



Horntalk Report

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Introduction

Since 2022, the government of President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud has implemented a comprehensive strategy to drain the swamps of violent extremism in Somalia, effectively putting the al-Shabaab Islamist group on the backfoot. But the on-going drawdown of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) ahead of its final exit by December 2024 is creating a vacuum that militia is exploiting to stage a comeback. In the absence of a seamless transition to the proposed African Union Stabilization Support Mission (AUSSOM) in January 2025 and emerging geopolitical rivalries by troops contributing African power risks emboldening and giving a new lease of life to the Islamist group

Fighting Al-Shabaab: What Next After Exit of ATMIS



Somalia has been battling violent extremist group al-Shabaab for the last 15 years, registering some successes and bad blows in its wake. Over the years, the government of the Federal Republic of Somalia has worked hand-in-hand with the various formats of the African Union forces to push back on the militants. The latest format of those forces are the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) which is expected to exit the stage in December following the end of the mandate.

There have been some agreements on the next force to take over, known formally as the African Union Stabilisation Support Mission (AUSSOM). Although the presumptive start times are in January 2025, the actual troop contributors are yet to be known because discussions are still going on. However, Egypt has been a forerunner, pledging troops and sending arms already in preparation for taking part in AUSSOM.

This has left Somalia's future security set-up a little uncertain, coming at time the government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud had established momentum between the Somali National Army (SNA), the volunteer vigilante groups and to some

extent ATMIS forces.

The future of the fight against the al-Shabaab was the subject of the Horn-talk think-tank which convened at the Villa Rosa Kempinski Hotel in Nairobi on October 2, 2024 to discuss the subject: Al-Shabaab: What Next After the Exit of ATMIS?

As is tradition, we invited 10 subject experts from Universities, media and think-tanks to weigh in on the matter. Our chief guest/expert was Dr Mustapha Ali, the Chairman of the Horn Institute for Strategic Studies, who is also Visiting Scholar at University of Nairobi. The discussant was Dr Esther Wangeci from the Department of Diplomacy, United States International University (USIU). The outcome of the session was that the momentum on al-Shabaab should be sustained but there are several issues that could affect the future of that fight.

The dedication of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud

Since coming to power in 2022, the Government of Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud has emerged as the most dedicated to the

fight against al-Shabaab. He identified a four-pronged strategy of dealing with al-Shabaab: Targeting them militarily by committing units of the Somali National Army backed by the vigilantes and ATMIS, curtailing the revenue sources for the militants including cutting out extortion rings and challenging banks to freeze accounts linked to the financiers of the militants, decampaigning al-Shabaab as outcasts and generally marketing the war on al-Shabaab as the basis for Somalia's longterm stability.

He has registered major victories and took back territories that were previously under al-Shabaab. There have also been some big blows, often seen as Al-Shabaab's last kicks. Those blows, however, have also been sources of lessons for the committed forces fighting the militants. Somalia hasn't been alone in this fight and was often backed by neighbours Ethiopia and Kenya as well as other troop contributing countries to ATMIS including Uganda and Djibouti.

The transition to a new AU mission, however, is eliciting some uncertainties as to whether this kind of cooperation will continue.

Ethiopia's controversial MoU with Somaliland region

Ethiopia had been one of the earliest countries to deploy troops to pursue militants in Somalia. After, it became a member of African Union Transition Mission to Somalia (Amisom) that was later reformed to ATMIS. Ethiopia also has troops deployed in Somalia under a bilateral arrangement with the Federal Government of Somalia.

Since January, however, Ethiopia and Somalia have been in a diplomatic tension, arising from Ethiopia's controversial MoU with Somaliland, a secessionist region in Somalia. That MoU supposedly gives Ethiopia a chunk of coastal strip where it could build a naval base and a port in exchange for recognition of Somaliland independence. That has angered Somalia which now says Ethiopia should not be part of AUSSOM nor should any of its troops be on Somali territory after ATMIS mandate.

While the two have mostly bickered diplomatically, and Ethiopian troops have remained stationed in Somalia, it has also slowed down the momentum and diverted attention and energy from the Al-Shabaab. In Somalia, some voices have even repackaged the group as a 'nationalist' force to counter Ethiopia. Indeed, al-Shabaab have publicly voiced opposition to the MoU. But that is the only point of agreement with the Federal Government to which it seeks to destroy and turn the country into some kind of caliphate.

In turn, Ethiopia has exploited clan politics in parts of Jubbaland and South-West regions to cast its forces as the better suited to defend Somalia from al-Shabaab, a paradoxical if not cynical posturing. It controversially sent arms to Puntland, raising further

tensions as to whether the communication between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu on troop movement, arms supply and other form of security information has been cut. In parts of South West, some people went to the streets to protest Mogadishu decision to stop cooperating with Ethiopia. Ethiopian troops, of course, have been station in this state for years, shielding local communities from al-Shabaab. Addis Ababa has, in fact, exploited these protests, by telling Somalia that its forces had sacrificed for years to defend Somali people. Such a rise in tension could easily become boon for al-Shabaab, weakening the gains made.

Lifting of arms embargo and the deluge of arms flow

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud may have won Somalia a crucial victory, convincing the UN Security Council to lift an arms embargo it first imposed on Somalia in the early 1990s and which had been progressively extended to deal with al-Shabaab over the years.

But that while it has offered the best chance for the defeat of Al-Shabaab, has also exposed Somalia to geopolitical games. Already, a rivalry between Egypt and Ethiopia, over the Nile and Red Sea waters, is playing out in Somalia after Ethiopia bitterly protested to Egypt's arms delivery to Somalia last month. Ethiopia feels Egypt is delivering arms to a country without proper management of its weapons flow and use, making them ease to reach al-Shabaab hands. Egypt thinks it is supporting a friendly state that is weak. In reality, Egyptians have exploited Somalia's institutional weaknesses to establish themselves at the door of their rival Ethiopia, causing discomfort to Ethiopia and breaking the usual cooperation on security issues with Somalia.

The flow of arms to Somalia, however, reflects the growing global trend where international laws managing security and wars are getting abandoned, or only used if they benefit the influential states. For Somalia, an arms embargo lift may be worth celebrating, but it also opens a market for weapons and a platform to play geopolitical games that could satisfy the richer folks. The solution may lie in ensuring the tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia on one hand, and Ethiopia and Egypt on the other does not curtail the concerted effort to defeat al-Shabaab. Countries in the Horn of Africa should, hence identify their common interest here, which is the common enemy in al-Shabaab.

Gaps left by ATMIS

Somalia has vowed readiness to take over places left by ATMIS. But the reality is that Somalia's own nascent security forces won't be able to hold the fort for long, unless backed by international partners. Somalia will take longer to generate enough troops and rightly equip them. The drawdown by ATMIS forces has already shown signs it can create gaps that al-Shabaab could exploit to step up attacks.

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