

Somalia: After Kismayo - What Next for Al-Shabaab and Somalia?

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Kenyan soldiers of the African Union Mission in Somalia are pictured inside their armoured personnel carrier on the grounds of Kismayo University, southern Somalia.

After a long wait, the Kenya Army finally entered the southern Somali port of Kismayo on 28 September, following an attack by sea, air and ground forces. Kenya deserves some praise for its effort to liberate Kismayo from the brutal rule of Al-Shabaab, but in the immediate aftermath it also seems to have missed the point, or an important part of it.

The Kenyan army, after spending considerable time and effort preparing the attack, allowed Al-Shabaab to escape rather than staying to fight and face annihilation. The Shabaab will however undoubtedly have left behind some of its members to provide them with information and carry out attacks. Preventing this is likely to become a major task for the Kenyan Army and Somali government forces in Kismayo. In this, they might find it useful to bring in some of the pro-government militia of the Ahlu-es-Sunna wa'l Jam'a, the Sufi group who are the prime enemies of Al-Shabaab, to help in identifying and dealing with Al-Shabaab's remnants in Kismayo.

Kenya has already taken an important first step by inviting representatives of the three major clans in Kismayo - the Harti (Mijerteen), Marehan and Ogadeen to a meeting in Nairobi aimed at agreeing on a representative administration for the town. This is essential in forestalling inter-clan fighting for control of the port, which is Kismayo's main source of revenue, and a key target and prospective 'cash cow' for local clans and warlords. Whatever agreement is made, the Kenyans will need to be guarantors and to make it known that they are prepared to enforce it.

Origins of Al-Shabaab

The key leaders of Al-Shabaab arose from the group which originally called itself the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which ran Mogadishu and parts of Somalia during much of 2006. After they launched raids across Somalia's border with Ethiopia in late 2006, the Ethiopian army went into Mogadishu, and chased the ICU leadership all the way to the southern dhow port at Ras Kamboni, near the Kenyan border, from where some of their leaders crossed into Kenya and went to Eritrea. From there they received support to return to Somalia and reorganize as al-Shabaab. Some of them, like the late Aden Hashi Farah "Ayro" - a close relative of "Sheikh" Hassan Dahir Aweys, and founder-leader of his militia - had been trained by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Much the same is true of "Sheikh" Ahmed Abdi-Godane, from Somaliland, who was with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan until the end of 2001. When released from prison in Somaliland in 2006, he fled to southern Somalia to join the ICU and took over the military command of Al-Shabaab in 2007 after the death of "Ayro."

Aweys, and his band of Salafi fundamentalists, having fled to the Arab Gulf states to escape the Siyaad Barre regime in Mogadishu, returned to Somalia in 1991 after the regime's collapse. With money from the Gulf, they were able to establish themselves in the North Eastern coastal town of Bosaso. By providing a few public services, such as Koranic schools and clinics, they were initially able to gain public support. Eventually however, when they insisted on imposing the extremist version of Islam they brought with them from the Gulf, the mainly Sufi Somali Muslims revolted against the extremists and drove them out.

From Bosasso, they moved to Ras Lanuf in eastern Somaliland, from which they were also eventually driven out, moving south across the Ethiopian Ogaden to Luuq in South western Somalia, near the borders of Ethiopia and Kenya. They established themselves in Luuq under the name of Al-Ittihad Al-Islamiya and began the same process of building support by setting up Salafi madrasas and clinics. They also built up their militia force with the assistance of foreign jihadists from the Gulf and elsewhere.

In this period, they recruited, indoctrinated and trained individuals from the Ethiopian Ogaden region, and when they felt strong enough, they began to launch raids across the border into Ethiopia. Eventually, this led to an incursion by Ethiopian forces who responded by destroying the Al-Ittihad militia camp at Luuq along with a couple of dozen foreign jihadis of reportedly Arab origin. Al-Ittihad was quiet for a time, until resurrected under the umbrella of what became known in 2006 as the 'Islamic Courts Union' (ICU) or the 'Supreme Council of the Islamic Courts (SCIC),' and eventually, as Al-Shabaab.

