

Falling short of security in Somalia

Briefing - January 2018 - Emily Knowles

Introduction

If you believe that fragile states breed instability and terrorism, Somalia should be worrying you. Over twenty years of conflict and a history of fractious relationships between the semi-autonomous federal member states has left the Federal Government in control of less than half of the country. By the end of 2017, around 20% of the country was estimated to be under the control of al-Shabaab.¹ This is the jihadist group responsible for high-profile attacks like the siege of the Westgate shopping mall in neighbouring Kenya in 2013 and a double bombing in Mogadishu at the end of October 2017.² *

Despite concerted international backing since the September 11th attacks in 2001, neither the Somali National Army (SNA) nor the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has been able to dislodge terrorist groups with any permanent effect. Worried that al-Qaeda would use Somalia as a safe haven after operations began in Afghanistan, the US sent a small team of Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to the country, liaising with local forces in a similar model to the early days of the Afghan conflict.³ Decades later, operations appear to be stepping up rather than winding down. In 2017, the total count of 34 US drone strikes equalled if not exceeded the cumulative number of attacks over the previous 15 years.⁴

At the same time, AMISOM has begun to withdraw its own troops out from the country.⁵ Budget pressures,⁶ including some disquiet over the disproportionate risks borne by regional troops versus their international backers,⁷ appear to be taking their toll. Somalia should therefore serve as a cautionary example of the difficulties of an approach that is becoming popular in Western capitals – working by, with, and through local

troops to confront terrorist groups. The success of light-footprint remote warfare requires strong local buy-in, effective ground forces, and careful international support. Current signs suggest that the anti-al-Shabaab operations have fallen short on each of these key criteria – although we will focus on the last of them here.

This briefing is based on a number of interviews conducted between October 2016 and November 2017 with serving and former UK and EU military personnel with direct experience of operations in Somalia. It also draws on material gathered during a series of expert roundtables with the British military community on the opportunities and costs of remote warfare as a strategic option for the UK.

* The Somali government has also blamed al-Shabaab for an attack in October 2017 which is Somalia's deadliest on record. A truck bomb exploded at a checkpoint and ignited a nearby fuel tanker, creating a massive fireball that killed more than 300 civilians and injured over 200 more. Al-Shabaab have not claimed credit for the attack.

The UK contribution to security in Somalia

There are several overlapping ways in which the UK has been supporting security in Somalia. These include the UK's bilateral support to the Somali National Army (SNA) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), as well as its engagement through the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the EU Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM-S). In addition, as early as December 2001 it was reported that Britain had been asked to help its American allies to prepare counter-terrorism strikes in the country.⁸

Then-British Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Sir Michael Boyce expressed "disquiet among British officials over America's plans to expand its war against terrorism to countries like Somalia, Iraq and Yemen", suggesting that "Britain is not prepared to put troops into so-called "failed states" like Somalia without the permission of the government in Mogadishu."⁹ Nevertheless, in June 2007 it was reported that a joint US/UK special forces mission had been launched in Somalia to try and track down foreign terrorists. DNA samples of those killed in the raids were apparently collected and analysed, with the hope of disrupting terror cells back in the UK.¹⁰

In February 2012 it was reported that the UK was considering launching air strikes on al-Shabaab training camps,¹¹ and in March 2012 the former chairman of the Commons Counter Terrorism Sub-Committee announced that "there have been a series of incursions into Somalia by British troops... Our Special Forces wield a considerable amount of power in the region. There is no doubt we are involved in the war against al-Shabaab."¹²

In October 2013, an assault took place in the coastal town of Barawe, a location linked to the leadership of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab claimed that British and Turkish special forces carried out the raid and that one SAS officer was killed. An MOD spokesman said that "no UK forces at all" were involved.¹³ However, in March 2016, a leaked memo that implicated UK special forces (UKSF) in Libya also placed the spotlight on Somalia, with King Abdullah of Jordan stating that his troops were ready with Britain and Kenya to go "over the border" to attack al-Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁴ In April 2016, a report emerged that UKSF had been training local soldiers how to fight al-Shabaab from a camp just north of the capital Mogadishu. The team was also cited as having a mission "to disrupt and stop al-Shabaab's operations."¹⁵

