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MAY 6, 2025

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Continued U.S. Airstrikes in Somalia Demonstrate Relentless Nature of the Threat



AP Photo from video

Bottom Line Up Front

- Even as U.S. President Donald Trump campaigned on extricating the United States from so-called “forever wars,” months into his second stint in the White House, Trump has ordered his national security brain trust to map out contingency plans for kinetic strikes in both Somalia and Yemen.
- More hawkish elements of Trump’s cabinet want to continue taking the fight to al-Shabaab and Islamic State Somalia, while others argue that Washington needs to remain focused on China and that counterterrorism is a distraction that siphons off resources needed for great power competition.

- Given the Somali government's inability to assume responsibility for its own security, and concerns that Somali forces have not been standing their ground to fight against al-Shabaab, there are clear parallels to Afghanistan in the lead up to August 2021.
- Al-Shabaab continues to diversify its funding portfolio while also demonstrating pragmatism in the alliances and partnerships it has developed with other transnational terrorist groups, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the Houthis in Yemen.

Throughout his presidential campaign, U.S. President Donald Trump ran on a platform that included extricating the United States from “forever wars,” and avoiding getting bogged down in internecine conflicts where a narrowly defined U.S. national interest is unclear. However, months into his second stint in the White House, Trump has ordered his national security brain trust to map out contingency plans for kinetic strikes in both Somalia and Yemen. An article from April in the New York Times described in detail fissures within the Trump administration regarding how to approach Somalia, with some officials fearing that rapid advances by [al-Shabaab](#), al-Qaeda's Somali affiliate, could warrant shuttering the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu. Previous U.S. foreign policy debacles in Libya and Afghanistan loom large in the collective memory of some current national security officials, even though these incidents did not occur on their watch.

More hawkish elements of Trump's cabinet want to continue taking the fight to al-Shabaab and [Islamic State Somalia \(IS-Somalia\)](#), while others argue that Washington needs to remain focused on China as the pacing threat, and that counterterrorism is a distraction that siphons off finite resources needed for [great power competition](#) against near peer rivals. Just last week, in coordination with the Federal Government of Somalia, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) conducted what it described as a “self-defense” airstrike against al-Shabaab, approximately 120 miles north of the capital Mogadishu, in Somalia's Middle Shabelle region. Al-Shabaab captured a Somali military base in Wargaadhi town in the Middle Shabelle, and the jihadists are now looking to sever a critical logistical road between Mogadishu and central Galmudug State. Somali troops have struggled to reach certain locations because al-Shabaab fighters control key transportation routes and hubs.

In February, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM), a peacekeeping force, replaced the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). With nearly 12,000 forces, including military, police, and civilian staff from Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Egypt, AUSSOM has been plagued by funding issues. The Trump administration has slashed funding across the board for a number of organizations and agencies and is notoriously skeptical of the United Nations and regional bodies like the AU. Washington's approach to Somalia has mostly focused on training and equipping [Somali special forces](#) known as the Danab, conducting drone strikes against high-value targets, and providing close air support for the Danab as its units fight against al-Shabaab on the ground. The United States has engaged in kinetic strikes in Somalia off and on for decades, with little progress to show for it. Al-Shabaab regularly attacks the Federal Government of Somalia and ATMIS forces. Somalia remains the archetypal failed state, where borders are porous, the rule of law non-existent, and violent non-state actors fundraise, recruit, and radicalize new members with veritable impunity. Further, al-Shabaab retains the ability to conduct cross-border strikes throughout the Horn of Africa, while also engaging in piracy operations along the Gulf of Aden and near the coast of Somalia.

U.S. strikes have targeted not just the al-Qaeda linked al-Shabaab, but also IS-Somalia. According to the latest United Nations 1267/1988 Monitoring Team report, “there was a growing confidence among some Member States” that Abdul Qadir Mumin, the leader of IS-Somalia, was Islamic State’s caliph, or leader of its global network, though “doubts continued to be expressed by other Member States.” Whether or not Mumin heads Islamic State’s global organization, there is no question that he is an important cog in its overall operations, especially given his role with the [al-Karrar Office](#), which is responsible for logistics, personnel, and funding decisions. As jihadism experts such as Tore Hamming and Aaron Zelin have noted, the al-Karrar Office is a lynchpin within Islamic State’s General Directorate of Provinces, which is responsible for managing the IS Global Network, leveraging its external provinces and making the organization more resilient and robust.

There are growing reports that Somalia’s President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, has alienated members of rival clans, but also powerbrokers within his own circle. Given the Somali government’s inability to assume responsibility for its own security, and concerns that Somali forces have not been standing their ground to fight against al-Shabaab, there are clear parallels to Afghanistan in the lead up to August 2021, when Afghan forces folded quickly and the Taliban ran roughshod over the country. Those events led to a disastrous U.S. withdrawal which was punctuated by an Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) attack at [Abbey Gate in Kabul](#), that left 13 U.S. servicemembers dead and killed another 170 Afghans.

In addition to tactical advancements, there are strategic developments that are making al-Shabaab an even more potent threat. This includes increased cooperation with other terrorist organizations, including [Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#), [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula \(AQAP\)](#), and the Houthis, part of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” and a group which the United States is also regularly targeting with aggressive airstrikes. The Houthis have also reportedly cooperated with Islamic State Somalia, demonstrating a knack for both pragmatism and opportunism, as myriad violent non-state actors in the region aim to diversify supply chains and build out redundancies in terms of training and weapons.

Estimates of al-Shabaab’s annual revenue vary widely, but fall between \$100 million and \$200 million per year. The group boasts a diversified funding portfolio and has increased its reliance on mobile money transfers using U.S. dollars, something that has, in turn, enabled the group’s extortion-related activities. In a recent profile of al-Shabaab for Insight Intelligence, Elena Martynova also detailed the group’s reliance on cash, formal financial institutions, hawala, and money service businesses to support its ongoing operations. What this means, is that even with continued U.S. counterterrorism pressure, al-Shabaab will remain an enduring threat in Somalia, and one that could very well continue to metastasize while threatening not just Somalia and the Horn of Africa, but U.S. and Western interests elsewhere on the continent and perhaps further afield.

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