Somalia and the Islamist War: Assessing the Probability of Al-Shabab Winning or Losing the War with Somalia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we assess the ongoing conflict between al-Shabaab on the one hand, and the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), on the other. Though al-Shabab has been around since the mid 2000s, the current round of the conflict began in 2010 when AMISOM was deployed to Somalia to bolster the fledgling Somali government. The main thrust of the paper, therefore, is to reexamine what effect, if any, this African force has had on the conflict. Data were collected from 2009-2021 through monitoring and analysis was done using software. Data gathered included recording specific instances of violence between the two groups, including who orchestrated the violence, the location of the violence and the fatalities in each act of violence. While TFG/AMISOM made substantial gains initially against al-Shabab, the result did not specifically conclude which of the two groups is poised to win the war. However, it demonstrates that al-Shabab is able to stay in play by resorting to a host of other strategies which neither the TFG nor AMISOM can deploy.

Keywords: Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Federal Government (FG), African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), al-Shabaab, Islamic Courts Union (ICU), al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the ongoing conflict between al-Shabab on the one hand, and the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG, which would later become the Somali Federal Government (TFG) and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)[1], on the other. This phase of the conflict commenced following the arrival of AMISOM in the country in 2010. Many analysts predicted the demise of al-Shabab as the robust and effective fighting force that it has been since its inception, controlling large swaths of south-central Somalia. The analysts quickly pointed to the setbacks that al-Shabab suffered, including its lose of ground, defections of its fighters, and the constriction of its source of finances. However, these predictions have not come to pass; instead, al-Shabab has grown more bold, lethal, and dangerous.

This study investigates the trajectory that the conflict had taken, and the impact of AMISOM in trying to beat back al-Shabab and bring about peace and stability to this war torn country. Despite suffering heavy loses in the beginning, al-Shabab, as resilient as ever, bounced back and now presents a serious threat to Somalia and its neighbors. Moreover, its unique capacity to

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[1] African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has changed its mission to Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) from 01 April 2022. ATMIS task include to hand over security responsibilities to Somalia's national army and withdraw from Somalia after a few more years.

adapt to new fighting situations makes it a force to reckon with and Somalia an unsafe place. To this end, the study has been collecting raw data to project whether al-Shabab will win or lose this war. The centrepiece of this data is the tracking of al-Shabab's violent, day-to-day attacks from 2009 to 2021. The data focus on particular elements of al-Shabab's violent activities, such as the sequence of events, date and description of events, sources, actors, targets, rationale, causality, and location.

A VIOLENT BIRTH

Al-Shabab's full name in Arabic is Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen, translating into the Movement of Striving Youth (Lydon, 2018).It is, however, popularly known as al-Shabab. Al-Shabab is not the first Islamist group in Somalia, though it is the most notorious. Still, unlike those groups that came before it, its violent birth is insightful in understanding its operations in the larger Horn of Africa. Like any other group, al-Shabab's presence was felt not only through its violent activities but also symbolically, including its military buildup, efficient administrative structure, and its extreme ideological inclinations that reverberate across the entire Horn of Africa.

Despite its prolonged presence, how al-Shabab came into being has stoked both controversy and debate. One of the first explanations of al-Shabab's rise theorisesthat it emerged out of the ashes of the defunct al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI) (CISAC, 2010). This argument asserts that some Somali youth members of AIAI had travelled to the northern town of Las Anod for a conference that sought to debate the way forward. A dozen or so of the youth in attendance stormed out in rage as the conference progressed. The youngsters were not the typical Somali youth but battle-hardened veterans who had participated in foreign wars (Shinn, 2011). Their contention followed from a proposal made at the meeting to form a Salafi politicalorganisationwhich they considered too acquiescent (ibid). Later, these youth convened a parallel meeting where al-Shabab was born.

