RED SEA Threat MONITOR

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Latitude 15° 36' 10.19'' N Longitude 54° 55' 04.27'' E

SEAHAWK
MARITIME
INTELLIGENCE.

Overview

Al Shabaab's operational activity in Somalia has decreased since 20 January, attributed to operations conducted by the Somali National Army (SNA), initiatives led by South West State authorities, and strategic actions by the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). These efforts have focused on disrupting elements associated with the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), Somali National Army (SNA) and Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF).

In Somalia, ISIS has increased its operational tempo against Puntland forces, leading to the neutralisation or detention of over 40 combatants . Puntland forces have reported conducting significant countermeasures, which include the destruction of approximately 50 operational sites and the downing of 30 drones employed by ISIS for reconnaissance and offensive operations since the onset of the clashes. In Yemen, Al Qaeda has sustained its campaign utilising Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for precision strikes and sniper operations for targeted engagements. Two Al Qaeda leaders, Abu Saleh Al Dayouli and Muhammed bin Saleh Al Mughi, were confirmed killed in US airstrikes in Shabwa province.

Al Shabaab Activity in Somalia

Al Shabaab has been conducting a series of aggressive armed attacks throughout central and southern Somalia, with a clear focus on targeting the Uganda People's Defence Force, Somali National Army and Ethiopian units on two notable occasions. These attacks have included ambushes on convoys and assaults on bases, designed to disrupt regional security and undermine counter-terrorism operations. However, a significant reduction in their operational tempo has been observed since 20 January of this year, which can largely be attributed to intensified efforts by the SNA, strategic initiatives by the South West State, and a proactive counter-terrorism approach by NISA. This decline in activity is also linked to the destruction of Al Shabaab's supply networks and the loss of key operational leaders in recent months.

South West State has launched operations aimed at breaking Al Shabaab's stronghold by mobilising local support to secure critical infrastructure and restore freedom of movement, with commendations from local law enforcement on the growing synergy between civilian populations and military forces. These efforts include clearing Al Shabaab's roadblocks, reopening essential supply routes and protecting vulnerable communities from militant attacks. Meanwhile, NISA is fostering a coalition among community forces for a comprehensive offensive, encouraging operations that transcend traditional clan boundaries, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of counter-insurgency efforts. This approach has also included intelligence-sharing initiatives and targeted strikes on high-value Al Shabaab assets, further weakening the group's operational capabilities.

Attacks between 15 to 22 January

- Ugandan forces encountered a significant ambush on a logistical convoy between Shalanbood and Kilometer 60 in Lower Shabelle, resulting in five fatalities, six injuries and the destruction of two vehicles. Subsequent attacks targeted UPDF bases in Barawe and Ambreso in Lower Shabelle, followed by further assaults on bases in Bardhere, Ceel Barde and the Dano area, south and southwest of Mogadishu.

- The SNA has suffered notable losses, including a targeted strike near Ceeldheer in central Somalia that killed an explosives ordnance disposal specialist. Al Shabaab utilised two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Goofgaduud town near Baidoa, resulting in two SNA fatalities. The group also launched direct assaults on SNA positions in Janale, 60 km southwest of Mogadishu, and a command post in Beled Hawo, on the border with Ethiopia, causing additional casualties. An IED attack near Mogadishu injured two SNA soldiers, while the SNA, supported by local militias, intercepted an Al Shabaab supply vehicle near Beledweyne.

- Ethiopian troops, part of the regional security framework, were attacked twice. The first incident occurred during a foot patrol in Baidoa, Bay region, with casualties remaining undisclosed, followed by a raid on their base in Xuddur town, near the Ethiopian border.

Al Shabaab's psychological operations

In a recent demonstration of operational capability, Al Shabaab held a military parade to commemorate the graduation of fighters from one of their training facilities. The event displayed the group's organisational capacity and discipline, aiming to project strength and enhance cohesion among its members. During the event, Mahad Karate, also known as Abdirahman Mohamed Warsame, the group's deputy leader and head of Amniyat, Al Shabaab's intelligence wing, delivered a strategic address. His speech focused on discrediting African Union missions, exploiting tribal divisions, and accusing President Hassan Sheikh's administration of contributing to unrest.

The event also included the attendance of Abwaan Nageeye and Abwaan Gamadid, prominent Somali cultural figures who aligned with Al Shabaab in early 2024. Their participation demonstrates the group's strategy of engaging influential personalities to expand its recruitment efforts and amplify ideological messaging. By incorporating these figures, Al Shabaab seeks to broaden its appeal within local populations and strengthen its psychological operations framework. This approach illustrates the group's adaptability in combining cultural and strategic tools to support its broader objectives.

