

The GLOCEPS

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Research and Analysis in Security and Defence Pillar

The rise of ISIS-Somalia's Global Expansion Agenda: implications for Horn of Africa security

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Photo credit: independent.co.uk

Executive Summary

The growing foothold of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Somalia threatens to destabilize the Horn of Africa's (HoA) regional security architecture. ISIS-Somalia, which seeks to establish a global caliphate in collaboration with other ISIS factions worldwide, continues to expand by recruiting fighters from within the region and beyond. The group's strategic objective is to position Somalia as a key operational base for its broader jihadist network, further destabilizing the region and exacerbating security challenges. This escalation complicates ongoing counter-terrorism efforts such as the African Union Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), particularly given the persistent threat

posed by the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, which remains active in Somalia. The brief opines that this development has significant implications for regional geopolitics, maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, and heightens the risk of instability across the HoA region. Key recommendations include enhancing intelligence-sharing mechanisms; prioritizing the disruption of ISIS-Somalia's revenue streams; bolstering maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean through improved naval patrols; reinforcing Somalia's security forces through increased participation in training and capacity-building programs; and intensifying efforts to dismantle



the group's cells and conduct targeted strikes on its hideouts.



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Context

The rise of ISIS-Somalia's global expansion agenda exacerbates an already volatile security environment plagued by extremist violence, political instability, and weak governance structures. Since its inception in 2015, the terror group has gradually expanded its recruitment beyond Somalia's borders including from Gulf states, leveraging local grievances, porous security structures, and regional conflicts to further its agenda. It emerged after a faction of Al-Shabaab defected and pledged allegiance to ISIS. Since then, the group has expanded its presence in Somalia, attempting to establish a broader influence across the region as part of its global jihadist agenda. The group has primarily entrenched itself in the mountainous regions of Puntland, a semi-autonomous territory in Somalia, where it has established training camps and operational bases. For instance, Somalia hosts Al-Karrar, one of ISIS's nine global recruitment hubs.

Somalia's persistent political instability and the absence of a fully functioning government have provided fertile ground for the group's operations. Additionally, the country's strategic location along the Indian Ocean and its porous borders facilitate the illegal entry of foreign fighters and the smuggling of arms into the region. The influx of foreign fighters

into the region including Arabs from Gulf states, poses a significant threat to regional stability, as it may escalate violence and prolong conflict. Following the decline of ISIS's stronghold in Syria after the weakening of Bashar al-Assad's regime, ISIS-Somalia has further strengthened its foothold in the HoA region. In response, the United States (US), through Africa Command (AFRICOM), has been conducting targeted operations against the group to safeguard its strategic interests in the region.

ISIS-Somalia and Al-Shabaab finance their operations through looting, illegal taxation, extortion, ransom payments, and foreign donations. However, while both organizations have an extremist interpretation of Islam, their ideological differences shape their strategies. Al-Shabaab majorly pursues a nationalist agenda, aiming to overthrow the Somali government and establish an Islamic caliphate within Somalia. In contrast, ISIS-Somalia aligns with the global ISIS agenda, which seeks to establish a global caliphate beyond Somalia. These conflicting goals have fueled power struggles including competition over territorial control and recruitment particularly in Puntland, where both groups compete for dominance. Clashes over territorial control have compelled ISIS-Somalia to consolidate its presence in the Bari region, further destabilizing Puntland and complicating counterterrorism efforts in Somalia.



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The fragile governance system in Somalia has enabled ISIS-Somalia to exploit socio-economic hardships for recruitment. Disillusioned youth, frustrated by the government's failure to provide employment and basic services, often join the group as a means of survival and livelihood. Militants further weaponize food and water by controlling wells, gaining leverage over displaced communities. The group continues to leverage religious radicalization to attract fighters not only within Somalia but also in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and the Middle East region. Social media has amplified this reach, allowing the group to spread propaganda, justify their attacks, and attract new followers globally. The escalating recruitment and global expansion agenda of the terror organization poses a grave security threat to the HoA region and beyond, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated action by the international community.

Key Issues

The following key issues highlight the implications of ISIS-Somalia's global expansion agenda on the HoA security architecture.



Increased Terror Attacks

ISIS-Somalia has significantly escalated terrorist attacks in the Puntland region, targeting security forces, government officials, and civilians. Suicide bombings, assassinations, and ambushes have

become common tactics, aiming to instill fear and assert dominance over territories. The group has also carried out complex, coordinated attacks in urban centers, signaling its operational sophistication and ability to strike at the heart of governance and economic activity. Such attacks not only result in loss of life but also severely disrupt local economies, force displacements, and create humanitarian crises.

