



SPECIAL REPORT: Emir Abu Ubaidah and the future threat of Al-Shabaab

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen declared 'Abu Ubaidah' as its new leader on September 6, following confirmation of the death of Emir Ahmed Abdi Aw Mohamed 'Godane' in a targeted strike on September 1, 2014. This brief provides analysis of the how the death of Godane and new leader Abu Ubaidah is likely to shape the future threat of al-Shabaab.

1. New leader Abu Ubaidah is announced

Following the strike, Vates sources identified Ahmed 'Diriye' as the prime candidate for leader on September 3.¹ Al-Shabaab has chosen to use Diriye's alias Abu Ubaidah when referring to their leader. Our sources indicated that Godane prepared his leadership contingency in event of his death, and named Ubaidah as his chosen successor. The sources indicated that Ubaidah was agreed new leader unanimously, in spite of speculation that there was indecision or disagreement among the leadership in confirming the Emir.

1.1 Who is Emir Abu Ubaidah?

Ubaidah was born in Ethiopia's Somali (Ogaden) region and is from the Diir clan, Biyamal sub-clan, found in southern Somalia. Ubaidah may also be linked to Godane's family through their mothers. Ubaidah held a series of senior commander roles in the group, including al-Shabaab Governor of Bay and Bakool, head of intelligence and more recently, head of Woliyat and advisor to the late Emir. Under Godane's leadership, al-Shabaab's intelligence unit became central to the command control of the group responsible for targeting, assassinations, VIP protection and counter intelligence. Ubaidah also played an instrumental, operational role in tracking and killing perceived opponents of Godane in 2013. Open source information and media describing Ubaidah as a weak individual lacking leadership qualities may be part of an IO campaign in an effort to demoralise the group during its leadership transition. However, our sources report he is respected by the Somali people and elders. The new leader will be central to if and how al-Shabaab will regroup, consolidate and refocus their terrorist campaign.

2. Al-Shabaab's Residual Threat Capacity within Somalia

Federal Government of Somalia (FSG) National Security Minister, Khalif Ahmed Ereg, has warned of impending attacks and claimed to have specific information that al-Shabaab is planning attacks against medical facilities, education centres and government sites. It is likely that the new leader may attempt to accelerate asymmetric attacks against the government and allied forces in an effort to change the current momentum of the campaign against al-Shabaab. Evidence that this may already be in progress occurred on Sept 8, when al-Shabaab launched two coordinated SVBIED attacks on the Lafoole – Afgoye road in Lower Shabelle region within an hour of one another. One SVBIED rammed into an AMISOM armoured Casspir vehicle reported to have been carrying AMISOM Western Mentors from Bancroft Global Development. The second attack was reported to have targeted a senior NISA official responding to the initial incident. The explosions resulted in the deaths of 16 or more civilians who were travelling in public vehicles in the area of the attack. This attack by al-Shabaab has proven the accuracy of its intelligence, targeting capability and intent to deliver on its threats in Somalia. The group will continue to plan and execute low scale, opportunistic attacks mainly against security and police forces. The group is also able to organise and conduct coordinated, sophisticated attacks against hardened targets, including Mogadishu international airport, Parliament and government buildings, United Nations installations and foreign embassies. Al-Shabaab's capability and intent to conduct its terrorist campaign within Somalia is likely to continue.

¹ The announcement of 'Abu Ubaidah' as al-Shabaab's new emir led to confusion among mainstream media, who initially described him as an 'unknown', with some suggesting Ubaidah was a 'ghost figure' named to allow the 'real' Emir to operate anonymously. It is apparent that the alias Abu Ubaidah triggered the confusion.

2.1 Likelihood of Defections

On Sept 2, and again on Sept 6, the FGS offered amnesty for all al-Shabaab members who leave the group within 45 days. This does not appear to have resulted in immediate large scale defections, in spite of unverified claims of militants abandoning the group. It is possible that some demoralised fighters and affiliated clans may leave the group and seek to engage with government regional administrations. Some commentators have suggested that foreign fighters will move to new battlegrounds and may be more attracted to the perceived growth of ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State rather than al-Shabaab on the defensive. While this is a possibility, the extent of the exodus may be overestimated. Additionally the majority of foreign fighters within Somalia are African, and have proven their resolve to remain to fight with al-Shabaab at times when the group may have appeared to be on its back foot, for example, when al-Shabaab lost its stronghold of Kismayo in 2012 after heavy confrontations with allied forces. The East Africa theatre and the lure of significant Western targets and interests offered by al-Shabaab's terrorism reach is likely to still appeal to foreign jihadists.