By late 2016 the UK raised the number of British training teams working with AMISOM and the SNA from 12 to 30,¹⁶ accompanied by a pledge for an additional £21 million of funding.¹⁷ Under CSSF funding, the UK has also been providing "early recovery and civilian military cooperation workshops for AMISOM military, Somali National Security Forces and the police

component of AMISOM (AUPOL)."¹⁸ Up to 70 British troops have also been deployed under UNSOM.¹⁹ In February 2017, a report on US special operations in Kenya's Boni National Reserve on the border with Somalia claimed that there had been British (and other allied) intelligence and SF support.²⁰

Somalia: a cautionary tale for remote warfare?

Low risk appetite

In Somalia, training is being given to troops who are already engaged in frontline fighting against al-Shabaab. This means that UK troops are operating in a more hostile environment than you might expect of a normal training mission. Indeed, plans for an international assistance mission to Libya in 2016 were scoped to be two-thirds force protection before they were eventually shelved –²¹ suggesting a reasonable level of concern that British troops could be forced into a firefight.

This points to one of the biggest challenges for remote warfare: one of its driving logics is to reduce political risk by supporting local forces in lieu of placing British troops on the frontlines. This minimises their exposure to enemy fire. However, it also tends to come with a set of restrictive rules of engagement (ROEs) that keep them mostly confined to their bases. This places a huge strain on their ability to train, advise, or assist the local troops that they are meant to be supporting. As one interviewee remarked, "This is what is going wrong in Iraq now with Peshmerga because the ROEs mean that advisers abandon troops before engagement. You can imagine how that feels."ⁱ

Our interviewees in Kabul in March 2017 complained that they were unable to stay out in the field long enough to access the Afghan troops they were meant to help, and this problem also appears to be hindering efforts in Somalia. One soldier told us how he regularly had to operate outside of his permissions, citing how impossible it was to do his job without the ability to attend local meetings and build relationships with local commanders.ⁱⁱ He went on to assert that "If I, or anyone, had got shot, that would have been it, the whole thing over."ⁱⁱⁱ

There appears to be a real risk that risk aversion – which drives the use of remote warfare in the first place – is simultaneously starving operations of their opportunities to succeed.

i Interview (20/10/16)

ii Interview (03/02/17)

iii Interview (03/02/17)

Inconsistent political will

On top of this, British commitment to better outcomes for Somalia has not been consistent over time. Soldiers were worried about the “limited ability to maintain budget and interest over the long-term,”^{iv} and the fact that appetites tended to wane “if immediate improvements aren’t seen.”^v One explained that while “everyone wants things to happen quicker than they can do... you have to take very small steps in order to achieve something big and significant.”^{vi}

This is not a problem restricted to remote warfare – changeable political will and the prioritisation of ‘quick wins’ are a recurring theme in many analyses of modern military operations.²² However, the light-footprint nature of British presence in Somalia was cited as making the disadvantages particularly acute.

As one interviewee put it, “when you’re there as a team of 15 you don’t have automatic influence... so you need time to build relationships instead. You’re there competing with other internationals for influence.”^{vii} With political will derided as “a yoyo,”^{viii} one soldier called the operation “a waste of time” because “you’re either all in or you’re not in at all.”^{ix} As another put it, it can’t be “tap on, tap off”^x without handing space to groups like al-Shabaab to grow and exploit the chaos.

Poor preparation

The last key theme when talking about UK contributions to security in Somalia was the fact that troops didn’t feel particularly prepared for the challenges they would face before they deployed. As one interviewee remarked, “there is no single AMISOM... there is a Ugandan, Kenyan, Ethiopian AMISOM...”^{xi} Another soon learnt that “each troop contributor to AMISOM fits into a hierarchy”^{xii} – even if this was largely unofficial. As one put it, the mistrust between the troops “really cannot be underestimated.”^{xiii} This made it “a political balancing act”^{xiv} – with one interviewee worrying that it was a challenge that their previous “12 years in the military weren’t particularly applicable for.”^{xv}

