

Ethiopia – Al Shabaab's new theater of Jihad

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The al Qaeda affiliated al-Shabab has been fighting the Somali government and African Union troops in Somalia for more than a decade, carrying out attacks in Somalia and neighboring Kenya. It adheres to the same global Islamist ideology as Al-Qaeda and has made several public statements pledging allegiance to the group.

Al-Shabab has long regarded Ethiopia an enemy for its military presence inside Somalia. Al - Shabaab group has exploited Ethiopia's domestic unrest and the concentration of Ethiopian armed forces in the north in the Tigray conflict to cross the border from Somalia in unprecedented attacks in late July 2022.

Al-Shabaab has managed to expand its operations in the region, especially in Kenya since invading Somalia in 2011, but al - Shabaab had never been able to conduct major operations inside Ethiopia and the turn to Ethiopia is a significant strategic shift. ¹

Al Shabaab has several objectives in Ethiopia:

Al-Shabaab has long been interested in exporting its brand of Islamist extremism to neighboring countries. The offensive appears to be the start of a major, strategic initiative to establish an active combatant presence in Ethiopia, probably in the Ethiopia's Somali region, also known as Ogaden, which is home to a majority ethnic Somali population. ²

Al Shabaab's attack against targets along the border and deep inside Ethiopia's territory is intended to make the Ethiopian forces in the African Union forces (ATMIS) reduce their activities in other areas of Somalia and concentrate on defending their country's border with Somalia. Fixing the Ethiopian forces near the border could increase al Shabaab's freedom of movement and operations in southwestern Somalia.

Al Shabaab is aware of the plans to withdraw the African Union forces (ATMIS) from Somalia by 2024 and the current attacks against Ethiopia are part of a wider move to put pressure on the African Union forces to withdraw earlier from Somalia. The withdrawal of ATMIS forces would allow al Shabaab to win significant victories against overstretched Somali National Army.

The preparations for the "July offensive"

Al-Shabaab's attack deep into Ethiopian territory required the organization to a lengthy preparation period that included planning, recruiting and training the fighters, logistical preparations and the transfer of the fighters to areas near the border with Ethiopia and the organization of a command-and-control system.

Al-Shabab has trained several hundred fighters for its new frontline with Ethiopia, including ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia. ³

Al - Shabaab may have also developed networks inside Ethiopia to prepare for the July 2022 offensive. Al-Shabaab fighters were able to slip into Ethiopia to collect intelligence and make preparations for the offensive. ⁴

Al Shabaab likely set conditions for offensive operations in Ethiopia by targeting Ethiopian convoys in southwestern Somalia with roadside

improvised explosive devices or ambushes. At least eight attacks targeted convoys traveling between a border town and Somali National Army (SNA) or Ethiopian military bases.

This campaign likely aimed to keep Ethiopian forces out of potential staging grounds that al - Shabaab used to gather the roughly 1,500 fighters used in the July 2022 offensive.

The deception

The operation began on July 20, 2022, when al-Shabaab militants shut down telephone networks in Somalia's Southwest region of Bakool before carrying out surprise attacks on the Somali towns of Yeed and Aato and Washaaqo village.

The towns are all located on the Somali-Ethiopian border and protected in part by Ethiopia's Liyu police security force. The Liyu police is a specially-trained counterterrorism unit.

Somali regional and intelligence officials believe the militant group's attacks on those towns were a diversionary effort to allow approximately 500 al - Shabaab fighters to drive into Ethiopia. The attacks preoccupied Liyu police forces and distracted them as other heavily armed al-Shabaab units crossed the border unopposed.⁵

Al Shabaab's main effort

Al Shabaab forces entered Ethiopia at several sites from Somalia's border regions of Hiran and Bakool. There were three groups of fighters - a group fighting at the border inside Somalia (deception) and 2 groups that infiltrated into Ethiopia.

One of the units passed through Aato road while the fighting was taking place and they headed for Bale region, between Ethiopia's Somalia and Oromia states. The unit that entered through Aato was confronted and surrounded by Liyu police but made it through despite losing most of their vehicles.⁶

A second al-Shabab unit entered Ethiopia from another front, east of El-Barde town and were engaged by Ethiopian security forces between Gode and Qallafo (between 100 – 150 kilometers) in Ethiopia.⁷

The Ethiopian response

Ethiopian military planes have carried out airstrikes in areas where Ethiopian and al-Shabaab fighters have clashed.

Coordination with the Somali government - Ethiopian military officials had arrived in Somalia's town of Beledweyne to discuss strategies to counter al-Shabaab's incursion. One of the first steps to improve the security situation will be the deployment of the Ethiopian force operating in the framework the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia along the border between Somalia and Ethiopia. The goal is to create a security buffer inside Somalia to guard against further incursions.

There are conflicting reports about the losses of both sides:

General Tesfaye Ayalew, the head of deployment for Ethiopia's national defense forces, said more than 800 al-Shabab fighters, including 24 top leaders, were killed in recent operations against the group.⁸

Ethiopia's Somali regional president, Mustefa Omer, told a regional assembly that more than 600 al-Shabaab fighters have been killed. Ethiopia's military has claimed the killing of three prominent al-Shabab figures including its propaganda chief, but the extremist group has denied it.

