



SPECIAL REPORT: Why the fall of Barawe may not mean the end of al-Shabaab

When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws. In guerilla strategy, the enemy's rear, flanks, and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted and annihilated. (Mao Tse-tung, On Guerrilla Warfare, 1937)

On October 5, 2014, the Somali National Army (SNA) forces supported by AMISOM entered al-Shabaab's key stronghold of Barawe in Lower Shabelle. Prior to the advance on the town, senior al-Shabaab commanders tactically withdrew, as did some AS wives and civilians, with a small number of fighters left behind to fight from the surrounding areas of the town. Allied forces faced initial ambushes on the outlying areas but limited resistance and soon captured the town. Acting Head of AMISOM, Lydia Wanyoto, stated, "Barawe was the nerve centre for al-Shabaab and that [the] defeat would be the group's most significant loss since being driven out of Mogadishu and Kismayo".

The loss of Barawe is a significant loss to al-Shabaab. While the Somali government, AMISOM and many media outlets have portrayed the fall of Barawe as bringing about the imminent demise of al-Shabaab, Vates analyses why, in the immediate future, this is unlikely to be the case.

How will al-Shabaab's Command and Control (C2) be affected?

Barawe is likely to represent a symbolic loss to al-Shabaab as the city was seen as the defacto headquarters since the group's inception in 2007 when its constitution was drafted from a location within the city. Senior commanders have also planned or coordinated operations in Somalia and abroad from within the Barawe. However, as a headquarters, the city is not critical to its leadership's ability to command and control, or coordinate future attacks. The nature of al-Shabaab's C2 element and its network of cells enables senior commanders to provide direction to commanders across Somalia, and the region as a whole, who act independently within the framework of commander's intent. This C2 may be delivered in face to face meetings, by voice, messaging or couriers. This structure and process was refined and grew under Ahmed Abdi Aw Mohamed "Godane", who as Emir was particularly vulnerable in Southern Somalia without the protection of his clan base in Somaliland. Godane relied heavily upon tradecraft, secrecy and support from his intelligence unit, Amniyat. We assess al-Shabaab's new Emir, Ahmad Umar "Ubaidah" will continue with this C2 structure, especially as his number two, Mahad Karate, formerly commanded Amniyat under Godane. Al-Shabaab bases remain in Jilib, Dinsor, Rama Adey, Sakow, Bardhere, and the Badmadow forest area south of Kismayo stretching into Kenya, among others. In addition, the militants have remote bases in mountainous and forested terrain across Somalia. Even as the group is dislodged from these strongholds, the nature of the group's C2 will allow for continued and coordinated asymmetric attacks within Allied controlled areas, and potentially outside of Somalia.

Will al-Shabaab survive from the loss of revenue and resupply hub?

AMISOM's capture of Barawe and plans to advance on other smaller ports along the south coast seeks to cut al-Shabaab's supply lines. Barawe's coastline enabled the militants to import commodities and export charcoal, providing revenue and resources to the group. It is estimated that exports of charcoal to Gulf States earned the group approximately USD 25 million annually. When Allied forces captured the key port of Kismayo at the end of Sept 2012, there were also claims that the loss of revenue would prove a severe financial hit to the group. However, al-Shabaab

merely 'taxed' charcoal traders at an earlier stage along the supply line. Al-Shabaab has proven itself as an effective fundraiser through its pervasive 'taxation' system that has enabled the group to demand 'Zakat' from residents, traders and businesses for its 'Islamic jihad' against 'invading' forces. Import of supplies is likely to be a loss and concern to commanders especially as Puntland Forces have also recently moved into al-Shabaab strongholds dislodging al-Shabaab from their northern stronghold, in what is known at the Galgala Mountains, and further disrupting the logistics and supply chain. However al-Shabaab has a strong network of sympathisers willing to do business with the group in Mogadishu, Kismayo and throughout the country, and this black market trade is likely to continue. Additionally, the AMISOM lull during the rainy season combined with income generation during Ramadan will have provided the opportunity for al-Shabaab to prepare and replenish key stocks. The stalled AMISOM offensive will have also allowed al-Shabaab to replenish and prepare caches of supplies, weapons and equipment in advance of the renewed AMISOM offensive, therefore the near term effects of the loss of Barawe are likely to be minimal.

Is AMISOM and SNA in 'control' of new areas and are gains sustainable?