The ICU and beyond

Aways' Al-Qaeda linked Islamist militia defeated the Mogadishu warlords, and then over-ran much of southern and central Somalia, between June and December 2006, using an initially successful strategy of talking peace and making war. For months, it helped to diffuse resistance - lull opponents into a false sense of security, and divert the attention of regional organizations and the international community from the nature of the SCIC and its potential threat to security. The engagement of some elements of the Arab League appeared to contribute to the problem.

Initially, the Islamist victory in Mogadishu had appeared to represent a step forward, as indicated by the restoration of peace in the capital. Initially, as well, some of those who appeared to be among the key Islamist leaders were making peaceful noises, hinting at willingness to talk to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), based in Baidoa, and disclaiming any intention of forming their own government, or of imposing an Islamist regime by force.

Eventually the SCIC 'talk peace, make war' strategy reached its limits. Over the course of five months, they had expanded their sway to towns across most of central and southern Somalia, by the simple expedient of arriving in each location with a massive display of armed force that local residents found too dangerous to resist.

The ICU soon became over-confident and repeated the mistakes it had made as Al-Ittihad by engaging in cross-border raids into Ethiopia. On 22 December 2006, following yet another ICU/SCIC cross-border incursion, the Ethiopian Government issued a final warning that was apparently dismissed by the SCIC. Ethiopia reacted on 24 December, with multiple strikes against the SCIC militias. On the same day, the Associated Press quoted an Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that Ethiopia was taking measures to counterattack the SCIC and foreign terrorist groups.

Following the initial clashes, the SCIC militias were soon in full flight across much of central and southern Somalia, abandoning their positions ahead of the advance of the Ethiopian and Somali Transitional Federal Government forces. On 28 December, the TFG forces with Ethiopian backup entered Mogadishu, to the cheers of the population, while others continued to chase the remnants of the SCIC and their foreign allies, who had already fled toward the southern port city of Kismayo. During the night of 31 December, the SCIC abandoned Kismayo without a fight and fled under cover of darkness, towards a small dhow port at Ras Kamboni and the nearby Kenyan border.

During their brief occupation of central and southern Somalia, the SCIC leadership had thoroughly alienated most of the population by its erratic behaviour and attempts to impose an extremist version of Islam - previously unknown in Somalia. They distinguished themselves through their perpetration of

diverse crimes against humanity, including shooting young people for watching videos of football games, ordering the execution of any Somali who did not pray five times a day, and forcibly recruiting young children into their militia forces.

The residents of Mogadishu and other central Somali towns had welcomed the expulsion of the warlords who had made their lives difficult for more than a decade. But they had not expected the Islamic Courts to be transformed into an armed political group attempting to impose a fundamentalist 'Salafi' version of Islam on Somali society. The new rulers had brought a measure of peace, but also a new type of clerical control and limitation of individual freedom that most Somalis neither believed in nor could accept.

The Kenyan Mission and AMISOM

Like the Taliban, the Shabaab have learned to move out when the pressure is more than they can take, only to return later. This has been their strategy in Mogadishu and elsewhere. The only effective way to deal with them is to maintain pressure at all times.

So far, the Kenyan forces seem to be getting most of their priorities right. One such was their apparent focus on taking the southern port town of Kismayo. Taking Kismayo will have removed a major source of local funding from terrorist control. But one thing that they may have missed is the need to block the Shabaab from resupply through the dozens of small airstrips scattered across Southern Somalia. To achieve this, they need to declare a no-fly zone over the Shabaab-controlled areas, to be enforced by the Kenya Air Force (KAF).

Liberating Kismayo from Shabaab control can play an important role in safeguarding Kenyan territory. But after securing Kismayo, the Kenyan forces also need to remove the Shabaab from Jamaame and Gelib further north.

Close collaboration between the Kenyan forces and AMISOM - the Ugandan and Burundian force - is also crucial. With KAF air support, AMISOM should be able to knock out the remaining Shabaab strong points around southern Mogadishu and move south to take the ports of Merca, just south of Mogadishu, and Barava (Brava) a bit further on. That would put an end to any resupply by sea of the Shabaab in southern Somalia, block their access to fuel, and significantly reduce their mobility. It could also block the export of charcoal to the Gulf, another source of local funding for the Shabaab.