Two other claims purport to expound on al-Shabab's rise, illustrating how convoluted al-Shabab's origins are (Felbab-Brown, 2015). The first of these suggests that both ICU and AIAI have contributed to al-Shabab's emergence in equal measure. The assertion presented in this strand is that disgruntled members from both groups had come together to form al-Shabab. On the other hand, the third one insists that al-Shabab had already been in existence under the defunct ICU (Bryden, 2014). After ICU lost ground in the southern city of Kismayo to the Ethiopians in 2007, its fighters melted away (Ibid.). The assertion is that al-Shabab was home to the more radical elements within the ICU who forked out into rural Somalia and subsequently reconstituted itself as a new outfit called al-Shabab. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the veracity of these claims, we point to the fact that they all concur in very significant ways. For example, they all agree that al-Shabab had not been formed from scratch but had evolved from a previously existing group. They also highlight that those who constituted the core of al-Shabab and set the tone for it primarily derived from hardline members of the preceding groups from which they were born(Lydon, 2018)

From the moment al-Shabab felt emasculated enough to militarily take on what was left of the clan-based militias and Ethiopia, it began to construct a multifaceted image of itself as representing one thing, while deploying many different strategies to attain that goal. The one idea that al-Shabab tirelessly sought to pursue was the Islamist face(Afyare, 2012). Al-Shabab

has made no secret that it was a Salafi group that sought to rule Somalia using the mandates and the tenets of the Salafi interpretation of Islam. This entailed denouncing any alternative sociopolitical or even slightly differing interpretation of Islam (ibid). Therefore, the TFG and Somalis who practised Islam differently from the Salafi manhaj (methodology) were the first victims of al-Shabab (Felter et al., 2021).

In addition to the Islamic bent, al-Shabab often portrayed itself as a nationalist group. Therefore, it actively cultivated the support of Somalis who had a profound detestation for the presence of foreign troops, particularly those from Ethiopia, which many saw as a historical foe and a colonising power(ibid). This strategy helped attract thousands of sympathisers and fighters from within Somalia and outside of it, including the Diaspora (Felter et al. 2022). In addition, another vital constituency that contributed to al-Shabab's early successes was fellow Islamists. Often called *Muhajiruun* by al-Shabab, this group responded positively and came in droves to fight for the installation of an Islamic state. Violence has remained al-Shabab's signature mechanism, as it expanded in the astronomical manner that it did and asserted itself in south-central Somalia. As a result, al-Shabab's entire administrative and political rule has centred on the deployment of violence.

With all the violence, one question that comes up: what are the goals of al-Shabab? Al Shabab's primary goal is to destabilise the TFG and establish an Islamic emirate based on a strict interpretation of *Shariah law*. In addition to its explicit call for an Islamic state, it has applied shariah wherever it ruled in Somalia. Indeed, it has been carrying out penalties such as amputating thieves' hands and stoning women accused of adultery in the areas under its control. Also, the group has banned things it deems un-Islamic, including outlawing music and cinemas, and it prohibited foreign news outlets. It did this to purge the country of foreign influences which it accused of pushing anti-Muslim imperialist agenda(Lydon ,2018). Al-Shabab takes advantage of complaints and handles disputes with minor corruption. This is especially appealing in underdeveloped or distant places where the fledgling government cannot reach or has failed to provide these crucial services. As a result, al-Shabab has established itself as Somalia's champion of the disenfranchised and marginalised clans and portrays itself as a shadow government (Jason Warner et al. 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected by observing instances of the violence, primarily conducted through monitoring and recording whenever it happened. However, not all acts of violence were recorded for this research, particularly if we did not deem it as fatal. As such, we left out any occurrence of violence that did not include death. We used cumulative frequency, and we started running a total of frequencies (events) starting from the first occurrence in 2009 to (2021). As stated, the frequency of an occurrence in a scenario is the number of times it occurs. It is the sum of all previous frequencies up to the current point that is used to establish the running total of frequencies. Because we needed to tabulate data in an organized fashion and determine the possibility that a given occurrence would fall inside a certain frequency distribution, cumulative frequency became a vital tool for this research.

Therefore, based on cumulative frequency, we identified the frequency of an event within a given time frame. To evaluate the result of the events, ratio analysis was applied. The resulting proportion was posed in the form of cumulative frequency.

