

The Mashariki Today

ISIS's Recruitment of Foreign Fighters in Somalia – Implications for Regional Security and Al-Shabaab's Dominance



Photo credit: SACAS

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Somalia has long been a focal point in the global fight against terrorism, with Al-Shabaab dominating the extremist landscape for over a decade. However, a new and growing threat is emerging with the Islamic State (ISIS) actively recruiting foreign fighters to establish a stronger foothold in the region.¹ This development highlights divergences in ideology and strategy between the two groups, with ISIS focusing on establishing a broader caliphate aligned with its global ambitions, contrasting with Al-Shabaab's more localized nationalist goals. These ideological differences have fueled tensions and competition, as ISIS actively recruits foreign fighters to solidify its foothold in the region. The resulting competition between these two groups risks exacerbating Somalia's already fragile security environment, with implications that extend well beyond its borders.

The situation is further complicated by Somalia's geopolitical vulnerabilities, including weak governance, porous borders, and a fragile socio-economic fabric that extremist groups exploit to gain recruits and expand their influence.²

ISIS's recruitment of foreign fighters adds a new dimension to the conflict, bringing in experienced combatants with transnational connections and varying ideological motivations. This influx could lead to a more violent and sophisticated insurgency that will likely intensify existing conflicts in Somalia and pose greater risks to regional stability. The increasing presence of foreign fighters not only poses an internal security challenge but also has broader implications for neighboring countries and the international community.

This commentary examines the key issues surrounding ISIS's recruitment strategies, their implications for Al-Shabaab and regional security, and offers a series of policy recommendations aimed at countering this evolving threat effectively.



Key Issues

1. Exploitation of Socio-Economic and Political Fragility

Somalia's chronic instability, weak state institutions, and pervasive poverty have long created a fertile environment for extremist recruitment. ISIS, much like Al-Shabaab, capitalizes on these socio-economic vulnerabilities by offering individuals financial incentives, a sense of belonging, and a clear, albeit extremist, purpose. Unlike Al-Shabaab's traditional nationalist appeal, ISIS leverages its global jihadist agenda to attract foreign fighters and marginalized local youth, portraying itself as part of a broader, more significant cause.

Unemployment, limited access to education, and the lack of basic services further exacerbate the vulnerability of Somali youth to radicalization. It is estimated that nearly 30.1% of youth in the country are unemployed⁴, thus

¹ISS recruits foreign fighters in Somalia to fight against Al Shabaab. Garowe Online. Obtained from: <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/isis-recruits-foreign-fighters-in-somalia-to-make-gains-against-al-shabaab>

²ReCSA. (2023). Somalia fragility: A national development strategy for Somalia [PDF]. ReCSA. <https://www.recsasec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SOMALIA-FRAGILITY-pdf.pdf>

³Brookings Institution. (2010). Confronting poverty: The ideas and actions needed to reduce poverty in the U.S. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2010_confronting_poverty.pdf

many young people, especially in remote and conflict-prone areas, view extremist groups as their only viable option for financial stability and social advancement. ISIS has strategically positioned itself as an alternative to the failing state, offering monetary support and social recognition to those who join its ranks, thereby creating a compelling pull for individuals living in desperate conditions.⁵

Moreover, political marginalization and poor governance have alienated various clans and communities, creating fertile recruitment grounds for ISIS.⁶ Shortcomings by the Somali government to provide inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution has allowed extremist narratives to flourish. Thus, addressing this issue requires not just military interventions but also socio-economic reforms aimed at addressing the grievances that fuel extremism and terrorism in Somalia. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the ongoing drawdown of ATMIS forces,⁷ which has reduced security capacity and left gaps exploited by terrorist groups. ATMIS has since been replaced by African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) from January 2025.

Compounding this issue is the tendency of intervening forces to adopt defensive rather than offensive postures, inadvertently playing to the advantages of extremist groups. Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires not just military interventions but also socio-economic reforms aimed at tackling the grievances that fuel extremism and terrorism in Somalia.

