

Good morning. It is an honor to be here this morning to discuss Somalia's current stability and security status, in particular the state of efforts against al-Shabaab. Thank you for the opportunity.

Over the past eleven years, substantial resources have been expended in the effort to defeat al-Shabaab. Most notably, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) deployed in 2007 to protect the fledgling Transitional Federal Government from the rising threat from al-Shabaab. Multiple countries, including the United States, have invested significant aid to build a Somali government that is capable of governing its people, investing heavily in the Somali National Army, police, and other parts of the security sector. In addition to training, advising, and even conducting joint operations, the United States has conducted an air campaign, launching strikes like the one that killed al-Shabaab's leader in 2014. The airstrikes have expanded and accelerated over the past year, striking al-Shabaab's training facilities, elements of the group involved in attacking the capital, and other targets.

There has been progress and signs of hope. AMISOM helped to regain substantial territory from al-Shabaab. The group has lost personnel, both because of counterterrorism operations and defections. Elections have been held in Somalia, with a peaceful transition of power last year.

However, at a strategic level, the campaign against al-Shabaab is at a stalemate. As I will discuss today, the current strategy will not militarily defeat al-Shabaab or even seriously degrade the group. Yet, there is little momentum to pursue a negotiated political settlement either. In the current no-man's land situation, al-Shabaab will continue to pose a regional threat, especially to Kenya and perhaps increasingly to Ethiopia. It will retain the ability to conduct devastating terrorist attacks in Mogadishu as well as operations against Somali and AMISOM forces. It will act as a shadow government, governing large swaths of rural Somalia overtly while indirectly ruling parts of Somalia seemingly under government and AMISOM control. It will continue to challenge the legitimacy of the still-fragile Somali Federal Government, both through its violence and through presenting itself as an alternative to the government.

The Prospects for a Military Victory Against al-Shabaab

Unfortunately, the prospects to defeat al-Shabaab militarily are bleak. The military campaign against the group consists of multiple components: AMISOM, U.S. counterterrorism strikes, training and advising the Somali National Army, and joint operations, just to name a few. I will focus here on the impact of AMISOM, the Somali National Army, and U.S. counterterrorism strikes.

Given the security situation in Somalia, it is easy to overlook AMISOM's accomplishments: re-capturing territory, including major cities, from al-Shabaab; preventing al-Shabaab from gaining control of Mogadishu; and helping to secure the country sufficiently for elections and a relatively peaceful transition of power last year. AMISOM has an enormous, perhaps impossible, mission with thirteen major components in its mandate. It has three current strategic objectives, based on UN Security Council Resolution 2372: to gradually handover security responsibility to Somali Security Forces; to reduce the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups; and to assist Somali Security Forces to provide security for Somalia's political process and peacebuilding efforts.

There is still some uncertainty about the future of AMISOM. It has committed to a conditions-based withdrawal. Recent statements indicate that AMISOM is fully aware that its gains will be lost if it withdraws prematurely and that a timetable for its withdrawal is not a sound approach. To be clear: an

AMISOM withdrawal will almost certainly allow al-Shabaab to re-gain substantial territory and influence and may even lead to the collapse of the Somali Federal Government. However, the funding for AMISOM remains uncertain, and it is that uncertainty, not the stability of the situation in Somalia and capability of the Somali National Army, which has motivated the withdrawal plans.

Even assuming that AMISOM stays with the current force levels, it has a limited offensive orientation and no appetite for the difficult offensive campaign that would be needed to dislodge al-Shabaab from its stronghold in the rural areas of Somalia. In addition, AMISOM's gains have often proven unsustainable. When AMISOM moves out of places that it has cleared, al-Shabaab quickly returns or re-emerges from the population.

In the meantime, al-Shabaab inflicts losses on AMISOM. Perhaps most notably, the group has overrun Forward Operating Bases, killing and injuring scores of troops and seizing arms, military vehicles, and heavy weaponry. More recently, it has become adept at ambushing AMISOM convoys, including a recent attack on Burundian soldiers escorting a convoy of trucks loaded with supplies, which reportedly killed five.

While AMISOM is essential to preserving the gains made to date, opposing "external occupiers" and condemning the Somali government as a puppet of foreign powers are constant themes in al-Shabaab's narrative. And this message resonates among some Somalis who resent AMISOM's presence, particularly the Ethiopian and Kenyan troops. Accusations of misconduct by AMISOM troops have contributed to some local opposition to their presence.

