



Al-Shabaab, the Branch of al-Qaeda in Somalia and the Horn of Africa

October 21, 2022

Overview

- ▶ The al-Qaeda leadership devoted the seventh issue of its magazine One Nation (al-Ummah al-Wahida), issued in August 2022, to Somalia. It predicted the al-Shabaab, its branch in Somalia, would soon be victorious, overthrow the government, take control of Mogadishu and expel the foreign forces.
- ▶ Al-Shabaab was established in 2006 as a local militia and joined al-Qaeda in 2012. It has been waging a military campaign against the Somali government and the forces that support it, and the organization's leaders have declared their objective is to overthrow the Somali government and take control of the country. In the meantime, al-Shabaab has gained in strength outside Somalia as well, and in recent months its operatives infiltrated Ethiopia and have also renewed activity in northeastern Kenya.
- ▶ Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud formulated a three-pronged strategy to weaken al-Shabaab and repel its forces from Mogadishu and the surrounding regions: a military effort, an economic effort to cut off the organization's funding and an ideological-media effort to fight the organization's extremism. The ideological-media effort is headed by Mukhtar Robow, former deputy head of al-Shabaab, who defected in 2017.
- ▶ In ITIC assessment, in the wake of its going increase in strength, al-Shabaab can be expected to continue its efforts to overthrow the Somali government, cause conflict and discord and damage support for the government. It will attempt to increase its activities in northeastern Kenya and continue its efforts to prevent the establishment of an Ethiopian security zone inside Somalia along the border between the two countries.

Al-Shabaab's Status in al-Qaeda



The front cover of the issue of One Nation devoted to Somalia (telegram, August 30, 2022).

► Al-Shabaab (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, "the Movement of the Young Jihad Fighters") was founded in 2006 as a local militia to fight the forces of the Somali government. On February 9, 2012, they joined al-Qaeda, and the leader of al-Shabaab at the time, Ahmed Abdi Godane, swore allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda (al-Arabiya News, February 9, 2019).

On August 30, 2022, the al-Qaeda leadership issued the seventh issue of its magazine, One Nation, which was devoted to Somalia. The lead article wished the organization's Somali branch, al-Shabaab, a speedy victory over the government of Somalia, similar to the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, control of Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, and the expulsion of all foreign forces. The al-Qaeda leadership also claimed al-Shabaab to possess the key to solving the regional issues in the Horn of Africa, such as Tigray¹ and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam² (GERD) (Telegram, August 30, 2022).

¹ In November 2020 the Ethiopian government declared war on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Tigray and the Tigray Region in northern Ethiopia, which quickly deteriorated into a regional war with the participation of Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, and into a civil war embroiling all of Ethiopia. The war continues to this day.

² In April 2011 the Ethiopian government declared the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, which was supposed to become the largest hydroelectric plant in Africa. The dam is almost full and has begun operations, but Egypt and Sudan are apprehensive lest filling and operating the dam will reduce the Nile flow, and are trying to reach an agreement with Ethiopia that will enable them to adapt to the decrease in available Nile water.



The Horn of Africa (area of al-Shabaab activity marked in red) (Halbeeg News, April 8, 2018)

► Devoting the issue of One Nation to Somalia may indicate al-Shabaab's growing importance and influence within al-Qaeda. According to intelligence information received by the UN in July 2022, al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Diriye, aka Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah, is a member of al-Qaeda's Hittin Committee, which governs and coordinates the group's global leadership, and is fourth in the organization's leadership hierarchy. In addition, according to the information, al-Shabaab uses some of its profits to fund al-Qaeda (VOA, July 28, 2022).

Al-Shabaab's Activity in Somalia

Statements from senior al-Shabaab figures about the president of Somalia

► On May 15, 2022, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected president of Somalia. The day after the election, Mahad Karate, al-Shabaab's second in command and commander of its intelligence service, was interviewed by Britain's Channel 4. He said the organization's goal was to take control of Somalia, and declared that al-Shabaab did not recognize the current Somali government as legitimate (Somali Guardian, June 16 2022).

► On July 8, 2022, al-Shabaab disseminated a 57-minute speech by the organization's leader. Ahmed Diriye aka Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah, recorded for Eid al-Adha. In it he attacked the Somali president, calling him extremely immoral, impulsive and corrupt, and promising that

al-Shabaab would fight to depose him and overthrow his government. He also attacked Somali politicians, claiming they wasted the money earmarked for combatting the drought (SBC Somali TV Twitter account, July 8, 2022; Citizen Witness, July 8, 2022).