Additionally, the increased frequency and intensity of attacks have continued to overwhelm local security forces, exposing weaknesses in counterterrorism efforts. The group's Al-Karrar recruitment base in Somalia draws extremists from Kenya, Uganda, and the Middle East, with potential links to ISIS branches in Mozambique (Cabo Delgado) and the Sahel. Many of the affected states, struggle with limited resources, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, making them vulnerable to ISIS-Somalia's terrorist attack. As a result, the group's terror campaigns threaten to destabilize entire regions, creating an environment where extremist ideologies flourish and undermine state authority.

Maritime Security Concerns

Somalia's proximity to key maritime trade routes, including the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, has heightened concerns over ISIS-Somalia's potential exploitation of maritime vulnerabilities. The group's foothold in Puntland, adjacent to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean enables it to exploit Somalia's porous coastline and poorly monitored ports. This threatens Red Sea shipping lanes, particularly the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which 12% of global trade passes. ISIS-linked factions are increasingly engaging in piracy, arms smuggling, and illicit trafficking as a means of financing their operations. If the group solidifies its maritime presence, it could pose a serious threat to vital shipping lanes,





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disrupting global trade and increasing insurance costs for vessels navigating these waters. The strategic importance of these routes for international commerce makes maritime security a critical concern for regional and global stability.

The rise of maritime terrorism in the region especially in the Western Indian Ocean could also trigger greater international military intervention leading to militarization of the region. As piracy and terrorist activities intensify, foreign naval forces may expand their presence to protect their interest in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. While international efforts have previously succeeded in curbing piracy off Somalia's coast, the evolving threat of ISIS-linked maritime insurgency presents new challenges that require coordinated regional and global responses. Without effective countermeasures, Somalia's maritime domain risks becoming a battleground for competing interests, further escalating conflicts between extremist factions and foreign military forces operating in the region.

The economic impact of maritime insecurity extends beyond Somalia, affecting neighboring countries reliant on secure trade routes. Strategic ports like Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Puntland risk becoming targets, endangering regional and international economic interests. Coastal states including Djibouti, Kenya, and

Tanzania, which depend heavily on stable maritime transit for their exports and imports, could suffer economic downturns if piracy and terrorist activities escalate. The increased risk of attacks may lead to higher freight charges and discourage foreign investments in maritime trade infrastructure such as Lamu Port in Kenya. Furthermore, disruptions in port operations and supply chains could inflate the cost of goods, adversely affecting regional economies.

Regional Stability

The growing influence of ISIS-Somalia poses a severe threat to the political stability of the HoA region. Countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti have already faced cross-border incursions and terrorist attacks orchestrated by the Al-Shabaab group, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of Somalia's instability. Clashes between ISIS-Somalia and Al-Shabaab over control of Puntland could spill into neighboring states where both groups have sleeper cells. Increased violence may displace populations, straining resources in host countries like Kenya fueling cross-border recruitment. The porous borders in the region enable extremists to infiltrate neighboring nations, exacerbating pre-existing ethnic and political tensions. These infiltrations not only heighten security risks but also strain regional governments, forcing



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them to divert substantial resources from critical development initiatives to counterterrorism operations. Additionally, the group targets the destruction of critical infrastructure, obstructing effective public service delivery to the citizens. As a result, national priorities such as infrastructure development, education, and healthcare are often sidelined, further weakening state institutions.

Beyond immediate security concerns, the persistence of the group fuels a cycle of violence that undermines long-term peace efforts in the region. The presence of extremist elements creates a security vacuum that opportunistic political actors and armed factions exploit for their own gains. In some cases, local militias align with or oppose the terror organization based on shifting power dynamics, leading to a constantly evolving and unpredictable conflict landscape. This fragmentation weakens governance structures, making it difficult for national and regional leaders to implement effective counterterrorism and stabilization strategies. Additionally, repeated terrorist attacks erode public trust in government institutions, creating disillusionment and fostering conditions that enable radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups.

Efforts to restore regional stability are further complicated by the transnational nature of operations. The group's networks extend beyond Somalia, linking with international jihadist movements that provide funding, training, and logistical support. Its collaboration with transnational crime syndicates could also facilitate arms trafficking and the movement of foreign fighters via the Red Sea and Indian Ocean routes. Without a coordinated regional and global response, ISIS-Somalia will continue to exploit weak governance structures and ungoverned spaces to expand its operations

destabilizing the entire HoA region.



Counterterrorism Efforts

The presence of ISIS-Somalia significantly complicates counterterrorism strategies in the HoA region, forcing security forces to confront a dual threat from both Al-Shabaab and ISIS-Somalia. While regional forces, including the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and its successor, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), have made substantial gains against Al-Shabaab, they now face an additional challenge from ISIS-affiliated militants. The rivalry between these two extremist factions has created an unpredictable security landscape, requiring counterterrorism agencies to adapt their strategies continually. However, this shifting focus often results in the reallocation of resources, leaving security forces stretched thin and unable to mount sustained offensives against both groups effectively.

