



Vates Special Report: Al-Shabaab Ethiopia Border Incursion

Security/Counterterrorism Analysis

Aug 2022

Executive Summary

On Jul 20 2022, at approx. 1730hrs, al-Shabaab launched coordinated attacks on Ethiopian Liyuu paramilitary forces stationed in Yeed and Ato towns, Bakool region, Somalia, located approx. 37km apart along the border with Ethiopia. Following the attacks, approx. 250 militants with 17 vehicles crossed the border into Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS), marking the most significant al-Shabaab incursion into Ethiopian territory to date.

On Jul 28, U.S. AFRICOM commander Gen Stephen Townsend described the incursion as "largely contained," stating fighters were 150km deep into Ethiopia. He warned this was not a one-off attack but part of al-Shabaab's increased emphasis on external attacks. Despite this assertion, which matched Ethiopian public statements, our sources indicate the incursion has not been contained. A large group of militants estimated to be in the hundreds has moved deep inside Ethiopian territory into the Bale Mountains, Oromia region.

The incursion was almost certainly enabled by the weakening of Ethiopia's security apparatus which was focused increasingly inward as a result of the Tigray civil war. Furthermore, five years of relative inaction by the Farmajo administration against al-Shabaab and the weakness of Somalia and international counterterrorism efforts have enabled this regional al-Qaida affiliate to evolve into a significant threat in Somalia and the greater East Africa region.

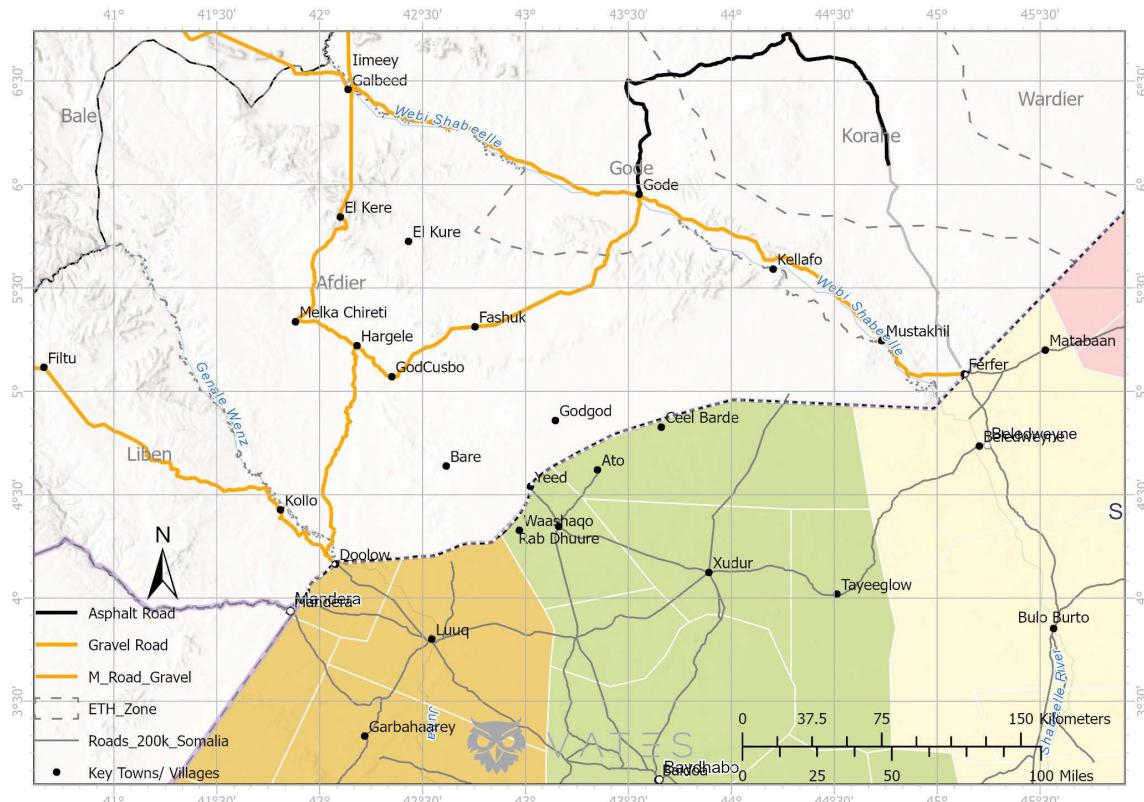


Figure 1 Map of key towns and locations along Ethiopia-Somalia border related to the al-Shabaab border incursion. Source: Vates Internal

Background; Pre-Planning and Infiltration

Credible reports from Ethiopian security sources indicate al-Shabaab cross-border activity in the months preceding the Jul 20 attacks and subsequent incursion. Based on these reports, it appears al-Shabaab intended to setup bases

in the vicinity of El Kure and Melka Chireti, El-Kure woreda, Afder zone, approx. 147km northwest of Yeed. We have previously confirmed al-Shabaab training of Ethiopians in Somalia dating back to Aug 2021.