We had reports of non-logistics officers being tasked to set up logistics hubs,^{xvi} military staff managing

iv Interview (03/02/17)
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significant FCO funding pots,^{xvii} Captains being sent to mentor Colonels,^{xviii} people being sent out without basic vocabulary crib cards,^{xix} and staff resorting to google as they learnt how to operate on the fly in their new environment.^{xx} The “very generic”^{xxi} pre-deployment training, plus the language and seniority gaps between the British soldiers and their local counterparts, made mentoring troops in a meaningful way a real challenge.^{xxii}

While responding to an adaptable environment may build valuable skills for British troops as well as for their international counterparts, it also – as one put it – “takes the right character, as it’s very different to usual military activities.”^{xxiii} In turn, these skills are only useful if they are then valued by the military going forwards, with one remarking that “It’s all good fun, but it doesn’t do you career [prospects] any good.”^{xxiv}

Competing international efforts

British efforts were criticised by their international counterparts for putting their effort into trying to effect change at the tactical level, rather than tackling thornier problems like getting AMISOM HQ to work better.^{xxv} This was echoed by British troops, who expressed concern that there was an unwillingness to sacrifice short-term goals to see longer-term progress.^{xxvi}

There were also real concerns that bilateral efforts were undercutting multilateral initiatives in the country rather than supporting them. The UK was criticised for attempting to run a parallel national effort while contributing troops to the EU mission. Rather than submitting to EU command structures, the British contingent was seen to be “actively undermining”^{xxvii} the EU effort by trying to operate under their own rules.

This has been symptomatic of wider problems in international efforts. The EU mission was criticised for allowing its member states (in this case Italy – the former colonial power in Somalia) to further their national interests under an international banner.^{xxviii} All but one of the commanders of the EU mission have been Italian,²³ as is the EU Ambassador to the country.²⁴ The UN also came under fire for perpetuating the conflicts that it was deployed to resolve, with some

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national actors suspicious that the UN had no interest in seeing the Somalia mission wrapped up.^{xxix}

Finally, even when progress was being made on military to military relationships, there was limited harmony between that and the international political effort to exert influence on the Somali ministerial offices. This fragmented the overall effort.

Conclusions

Long-term prospects for security in Somalia aren't looking particularly promising. This is not least because there remain real concerns about the viability – and the acceptability – of the SNA as a long-term security provider in the country. As one soldier remarked, the Somali National Army are “just another militia, albeit an apparently legitimate militia”. When they run out of ammunition, there are no procedures in place to resupply them. In many cases, there are no funds to pay them either. This results in what another soldier described as “a big recruitment tool for Al-Shabaab because... they steal, rape, etc. Same as others, but this time in uniform, with Somali flags on it.”^{xxx}

Nevertheless, there are some signs of progress. As one interviewee remarked, “if you measure... success based on demonstrable improvements in AMISOM, you wouldn't see much improvement. But to see this in isolation is [a] mistake.”^{xxxi} Instead, we must look to the “longer-term relationships” that are being developed despite the difficulties that troops are encountering.

At the time of interviews, the UK was the only country to have secured a Memorandum of Understanding that allowed their troops to operate under UK rather than Somali law. They were also the only ones allowed into the operations and intelligence room at AMISOM.^{xxxii} This suggests a high level of access – which could lead to more effective partnerships in the future.

However, the big question will be what happens to British efforts now that AMISOM troops are beginning to withdraw. Recently, a small faction of al-Shabaab split away to set up an ISIS-aligned group in Somalia. The US began conducting airstrikes against ISIS-Somalia in November 2017,²⁵ and it does not look like the fight for security in Somalia will be over soon. The test for remote warfare, it seems, will be in whether it prepares the ground for a positive transition towards peace talks and greater stability, or whether it locks everyone into a never-ending cycle of violence.

xxix Interviews (20/10/16)

xxx Interviews (20/10/16)

xxxi Interviews (03/02/17)

xxxii Interviews (20/10/16)

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The Remote Warfare Programme is a project of the Network for Social Change and part of Oxford Research Group. The project examines changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote control warfare. This form of intervention takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.

Endnotes

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