The AMISOM operation dubbed 'Operation Indian Ocean' was publicly announced and was not a surprise to al-Shabaab. Since Mogadishu, there have been few direct confrontations when Allied forces capture new areas, with al-Shabaab conducting tactical withdrawals in advance of Allied operations. This indicates that commanders understand that while al-Shabaab is militarily inferior, its strength lies in operating as a guerrilla force. As an example, fighters and support networks have remained inside and on the outskirts of newly captured towns, such as Bulo Marer, from which they continue to launch asymmetric assaults on forces. In addition, its cell-network and effectiveness of groups such as Amniyat, enables al-Shabaab to operate in cities and infiltrate and exert influence on businesses and government agencies. From this vantage, al-Shabaab continues to have capacity to plan and execute coordinated and sophisticated attacks against hardened targets within key cities, including Mogadishu and Kismayo.

There are also indications that residents in newly liberated areas are suffering from acute food shortages and drought as al-Shabaab has blockaded routes and attacked convoys, preventing humanitarian assistance reaching towns. While civilians were subjected to al-Shabaab's fearful and, at times, brutal authority, it is possible that some populations may not be experiencing the benefits of being under AMISOM 'control'. There are indications that in some locations conditions for populations have deteriorated following the AMISOM advance. The Somali government and AMISOM's greatest challenge will be demonstrating to local populations that the government is fully in control through the provision of basic services and prevention of terrorist attacks. Al-Shabaab's Radio Andalus and its media wing al-Kataib continue to operate its propaganda campaign against AMISOM, locally portrayed as enemies of Islam and foreign invaders. The recent allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by AMISOM may also undermine the ability to gain the support and trust of local populations.

Furthermore, as complex attacks within key cities such as Mogadishu and Kismayo have persisted, claims that AMISOM is now in 'control' of strategic towns such as Barawe is questionable. While AMISOM and SNA forces may have a presence in new towns, al-Shabaab has continued to launch asymmetric attacks within these areas and along arterial routes. As AMISOM's 22,000 strong force is further stretched over the regions across South Central, this will heighten its vulnerability to attacks and may raise concern of local liberated populations of being at increased likelihood of collateral attack due to Allied presence in their areas. There will also be underground pressure on the local population as al-Shabaab has built support networks, sympathisers and families embedded into these 'controlled' areas and it may be difficult to differentiate between real and perceived support from the local communities. The impending Deyr rain season from Oct to Dec may likely result in another lull in the offensive, and perhaps opportunity for al-Shabaab to further consolidate its operations and logistics.

Will disaffected fighters surrender to the government and support Allied forces?

It has been suggested that the loss of Barawe, just over a month after a targeted strike killed al-Shabaab leader Godane, is likely to see fighters decamping to other countries or surrendering to the government. Reports indicate that a number of low level al-Shabaab fighters have taken up the government amnesty offer. Success of this programme will be based on its ability to rehabilitate and reintegrate combatants into society and to provide viable livelihoods, but this will be greatly influenced by the question above, and if the government is really in control of these newly liberated areas. Attempts to rebuild the country's economy may take years, and unless effective security, aid and assistance is immediately available to these local communities, it is possible that life under al-Shabaab may be more appealing than the unknown. A more dangerous prospect of amnesty is the potential of summary justice against family members that remain behind or those found to have collaborated or surrendered.

What else needs to happen to diminish the al-Shabaab threat?

Emir Ubaidah's new leadership has not yet lead to divisions and infighting as some commentators predicted. Ubaidah, with assistance from Fuad Mohamed Khalaf "Shongole", has attempted to consolidate the group by trying to entice former senior members, such as Mukhtar Abu Mansur "Robow", to re-join al-Shabaab. These negotiations have thus far been unsuccessful, but are reported to be ongoing. Robow's reintegration, ongoing negotiations, allegiances, or the impact of this decision on other senior members of al-Shabaab's leadership ambitions may also divide the group and may be used by Allied forces in both the IO campaign and other operations, such as targeted strikes against al-Shabaab leadership. The further targeting of senior al-Shabaab leadership, such as its new Emir Ubaidah, second in command Mahad Karate, and other senior leaders may significantly diminish the capacity of the group and demoralise current fighters who may not yet see the Somali Federal Government as a viable alternative to al-Shabaab.