Over the preceding months, al-Shabaab contacted four SRS clan elders summoning them to Somalia while seeking support to establish bases deep in Afder zone. On Jul 23, Liyuu force Commander of 2nd Brigade, Abdi Ali Siyad, confirmed these elders were summoned by al-Shabaab to facilitate an al-Shabaab network in Ethiopia. Prior to the Jul 20 attack, Liyuu forces apprehended the elders near El Kure, killing one and capturing three.

Al-Shabaab's plan included recruiting individuals from El Kure and Melka Chireti and sending them to Jilib and Saakow in Middle Juba, Somalia, for training on IEDs and explosive materials handling, and general military training. During the planning phase, al-Shabaab was reported to have smuggled small consignments of weapons into El Kure on food delivery trucks while burying weapons caches. Liyuu Commander Abdi Siyad reported weapons were handed to al-Shabaab-linked individuals, with security forces discovering 50 AK-47s and ten RPGs in one location. Some ethnic Somali individuals from El Kure and Melka Chireti had smuggled weapons to Oromia with plans to extend efforts to Bale and West Hararghe Zones.

Why Now: Exploiting Ethiopian Vulnerabilities

Somalia's Bakool region is mostly under al-Shabaab influence and control, apart from Xudur, Wajid, and few other garrison towns under government administration, while Ethiopian security forces control border crossings. Al-Shabaab has not previously launched a large-scale movement into the SRS, primarily due to the strength of the Ethiopian internal and external security apparatus and its control over the local population.

During the Tigray war, Ethiopia's national security focus shifted to Tigray, and internally. In addition to force attrition during this internal conflict, ENDF forces were drawn down from the SRS border and many bilateral ENDF forces in Somalia operating outside of the AMISOM/ATMIS mandate were withdrawn and redeployed to Tigray frontlines, with Liyuu forces backfilling border positions. With Liyuu stretched thin, al-Shabaab likely assessed it could exploit Ethiopia's weaknesses with support from an established network inside the SRS.

Al-Shabaab's investment in pre-planning, clan infiltration, and dedication of sizeable forces and weapons indicates significant commitment. El Kure (approx. 145km from the border) and Melka Chireti (approx. 128km) were selected due to the areas being somewhat remote yet central, proximate to the B102 main supply route, and favourable clan dynamics – predominantly Ogaden/Aulihan bordering with Bantu and Ogaden/Mohamed Zubeir/Reer Abdulle to the north, Hawiye/Gugundabe/Degodiye to the southwest, and Oromo to the west.

These vulnerabilities were inadvertently confirmed by SRS president Mustafa Muhammed Omer 'Cagjar' who told VOA Amharic of the need to create a 'buffer zone' against al-Shabaab on Jul 26. This is effectively what Ethiopia maintained prior to the Tigray war through bilateral forces in Somalia, largely in Bakool, Bay, Gedo and Galgadud.

Initial Attack: Jul 2022

On Jul 20 at approx. 1730hrs, al-Shabaab attacked Liyuu forces in Yeed and Ato towns. During the attacks, al-Shabaab fired mortars at Washaago village, approx. 24km south of Yeed, likely to disrupt Liyuu reinforcements. Al-Shabaab briefly took control of both towns, setting fire to several properties including Liyuu bases. Casualties and prisoners were confirmed, though reports conflict – al-Shabaab claimed 87 Liyuu killed; Ethiopian sources reported 17 while propaganda images showed significant damage and casualties.

Following the attacks, approx. 250 militants with 17 vehicles crossed from Yeed into Afder zone, SRS.

Godgod Engagement and Ethiopian Response

On Jul 22, Liyuu forces engaged al-Shabaab near Godgod, Barey Woreda, Afder Zone (approx. 38km northeast of Yeed, 20km north of the Somalia border). Results: 15 additional Liyuu killed, 73 militants killed, 59 captured (some wounded); five al-Shabaab vehicles destroyed, eight captured, four remaining with militants.

