



Countering al-Shabaab in Somalia

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Due to the absence of a functioning government, a counterinsurgency in a failed state can be a difficult enterprise. Since Somalia's state collapse in 1991, various actors have been combating the threat of Al-Shabaab with mixed results.

Counterinsurgency measures, as the name suggests, are meant to suppress an insurgency and in the long run create an enabling political environment for the establishment of a functional state capable of ensuring sustainable security. These goals are, however, difficult to achieve under conditions of state collapse given the virtual absence of a functional government. As a collapsed state that has had no functional government since the end of Siad Barre's rule in 1991, Somalia represents an interesting case.

Since 1991, many of Somalia's counterinsurgency operations launched have been driven by concerns regarding the impact of Somalia's conflict on regional security and the desire to create a functional state capable of providing basic human and physical security to its citizens. Given that Somalia is a collapsed state, the initiative of adopting and effecting counterinsurgency measures in the country has been externally driven by regional and international organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN), as well as Western countries such as the United States (US) rather than by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).

This article focuses on the military component of the peace enforcement African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which has positioned itself as a counterinsurgency force against the armed insurgency group *Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujaheddin* group, commonly known as *Al-Shabaab*.

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Somalia's insurgency and counterinsurgency

The nature of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Somalia is complex as it involves a variety of non-state, state and international actors. The militant Islamist group *Al-Shabaab*, the most significant armed non state actor, describes and perceives itself as an insurgent movement but is labelled and depicted by the FGS and external actors as a terrorist group as they see it as a transnational violent armed non-state actor. The conceptualisation and labelling of *Al-Shabaab* both simultaneously as an insurgent and terrorist group only complicates counterinsurgency operations in the country. This is so, in that it is not effective enough to conduct counterinsurgency as counterterrorism to suppress a group that perceives itself and thereby conducts its operations as an insurgent rather than a terrorist one.

The combination of state collapse with the complexity and paradoxical nature of insurgency and counterinsurgency operations in Somalia has adversely affected human and physical security in the country and has provided *Al-Shabaab* with new political opportunities to sustain violent action. The AMISOM's strategic concept of operations (CONOPS) and rules of engagement (ROE) indicate that its short-term repressive security measures are better clarified as counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency, as they appear to focus on both simultaneously national and transnational terrorist activities, rather than efforts to defeat the insurgency in Somalia and ultimately create a functional state.

The AMISON's CONOPS combine all ongoing separate military operations in Somalia into a coordinated and coherent effort against *Al-Shabaab* so as to extend the authority of the FGS country-wide. It also aims at creating an enabling environment for the effective implementation of AMISOM's mandate.

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AMISOM's CONOPS have, however, been adversely hindered by the mission's lack of adequate financial, human and military resources, thereby rendering it ineffective in its mandated operations. AMISOM's ROE are key to ensuring that military operations are conducted in compliance with international humanitarian law obligations in Somalia's socio-political context.

Though the ROE are in conformity with the operational realities of the mission, AMISOM continues to operate in extremely volatile conditions created by state collapse, whereby *Al-Shabaab's* asymmetrical warfare targets civilians within populated areas. This situation makes it extremely difficult for AMISOM to ensure civilian protection in the conduct of its operations and to consistently apply the mission's ROE. Counterinsurgency operations that cannot consistently sustain themselves for long periods are ineffective and will not achieve the intended outcome of enhancing sustainable security.

A success or failure?

The successes or failures of insurgency and counterinsurgency operations in Somalia depend on population support. So far, the counterinsurgency strategies in Somalia conducted by AMISOM and its coalition forces, especially the Somali National Army, have been unable to gain the support of the people. *Al-Shabaab's* led insurgency has gained popular support among the local-level communities, largely due to the social services and more importantly the local-level security governance it provides, in the absence of a functional state. All these strategies of *Al-Shabaab*, which are aimed at legitimising itself, are implemented through variants of Islamism. The movement was very effective in the provision of alternative governance structures at the local-level prior to the pre-2010 military intervention of AMISOM. The literature on counterinsurgency operations in Somalia indicates that the security vacuum

created by *Al-Shabaab's* departure as a result of AMISOM's operations in these areas has led to an increase in the levels of insecurity thereby questioning the legitimacy of the latter's operations.

The Somali populace also perceives these counterinsurgency efforts as externally driven and extremely hesitant to engage, positively, with the fundamental Somali socio-political structures such as the clan structure and Islam. In order to be effective counterinsurgency measures, should take into account the legitimacy of these socio-political structures that play a significant role in local-level peacebuilding and governance processes.

Doomed from the start?

Counterinsurgency operations in Somalia have also been adversely affected by poor planning and their inability, so far, to create an enabling environment which enhances state capacity. Any credible counterinsurgency operation with a military component requires careful planning before any military incursion begins. A number of indicators suggest that, in the early stages, AMISOM neither planned nor implemented an effective counterinsurgency strategy. The initial objective of Kenya's military incursion into Somalia through Operation *Linda Nchi* and subsequent incorporation into AMISOM was not peace enforcement countering the direct physical threats posed by *Al-Shabaab* on its territory.

Counterinsurgency measures were later driven by socio-political and economic interests rather than peacebuilding in Somalia. Kenya's military intervention in Somalia can be perceived as counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency efforts given that they were initially driven by short-term strategic interests. The establishment of a functional state has so far not been achieved in Somalia as

it has been has been compromised by the manner in which regional and international peacekeeping efforts, have been conducted in the country. Most of these, if not all have been characterised by failures rather than successes. For example, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia constantly accuses the Kenya Defence Forces component of violating AMISOM's mandate. AMISOM has not been effectively taking the appropriate measures aimed at supporting the creation of a functionally effective state due to the strategic interests of its member states. This has compromised peacebuilding and security governance in the country.

The resilience of Al-Shabaab as a transnational violent non-state armed actor, is partly a function of ineffective repressive counterinsurgency measures in Somalia. The repressive counterinsurgency operations conducted largely by external actors in the country are reactive, achieve unintended consequences and hence counterproductive. A political strategy supported by security operations in the formulation and implementation of counterinsurgency operations is still ideal for any country facing an insurgency.

Counterinsurgency measures, however, that do not require repressive security operations that focus on causes not symptoms are best suited for Somalia in the medium and long-term. Since Somalia does not have a functional government capable of providing effective counterinsurgency operations let alone human and physical security, non-repressive measures would best be conducted by non-state actors such clan leaders and clans, and Islamic civil society organisations.

Non-state actors are appropriate in the implementation of non-repressive counterinsurgency measures in that they not only located within fundamental Somali socio-political structures, but also have the capacity to use informal

process oriented means rather than formal goal-oriented ones. Informal process-oriented methods are more appropriate when it comes to addressing the root causes of the insurgency while formal goal-oriented ones are reactive focussing on symptoms. These measures, such as those that focus on countering violent extremism, take into account fundamental Somali socio-political structures, and their corresponding customs norms and traditions thereby gaining population support and subsequently legitimacy. Such counterinsurgency measures will achieve their intended outcome of dealing with insurgency, the grievances of that insurgency and ultimately create the socio-political environment required to establish a functional state.

Image of AMISON troop via [UN Photo/Flickr](#).

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