

U.S. Counterinsurgency Proposal: Al-Shabaab

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Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen's influence in Somalia and its bordering states have fluctuated throughout the years since its inception. By 2016, al-Shabaab lost much of its claimed territory with the help of the U.S. and other foreign assistance. This loss of territory, however, certainly did not mean that the group had been defeated. In fact, the recent reports reflect that recruitment has increased for the group due to their skilled use of social media and the internet ("Country/Territory Report – United States" 2020, 120). If the U.S. seeks to defeat al-Shabaab, its counterinsurgency plan should be largely based around maintaining the momentum it has created since 2016 and expanding on the practices that have already been put in place (Jones et al. 2016, 59). The loss of territory has weakened the group, allowing for less regional influence and a decrease in legitimacy. This, along with several other counterinsurgency measures taken by the U.S. and its allies, could ultimately aid in the fracturing of the insurgency itself.

To understand the threat that an insurgency presents it is necessary to understand its history. In doing so, a U.S. counterinsurgency plan can be catered specifically to the unique challenges in combatting al-Shabaab specifically. Reports indicate that al-Shabaab was established as a subgroup of al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI), an Islamist militant group based out of Somalia in the 1980s. What began as a loosely formed network of around thirty members has grown significantly. Between 2009 and 2011, al-Shabaab was believed to have between 5,000-12,000 fighters. That number has since decreased and reports from 2016 reflect 3,000-8,000 members (Jones et al. 2016, 8). Al-Shabaab established international relations with terrorist factions like ISIS and Boko Haram; however, its major affiliate was al-Qaeda with whom it publicly merged with in 2012 (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2019, 3). Al-Shabaab established training camps throughout Somalia and Kenya where it has indoctrinated the country's youth with the ideology of al-Qaeda and its fundamentalist beliefs (Hansen 2013, 2). Specifically, it targeted impoverished youth within its

capital city of Mogadishu and Mombasa, Kenya in recruitment efforts. In addition, the group has been largely successful by capitalizing its efforts with the use of social media, a common recruitment tool used by many extremist groups today. Al-Shabaab's aptitude for using these platforms, especially YouTube and Twitter, has allowed the group to continually gain momentum despite counterterrorism efforts (Conway et al. 2017, 4).

This context is necessary for a counterinsurgency plan as it allows the U.S. to recognize what its ideologies are as well as were its grievances. It also shows where al-Shabaab finds support in advancing its objectives as well as its methodologies of gaining new members. As pointed out by Jones et al., there are three main strategic options for counterinsurgency operations for the U.S.: "indirect engagement, tailored engagement, robust intervention" (Jones et al. 2016, 34). Though notable, all come with inevitable complications within Somalia. With al-Shabaab, I believe some adaptation of all of those strategies over time could be prudent.

The two primary strategies that should first be implemented would be robust intervention and tailored engagement. First, robust intervention would not only involve the direct involvement of the U.S and USAID but by utilizing other foreign economic aid and international partners – especially its close ally, Kenya. In 2007, the United Nations Security Council addressed the threat of al-Shabaab and authorized the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to establish a peace-keeping mission within Somalia (Felter et al. 2020; "Security Council" 2007). Counterinsurgency efforts have fluctuated in their success throughout the years. AMISOM has played a significant role in the attempt to stabilize Somalia as well as assist Kenya in its efforts to control and eliminate al-Shabaab (Jama and Katman 2019, 223; Williams 2018, 96). However, they have encountered numerous challenges that have hindered their cause. Critics of AMISOM have stated that its operations lacked "appropriate human and logistic resources as well as the

strategy to stabilize the country and get rid of the militia groups like Al-Shabaab” (Jama and Katman 2019, 228). Furthermore, that it was unable to “align its military and political tracks” (Williams 2018, 104). Nevertheless, while not always successful, its intervention has proven beneficial to Somalia and its surrounding states. Strengthening AMISOM is imperative to reallocate where it lacked human and logistic resources in the past. Counterinsurgency campaigns are largely reliant on foreign aid. For Somalia specifically, this is especially true as its weak governance aided in the establishment of al-Shabaab. Furthermore, without AMISOM the U.S. would not have been able to maintain a broader tailored engagement strategy (109).

Tailored engagement could involve the use of special operations forces to conduct targeted attacks on its resources. This can happen in a multitude of capacities including – but not limited to – conducting air strikes, targeted surveillance, cyber operations, disrupting its finances et cetera. Tailored engagement should involve training the Somali military and better preparing them for the threats encountered by the insurgency. This can be done by not only advising and supporting them in their efforts but accompanying them on missions as well (Jones et al. 2016, 39). We have learned that territorial gain has benefitted al-Shabaab and, consequently, that taking it away has weakened them. The same approach could be taken towards their recruitment efforts since they have used the internet and social media strategically. Targeting platforms utilized in their recruitment could thwart their efforts by not allowing to spread propaganda as easily.

Another approach, albeit it incredibly challenging, could be by “targeting” those in which al-Shabaab are likely focus their recruitment efforts on. As aforementioned, al-Shabaab has established training camps throughout Somalia where it has indoctrinated the country’s youth with the teachings of al-Qaeda (Hansen 2013, 2). Specifically, the group has targeted poor impressionable youth in Mombasa and Mogadishu. A recruit’s age and impressionability are not

the only primary drivers in joining al-Shabaab. Studies show that religious and economic push factors are highly influential in a recruit's decision making (Botha and Abdile 2016, 4). By tailoring efforts through U.S. intervention in supporting institutional reform in Somalia and Kenya, al-Shabaab may have less success in their recruitment efforts over time.

Lastly, it would be prudent to address an indirect engagement strategy and why it could for a counterinsurgency initiative only *after* the other two strategies have been successfully employed. The U.S. adopted an indirect engagement strategy in the mid-2000s which heavily relied on other forces combatting the insurgency (Jones et al. 2016, 35). During that time, terrorist attacks and civilian casualties grew while they gained regional influence. Without the intervention of the U.S. and AMISOM, al-Shabaab became the “de facto government in parts of Somalia” (36). Nevertheless, if both tailored engagement and robust intervention strategies were *successfully* implemented and the core domestic and regional institutional infrastructure was stable, then an indirect engagement could be the way forward as an exit strategy. This would ultimately allow the U.S. to use less money and personnel in the region in the future if the groundwork was effectively established.

As previously mentioned, some adaptation of robust intervention, tailored engagement, and indirect engagement could prove beneficial in a counterinsurgency operation towards al-Shabaab. Specifically, military intervention as a sole strategy is not the way forward in defeating the insurgency. Jones et al. wrote, “Most successful counterinsurgency campaigns have required political, economic, and social programs to help fill the vacuum once military forces clear territory” (Jones et al. 2016, 59). For this reason, though often thought of as taboo, negotiations should be considered. Every insurgency ends uniquely “depending on a range of complex variables, including local conditions” (Jones 2019, 171). The conditions in Somalia and the

uniqueness of Somali clans certainly create a complex environment to successfully adapt a counterinsurgency plan. Regardless of its affiliation with al-Qaeda, there seems to be a global disinterest for al-Shabaab and its actions compared to other insurgencies. Moreover, that apathy is shared with Somalia itself. Deeper knowledge of the state through cooperation with international and regional allies would benefit the U.S. in its counterinsurgency efforts and help create long-term stability in Eastern Africa.

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