On August 20, 2022, the day after the mass-casualty attack on the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu,³ al-Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Abdulaziz Abu Musab mocked the Somali president for claiming he could wipe out al-Shabaab, because it was al-Shabaab that would wipe out the Somali government, whose members should be afraid to sleep in their beds at night (Somalimemo, August 20, 2022).



Right, Mahad Karate; left, Abu Ubaidah (Garowe Online, August 24, 2022).

Military Activity

► Since May 15, 2022, when Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected president of Somalia, al-Shabaab has increased its activities against the Somali government and army, attacked civilian targets and African Union forces stationed in the country.⁴ Al-Shabaab's hostile activities have not changed since its founding and include the following examples:

- ◆ **Detonating car bombs at administrative headquarters:** On October 3, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the explosions caused by three car bombs at the local government headquarters in the town of Beledweyne in the Hirshabelle state, north of Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab claimed the explosions killed more than 50 people,

³ The attack was carried out on August 19, 2022, killing 21 people and wounded 117.

⁴ The African Union Mission in Somalia was established in 2006 to stabilize the internal situation, support a dialogue and reconciliation, defend government institutions and make it possible for the government to function and protect military facilities and equipment. On April 1, 2022, its name was changed to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). It is an active African Union transition and drawdown mission from peacekeeping operations in Somalia with military, police and civilian forces. Its mandate will end in 2024, with full transition of security operations to the Somali National Armed Forces (Wikipedia).

including members of parliament, senior administrative figures, and military and police officers (Twitter account of Morad News, October 3, 2022).

◆ **Combined attacks on bases of African Union forces:** On May 3, 2022, al-Shabaab attacked the African Union forces' base in the village of El Baraf, about 150 kilometers north of Mogadishu. The attack began inside the base with the detonation of three trucks packed with explosives, after which al-Shabaab operatives attacked African Union Mission soldiers. Al-Shabaab claimed 173 soldiers had been killed. However, according to the government of Burundi, ten Burundian soldiers had been killed, 25 wounded, and five could not be found. It was the first attack carried out by al-Shabaab operatives against an African Union force after its name had been changed (VOA, May 4, 2022).

◆ **Suicide bombing attacks at Somali Army bases:** On September 25, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack carried out by one of its operatives at a military training base in Mogadishu, killing 32 soldiers and wounded 42 (Somalimemo, September 25, 2022).

◆ **Ambushing Somali Army soldiers:** On September 15, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for ambushing Somali soldiers being trained by the Americans in the suburbs of the town of Bulaburde in the Hiran region in central Somalia. Ten soldiers were killed and 15 wounded; two Somali army vehicles were destroyed (Somalimemo, September 15, 2022).

◆ **Firing mortars at African Union force bases:** On September 17, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for firing mortars at a Kenyan base in the town of Huzungo in the Juba region of southern Somalia; reportedly, four soldiers were wounded (Twitter account of TRACTerrorism, September 20, 2022).

◆ **Mass casualty attacks against civilian targets in Mogadishu:** On August 19, 2022, al-Shabaab operatives attacked the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu, where government personnel customarily lodged. Twenty-one people were killed in the attack and 117 wounded.

◆ **Killing government functionaries and Somali soldiers:** On October 1, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for killing Muhammad Hassan, who worked for the ministry of the interior, and a Somali soldier in two separate attacks in Mogadishu (Twitter account of TRACTerrorism, October 2, 2022).

◆ **Detonating IEDs:** During the past year al-Shabaab often carried out IED attacks. On September 30, 2022, five Somali soldiers were killed and eight wounded when their vehicle hit an IED and turned over in the town of Balcad, about 30 kilometers north of Mogadishu (Twitter account of Morad News, September 30, 2022).

Although al-Shabaab is active throughout Somalia, during the past two months most of its activities have focused around Mogadishu, the capital city, and the Hiran region in the center of the country, where it operates against the Somali Army and auxiliary forces composed of armed civilian militias, for example, by attacking an army base in the village of Muriyale, near the town of Balcad. Al-Shabaab claimed 12 soldiers were killed and weapons and ammunition had been seized. However, the Somali government claimed 19 al-Shabaab operatives had been killed in the attack (Twitter account of Morad News, October 8, 2022). In addition, Al-Shabaab retook control of cities, towns and villages which had been occupied by the Somali Army: on October 1, 2022, the organization announced it had taken control of the strategic city of Maqkari and the nearby suburbs and villages after the Somali Army had retreated. During various battles al-Shabaab has killed many Somali soldiers. On September 21, 2022, in a battle between al-Shabaab and the Somali Army in the town of Boao, 40 soldiers and officers were killed and 20 wounded (Twitter account of TRACTerrorism, September 22, 2022). Al-Shabaab also attacked local civilian militias which supported the Somali government: on September 6, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed that in an attack in the suburbs of the town of Mahas, 50 militia fighters were killed (Somalimemo, September 6, 2022).