Yet, the Somali National Army is woefully unprepared to accept responsibility from AMISOM. For the most part, the Somali National Army is adequate to the task of holding its positions, but can only do so in conjunction with AMISOM or with the agreement of local forces. But it cannot move beyond its current positions, and for both military and political reasons, it cannot expand into al-Shabaab-held territory.

In addition, the Somali National Army continues to suffer the ill effects of clannism. Overall, it is dominated by the Hawiye clan, leading others to see it as essentially a clan militia. Within the SNA, clan divisions persist, contributing to infighting, poor command and control, and a lack of discipline. Loyalty and obedience are often determined more by clan affiliation than position and rank. Particularly since the collapse of the state, individuals depend upon their clans for support and protection. The task of supplanting this to realign with the state as national soldiers is a long-term and fraught endeavor.

In contrast, al-Shabaab has positioned itself as a champion of disenfranchised clans, particularly those insufficiently represented in the clan-based power sharing formula. While al-Shabaab does not transcend clan, as it claims, it has sufficient internal discipline that personnel obey commands even in the face of clan differences.

The Somali National Army also experiences endemic corruption. While corruption is not unique to the Somali National Army, the SNA's corruption and misconduct in particular benefit al-Shabaab. It is difficult to provide numbers of SNA personnel because troop numbers have often been inflated with "ghost soldiers" in order to secure more funding from international donors.

In particular, irregular pay, in part because of corruption at more senior levels, has damaging consequences. It contributes to a lack of discipline and leads SNA soldiers to prey upon the population.

Moreover, there is a lack of accountability and redress when civilians lodge complaints against SNA personnel. Of the 228 complaints filed against the Ministry of Defense with the Somali anti-corruption NGO Marqaati, 97% concerned soldiers robbing people at gunpoint. Soldiers sometimes sell their weapons, equipment, or even uniforms, which can end up in al-Shabaab's hands and contribute to the SNA's equipment and supply shortfalls. Irregular pay also makes the SNA more susceptible to infiltration by al-Shabaab, which is already a significant problem. Some SNA personnel have reportedly even defected to al-Shabaab after prolonged periods without pay.

On the other hand, al-Shabaab is comparatively less corrupt, particularly in its treatment of the Somali populace. Traveling on roads that it controls involves paying a one-time "tax" that comes with a receipt, rather than paying at multiple checkpoints or being robbed on other roads, including those controlled by SNA soldiers. Al-Shabaab has a system for people to lodge complaints against its members for misconduct. The group takes a hard stance against internal corruption, severely punishing members who engage in such conduct.

Finally, U.S. airstrikes and joint operations are putting pressure on al-Shabaab and causing some internal disruptions within the group. In 2017, the United States conducted twice as many airstrikes against al-Shabaab as it did in 2016. Last March the campaign expanded beyond self-defense to include offensive strikes with greater flexibility to target the group and to support AMISOM and Somali forces.

The strikes are succeeding in forcing al-Shabaab commanders to focus more on personal security at the expense of other activities. They have to be more cautious about their movements and communications, which hampers coordination. Their leaders, particularly high-value targets, are less accessible to their followers. When members have to dedicate resources to their own security, it reduces their ability to effectively engage in operational planning. The airstrikes also stoke fears of spies and infiltrators, which can lead to witch hunts that damage group cohesion and alienate the local population. In addition, the airstrikes have disrupted some planned attacks on Mogadishu and eliminated individuals involved in those operations.

However, after more than a decade and having endured numerous losses, including of its founding leader, al-Shabaab has developed a deep bench — which means it can replace commanders, and even leaders, with limited long-term disruption. Though the strikes have thwarted some attacks and damaged the group's planning, al-Shabaab retains robust operational capacity, including in Mogadishu. Moreover, al-Shabaab has sought to persuade Somalis, with some success, that the airstrikes disproportionately harm civilians.

Overall, al-Shabaab has and will continue to incur losses from AMISOM, the Somali National Army, and U.S. CT strikes. The United States' provision of an unmanned aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) system to AMISOM will help AMISOM to avoid or pre-empt some al-Shabaab ambushes. But al-Shabaab's setbacks have been and will remain largely tactical. It is a mature and resilient organization with a proven track record of adapting its tactics to changes in the environment. Perhaps more importantly, the group is embedded in Somali society, making a military victory difficult in the best of circumstances, but highly unlikely in the current situation.