The AMISOM force in Mogadishu now has significant manpower, but still faces constraints in terms of equipment and air support. KAF air strikes against Al-Shabaab strong points and armed convoys south of Mogadishu in the context of close coordination between the two forces could make a significant contribution to the effectiveness of both.

The Kenyan mission needs to draw lessons from the limited success of the originally under-manned, under-equipped, and under-informed AMISOM mission, as well as setting itself limited goals. The aim of protecting of the decrepit TFG was doomed from its outset, as was that of UNISOM before it. A key lesson of the past two decades is that the only path to success against an enemy like the Shabaab is to set the goal of destruction of that enemy, and be willing to stay the course until it is achieved.

It also needs to identify the most likely local permanent enemies of Al-Shabaab, such as the Ahl-es-Sunna-wa-l-Jam'a, who are Sufi Muslims like most Somalis, and have been severely persecuted by the Islamist extremists. These can play a key role in identifying, eradicating and preventing the resurgence of Al-Shabaab remnants in areas where they have been defeated. In the absence of this, such defeats could be temporary.

In most of the areas occupied by the Shabaab, the population is fundamentally opposed to the extremists, but also terrified by them. Once the main terrorist forces are defeated, local populations need armed support and protection to help them eliminate the remnants and prevent them from hiding among the population.

Also urgent is restarting the flow of food aid to the areas liberated from Al-Shabaab. People in southern Somalia have not been at all happy with the determination of the Shabaab to let them die. If the arrival of food aid, and assistance for reconstruction follows in the tracks of the Kenyan and AMISOM forces, that can strengthen the local constituency for the elimination of the group in southern Somalia.

Implications for the IGAD region

Al-Ittihad, in its various guises, as ICU/SCIC/Al-Shabaab has maintained linkages with Al-Qaeda and other Al-Qaeda linked jihadist groups as sources of training and funds. Among others, this is indicated by the continuing flow of funds from sources in the Gulf and elsewhere, the continuing availability of Arab jihadist trainers and combatants, and broadcast exhortations from Al-Qaeda leaders to "continue their struggle."

The longer-term strategy of the jihadist groups includes the use of terror to eliminate or intimidate non-fundamentalist opinion, and cross-border attacks to provoke retaliation and build support against what are presented as "violations of Somalia's sovereignty." The establishment of jihadist bases on or near the borders of neighbouring states provides ample opportunity for this, as both Ethiopia and Kenya have already experienced. This, therefore, needs to be prevented, particularly through proactive action to prevent jihadist groups from establishing new bases in border areas from which to launch terrorist attacks.

The Jihadist groups are well versed in this strategy, and have access to the resources for it. Besides their sources from the fundamentalist charities, they have built up important business interests that have become significant sources of funding. In Mogadishu, and even in Bosaso, these groups and their adherents control large sectors of the local marketplace - often built up with initial capital from Islamist groups in the Gulf. Their businesses in Mogadishu, Bosaso and elsewhere obtain resources on attractive terms from their colleagues in the Gulf or even operate partnerships with them in a variety of trading businesses, ranging from exporting, to bringing goods from the Gulf for sale in Somali markets like Bakara in Mogadishu, or smuggled across borders to Kenyan and Ethiopian.

The Way Forward

Underlying the continuing extremist threat to Somalia is the Salafi/Wahabi fundamentalist control of much of the economy and of key social sectors, such as health and education, which has been consolidated over the past fifteen years. The new Somali government will need to find ways to effectively address this, particularly in Mogadishu and other major towns. This is also a threat to the peace and security of the neighbouring countries, for example through certain fundamentalist institutions in Nairobi's Eastleigh, Mombasa, and some Ethiopian towns.

Most of Somalia's problems over the past two decades have been closely linked to poor governance or lack of governance, recurrent disaster, widespread destitution, and lack of access to livelihood. To achieve significant and sustainable change and enable peace in the region, these factors need to be effectively addressed. To do so, Somalia needs economic development, which will require significant external assistance as well as increased cooperation with its neighbours.

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