From Jul 23-28, ENDF and Liyuu built up approx. 3,000 troops with seven days' supplies near Godgod. The area where militants were held up is described as barren with no water or food. Ethiopians initially sought interpreters as many fighters were speaking Af Maay, common in Somalia's Southwest state. On Jul 28, 17 militants were killed near Yeed attempting to escape. On Jul 29, Ethiopia reported 37 additional militants killed in Godgod with air operations engaging remaining fighters.

Second attack on Ato: Jul 29 2022

On Jul 29, al-Shabaab attacked Ato again, initiating with mortar fire followed by large numbers of gunmen. After 15+ Liyuu killed, Ethiopian forces withdrew. Al-Shabaab overran and temporarily occupied the position. ENDF dispatched Mi8 helicopters from Gode targeting the militant mobilisation near Ato. Sources claimed 'hundreds' of fighters killed and tens of technicals destroyed.

ENDF claimed three al-Shabaab senior commanders killed: Sheikh Fuad Muhammad Khalaf ('Fuad Shongole'), Abdiazziz Abu Muscab (military operations spokesperson), and Ubayda Nuur Ciisa (Bay Bakool Governor). However, claims of these deaths appeared to be false – al-Shabaab released audio of Abu Muscab on Jul 29 and Jul 30, and Fuad Shongole on Aug 03 commenting on the Liyuu attacks and Ethiopia's failed attempts at killing him. On Aug 07, al-Shabaab probed Ato again with five mortar rounds.

Ethiopian Airstrikes

On Jul 28 at approx. 0830hrs, ENDF airstrikes targeted al-Shabaab near Garas Wiine, Bakool. Further strikes occurred Jul 29 evening and Jul 30 (13 killed including one alleged civilian). Large-scale al-Shabaab movements were reported near Ceel Cadde, Gedo (Jul 30) and crossing Golweyn bridge toward Bakool (Jul 31). On Aug 01, Liyuu detained "dozens" of al-Shabaab suspects along the border with large weapons seizures.

On Aug 07, Ethiopian warplanes struck al-Shabaab positions near Bacda village, Beledweyne district (32km east of Ferfer, 18km from border). U.S. AFRICOM confirmed three airstrikes on Aug 09 "near Beledweyne," killing four militants.

Second Mobilisation and Continued Pressure

Since approx. Jul 24, a second large-scale mobilisation of approx. 270 militants has been seeking to cross from Hiraan region southwest of Ferfer. Al-Shabaab advance recce teams were confirmed to be probing for vulnerabilities. This second mobilisation likely intended to reinforce fighters near Godgod and/or draw Ethiopian forces away from the southern incursion.

On Aug 02, SNA forces killed 19 and wounded four militants crossing back into Somalia near Jawiil (20km southeast of Ferfer), capturing 30 weapons. Also on Aug 02, Hiraan governor Ali Jeyte's forces were engaged by al-Shabaab near Maxaas Bukurale while returning from operations in Ethiopia's Shabelle Zone.



Figure 2 Jul 20 Yeed-Ato Attack. Source: @Somalimemo



Figure 3 Al-Shabaab vehicles destroyed; Prisoners. Source @Abdirahmanbidhan; @Ogaadenia media English

On Aug 08 sources reported approx. 120 al-Shabaab Jabha forces mobilised from Gedo, Bay, and Bakool toward Ferfer with intent to breach the border. The unit is located in Doodaale (78km southwest of Buurhakaba) with seven vehicles – one truck and six with mounted weapons (three DShKs, two 14.5mm ZPUs, one B10) led by Commander: Adan Somow (Rahanweyn/Yantar). Estimates put al-Shabaab numbers over 1,000 in northern Bakool alone.

Kalabeyr SVBIED Attack: Aug 05 2022

On Aug 05 at approx. 1300hrs, a Toyota-Dyna SVBIED detonated at Kalabeyr SNA FOB entry checkpoint (19km south of Ferfer). The driver detonated when stopped for tax collection. Three Gorgor soldiers killed, eight wounded. Eight Hawiye/Habar Gidir passengers in a following minibus killed; three Hawiye/Mudulod/Ujejen locals at a nearby teashop wounded. The FOB is occupied by SNA 5th Company Gorgor and 5th Battalion 27 Brigade.

The attack likely targeted Gorgor forces bolstered in support of the counter-offensive, seeking to reduce threats to al-Shabaab fighters in northern Hiraan and undermine SNA support for ENDF/Liyuu along the border. On Aug 06, al-Shabaab destroyed the Hormuud Telecommunication tower in Goobo village, Buulo Burto district, likely to limit intelligence on its movements.