Once the data were accumulated, the total outcome was worked out using a graphical program such as Excel. Then the tangible result of the years of research case was calculated to determine the relative cumulative of the events, which is done by tabulating the yearly event with the total number of the events. This will give us the relative cumulative of the events in a ratio. Again to perceive the overall result of the situation of the conflict, the increase of yearly percentage increase of event is also calculated. The success or failure of the combatant group depends on the state of its ratios in all areas. Any weakness in one place may significantly affect its overall capacity to win or lose a war. The data include the sequence of events, description of event, the actor(s) of the event (i.e. Al-Shabab or FG/AMISOM) and other countries, the causality intended and the interconnected events, the target of the action, the rationale of the action, the location where the event occurred (local or outside the country).

FINDINGS
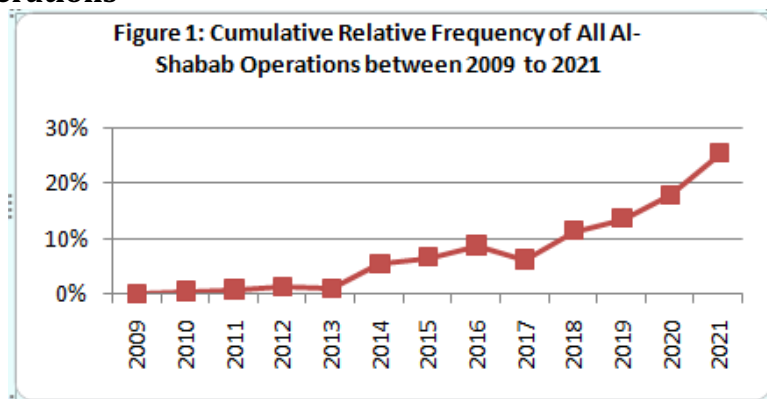
Frequency of Operations

Figure 1 shows al-Shabab's frequency of operations. It illustrates a gradual increase in al-Shaba violent acts, particularly in the last two years of the research at 299 (around (57%). From 2009 to 2018, al-Shabab attacks stood at 225 (around 43%). The only outlier in this trend was in2017,when violence dropped by13% compared to the previous year

| Table 1: The Frequency and Locations of Al-Shabab Al-Shabab Operations | | | | | | | | | | % of +/- | | | |
Year	Operations in Mogadishu	Other parts in Somalia	in Other Countries	Sub-tot Oper in Somalia	Totals		% Operations in Mogadisho	% Operations in Other Parts of Somalia	% Totals	% of operations in Mogadishu	% in other locations in Somalia	% in Other Countries	% total checks
2009	1	0	0	1	1					100%	0%	0%	100%
2010	3	0	0	3	3	100%				100%	0%	0%	100%
2011	4	1	0	5	5	100%				80%	20%	0%	100%
2012	5	2	0	7	7	100%				71%	29%	0%	100%
2013	3	2	1	5	6	83%				50%	33%	17%	100%
2014	20	8	1	28	29	97%				69%	28%	3%	100%
2015	26	8	1	34	35	97%				74%	23%	3%	100%
2016	37	6	3	43	46	93%				80%	13%	7%	100%
2017	16	9	8	25	33	76%				48%	27%	24%	100%
2018	34	19	7	53	60	88%				57%	32%	12%	100%
2019	51	13	8	64	72	89%				71%	18%	11%	100%
2020	70	14	10	84	94	89%				74%	15%	11%	100%
2021	87	34	12	121	133	91%	72%	28%	100%	65%	26%	9%	100%
Total	357	116	51	473	524		100%			91%		9%	100%
	524												

Finding 2: Locations of Operations of Al-Shabab

The study also examined specific locations in which violent activities were concentrated. Between 2009 and 2021, al-Shabab unleashed a record 524 operational attacks (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Of these, 91% occurred in Somalia, while the rest (9%) were spread out in Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti and Ethiopia (see Table 2). Unsurprisingly, 72% of the operations in Somalia were in Mogadishu, the Somali capital city, while the remaining 28% took place in other parts of the country (see Table 3).
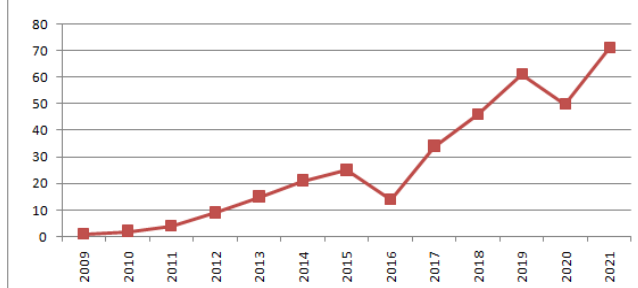
Table 2: Locations of Al-Shabab Operations in and outside Somalia (2009 – 2021)		
In Somalia	473	91%
In Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, and Ethiopia	51	9%
	524	**100%**