2. Ideological and Operational Rivalry Between ISIS and Al-Shabaab

The rivalry between ISIS and Al-Shabaab extends beyond mere territorial disputes and reflects deeper ideological and operational differences.⁸ While Al-Shabaab has traditionally maintained a nationalist agenda focused on establishing an Islamic state within Somalia, ISIS's agenda is far more global, seeking to establish a caliphate that transcends national borders. This ideological divergence has fueled tensions and violent confrontations between the two groups as they compete for influence and recruits.⁹

ISIS's recruitment of foreign fighters is a significant factor in this rivalry. By bringing in combatants from conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, ISIS introduces new tactics, resources, and a more globalized approach to insurgency. Recent developments in Syria, including the toppling of the Assad regime,¹⁰ could have profound implications for the group. With the destabilization of existing power structures, ISIS may find renewed opportunities to recruit fighters and gain access to abandoned weaponry or financial resources from a weakened Syrian state. These foreign fighters often bring battlefield experience and advanced combat techniques, which could shift the balance of power in regions where Al-Shabaab has traditionally been dominant, such as Puntland and southern Somalia. This

⁴African Development Bank. (2023). Somalia economic outlook. African Development Bank. Retrieved December 9, 2024, from <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries-east-africa-somalia/somalia-economic-outlook>

⁵U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2023, September 26). Secretary Janet L. Yellen's statement on the global minimum tax implementation agreement. U.S. Department of the Treasury. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2477>

⁶United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2024, July 19). Somalia: Inter-clan conflicts – situation report 1 (July 19, 2024). ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/somalia-inter-clan-conflicts-situation-report-1-july-19-2024>

⁷African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). (2024). ATMIS kickstarts third phase of troop drawdown. Retrieved from <https://atmis-au.org/atmis-kickstarts-third-phase-of-troop-drawdown/>

influx of external resources threatens to destabilize Al-Shabaab's internal cohesion and challenges its long-standing control over strategic territories, potentially intensifying the rivalry between the groups. Additionally, the operational rivalry manifests in direct confrontations and propaganda battles. ISIS's sophisticated media operations contrast with Al-Shabaab's more localized messaging, appealing to a broader, international audience.¹¹ This allows ISIS to attract a diverse range of recruits, from ideological extremists to mercenaries seeking financial gain. If this rivalry continues to escalate, it could lead to more frequent and intense conflicts, resulting in greater instability not only in Somalia but also across the Horn of Africa.



Photo credit: ACCORD

3. Regional Spillover and Transnational Implications

The rise of ISIS in Somalia and its recruitment of foreign fighters pose significant threats beyond Somalia's borders. Neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti are particularly vulnerable to the spillover effects of this conflict. Cross-border movements of fighters, arms trafficking, and the potential for coordinated attacks increase the risk of regional instability. Kenya, having already suffered numerous Al-Shabaab-led attacks, faces heightened risks as ISIS establishes itself as a competing force with cross-border ambitions. However, the recent truce between Ethiopia and Somalia brokered in Turkey¹² marks a significant step toward resetting relations and enhancing regional security cooperation. This compromise could strengthen joint counterterrorism efforts, creating opportunities to address threats like ISIS more effectively. Moving forward, sustained collaboration between Ethiopia and Somalia may help stabilize border

⁸International Crisis Group. (2024, September). ISIS in Somalia: A growing threat [PDF]. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b201-isis-somalia.pdf>

⁹ibid

¹⁰Reuters. (2024, December 7). Syria rebels celebrate captured Homs, set sights on Damascus. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-rebels-celebrate-captured-homs-set-sights-damascus-2024-12-07/>

¹¹Sweeney, D. (2024, September 12). How East Africa's terrorists build their brand strength. RUSI Newsbrief. Royal United Services Institute. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/how-east-africas-terrorists-build-their-brand-strength>

¹²Al Jazeera. (2024, December 12). Somalia, Ethiopia agree on compromise to end tension, Turkish leader says. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/12/somalia-ethiopia-agree-on-compromise-to-end-tension-turkish-leader-says>

regions and mitigate the risks posed by extremist groups with cross-border ambitions, such as ISIS.