The Prospects for a Political Settlement

Despite the absence of a viable route to militarily defeating al-Shabaab, there are also limited prospects for a political settlement. Without question, any negotiations with al-Shabaab face serious obstacles, not least of which is how unpalatable it is to negotiate with an al-Qaida-affiliated organization that engages in terrorist attacks like the one that killed 500 in Mogadishu in October. However, in focusing on the group's terrorist attacks, one can overlook that the group has established a position as a credible alternative to the government, effectively capitalizing on grievances, delivering a modicum of justice and security, and offering an alternative to the clannism and reliance on external actors that defines the current political system. Despite experiencing some tensions, al-Shabaab is probably the most cohesive and unified entity in southern Somalia. But ultimately, al-Shabaab's main strength is the weakness of its main adversary: the Somali Federal Government.

To be clear at the outset: there are few indications that al-Shabaab as an organization seeks negotiations to find a political settlement. Some argue that the group, or at least elements of it, are irreconcilable. That is probably true, though it is impossible to definitively know this until negotiations are seriously attempted. There are parts of the group, particularly its leaders, who are ideologically hardline and committed to al-Qaida, and thus probably irreconcilable. But a substantial number of al-Shabaab members joined because of grievances about political marginalization and economic exclusion in the current system. Some even joined for personal profit. This segment of al-Shabaab likely has the potential to reconcile and reintegrate. However, given al-Shabaab's strength, the hopes that al-Shabaab can be significantly weakened through defections are unwarranted.

Perhaps equally problematic, al-Shabaab still enjoys a position of relative strength compared to the government, which gives it little incentive to enter into negotiations. It can readily endure the military pressure it faces. And with the prospect of an AMISOM withdrawal looming, the group may believe that all it needs to do is wait to improve its position further. Even if it did enter negotiations, it is in a sufficiently strong position that the government would be hard pressed to offer it more than it already has.

Another risk of negotiations is that they could damage the credibility of the still fragile Somali Federal Government. Despite some progress, the government is far from secure. Al-Shabaab has reportedly infiltrated many of the major Somali Federal Government institutions. And some government officials have made unrealistic promises about the prospects to militarily defeat al-Shabaab and build a Somali National Army, promises that would be exposed as such if the government pursues negotiations. In addition, negotiations with al-Shabaab may also face resistance from important international donors, not least of all, the United States.

In contrast, al-Shabaab has garnered legitimacy as an alternative to the government. It has a relatively well run administration, which flies in the face of claims that Somalia is ungovernable. The main services it provides are relative security in the territory it controls and justice for those who use its court system. As long as the population adheres to its edicts, they enjoy a modicum of security. Its courts are perceived as fair, efficient, and uncorrupt, which leads even some who do not live under al-Shabaab courts to seek them out to resolve disputes. Equally important, people adhere to al-Shabaab's court rulings, if for no other reason than the group's ability to inflict punishment on those who try to defy it.

Al-Shabaab also runs an extensive taxation system that enjoys near universal compliance, for largely the same reason. Though it has sometimes overreached in what it tries to extract from the population, for the most part, the group efficiently collects "taxes," even from businesses in Mogadishu, a feat that the

government has not matched. Many licit and illicit businesses alike cooperate with al-Shabaab, because where al-Shabaab's writ extends, its licenses, rulings, and receipts are honored. In addition to offering a robust source of income, taxation is yet another way that al-Shabaab makes its presence felt throughout Somali society.

Al-Shabaab's combination of legitimacy and coercive power have produced results unparalleled in southern Somalia since the collapse of the state. Should negotiations occur, al-Shabaab would be in a powerful negotiating position. Rather than postponing negotiations until al-Shabaab is weakened, waiting to begin negotiations may actually give the group the ability to improve its position.

Conclusion

To conclude, if one measures the state of the effort against al-Shabaab by the territory it controls compared to its peak or the number of al-Shabaab fighters or high value targets who have been killed, the assessment may not appear as grim. But these metrics do not capture the far more complex conflict underway between a fragile government seen by some as propped up by external actors and a jihadist insurgency that has succeeded in embedding itself in society. The group has been declared on its back foot or on the verge of defeat many times. It is simply not the case.

With limited prospects for a military victory and little motivation on either side to enter the difficult negotiations that would be needed to find a political settlement, the conflict with al-Shabaab has reached a stalemate. Both sides will achieve tactical victories and experience tactical defeats. If one side holds a strategic advantage in the stalemate, it is al-Shabaab. While time and resources do give the Somali Federal Government a chance to improve governance, the political will among donor countries or AMISOM may wane over time, absent significant progress or simply because of other crises demanding resources. For the time being, the conflict is in a holding pattern, one that is costly in terms of lives and resources. And one that is unlikely to end with al-Shabaab's defeat.