



## Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab (*Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidin*, Mujahidin Youth Movement) is a Somalia-based insurgent and terrorist group that U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2022 labeled “the largest, wealthiest, and most lethal Al Qaeda affiliate in the world today.” AFRICOM reports that the group poses the greatest danger to U.S. citizens and interests in East Africa, and is a threat to the United States.

### Background

Al Shabaab emerged in the mid-2000s amidst a vacuum of state authority in Somalia. It evolved out of a militant wing of the federation of Islamic Courts that took control of Mogadishu and much of southern Somalia in 2006. When Ethiopia, which backed Somalia’s nascent transitional government, intervened militarily—with U.S. support—to oust the Courts, Al Shabaab used historical anti-Ethiopian sentiment among Somalis to draw recruits and support, including among the diaspora in the United States.

Al Shabaab held much of south-central Somalia, including the capital, from the late 2000s until African Union (AU) forces gained momentum against the insurgency in 2011–2012 and reclaimed some territory from the group. Shabaab has nevertheless retained control over parts of the country, despite international recognition of Somalia’s federal government in 2012 and a range of multilateral efforts to degrade its capacity. The group also maintains influence and the ability to conduct attacks in government-held areas.

### Relationship with Al Qaeda

Some of Al Shabaab’s founding members trained with Al Qaeda (AQ) in Afghanistan, and senior AQ operatives in East Africa, including Fazul Mohammed—the late mastermind of the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania—have been associated with the group. After expressions of allegiance to Al Qaeda in Al Shabaab’s early years, the groups announced a formal affiliation in 2012.

While Al Shabaab’s leaders appear to broadly share Al Qaeda’s transnational agenda, the group operates independently. Among other AQ affiliates, the group maintains ties with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with which it runs a smuggling network.

In 2015, some Al Shabaab members pressed for a shift in allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). Al Shabaab leadership rejected the proposal and launched a deadly crackdown against IS supporters. A small IS faction in northern Somalia survived the purge. Al Shabaab remains the dominant group and appears to view the IS cell as a rival.

### The Threat

Al Shabaab has waged an asymmetric campaign against the Somali government, AU forces, and foreign targets in Somalia. Per UN data, 2022 was its deadliest year since 2017, when a truck bomb in Mogadishu killed over 500 people (Al Shabaab’s deadliest single attack to date).

While the group has focused primarily on Somalia, it also threatens the countries participating in the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS, previously known as AMISOM) and has conducted attacks in neighboring countries and Uganda. Al Shabaab has been most active in Kenya, which launched a military operation in Somalia against the group in 2011 (Kenya joined AMISOM in 2012). The group has killed hundreds of Kenyans, many through hit-and-run attacks near the Somali border. Its 2015 assault on a university in northeast Kenya, which killed at least 147 people, was the deadliest terrorist attack in Kenya since Al Qaeda’s 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy.

Al Shabaab’s July 2022 incursion into Ethiopia is its largest operation outside Somalia to date, reportedly involving some 2,000 Al Shabaab fighters. UN experts estimate that as many as 1,000 fighters remain in Ethiopia, giving it a foothold, despite Ethiopian claims of routing the group.

Al Shabaab has threatened U.S. and Western targets in the region and called for attacks against the United States. Attacks on international targets in Kenya’s capital—the 2013 Westgate Mall siege and the 2019 DusitD2 hotel assault—raised the group’s international profile. Over 50 U.S. citizens were reportedly in the Westgate mall when the attack started—all escaped but six were injured. In 2020, Al Shabaab killed a U.S. soldier and two U.S. contractors during a raid on Manda Bay Airfield, a Kenyan military facility used by the U.S. military near the Somali border.

The group has not claimed any attacks in the United States. It has, however, encouraged lone-wolf attacks in its propaganda, and in 2015, it produced a video identifying shopping malls in Europe and the United States as potential targets. In 2019, a Kenyan national was arrested in the Philippines and later extradited to the United States on charges of conspiring to hijack an aircraft on behalf of Al Shabaab to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States.

### Objectives

Al Shabaab rejects democracy, broadly ascribing to a vision of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia in an Islamic state under its version of Sharia law. It characterizes the Somali government as an illegitimate apostate authority that is beholden to foreign powers. Al Shabaab leaders have repeatedly expressed their commitment to global jihad. They justify attacks outside Somalia as retaliation against countries conducting military operations in Somalia and as retribution for alleged abuses against Muslims. Al Shabaab described the Manda Bay and DusitD2 attacks in Kenya as consistent with Al Qaeda directives to target U.S. and Israeli interests, and referred to the airfield as one of the “launch pads for the American crusade against Islam in the region.” Al Shabaab activities in Kenya more broadly appear focused on sowing internal dissent and fomenting an insurgency. Its fighters have specifically targeted non-Muslims in some attacks there.

## Leadership

Ahmed Diriye (aka Abu Ubaidah), a Somali national, has led Al Shabaab since 2014. He succeeded Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike that the Obama Administration described as responding to an “imminent threat,” citing Godane’s oversight of “plots targeting Westerners, including U.S. persons in East Africa.” Godane’s predecessor was killed in a U.S. strike in 2008.