► Al-Shabaab also attacks the civilian infrastructure. On August 31, 2022, organization operatives blew up wells and communications facilities in a number of villages in the Galmudug region in central Somalia (Goobjoog News, September 1, 2022).

Use of UAVs



Al-Shabaab operative and a UAV (Garowe Online, September 15, 2022).

- ▶ According to intelligence information received by the UN in July 2022, at that time al-Shabaab had between 7,000 and 12,000 operatives and spent about a quarter of its annual budget, about \$24 million, on weapons, explosives and UAVs (VOA, July 28, 2022).
- ▶ On September 4, 2022, al-Shabaab published pictures of an American ScanEagle (Twitter account of Dalugug Security, September 5, 2022). It is a small, long-endurance, low-altitude unmanned aerial vehicle, apparently used by the organization
- ▶ On August 31, 2022, Jeffrey DeLaurentis, acting ambassador for special political affairs of the American delegation to the UN, revealed that during an unofficial session of the UN Security Council, which dealt with the supranational activities of al-Shabaab, it was revealed that the organization used UAVs to attack, collect intelligence and produce propaganda (website of the American delegation to the UN, August 31, 2022).
- ▶ Note: in January 2021 al-Shabaab published a photograph taken by a UAV of its attack on the American Naval Base in Manda Bay, Kenya, on January 5, 2020. It was al-Shabaab's first attack against an American military base in Kenya⁵ (Twitter account of Middle East Update, January 31, 2022).

Civilian Activity

- ▶ On September 18, 2022, al-Shabaab issued a video documenting the final ceremony of the Brigade of Shaheed Aspirants in its al-Sayid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan military training camp. Senior organization figures attended the ceremony. Organization spokesman Ali Dheere said that beginning in January 2022, al-Shabaab had helped the population affected

⁵ Three people were killed in the attack, six American aircraft vehicles, one aircraft owned by Kenya and a number were destroyed (website of the US Department of State, March 10, 2022).

by the drought in all the areas under its control by distributing free food, water and medical care. He said that al-Shabaab had helped 47,169 families, delivered 3,611 water tankers, supplied farmers with fuel so they could water their crops with pumps from the Shabelle and Juba rivers and dug wells (Twitter account of Christopher Anzlaone, September 18, 2022).



Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Dheere speaks about al-Shabaab aid to Somalis afflicted by drought (Twitter account of Christopher Anzlaone, September 18, 2022).

Al-Shabaab Activity in Ethiopia and Kenya

Ethiopia

- ▶ In recent months al-Shabaab has begun operating in Ethiopia.⁶ On May 26, 2022, the commanders of the criminal investigation department of the Ethiopian federal police and the police in Addis Ababa reported they had prevented a terrorist attack al-Shabaab planned to carry out in Addis Ababa. The operatives came from Somalia and infiltrated into the city through the Somali region in Ethiopia (Addis Standard, May 20, 2022).
- ▶ At the end of July 2022 al-Shabaab operatives attacked along the Somalia-Ethiopia border several times.⁷ On July 24, 2022, the Security Council of the Somali region announced it had killed the al-Shabaab operatives who had infiltrated into Ethiopian territory (Addis Standard, July 25, 2022). However, on July 26, 2022 Mohamed Abdi Tall, governor of the Bakool region in southwestern Somalia where the battles were fought, said that the al-Shabaab operatives who had infiltrated Ethiopia had not fought in the attack on Aato, Yeed and Washaago. He said there were two al-Shabaab groups, one which fought along the Ethiopian border and the other which entered Ethiopia through the Aato road during the fighting, and was en route to

⁶ Al-Shabaab previously tried to get a foothold in Ethiopia and carry out terrorist attacks but without success. In 2013 and 2014 the Ethiopian security forces prevented two large terrorist attacks planned by al-Shabaab for the soccer stadium and a shopping mall in Addis Ababa.

⁷ For further information, see the August 3, 2022 bulletin, "Spotlight on Global Jihad, July 28 – August 3, 2022."

the Bale region, which lies between the Somali and Oromia regions. The group was surrounded by the Liyu police of the Somali region in Ethiopia, but nevertheless continued into Ethiopian territory even though it had lost most of its vehicles. In addition, there was a third al-Shabaab group which entered Ethiopia in a different region, east of the town of El Barde in the southwestern part of the Somali Bakool region. They had not yet encountered the Ethiopian security forces situated between the Somali-Ethiopian border and the towns of Gode and Kelafo in Ethiopia's Somali region (VOA, July 26, 2022).

