are in Mogadishu as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The TFG was almost pushed out of Mogadishu in June 2009 by a concerted insurgent offensive. The TFG controls only a fraction of the capital and has influence in other parts of southern Somalia through loose alliances with clan-based political leaders and militias. Even in Mogadishu, the TFG has extremely weak command and control over the militia forces that support it, including strongmen in the security services and Ahlu Sunna wa Jamaah, a Sufist movement that recently spawned several armed militias. These groups function with almost complete independence, are constituted by different and competing sub-clans, and control their own patches of Somali

territory -- much as the country's warlord-based factions did in the 1990s.

Armed Opposition Groups

The insurgency in Somalia is comprised of two major groups: Hizb al-Islamiyah and Harakat al-Shabab, both of which have leaders associated with al-Qaeda's East Africa cell. Hizb al-Islamiyah is a loose amalgamation of several militant movements in southern Somalia that emerged from the ICU. The group is led by Hassan Dahir Aweis, the former military commander of al-Itihad al-Islamiyah (AIAI), Somalia's first modern Islamist militant movement in the 1990s and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. Hizb al-Islamiyah is viewed by many as a vehicle for Aweis's personal ambitions to become the first leader of an Islamist state in Somalia. He was joined by the Ras Kamboni group, led by Hassan al-Turki -- another former AIAI leader -- and based in the Darod clan areas of the lower and middle Juba region. Hizb al-Islamiyah also includes two smaller militia groups: the Somali Islamic Front and the Anole group.

Harakat al-Shabab (The Youth Movement) is a decentralized and violent Somali jihadist movement that aspires to create a fundamentalist Islamist emirate across the Horn of Africa. This contrasts with Hizb al-Islamiyah, which has maintained a more nationalistic, Somalia-focused agenda. Although al-Shabab did not come to the attention of analysts until mid-2006, the group's core leadership had been active since at least 2003. Al-Shabab evolved from a small group of committed Somali militants working with Aweis and AIAI to provide protection and support to al-Qaeda's East Africa cell. Al-Shabab eventually gained autonomy from the AIAI leadership, began "manhunting" operations against warlord militia commanders supporting Western counterterrorism efforts, and conducted a spate of murders of international aid workers and peace activists. The movement then became the elite fighting force of the ICU, and is now the backbone of the anti-TFG insurgency. Thus far, the group's most devastating attacks took place in the relatively peaceful northern regions of Somaliland and Puntland in October 2008. The five simultaneous explosions at local government offices, a UN compound, and the Ethiopian consulate demonstrated both the sophistication and reach of al-Shabab's network.

Al-Shabab is a loosely coordinated jihadist militia and most likely does not have a leader with complete command and control over all of the group's forces. Rather, a Shura council, composed of senior commanders and religious figures -- including Ahmed Abdi Aw-Muhammad Godane -- probably ensures coordination among cells operating in different parts of southern Somalia. By the end of 2008, al-Shabab began administering southern Somalia, where it became quickly unpopular through its imposition of draconian vice laws. Even though the public may not support al-Shabab, Somali citizens have limited means to oppose the group, which maintains order through the ruthless exercise of force.

The result has been a patchwork of al-Shabab and Hizb al-Islamiyah groups that have relatively distinct areas of operation in Mogadishu, Merka, Kismayo, Baidoa, Gedo, Hiran, and Galgadud. Individual al-Shabab leaders are usually from the same clans and subclans that predominate their respective areas. Although they coordinate and support each other's more important operations, the lack of a common command-and-control system results in tensions stemming from personal differences and varying political positions. The leaders often differ on various issues: levels of tolerance or opposition to the presence of UN relief operations; sending troops to support each others' operations; and how to handle ransom negotiations for Western hostages, including aid workers, journalists, and most recently, two French security advisors to the TFG.

Although it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of insurgents, most analysts agree that the groups have expanded from several hundred committed Somali militants, with ties to AIAI and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, to a current high of 5,000 to 10,000 fighters. Most of these fighters, however, are not hardened or experienced jihadists; a significant portion comprises young Somali men who have joined the militias out of a desire for payment rather than for reasons of politics or ideology. In terms of foreign support, Eritrea is regularly criticized for providing financial

and military assistance to the insurgents. Many local sources of revenue also exist. The war economy in Somalia depends primarily on control of key infrastructure and real estate (including airports, seaports, markets, and road junctions) from which taxes can be extracted. Access to diaspora remittances is also an important source of funding, and support is coerced from many subclans and local businesses.

Conclusion

Although the insurgency in Somalia is seemingly widespread, its strength should not be overestimated. Hizb al-Islamiyah and Harakat al-Shabab are beset by limited public support, limited fighting power, political infighting, and the constant need to negotiate access to new funds. Given the poor performance of the TFG in developing integrated political, security, and development capabilities, however, even a weak and divided insurgency can continue to plague Somalis for many years to come.

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