Assessment: Incursion Not Contained

Information continues to be difficult to confirm, but we are now confident the incursion has not been contained. Security sources indicate hundreds of militants have moved deep into the Bale Mountains, Oromia region, bordering Afder Zone. These militants have yet to be engaged, though skirmishes occurred near El Kere, Afder Zone on Aug 10. The large Bale Mountains contingent will likely split into smaller groups, dispersing into local populations.

Attacks on Ato and Yeed were somewhat successful with Liyuu casualties and militants overrunning bases multiple times. Ethiopian response has killed up to 300+ militants. Nevertheless, this activity in northern Bakool and Hiraan is assessed as diversionary, likely aimed at enabling ongoing movements inside Afder and Shabelle Zones.

While ENDF are supporting Liyuu with air support and ground forces, high-level SRS administration sources confirm Liyuu forces lack heavy weapons to counteract the large numbers of al-Shabaab inside the SRS – a problem created by the Tigray war and concerns that regional administrations may arm against the Ethiopian government. High-level SRS officials have begun sourcing DShKs, RPGs and ammunition in Somalia outside normal procurement – a significant indication of concern given Ethiopia produces these weapons domestically.

Regional Security Coordination

On Aug 02, Ethiopian intelligence and military officials visited Somaliland to discuss security. On Aug 05, Southwest State President Laftagareen visited Addis Ababa to meet Ethiopian government and security officials. Ethiopian intelligence has been reaching out to other Somalia regional intelligence officials to coordinate support.

We assess with roughly even odds that Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) may re-emerge along the border, potentially armed by Ethiopia. This would likely create issues with Galmudug state as it would mean rearming a group recently disarmed after significant inter-communal conflict.

Strategic Objectives

The developments indicate a concerted effort by al-Shabaab to move large numbers of forces into Ethiopia. Sources indicate militants may intend to link up with Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)/Shane rebels, supporting with fighters, ammunition, and explosives for operations in Guji and Borena zones. If not contained, in the longer term, al-Shabaab may seek to expand operations through Somaliland and access Djibouti.

Source reporting indicates al-Shabaab has been attempting to establish extensive networks in the SRS and Oromia through clan relations, reaching out to ethnic groups dissatisfied with the current government who are interested in receiving weapons and support. Additionally, reports indicate al-Shabaab may be seeking to expand its network inside the Kenya border.

With politicisation of the incursion, including claims the attack is a conspiracy by Egypt and the TPLF, tensions could heighten between Ethiopia and President HSM's administration, which has recently appeared to make political overtures towards Egypt perceived by some as against Ethiopia's interests.

Assessment

Near Term: Al-Shabaab is very likely to continue posturing at the Ethiopian border to stretch ENDF capabilities as forces disperse into local communities. Increased cross-border asymmetric attacks inside the SRS are likely. Ethiopian security forces will seek to identify and eradicate terrorist networks.

Medium Term: We assess an increased likelihood that al-Shabaab will seek to plan and potentially undertake further terrorist attacks in Ethiopia. A wider asymmetric campaign may develop as Ethiopian and Somali forces attempt to flush out militants.

Long Term: With ongoing operations against the OLA in Oromia and forces on Tigray frontlines, al-Shabaab's incursion will significantly strain ENDF and Liyuu capacities. Ethiopia is likely to remain primarily internally focused for the medium to long term and with the evolving terrorism landscape in the region it will be important to reestablish its internal and external networks to mitigate against these threats.

Conclusion

Local sources describe al-Shabaab movements as resembling military manoeuvres from a nation state due to numbers and commitment. While hundreds of militants may have been killed, if hundreds have reached the Bale Mountains as Ethiopian security sources are reporting, this represents a near-term success for the militants.

The incursion is almost certainly linked to Ethiopia's Tigray civil war and the degradation of its security apparatus. Several factors contributed to al-Shabaab's growth: counterterrorism complacency by the Farmajo administration, lack of coordination by AMISOM/ATMIS, international fatigue, and rising threats from near-peer competitors in eastern Europe and the Pacific.

While Ethiopian intelligence services have historically been successful combating al-Shabaab, gaps have appeared. We assess it is highly unlikely al-Shabaab will establish a significant permanent presence in the SRS in the medium to long term, but the group will likely step up efforts against its historic foe. With hundreds of militants reportedly inside Ethiopian borders, counterterrorism efforts will be required on both sides of the border to counter this threat. **End**