Finding 3: Operations Against Al-Shabab

 The final focus of the paper was TFG/AMISOM operations against al-Shabab. These operations were uneven and were characterised by sudden rise and a fall. For instance, between 2017 and 2021, they were high 144 (70%) as American operations against Al-Shabab increased. In the years prior to 2017, 2009-2016, it stood at 30 (61) operations(see Table 4: Operations against al-Shabab and Figure 2).

Table 3: All Shabab Operations in Somalia between 2009 to 2021		
% Operations in Mogadishu	% Operations in other parts of Somalia	% Totals
72%	28%	100%

Figure 2: Operations againist Al-Shabab (2009-2021)

Table 4: Operations Against Al-Shabab (2009-2021)							
Operations				% of +/-			
Year	Locations in Somalia	in Other Countries	Totals		% in locations in Somalia	% in Other Countries	% Increase / Decrease	% total checks
2009	1	0	1		100%	0%	-	100%
2010	2	0	2		100%	0%	100%	100%
2011	3	1	4		75%	25%	100%	100%
2012	9	0	9		100%	0%	125%	100%
2013	13	2	15		87%	13%	67%	100%
2014	16	5	21		76%	24%	40%	100%
2015	21	4	25		84%	16%	19%	100%
2016	11	3	14		79%	21%	-44%	100%
2017	22	12	34		65%	35%	143%	100%
2018	34	12	46		74%	26%	35%	100%
2019	41	20	61		67%	33%	33%	100%
2020	39	11	50		78%	22%	-18%	100%
2021	56	15	71		79%	21%	42%	100%
Total	268	85	353		100%			Total

DISCUSSION

This section discusses factors that have favoured al-Shabab despite mounting local and international pressure against it. Though al-Shabab has held off the pressure and in fact has been mounting an offense against TFG/AMISOM, there is no clear winner in this battle. What we intend to elucidate here is what sustains al-Shabab's successes. This success does not only accrue from violence though it primarily does, but from its versatility and utilisation of an eclectic set of techniques appropriate to a given situation. Accordingly, when it deems violence as unsuitable or counter productive in a given situation, al-Shabab resorts to a more appropriate method. Its resilience also demonstrates that al-Shabab is changing and getting more innovative. Recruiting, arming, coordinating, and hiding killers are a sophistication that makes it more effective. Also, al-Shabab has cultivated local and outside alliances who help it marshal resources, e.g. al-Qaida. Furthermore, it has harnessed its own resources, both in Somalia and Kenya, including levying taxes on areas under its control. Failure to suffice these taxes can often attract swift and deadly retribution. In addition, several reports have emerged accusing al-Shabab of involving in illicit trade such as charcoal and sugar sales (Masters& Sergei, 2015).

The most popular fighting strategy utilised by al-Shabab are unconventional tactics. Al-Shabab is primarily a guerilla outfit, putting it at a better advantage than TFG/AMISOM. By resorting to this strategy, al-Shabab knows that it has a tactical and logistical advantage over the TFG/AMISOM troops. Al-Shabab picks and chooses when and where to strike, hitting targets unawares and reducing them to sitting ducks and unable to respond adequately or in time. This helps it win battles because of its knowledge of guerilla warfare, the terrain of the land, and adaptability to the environment. Most of these guerilla operations are carried out through hit and run as well as suicide attacks. A deadly attack that attests to this strategy is the Garissa University attack in Kenya, whereon April 02, 2015, 148 people were killed and more than 79 wounded.

