

Query response

Somalia: Power relations in Southern Somalia

- Which areas are held by the government?
- Where does al-Shabaab still hold power?
- Stability of power relations

Introduction

There are limited possibilities to obtain information about power relations in Southern Somalia. As this query response shows, power relations can also shift, which means that information quickly become outdated. This naturally limits both the chance to and the relevancy of giving a detailed and exhaustive overview of the topic. Hence the query response only provides a general description of power relations in Southern Somalia.

The query response focuses on the Somali authorities¹ and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab), who are the main actors in the ongoing power struggles in Southern Somalia. The authorities are supported by military forces from the African Union (AMISOM). AMISOM consists of military ground forces from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia,² Kenya and Uganda, and has a mandate from the UN to use «all necessary means» to fight al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups, and to assist the Somali forces in expanding and consolidating control over Somali territory (UN Security Council 2016, p. 3-4).

The query response is partly based on information obtained during fact finding missions to Mogadishu in January 2016 and the city of Belet Weyne in February 2015 (see list of references). Several sources are anonymized for the sake of their work situation and/or safety.

¹ «Authorities» refers to the internationally recognized Somali federal government and its subordinate agencies. The term is somewhat misleading, as the authorities have very limited capacity.

² Ethiopia also operates national forces outside AMISOM in Southern Somalia (sources B and D, meetings in Mogadishu, January 2016; source G, meeting in Jijiga, April 2016). According to source B these forces count several thousand Ethiopian soldiers.

Government areas³ and the significance of AMISOM

The authorities are largely unable to occupy and defend areas without the assistance of AMISOM.⁴ This was most recently highlighted in October 2016, when al-Shabaab attacked the cities of Afmadow in Lower Juba and Afgoye in Lower Shabelle, and were only driven back when AMISOM forces came to the rescue of the authorities (Shabelle News 2016a & b). In September 2016 al-Shabaab drove the government forces out of the border town El Wak in Gedo (Garowe Online 2016b). Al-Shabaab thus took control of the city before the government forces received assistance from AMISOM in recapturing it (AFP 2016).

AMISOM's operations against al-Shabaab are relatively well described in the media, but the information should be used with caution. News reports often show AMISOM taking a number of areas in connection with various operations. Developments are often visualised by use of overview maps (see, for example, BBC 2016b and van Linge 2016). Such news reports and maps can give a misleading picture of the actual situation on the ground. AMISOM has about 22,000 soldiers (UN Security Council 2016, p. 3) in an operational area the size of mainland Norway,⁵ and therefore cannot maintain a military presence in all areas they enter. Military presence is normally established in the form of bases, primarily in and/or by major cities, normally district cities, and in/by some strategically important villages.⁶ Most areas are only passed by AMISOM (source B, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016; AMISOM, meeting in Belet Weyne, February 2015). This means that government areas consist of separate enclaves or «islands». Most district cities in Southern Somalia are currently held by the authorities.

The last major AMISOM offensive against al-Shabaab, «Operation Juba Corridor», took place in July 2015, and resulted in the authorities seizing the cities of Bardhere and Dinsoor (AFP 2015).⁷ As in previous AMISOM offensives, al-Shabaab withdrew without showing considerable resistance. In a meeting with Landinfo in January 2016 source B described the retreat as very well coordinated. This is a deliberate tactic from al-Shabaab's side to keep their army intact and thus be able to fight when conditions are more favourable to them (AMISOM, meeting in Belet Weyne, February 2015). The more areas AMISOM has occupied, the more dispersed their forces have become, and the longer their supply lines have become. This has made them vulnerable. Al-Shabaab exploits this by attacking supply lines and small military units (see for example Anzalone 2016, p. 14). At the same time, Al-

³ Government areas refer to areas held by the authorities.

⁴ The Somali army (Somali National Army – SNA) consists mainly of clan militias, whose loyalty is first and foremost to the clan (McCormick 2016; WPR 2016). The number is very uncertain. The UN Secretary General (UN Secretary General 2015, p. 6) said in September 2015 that SNA had about 16,000 registered soldiers, but according to the UN monitoring group for Somalia (UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea 2015, p. 24) SNA has systematically exaggerated the number of soldiers. The soldiers are generally poorly trained and ill-equipped (source B, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016).