Security officials in Ethiopia's Somali state said that there were heavy casualties on Ethiopia's side and several officials, including local administrators, were captured by al-Shabab.⁹

Via its Radio Andalus media arm, al Shabaab has claimed killing at least 187 Ethiopian regional forces and seizing military equipment in its attacks.¹⁰

Al Shabaab's offensive in Hiran region

In the meantime, al-Shabaab continues its attacks inside Somalia's territory in the Hiran region bordering Ethiopia.

On August 6, 2022, a suicide truck bomb blast targeted a military base in the Hiran region, near the Somali-Ethiopian border, that houses Turkish-trained special forces. The bombing killed at least one soldier and wounded three. Al-Shabab claimed responsibility for the attack and said more than 40 soldiers were killed or wounded.¹¹

On September 2, 2022, Al Shabab killed 20 people and burned seven trucks carrying food supplies in central Somalia. The attack took place

overnight as vehicles ferried passengers, food aid and commercial goods between the towns of Beledweyne and Mahas in the central Hiran region. Two vehicles carrying those who went to rescue the victims were also targeted with improvised explosive devices.¹²

Al Shabab claimed responsibility for the attack but said they had targeted vehicles ferrying supplies for members of a local security force backed by the Somali government.

Al Shabaab attacks against Ethiopia (2013 – 2022)

Many previous al Shabaab attacks have targeted the approximately 4,000 Ethiopian soldiers in the African Union peacekeeping mission, now called the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

Al-Shabab tried to establish a presence in Ethiopia before, without success. The group's late leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, tasked al-Shabab's intelligence wing, the Amniyaat, to carry out attacks in Ethiopia. These included a failed bomb plot against a football stadium in Addis Ababa in 2013 and suicide bomb attack against a major shopping mall in Addis in 2014 that was disrupted before it could take place.

In September 2019, Ethiopian security officials announced the arrest of a number of alleged Al-Shabaab suspects. The suspects aimed to attack hotels, religious festivities, gathering places and public areas in the capital Addis Ababa, Oromia and Ethiopia's Somali region, according to a statement by the country's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). The suspects were said to have entered Ethiopia through Djibouti and Somalia, as well as the breakaway state of Somaliland.¹³

In November 2020, Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) said it has arrested 14 Al-Shabaab terrorist members who were on a mission to carry out attacks on various areas in the country. Members of the terrorist group had been recruiting people, plotting terrorist attacks and identifying targets for their attacks. Communication equipment and other materials prepared to be used for the destructive missions were also seized.

In April 2022, the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) said that 34 members of al-Shabaab were captured in collaboration with the security forces of Somali and Oromia regional states. The security agencies have been secretly monitoring the suspects plotting to carry out terror attacks during celebration of religious events in Addis Ababa, as well as Somali and Oromia regions. Various weapons

including rifles and ammunition as well as documents and passbooks were also seized from the suspects' homes.¹⁴

Concluding Remarks

Al Shabaab's attack deep into the territory of Ethiopia expresses two important developments regarding the goals and capabilities of the Al Shabaab organization.

Although the group suffered heavy losses it has demonstrated for the first time that it is capable to launch major military operations inside Ethiopia.

Al-Shabaab has proven that the group is a significant regional actor and a threat to the stability and security of the countries of the region and beyond.

The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and its security forces are struggling with unrest at home especially since the Tigray conflict began in late 2020. Ethiopia has long resisted such cross-border attacks by al-Shabaab, in part by deploying troops inside Somalia but unless Addis Ababa can afford to redeploy capable military units from elsewhere in the country, then al-Shabab may succeed in establishing a military presence in Ethiopia for the first time.

In order to prevent al-Shabab from taking over Somalia and expanding its influence in the countries of the region, especially in Ethiopia and Kenya, the US and the international community must help Somalia and the countries of the region in their war against al-Shabaab.

President Biden's decision to return to Somalia the American force of about 500 soldiers is an important step in the right direction but not a satisfactory step. In order to respond to the challenges posed by the al-Shabaab organization, military aid to the Somali army should be increased.

It is important to cancel the decision to withdraw the African Union forces (ATMIS) from Somalia in 2024 and moreover, it is necessary to consider strengthening these forces so that they can effectively deal with the threats posed by the al-Shabaab organization.

Notes:

¹ Ethiopia: Why Did Al-Shabaab Attack Inside Ethiopia? allAfrica, July 29, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Omar Faruk, in a first, Somalia-based al-Shabab is attacking in AP, August 5, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ethiopia: Why Did Al-Shabaab Attack Inside Ethiopia? allAfrica, July 29, 2022.

⁶ Liam Karr Africa File: Al Shabaab Attacks Ethiopia, critical threats, July 28, 2022.

⁷ Ethiopia: Why Did Al-Shabaab Attack Inside Ethiopia? allAfrica, July 29, 2022.

⁸ Ethiopia's Military: 800 Al-Shabab Fighters Killed in Recent Clashes, VOA, August 6, 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Omar Faruk, in a first, Somalia-based al-Shabab is attacking in AP, August 5, 2022.

¹¹ Ethiopia's Military: 800 Al-Shabab Fighters Killed in Recent Clashes, VOA, August 6, 2022.

¹² Abdi Latif Dahir, Militants Attack Trucks Carrying Food Relief in Somalia, the New York times, September 3, 2022.

¹³ Ethiopia says it detains suspected Islamist militants planning attacks, Reuters, September 21, 2019.

¹⁴ Al-Shabaab's Terror Plots Foiled, 34 Suspects Arrested, Ethiopian monitor, April 23, 2022.