► On August 9, 2022, senior Ethiopian officials admitted that between 50 and 100 al-Shabaab operatives had reached the mountainous region lying between the Somali and Oromia regions in Ethiopia, near the town of El Kari, where al-Shabaab established a local cell the previous year. On July 15, 2022, Somali region security forces operated in the region and killed Mohamed Hassan Osman, a local Muslim sage, whom local authorities claimed was an al-Shabaab commander, important to al-Shabaab and one of the pillars of the organization's attempts to undermine Ethiopian stability (VOA, August 9, 2022).

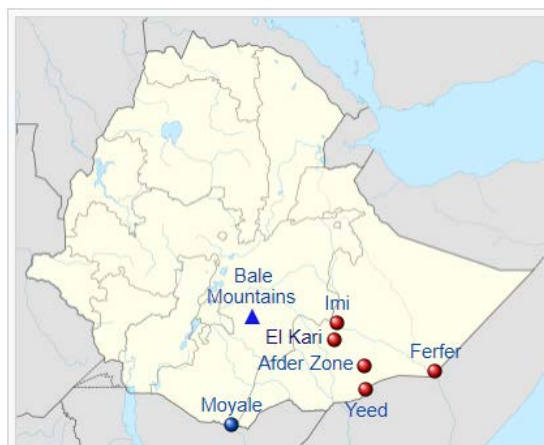
► On August 11, 2022, the government of the Somali region in Ethiopia reported heavy fighting between the Somali region police and al-Shabaab near the village of Sanku Dhooble, which is near Kelafo (southeastern Ethiopia) (Hiiraan Online, August 11, 2022).

► In recent weeks al-Shabaab has focused on attacking Ethiopian army bases on the Somalia-Ethiopia border by shooting mortars and placing IEDs.

On October 2, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for killing 132 Liyu militia soldiers of Ethiopia's Somali region and published pictures of the corpses of Ethiopians killed in the fighting in the village of Qarale on the Somalia-Ethiopia border in Somali territory (Morad News Twitter account, October 6, 2022).

On September 16, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for shooting 20 mortar shells at an Ethiopian army base in the border town of Wanako, between Somalia and Ethiopia (TRACTerrorism Twitter account, September 17, 2022).

On September 13, 2022 al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for an IED attack on the city of Atto on the Somalia-Ethiopia border. Nineteen Ethiopian soldiers were killed in the attack and two were wounded (TRACTerrorism Twitter account, September 15, 2022).



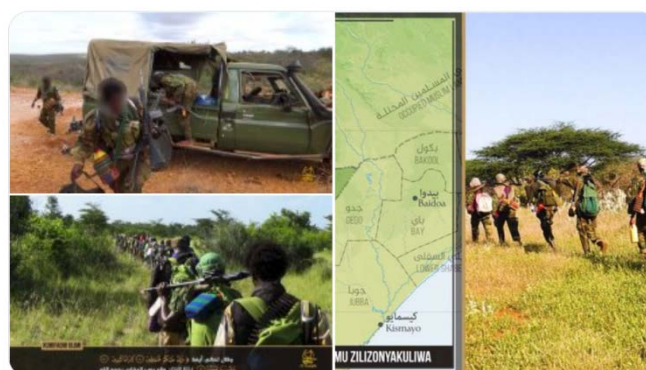
Al-Shabaab infiltration into Ethiopia, indicated by red dots (Wikipedia)

► Several months ago Ethiopia began taking action against al-Shabaab, declaring its intention to establish a security zone in the Bakool region to prevent additional infiltrations (VOA, August 6, 2022).

The Ethiopian air force attacked the Bakool region on July 30, 2022 (Somaliland Standard, July 31, 2022).

On August 7, 2022, thousands of Ethiopian Army soldiers crossed the border in the Gedo region in Somalia and established a military base in the airport of the border town of Dolow. Another Ethiopian Army convoy entered the town of Balad-hawo (Somali Guardian, August 7, 2022).

Kenya



Al-Shabaab activity in northeastern Kenya (Naja Twitter account, July 18, 2022).

► After months of al-Shabaab inactivity in Kenya, on July 20, 2022, the organization renewed its attacks and cut off communications in the Mandera county (Garowe Online, July 22, 2022).

► During the past two months most of al-Shabaab's activity in Kenya has focused on attacking military and police targets in the northeastern part of the country.