⁵ Southern Somalia, here defined as the southern regions towards and including Mudug, covers an area of about 340,000 km² (GeoNames, n.d.). Mainland Norway constitutes 323,781 km² (Kartverket 2016).

⁶ What constitutes a city or a village is relative. District city here refers to cities that have given name to the district. Normally this is the largest city in the district.

⁷ It is uncertain when the offensive against al-Shabaab continues. According to source B (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016), the offensive will likely continue in the direction of the cities Jamame and Jilib. The source substantiated this by referring to the fact that Ethiopian AMISOM troops were flown to the Kismayo area in January 2016 to participate in the offensive (see also Hiiraan Online 2016). The fact that no offensive has been carried out so far confirms that AMISOM has limited resources.

Shabaab conducts assassinations and terrorist attacks in government areas against people and places with ties to the government.

The vulnerability of AMISOM was especially illustrated from mid-2015, when al-Shabaab stormed three AMISOM bases by the villages of Lego in Bay, Janaale in Lower Shabelle and El Adde in Gedo.⁸ In June 2016 an Ethiopian base by the village of Halgan along the main road between the villages of Belet Weyne and Bulo Burte in Hiran was attacked, although this time al-Shabaab was pushed back (Burke 2016b). All the attacks involved several hundred al-Shabaab fighters (Burke 2016b; Maruf 2015; source B, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). The attacks resulted in AMISOM pulling out of areas on some later occasions, out of fear that they would not be able to defend themselves against al-Shabaab attacks. After the attack by Lego, for example, AMISOM withdrew from parts of the district city Qoryoley (Goobjoog News 2015; source H, e-mail August 2015). After the attack by El Adde AMISOM withdrew from the district city Badhade (Garowe Online 2016a). In February 2016 AMISOM withdrew from parts of the district and region city Merka (Burke 2016a; source H, e-mail, February 2016). The areas from which AMISOM withdrew were immediately taken over by al-Shabaab. Both Qoryoley and Merka were quickly taken back by AMISOM,⁹ but al-Shabaab has continued to hold power in Badhade (source H, e-mails August 2015, February 2016 and October 2016).

These events not only show how dependent the government and SNA are on AMISOM, but also that power balances can change in al-Shabaab's favour. There is broad consensus amongst Landinfo's sources that it is unlikely that al-Shabaab is able to seize major cities such as Mogadishu, Kismayo, Baidoa and Belet Weyne. Al-Shabaab has limited resources and it is risky for them to gather attack forces.¹⁰ This was recently highlighted in March 2016, when the U.S. bombed an al-Shabaab training camp by the village of Raso in Hiran (Cooper 2016; McCormick 2016; Smith & Ackerman 2016).¹¹ The above incidents also show that al-Shabaab is not able to maintain control over areas if AMISOM decides to occupy them.

Since it was established, AMISOM's mandate has been continuously extended and partly also enlarged. The current mandate lasts until 31 May 2017 (UN Security Council 2016, p. 3). There is nothing to suggest that the mandate will not be extended. Nor is there any concrete evidence that the countries that currently make up AMISOM will suspend troop contributions. However contributing countries sometimes raise this possibility. Most recently in June 2016 Uganda, which has the largest AMISOM contingent, said that they were considering pulling their troops out before December 2017 (BBC 2016a). The statement was moderated already in

⁸ In June 2015 al-Shabaab defeated a Burundian AMISOM base by the village of Lego along the main road between the district cities of Bur Hakaba and Wanla Weyne (AFP 2015). In September 2015 al-Shabaab stormed a Ugandan AMISOM base by the village of Janaale in Lower Shabelle (Harar24 2015; Kalinaki 2016). In January 2016 al-Shabaab seized a Kenyan AMISOM base by the village of El Adde in Gedo (Gettleman 2016).

⁹ Al-Shabaab seized parts of Merka village on 5 February 2016. They raised their flag and addressed the population. On 8 February AMISOM took the city back (source H, e-mail February 2016). Al-Shabaab also temporarily seized parts of Merka in July 2016, when AMISOM again withdrew (Maruf & Olad 2016; Goobjoog News 2016; UN Secretary-General 2016, p. 2).

