

The Fight Against Al Shabaab in Somalia in 2016

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Related Author

- [Lauren Ploch Blanchard](#)
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Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs (lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640)

Al Shabaab, a Somalia-based Al Qaeda affiliate, recently made headlines with a [recruitment video](#) featuring footage of the late American jihadist ideologue Anwar al Awlaki, Malcolm X, the Ku Klux Klan, and Donald Trump. It cited purported anti-Muslim sentiment and racism in the United States, calling on black Americans to convert to Islam, and venerated the "Minnesotan Martyrs," a group of [young, mostly ethnic Somali American men](#) who joined Al Shabaab and died in Somalia. The video's attempt to manipulate grievances in the United States mirrors the approach of a February 2015 Al Shabaab video [targeting neighboring Kenya's Muslim minority](#) for recruitment and calling for followers in the West to attack shopping malls in the United States, England, and France. The latest video's release came weeks after the [most recent reported U.S. air strikes](#) against the group in Somalia.

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) lists ["neutralizing" Al Shabaab](#) and facilitating an eventual transition from the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), a U.N.-supported regional stabilization force, to a Somali-led operation first among its key lines of effort. Somalia's nascent security forces currently lack cohesion, however, and remain under-resourced and largely unable to maintain security without AMISOM support. [Direct U.S. strikes](#) against Al Shabaab in Somalia have been limited compared to those in Pakistan and Yemen, but the tempo of strikes in Somalia [appeared to increase in 2015](#). The United States has invested more than \$1.5 billion to build the capacity of AMISOM and the Somali security forces, [which has drawn congressional interest](#). In November, the State Department issued rewards for information regarding [six key leaders of Al Shabaab](#), and in January 2016 the Department of Justice announced [charges against Maalik Jones, a Maryland man](#) who fought with Al Shabaab in Somalia and was recently caught en route to Yemen. Jones is the latest in a series of Al Shabaab supporters [wanted by the FBI](#) or who have been, or are being, prosecuted in U.S. federal courts.

AMISOM, currently the world's largest peace operation, with more than [22,000 troops and police](#), is often cited as a [counterinsurgency case study](#). It has made significant territorial gains against Al Shabaab, retaking key Somali towns in 2015 like Diinsoor, which served as the group's headquarters after it lost the port city of Baraawe in 2014. U.N. officials report that AMISOM and allied forces have [recovered 14 districts](#) in Somalia from Al Shabaab since 2013. However, AMISOM also suffered several major attacks in 2015, with its Ethiopian, Burundian, and Ugandan contingents losing dozens of soldiers (AMISOM does not release casualty figures, and [estimates vary widely](#)). Unified command and [coordination among AMISOM's national contingents](#) reportedly remains a problem, as does a shortage of aviation assets, among [other shortfalls](#). A political crisis in the central African country of [Burundi](#) raises questions about the future participation of Burundi's 5,000-plus troops in the mission. AMISOM's expanding area of operations presents additional challenges, stretching its forces thin and leaving its bases and supply lines—including for humanitarian aid—vulnerable to attack. [Reports of violence against civilians](#) by AMISOM forces, a problem in its early years, also plague the mission.

Neighboring Ethiopia, which joined AMISOM in 2014, has played an [increasingly prominent role](#) in mission operations, including by supporting AMISOM's ground offensives with air strikes. Ethiopia's expanding role is controversial, however, given its history in Somalia, and [could fuel Al Shabaab support](#). AMISOM operations against Al Shabaab were enhanced in 2015 by U.S. air strikes, some [in support of AMISOM, Somali, and U.S. forces, an apparent change from previous U.S. strikes](#), which focused on senior leaders and other "high-value targets." The U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia suggests that such targeted strikes may have achieved near-term gains but [have not degraded Al Shabaab's operational capacity](#). Likewise, the impact of AMISOM's latest offensive on Al Shabaab's fighting force is unclear—the group reportedly demonstrated little resistance to AMISOM's efforts to retake territory, instead withdrawing to rural areas from where it launches ambushes and blockades reclaimed towns.

Al Shabaab's trajectory remains subject to debate. By many accounts, the group proved [resilient](#), if not [resurgent](#), under new leadership in 2015, demonstrating a transnational agenda and an ability to launch [high-profile conventional attacks](#) against AMISOM and Somali forces. It has maintained a campaign of assassinations and terrorist attacks in "liberated" areas, such as the deadly July attack on Mogadishu's luxury Jazeera Palace Hotel, which housed several diplomatic missions. Al Shabaab has continued to launch frequent attacks and recruit in Kenya, despite [Kenyan security operations](#) against its camps in remote border areas. While Al Shabaab profits from Somalia's charcoal trade have reportedly declined, the group continues to generate revenue through extortion of farmers and business owners, even in areas outside its control, and is [reportedly earning substantial income](#) from the illicit sugar trade into Kenya. Possible involvement in heroin trafficking is also discussed in the most recent U.N. Monitoring Group report.

While still posing a potent threat, Al Shabaab suffers divisions, with some fighters [pledging allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State](#) (IS, or ISIS) in 2015, a challenge to Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Diriye, who has maintained the group's relationship with Al Qaeda. (Al Shabaab also has long-standing ties to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.) Other pro-IS fighters, including two Americans, have [surrendered to Somali authorities](#) in recent months. Pro-IS factions in [Puntland](#) and in [southern Somalia](#) have emerged, and Al Shabaab's leadership [launched a deadly crackdown](#) against [IS supporters](#) in late 2015. Among reported IS "defectors" is a prominent Kenyan Al Shabaab commander in southern Somalia who reportedly planned the attack against Kenya's Garissa University College in April 2015. IS recruitment is of increasing [concern to regional security officials](#).

These developments play out against the backdrop of efforts to stabilize Somalia after decades of state collapse—Somalia's internationally-supported federal government approaches the [end of its term](#) this year, and political infighting, clan competition, and corruption all complicate the way forward. For background, see CRS In Focus IF10170, [Al Shabaab](#) and CRS In Focus IF10155, [Somalia](#).