In addition to the operational challenges, the fragmentation of counterterrorism efforts among international partners has further hindered progress. Countries such as the US, the United Kingdom (UK), Turkey, and the European Union (EU) provide military aid, intelligence, and logistical support to counterterrorism operations in Somalia. However, differing strategic priorities, doctrines, varying rules of engagement, and





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inconsistent funding mechanisms often lead to disjointed responses. Some initiatives focus on targeted drone strikes, while others emphasize capacity-building for Somali security forces. The lack of a unified approach weakens the overall effectiveness of these efforts, allowing the terror organization to exploit existing gaps and expand its influence.

Addressing this growing security challenge requires a more cohesive and multi-dimensional strategy that goes beyond military interventions. A comprehensive counterterrorism framework should improve coordination between military and civilian security agencies, and address the socio-economic drivers of radicalization. Additionally, strengthening governance structures and stabilizing Somalia's political landscape is critical to preventing the group from further entrenching itself. Without a well-coordinated and long-term approach, counterterrorism efforts in Somalia risk being outpaced by the evolving strategies of terrorist organizations, undermining regional security and development.

Geopolitical Tensions

ISIS-Somalia's ambitions for global expansion in the HoA region could exacerbate geopolitical tensions by drawing foreign powers into an already complex security landscape. The group's growing presence in Somalia coincides with existing

regional rivalries, complicating collective counterterrorism efforts. By leveraging propaganda that glorifies Red Sea attacks and portrays itself as a defender of Islam against Western naval forces, ISIS-Somalia could radicalize diaspora communities worldwide, further destabilizing the region.

The ongoing competition among Gulf powers, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, for strategic influence in the Red Sea through port investments has intensified regional divisions. These rivalries create a fragmented security environment, making it easier for the group to exploit weak governance structures and expand its operational footprint. Divided loyalties among regional actors hinder coordinated responses, allowing the militant group to establish stronger footholds in ungoverned spaces.



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Moreover, ISIS-Somalia could deepen geopolitical instability by forging alliances with militants in Eritrea or Yemen while taking advantage of unresolved conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan. As internal strife continues to weaken these states, new operational fronts could emerge, providing ISIS-Somalia with strategic advantage and cross-border operational capabilities. These dynamics not only threaten regional stability but also risk transforming the region into a

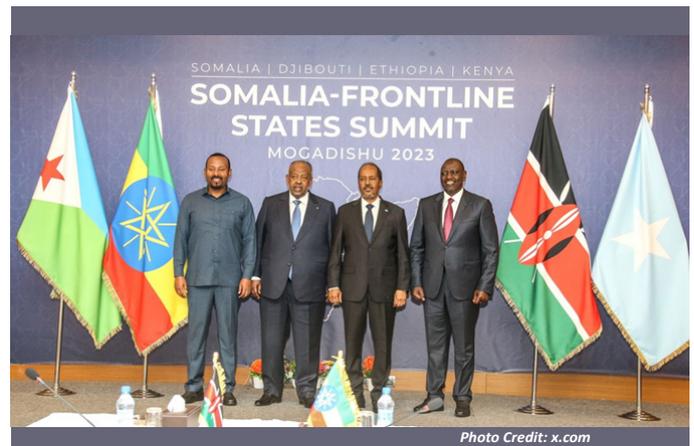


a battleground for global power competition, further complicating efforts to counter the extremist threat.

Conclusion

The growing threat posed by ISIS-Somalia is a significant regional and global security risk. The group's expanding influence and desire to establish a global caliphate threatens regional security. Its operations in Somalia continue to undermine the country's stability, fuel geopolitical tensions, and threaten vital maritime trade routes. If left unchecked, the terror organization could further entrench itself within the region, escalating violence and making counterterrorism efforts increasingly difficult. Its growing ties and coordination with other ISIS affiliates in Africa and beyond heighten security risks for the HoA region.

Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive international response undermines efforts to dismantle the group's networks and their financing channels. Without a proactive and comprehensive strategy, the HoA region risks becoming a stronghold for ISIS-affiliated militants, posing dire consequences for regional stability and economic development.



Recommendations

1. The HoA states in collaboration with AUSSOM and international partners should;
 - a) intensify efforts to dismantle the group's cells and conduct targeted strikes on its hideouts;
 - b) prioritize the disruption of ISIS-Somalia's revenue streams;
 - c) reinforce Somalia's security forces through increased participation in well-coordinated training and capacity-building programs;
 - d) bolster maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean through improved naval patrols;
 - e) enhance intelligence-sharing mechanisms; and
 - f) increase investment in port security infrastructure.





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