¹⁰ Al-Shabaab's forces mainly operate in smaller, mobile groups, but gather in larger units before attacks (AMISOM and source B, meetings in Belet Weyne, February 2015). The training camps are temporary and mobile (Smith & Ackerman 2016).

¹¹ AMISOM does not have a separate air force, but both Ethiopia and Kenya use their national air force against al-Shabaab.

July 2016 (Osman 2016). In Landinfo's understanding statements about withdrawing are often an expression of frustration over the lack of funding from Western donors (see also Anyadike 2016).

In October Ethiopian forces withdrew from a number of areas, including Halgan in Hiran and Tiye glow in Bakool, which were promptly seized by al-Shabaab (Aljazeera 2016; Radio Kulmiye 2016). This is not the first time Ethiopian forces have withdrawn from areas. For example they also withdrew from Halgan in August 2015 (Hiiraan Online 2015). Viewed in light of the declared state of emergency in Ethiopia, the recent withdrawal has raised concerns that Ethiopia is suspending their contribution of troops to AMISOM. Ethiopian authorities deny this, and explain that they only withdraw forces that are not part of AMISOM (BBC 2016; Maruf 2016).¹² When Landinfo conducted a fact finding mission to Addis Ababa and the Somali region in Ethiopia in April 2016, the sources emphasised that Ethiopia has a national security interest in fighting al-Shabaab in Southern Somalia (see for example sources E, F and G).

Al-Shabaab areas

Before AMISOM started their offensives, al-Shabaab was largely a city phenomenon (Hansen 2013, p. 89). Outside the cities al-Shabaab was absent or represented by allied clan militias. Al-Shabaab still has power in some district cities, including Buala, Jilib and Sakow in Middle Juba, Badhade and Jamame in Lower Juba, Sablale in Lower Shabelle, Tiye glow in Bakool, El Dheres in Galgadud and Haradhere in Mudug. Al-Shabaab also has power in some villages, such as Bulu Haji in Lower Juba (source H, e-mail, October 2016).

AMISOM has forced al-Shabaab out of most of the district cities in Southern Somalia. This has resulted in a greater degree of al-Shabaab presence in rural areas than in the past. A number of sources point out that al-Shabaab can move relatively freely in rural areas and that they exert influence on the population (Williams & Hashi 2016, p. 30; Williams 2016; AMISOM and source A, meetings in Belet Weyne, February 2015). However this does not mean that al-Shabaab holds power in all areas not held by the government. As with AMISOM, al-Shabaab also has a limited number of members.¹³ Al-Shabaab's power also varies depending on local clan relationships, and some clans resist them (source A, meeting in Beled Weyne, February 2015; source B, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). In February 2016, for example, the Abgal clan militias forced al-Shabaab out of a number of areas in Middle Shabelle (Barnes & Yusuf 2016).¹⁴

Sources Landinfo met during the trip to Mogadishu in January 2016 and to Belet Weyne city in February 2015 agreed that al-Shabaab generally has a presence around government areas and a lot of influence along the main roads. This is supported by the fact that al-Shabaab carry out attacks against government forces and their allies along roads and disrupt supplies and commerce to government areas.

¹² See footnote 2.

¹³ The size of al-Shabaab's army is uncertain. Source B (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) estimated that the army consists of between 5,000 to 7,000 fighters, including allied clan militias.

¹⁴ AMISOM and SNA seized Adan Yabal city in April 2016 (AMISOM 2016).

Summary

Most district cities in Southern Somalia are currently held by the authorities. Government areas constitute separate enclaves or «islands». Al-Shabaab has maintained power in some district cities, but has largely been forced out in rural areas. The authorities are dependent on assistance from AMISOM to seize and maintain control of areas. Al-Shabaab is not able to hold areas if AMISOM decides to seize them, but AMISOM has a limited number of soldiers and is vulnerable because the soldiers are dispersed over a large area, and the supply lines are long. On occasion, this has caused AMISOM to withdraw from areas. Areas which AMISOM withdraws from are immediately seized by al-Shabaab. However al-Shabaab has limited resources and it is unlikely that al-Shabaab is able to seize major cities such as Mogadishu, Kismayo, Baidoa and Belet Weyne. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that AMISOM's mandate will not be extended, or that any of the contributing countries will withdraw their forces.

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