

ACSRT/Incident-Preliminary-Analysis-003-2015

Algiers, 4 February 2015

Incident Preliminary Analysis

Top Al Shabaab figure killed in airstrike.

4 February 2015

I. THE INCIDENT

On 4 February 2015, Pentagon spokesman, Rear Admiral *John Kirby*, confirmed in a press conference, in Washington D.C. that on Saturday 31 January 2015 at 14:00 GMT, an MQ-9 Reaper UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) stroke a convoy near the *Al Shabaab* occupied town of Dinsoor, 270 kilometres south of Mogadishu and killed 45 *Al Shabaab* members. The Reaper drone fired several Hellfire missiles at the convoy. Rear Admiral *Kirby* further



MQ-9 Reaper drone firing Hellfire missile.

confirmed that one of the persons killed in this latest attack has been positively identified as *Yusuf Dheeq*. *Dheeq* was a senior *Al-Shabaab* member, and chief of external operations, intelligence and planning. *Dheeq* has been instrumental in supreme planning and execution of *Al-Shabaab Amniyat* operations inside and outside Somalia, and has been the chief planner for the Westgate Mall massacre in Nairobi, Kenya, on 22 September 2013, which killed 68 people .

In a similar fashion, on 1 September 2014, the *Al-Shabaab's* leader, *Ahmed Abdi Godane*, was killed in a US drone strike on his convoy in the Bay area in south eastern Somalia. And Washington carried out another drone air strike on 29 December 2014 which killed *Tahliil Abdishakur*, the previous leader of the *Al Shabaab Amniyat* units¹. *Amniyat* has various branches which include the intelligence, suicide bombers, and special operations units, and has been the most successful of all the *Al Shabaab* units in perpetrating terror attacks in Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia since 2011.

¹ *Amniyat* are intelligence gathering cells of *Al Shabaab* that consist of five-man units. Each person in the unit is a specialist in specific field namely intelligence gathering, assassinations, recruitment, suicide bombings, obtaining funds for *Al Shabaab*. It is these units that are the most successful arm of *Al Shabaab* in carrying out bombings, suicide attacks, assassinations and other terror attacks on civilian, government and AMISOM targets.

This latest attack against Al-Shabaab leadership in Somalia is the seventh since *Al-Shabaab's* former intelligence chief, *Zakariya Ismail Hersi*, surrendered on 27 December 2014 to Somali authorities.

Since 2012, Al-Shabaab has lost several important leaders due to drone strikes, among which:

- In January 2012, *Bilal al Berjawi*, the senior deputy to *Fazul Abdullah Mohammed* (senior leader of *Al Qaeda in East Africa*) was killed by a drone strike.
- on 29 October 2013, *Ibrahim Ali Abdi* a.k.a *Anta Anta*, a master bombmaker and expert suicide operations trainer was killed during a Predator drone strike in Somalia.
- On 26 January 2014 a US drone strike killed *Ahmed Mohammed Awey*, a senior Al-Shabaab commander, and *Sahal Iskuduq*, a senior commander and senior member of *Amniyat*.
- On 27 January 2014 a drone attack killed *Sahal Iskuduq*, a senior commander and senior member of *Amniyat*.



II. ANALYSIS

The most recent loss of prominent Al-Shabaab commanders, coupled with previous losses of senior Al-Shabaab leaders in 2012, 2013 and 2014, has seriously affected the operational capacities of Al-Shabaab in that the group has lost considerable experience and knowledge in guerilla/urban/assymetrical warfare. It is a significant blow to the ability of the group to conduct, plan, and execute terror operations inside and beyond Somalia. This, coupled with the setbacks and losses incurred in conventional warfare during the successful AMISOM operations of 2014 notably, "Operation Eagle" and "Operation Indian Ocean", Al-Shabaab has lost control of all districts in the regions of Bakool, Hiraan, Middle Shabelle and Gedo. In total Al-Shabaab has, at present, full control of only eight districts and towns in Somalia, namely Dinsoor and Ufurow in Bay region, Jamaame and Kamsuma in Lower Jubba region, Buale, Sakow and Jilib in Mudug region and Haradere port.

The successful drone strikes in recent years are also an indication that AMISOM has considerably enhanced its capacity to gather quality operational intelligence on Al-Shabaab which it shares with its partners and allows for precision drone strikes on senior leaders and commanders of the terrorist group.

However, much as today's Al-Shabaab is just a shadow of what it used to be in 2009, it is too early to draw any conclusions about its immediate predicament. In not so distant past, Al-Shabaab sustained serious setbacks just to re-emerge in the war front with renewed strength months later. This had also previously happened with its predecessor, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), when it was almost decimated following the US-supported Ethiopian intervention in Somalia in 2007. Al-Shabaab is a very resilient terrorist organization. Despite repeated defeats in various battle fronts, it has, in the past six months, been able to launch repeated attacks against AMISOM, Somali government and civilian targets in Somalia and outside Somalia, particularly in Kenya. The ability of Al-Shabaab to adapt and regenerate has been demonstrated by the fact that in the districts it has lost control it still has the capacity to regularly disrupt and block the movement of people, food and non-food supplies, making it difficult for AMISOM and the Somali government to ensure road security in those areas. As a result of this successful disruption, Al-Shabaab has in unhindered manner, been able to continue its recruitment activities and collect “taxes” on roads and businesses in the blockaded areas.

III. Conclusions

- Despite the loss of *Ahmed Godane*, Al-Shabaab appears to have been able to cope with the new reality and forge ahead. Al-Shabaab 's new leader, *Ahmed Omar* a.k.a *Abu Ubaidah*, seems to have taken a more radical approach than Godane on where to take Al-Shabaab in the immediate future. It can, therefore, be surmised that under his leadership more vicious and bloody attacks in Somalia and in the AMISOM troop-contributing countries are likely to take place.
- *Amniyat* units will, most probably, continue to target vulnerable, difficult to protect civilian populations, AMISOM and Somali Government installations. Targeted assassinations and suicide bombings can be expected to increase.
- It can also be expected that stringent security measures will be tried to ensure better protection of Al-Shabaab leadership. Information regarding leaders, senior officials and other sensitive Al-Shabaab objects will be scarce as it may, most surely, be availed only on a need to know basis to reduce the likelihood of their exposure to drone strikes and other attempts on their lives. *Abou Ubaidah* and the Al-Shabaab in general will continue to rely heavily on *Amniyat* for security and effectiveness on the ground. The preferential treatment of *Amniyat* will, therefore, continue and substantial Al-Shabaab's resources may be directed to the strengthening of *Amniyat*'s capacities particularly regarding intelligence collection identification and rooting out informers from within the Al-Shabaab's ranks, infiltration of agents in the Somali government and AMISOM command structures, expansion of *Amniyat* cells activities and effectiveness within and outside Somalia.

- Al-Shabaab will continue to adapt to the fact that taking AMISOM and Somali government forces upfront through conventional warfare is suicidal. It will do its best to preserve as much as it can, the 1000-strong core group of hard-line, committed and experienced fighters it still has and use them sparingly and more efficiently. It will try to improve further its capacity to plan, finance and operate in the field. It will enhance its flexibility as a group operating in regional commands and independent cells. Asymmetric warfare in the form of surprise attacks, targeted assassinations, suicide bombings and the planting of road side IEDs will remain the privileged method of confronting AMISOM and Government troops. Despite this, the loss of a large number of experienced fighters and planners will continue to haunt Al-Shabaab and impact its performance as it will, for some time to come, remain poorly structured, ill equipped and increasingly led by not so experienced field commanders.