On September 8, 2022, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for an ambush in a Kenyan Army base in Sheikh Baro in Mandera in northeastern Kenya (TRACTerrorism Twitter account, September 8, 2022).

On September 2, 2022, in broad daylight al-Shabaab operatives invaded the police station in the Mandera county, wounding three policemen (Capital News, August 2, 2022).

► Al-Shabaab also worked to disrupt the presidential elections held on August 9, 2022, by threatening local residents not to vote, physically preventing people from reaching the polls and destroying ballot boxes and voting centers (Dalka Times, August 9, 2022; Somali Dispatch, August 9, 2022).

► On August 28, 2022, al-Shabaab issued a threat in English to new Kenyan President William Ruto and his government, claiming that if Kenyan forces were not withdrawn from Somalia, the organization would carry out terrorist attacks in the heart of the country (Twitter account of 5W file, August 28, 2022).

Somali President's Strategy to Stamp Out al-Shabaab



Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, president of Somalia
(Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's Twitter account, August 23, 2022).

► At the beginning of July 2022 the president of Somalia presented his strategy to eradicate al-Shabaab. He said he would negotiate with the organization at the appropriate time, after it had been weakened by means of a military, financial and ideological fight (The New Arab, July 6, 2022).

► **The military fight:** The Somali army is focusing its efforts on removing al-Shabaab from the areas near Mogadishu, especially the Hiran state in the center of Somalia, and on liberating the towns and villages under al-Shabaab control (Radio Risalah, August 8, 2022). In the war against al-Shabaab the army is collaborating with local civilian militias. On September 11,

2022, the Somali ministry of information, culture and tourism issued a press release stating that the Somali Army had liberated twenty towns from al-Shabaab control in the Hirshabelle and Galmudug and Southwestern states in central and southern Somalia and killed more than 100 al-Shabaab fighters. The army was supported by local civilian militias fighting against al-Shabaab in those area (Twitter account of Rashid Abdi, September 12, 2022).

The financial fight: The Somali army is destroying the organization's financial centers. On August 9, 2022, the Somali ministry of information, culture and tourism issued a press release stating that Somali Army special forces had destroyed the al-Shabaab financial center in the town of Mubarak in the Lower Shabelle in the Southwestern state of Somalia, killed the al-Shabaab leader and wounded about 20 operatives. During the attack the special forces liberated hostages who had been held by al-Shabaab (Twitter account of Harun Maruf, September 8, 2022).⁸ American UAVs also participated in the attack (Twitter account of Morad News, September 10, 2022; Twitter account of Halgan Media, September 9, 2022).

► **The ideological fight:** On August 2, 2022, Somali Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre appointed Mukhtar Robow, aka Abu Mansour, to the office of minister of endowments, religion and the fight against terrorism, responsible for the ideological fight against al-Shabaab. Mukhtar Robow was formerly a spokesman for al-Shabaab and the organization's deputy commander. He defected in 2017 (Reuters, August 2, 2022).

► On August 23, 2022, four days after al-Shabaab attacked the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu, killing 21 and wounding 117,⁹ the president gave a speech to the nation. He said the only solution was to eradicate al-Shabaab, and called on the public to prepare themselves for a comprehensive war against the organization (Twitter account of Harun Maruf, August 23, 2022). On September 12, 2022, he called on the public to leave the regions under al-Shabaab control and warned them that if they stayed they could be killed in aerial attacks or night raids, because every al-Shabaab operative was a target (Twitter account of Harun Maruf, September 12, 2022, Twitter account of Halgan Media, September 12, 2022).

⁸ For further information see the August 14, 2022 bulletin, "Spotlight on Global Jihad, September 8 – 14, 2022."

⁹ For further information see the August 24, 2022 bulletin, "Spotlight on Global Jihad, September 18 – 24, 2022."

Summary and Significance

- ▶ In ITIC assessment, the status of al-Shabaab within al-Qaeda has risen, and is considered a successful and influential branch of the organization. In addition, in recent months its self confidence and military power have become stronger, enabling it to attempt to establish a presence in Ethiopia, and at the same time, to renew its activity in northeastern Kenya. The use of UAVs is additional proof of its military buildup.
- ▶ In ITIC assessment, al-Shabaab can be expected to try to prevent the establishment of an Ethiopian security zone in Somalia and to increase its activities in northeastern Kenya. It will also continue trying to topple the Somali government, cause conflicts and discord within the government and attack its popularity and legitimacy in the eyes of the Somali public. There is still a long way to go before al-Shabaab is stamped out.