While guerilla warfare has been extremely useful to al-Shabab, it also engages in military operations though with a different purpose. This type of strategy is to seize logistical and military equipment and ammunition. It does this by intercepting and ambushing TFG/AMISOM supply convoys. It also carries out these attacks to weaken TFG/AMISOM resources and capacity. Al-Shabab's operations are more productive, targeted, and efficient. Its guerilla activities use mobility against conventionally structured TFG/AMISOM. Military operations have involved using a small number of men against a heavy conventional force. The plan of the army attacks is also meant to stretch TFG/AMISOM thin and weaken TFG/AMISOM control, resources and power base. The result of the campaigns exposes TFG/AMISOM security lapses and weaknesses. To control major towns such as Mogadishu requires the ability to control the countryside.

These two operation methods are strategic and are focused on specific targets with particular outcomes: to kill government employees (both federal and regional) and foreign workers or clients. In Mogadishu, where most of the attacks have been concentrated, the enormity of al-Shabab actions are centred around key strategic locations: military training camps, checkpoints, security offices and police stations. Al-Shabab also hunts down and revenges against soldiers known to have tonight it on the battlefield.

Hotels have become the most vulnerable targets for al-Shabab, as they are places where government officers, foreign envoys, and guests often find refuge. Hotels in Mogadishu have been constructed as fortresses, surrounded by high walls, manned by private security, and equipped with scanners. Top government workers avoid their homes and instead reside in hotels for safety. Al-Shabab goes after them, making these hotels sites of deadly attacks. Al-Shabab has a strong intelligence network that allows it to identify who stays at which hotel and when. In addition, security officials say the militants usually have sympathisers working in the hotels, who can inform key details such as which room a particular individual is staying in. For instance, when Central Hotel was attacked on 20 February 2015, one of the suicide bombers was Lul Dahir, who worked at the reception of the same hotel.

Al-Shabab creates fear and apprehension and damages the livelihood of people and countries, including local leaders/chiefs in Somalia and Kenya. Fearing for their lives, these officials are less likely to collaborate with the government and security apparatuses. In addition, they target and intimidate diplomats, envoys, and tourists by creating uncertainties by killing or taking workers as hostages. For instance, al-Shabab severely crippled Kenya's tourism sector by attacking reserve games and coastal tourist areas. As a result, tourists were deterred from coming to Kenya. This has led to "income from tourism decreased by 21% in 2014, a decrease that has continued into 2015, with the first five months of the year seeing a decline of 25% of visitors" (Sarah Gerber 2015).

Al-Shabab also seeks legitimacy in its actions in the wider Somali public by threatening and eliminating prominent Somali sheikhs who they accuse of being opposed to them based on their different interpretations of Islam. At the same time, it advances its own narratives. Two well-known sheikhs are Dr. Ahmed Haji Abdirahman, killed on December 5, 2011 in Bosaso, Puntland, Somalia, and Sheikh Abdulkadir Nur Farah, who was assassinated on February 16, 2013. The former was assassinated after morning prayers, while the latter was shot as he prayed in a mosque in Garowe, Puntland, Somalia. Al-Shabab, however, has denied the killing of Dr Ahmed Haji Abdirahman. But on February 6, 2015, a penal court in Puntland, Somalia, sentenced some members the authority claimed to be of al-Shabab who were accused of killing the sheikh and were sentenced to death. Four and two others were to serve imprisonment.

CONCLUSION

Al-Shabab is an insurgent group that emerged in the mid-2000s to establish an Islamic state in Somalia. While it has been a powerful force to reckon with from its inception, al-Shabab had encountered pushback from TFG/AMISOM from 2010 when AMISOM was deployed. Nonetheless, the group is still strong and continues to carry out devastating attacks across East Africa. This research sought to investigate the pattern of the war to figure out its trajectory and which side was likely to win. Raw data were collected as they happened, and the result demonstrated that there is no clear winner. We, however, have drawn two important conclusions from this study. First, a military campaign alone will not be enough to deter or defeat al-Shabab. Primarily, al-Shabab is a guerilla outfit that is at the same time versatile and can easily utilise various other strategies and inflict painful casualties in Somalia and beyond. The other techniques include: face to face encounters, instilling fear in the populace, and targeted killings. More importantly, also, is that the chaos prevailing in Somalia is particularly advantageous to al-Shabab, giving it the cover for both offense and defense. Based on these

observations, the conclusion is that the status quo will hold, and the violence will continue as it has for the last ten years.

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