Al Shabaab faced infighting under Godane, who consolidated power by assassinating rivals, reportedly including American jihadist Omar Hammami in 2013. Some prominent commanders left the group or surrendered to Somali authorities in exchange for amnesty during that time. Former deputy leader Mukhtar Robow defected, and later ran for state office, drawing on support from his clan. He was detained during his 2018 campaign and held without charge until 2022. He was released by Somalia’s new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and appointed Minister of Religious Affairs. In his new role, Robow is tasked with countering Al Shabaab’s extremist ideology.

## Area of Operations and Capabilities

AMISOM and neighboring militaries pushed Al Shabaab from Mogadishu and other urban centers and ports between 2011 and 2014. Al Shabaab’s control of large areas of south and central Somalia, however, remained largely unchanged from 2015, when AMISOM’s major offensive operations ceased, until 2022, when the Somali government launched a new offensive in coordination with local militias and a grassroots uprising. Al Shabaab has since lost significant territory in central Somalia, but it continues to conduct reprisal attacks there.

While Al Shabaab’s loss of Mogadishu and other port cities initially restricted its revenue, the group has developed an extensive taxation system covering all aspects of the Somali economy, per UN and other reporting. Al Shabaab extorts businesses even in government areas. It generates between \$50 and \$100 million annually, according to UN monitors, and uses at least 25% on military purchases; Al Shabaab also supports Al Qaeda directly with its tax proceeds.

UN monitors report that Al Shabaab is estimated to have 7,000-12,000 fighters. The group capitalizes on grievances and distrust of the government in parts of Somalia and fills local governance roles, providing basic services and resolving disputes. It also forcibly recruits fighters, including children. Al Shabaab uses various propaganda tools to spread its message in multiple languages. In Kenya, reportedly its largest source of foreign fighters, Al Shabaab plays on narratives of collective punishment by the Kenyan government against Muslims, among other themes. Kenyan nationals of non-Somali descent led the DusitD2 attack.

Despite territorial losses, Al Shabaab maintains the ability to conduct frequent attacks in Mogadishu and other areas beyond its control, including through complex vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In 2016, an Al Shabaab suicide bomber on a Somali airliner detonated a bomb concealed in a laptop computer. (It did not destroy the plane.) Advances in Al Shabaab’s explosives-making capacity led the UN Security Council to ban the transfer of explosive precursors to Somalia in 2019.

## U.S. Responses

The United States named Al Shabaab a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2008 and has designated over two dozen related persons for sanctions, either under Executive Order (E.O.) 13536 (on Somalia) or as under E.O. 13224 (on terrorism). Among those designated are several Kenyan clerics implicated in fundraising and recruiting for the group and members of its smuggling and weapons trafficking network in Yemen. The United States has prosecuted several U.S. citizens for fundraising on Al Shabaab’s behalf.

The United States provides security assistance to AU and Somali forces, and has supported counter-radicalization programs in the region. In addition to airstrikes, U.S. forces have engaged in “advise, assist, and accompany” missions with Somali and AU forces since 2016.

In late 2016, the Obama Administration publicly named Al Shabaab an “associated force” of Al Qaeda in the context of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40). U.S. airstrikes in Somalia were limited until 2015, when President Obama broadened the justification for U.S. military action in the country—previously “to counter Al Qaeda and associated elements of Al Shabaab”—to cover support for AU, Somali, and U.S. forces operating there. The tempo of airstrikes rose. President Trump changed the rules of engagement for U.S. operations in Somalia in 2017, authorizing offensive airstrikes and designating parts of the country as an “area of active hostilities.” Airstrikes have continued, after a brief pause, under President Biden: AFRICOM conducted over a dozen airstrikes in Somalia in 2022, citing most as “collective self-defense,” in support of the Somali army.

In late 2019, three months before the Manda Bay attack, Al Shabaab launched an unsuccessful assault on an airfield used by the U.S. military in central Somalia—it was the largest attack on U.S. forces in the country in nearly thirty years. No U.S. or Somali forces were killed. Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces—then estimated at 700—from Somalia at the end of his term; Biden authorized the redeployment of U.S. troops to Somalia in May 2022.

## Outlook

After over 15 years of counterinsurgency operations against it, Al Shabaab still poses a serious threat in Somalia and East Africa, despite the ongoing deployment of 18,000 AU troops. Airstrikes have eliminated some “high-value” targets and supported partner operations, but Al Shabaab maintains the capacity to conduct complex, asymmetric attacks in Somalia and assaults in neighboring countries. Over the past decade, political infighting and corruption have hampered the Somali government’s ability to extend state authority. Donor fatigue and frustration has reduced support for the AU mission, which is due to withdraw by the end of 2024. The “total war” Somalia’s new government launched against Al Shabaab in 2022 could be a turning point, but Somalia has struggled to “clear and hold” when AU forces have managed to gain ground in the past. For more, see CRS In Focus IF10155, *Somalia*.

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