The regional implications are not limited to conventional military threats. The presence of well-organized extremist groups with transnational networks raises concerns about the potential for coordinated attacks on critical infrastructure, such as energy pipelines, transportation networks, and diplomatic missions. For instance, the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), active in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique,¹³ exemplifies the cross-border connections that amplify the threat. These affiliates demonstrate ISIS's ability to leverage regional networks for recruitment, resource sharing, and coordinated operations. The involvement of foreign fighters with international experience further increases the likelihood of complex, multi-faceted attacks that could destabilize not only Somalia but also key regional hubs, underscoring the interconnected nature of these threats across East and Southern Africa.

Moreover, Somalia's proximity to major maritime routes heightens concerns about the convergence of terrorism and piracy. The possibility of ISIS using maritime routes for arms smuggling, human trafficking, or attacks on commercial vessels could disrupt international trade and pose a significant threat to global maritime security. Given the strategic importance of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean trade routes, any escalation in maritime terrorism could have far-reaching economic and security repercussions beyond the immediate region.



Policy Recommendations: Strategic Interventions for Countering ISIS Recruitment

1. Strengthen Regional and International Cooperation

Effective counter-terrorism in Somalia requires robust regional and international collaboration. Neighboring countries and international stakeholders must work together to establish a comprehensive security framework that includes intelligence sharing, joint military operations, and coordinated

¹³Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2023, October 30). Actor profile: Islamic State Mozambique (ISM). Retrieved from <https://acleddata.com/2023/10/30/actor-profile-islamic-state-mozambique-ism/>

border surveillance. Regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should play a central role in facilitating dialogue, enhancing cooperation, and mobilizing resources for counter-terrorism efforts. This dialogue, however, is not about negotiating with extremist groups like Al-Shabaab, but rather fostering communication and coordination among regional actors to address shared security challenges, align strategies, and mobilize resources to tackle underlying issues such as governance deficits and socio-economic grievances.

International partners, including the United Nations and the European Union, should provide technical and financial support to strengthen Somalia's security infrastructure. This support could extend to training local security forces, enhancing intelligence capabilities,¹⁴ and providing advanced technological tools to monitor and combat extremist networks. However, the transition from the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) to the African Union Stabilization and Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) in January 2025 presents both challenges and opportunities. ATMIS has faced several shortfalls, including resource limitations, operational constraints, and capacity gaps in addressing the evolving security situation. AUSSOM, with its renewed mandate and structure, aims to address these challenges by providing a more comprehensive and integrated approach to stabilizing Somalia, offering enhanced coordination, greater international support, and improved operational effectiveness in combating terrorism and strengthening security.



Photo credit: Medium

2. Enhance Border Security and Control Mechanisms

Strengthening border control is essential to prevent the influx of foreign fighters and the movement of arms and illicit goods. Implementing advanced surveillance technologies such as biometric identification systems, drone monitoring, and enhanced checkpoint security can deter cross-border activities by extremist groups. Joint border patrols and

¹⁴Amani Africa. (2024). One year of ATMIS operations: Progress, challenges, and funding. Retrieved from <https://amaniafrica-et.org/one-year-of-atmis-operations-progress-challenges-and-funding/>

information-sharing mechanisms between Somalia and its neighbors will be crucial in disrupting ISIS's transnational networks and limiting their operational reach.

Conclusion: Navigating the Complex Threat Landscape

ISIS's growing influence in Somalia, driven by its aggressive recruitment of foreign fighters, represents a significant shift in the regional terrorism landscape. This development poses new challenges to Al-Shabaab's dominance and introduces a more complex and dangerous threat to Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa. A multi-dimensional, coordinated response is essential to mitigate the risks associated with this evolving conflict.

By strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing border security, implementing counter-radicalization programs, and addressing humanitarian needs, stakeholders can prevent ISIS from entrenching itself and further destabilizing the region. Failure to act decisively could result in an entrenched insurgency with far-reaching consequences for peace, security, and development in East Africa and beyond. According to Perliger and Weinberg (2010), terrorism can also end through comprehensive development, improved governance, socio-economic reforms, and effective conflict resolution.



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