2.2 Response to Operation Indian Ocean

AMISOM's offensive Operation Indian Ocean has succeeded in the capture of strategic towns across Bakool, Hiraan, Middle and Lower Shabelle regions by allied forces. The campaign has seen little direct confrontation between AMISOM forces and al-Shabaab militants, with the militants often withdrawing in advance. Al-Shabaab's latest withdrawal from its stronghold of Bulo Marer, Lower Shabelle, indicates the pressure being placed on the group. Alongside the killing of their leader, some have suggested that the group is likely to fragment. It is assessed that al-Shabaab threat capacity remains significant. Al-Shabaab is indeed on the defensive. The group's evolution towards asymmetric warfare has shown its ability to survive and continue to undertake strategic attacks against allied forces and the Somali Federal Government. It is likely that al-Shabaab will 'give up' its strategic stronghold of Barawe, Lower Shabelle in advance of AMISOM or with little resistance. It is possible that the group may decide to wait out the AMISOM mandate in 2016 before any steps are taken to regain strategic strongholds. It is unlikely that AMISOM and the FGS will be able to sustain its territorial gains beyond the main towns and cities due to the reach of its resources and personnel, which will make 'liberated' areas vulnerable to blockades and ambushes along main supply routes, as well as asymmetric attacks on targets within the towns.

2.3 Support and reconciliation with local clans

Sources indicate that al-Shabaab leadership has been holding meetings with local clan groups and elders, seeking their allegiance and support towards Ubaidah. Radio Andalus reported that al-Shabaab administration in Bay and Bakool regions held meetings to bring the Rahanweyn community into 'mujahideen' ranks on Sept 4. Former senior al-Shabaab commander, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow 'Abu Mansur', fled to his Rahanweyn clan stronghold after falling out with Godane in Sept 2013. Robow has never denounced al-Shabaab. The outcome of the meeting with the Rahanweyn is not clear. If al-Shabaab can achieve reconciliation with Robow this would help boost its strength and support with an important clan, which will be important to the viability of any long term asymmetrical campaign. However, it may be difficult to achieve reconciliation given that Ubaidah led the units that executed several of Robow's allies.

3 Al-Shabaab's Global Threat

While al-Shabaab has threatened to launch attacks in New York and Washington, its ability to successfully command and control operations is questionable. Additionally, while the group may receive financial support and a small number of foreign fighters from the West, the majority of Western members of al-Shabaab are Somali diaspora, and to date, there has been no al-Shabaab attacks beyond the East Africa region. A 2009 foiled plan to attack Holsworth Army Barracks in Sydney, Australia appeared to fail to receive endorsement from al-Shabaab in Somalia. Nevertheless the group's sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda since 2012 indicates al-Shabaab's global ambition.

4 Al-Shabaab's Regional Threat

Godane's death is unlikely to indicate that Ubaidah will shift towards a national-focused terrorist campaign and the group is considered as, if not more, dangerous to the region, following the death of Godane. Godane had a global jihad ideology and, under his leadership, the group has been responsible for high profile terrorist attacks in Uganda (2010), Kenya (2013) and Djibouti (2014). The international attention and notoriety that followed Nairobi's Westgate mall attack in September 2013 and Djibouti attack in May 2014 is likely to have convinced the core of the group of the importance of external attacks. We assess that al-Shabaab will continue to be a regional threat, especially to East African countries supporting AMISOM.

4.1 Allegiance and networks

There was speculation that the new Emir may have used the occasion of Godane's death to change the current allegiance to al-Qaeda in preference for Islamic State (IS) leadership in an attempt to capitalise on international media attention and access their considerable funds in order to buoy the group. However, for the time being, al-Shabaab continues to align to al-Qaeda. The statement announcing Ubaidah's appointment reaffirmed the group's allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. On September 8, it was reported that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) announced its support towards to al-Shabaab's new Emir in an unsigned statement. The announcement also stated that it had not forgotten brothers in East Africa, Mombasa, Harar (Ethiopia), Bangui and would assist them with every means possible. This is a strong indicator that al-Shabaab intends to continue its regional campaign. The reference to Bangui in Central African Republic may indicate the intention of the group to build on its links with other al-Qaeda affiliated militants across central and west Africa.

5 Key anniversaries and Summary

The anniversaries of September 11 and Nairobi's Westgate attacks are approaching, and it is possible that the group may attempt to launch attacks against Western/ international targets in the East Africa region in an attempt to capitalise on these symbolic dates. It is likely that al-Shabaab may have renewed its focus to attack western and US assets and personnel in East Africa. The regional threat of al-Shabaab is unlikely to lessen or change significantly under Ubaidah's leadership. The continued targeting of senior al-Shabaab leadership could significantly impact the group and its followers, but it is assessed that the AMISOM offensive alone is unlikely to rid the group from Somalia.