Al Shabaab's military parade on 17 January 2025
Source: al kataib

ISIS Somalia activity in Puntland

In the ongoing counter-terrorism operations, the Puntland Armed Forces have intensified their campaign against ISIS, resulting in the elimination or capture of over 40 militants during engagements in the Cal Miskaad Mountains. Their efforts have also led to the destruction of approximately 50 ISIS operational sites and the downing or capture of over 30 drones used by the group for reconnaissance and potential attacks since the offensive began.

Despite these setbacks, ISIS has increased its activities, focusing on targeting Puntland forces. On 15 January, ISIS claimed through its publication Al Naba that an attack killed 15 Puntland soldiers, injured dozens and destroyed seven vehicles. However, Puntland's report contradicted this claim, stating that over 20 ISIS fighters were killed in the same engagement, with no confirmation of the claimed casualties among Puntland forces.

On 22 January, ISIS reported another attack targeting a military patrol vehicle of Puntland's local forces with an IED near Hablei town, which they claimed resulted in the deaths of 12 Puntland soldiers. In a separate incident, clashes in the Wali Sur Valley near Bali Tadan reportedly left 10 casualties on Puntland's side, with two confirmed dead and eight injured, though independent sources verified only six injuries.

ISIS also conducted seven mortar attacks on Puntland positions in the Abara Mountains in Puntland's Bari region on 16 January, with the details of the strikes only recently disclosed. This wave of attacks indicates a shift in ISIS's strategy towards more direct and lethal engagements, employing IEDs for targeted strikes, small arms for close combat, and mortars for area suppression, demonstrating their tactical adaptability despite recent losses.

ISIS Somalia activity in Puntland

Amid the ongoing military operations against ISIS, the Puntland military units have intensified their operations against ISIS, resulting in the elimination or capture of over 40 militants in a series of engagements in and around the Cal Miskaad Mountains. Their campaign has also led to the destruction of approximately 50 ISIS operational sites and the downing or capture of more than 30 drones used by the group for surveillance and potential attacks since the beginning of the offensive.

Despite these setbacks, ISIS has recently escalated its activities, focusing on Puntland forces. On 15 January, ISIS claimed through their editorial magazine *Al Naba* that an attack killed 15 Puntland soldiers, injured dozens and destroyed seven vehicles. This claim contradicted Puntland's report, which stated that over 20 ISIS fighters were killed in the same engagement.

On 22 January, ISIS reported another attack in which they targeted a patrol vehicle of the local Puntland military with an IED in Hablei town area, Bari province, resulting in the death of 12 soldiers. Clashes in the Wali Sur Valley near Bali Tadan, also in Bari, saw ISIS claiming 10 soldiers affected, with two confirmed dead and eight injured, though only six injuries were verified.

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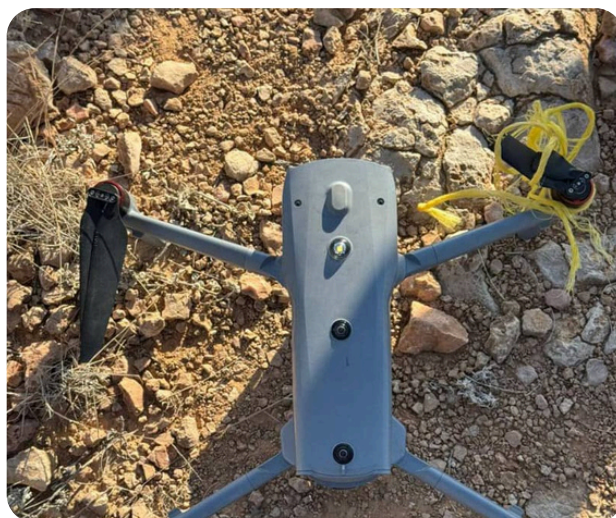
Houthi drone shot down in yemen
Source: Bawabatii media

ISIS drone captured by Puntland forces
Source: Puntland Counter Terrorism (Telegram)

AQAP Activity in Yemen

AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) has demonstrated a persistent operational capability in Yemen, despite ongoing counter-terrorism measures. On 15 January, AQAP claimed responsibility for targeting a military vehicle belonging to the UAE-backed Shabwa Forces at the Al Jubail site using a UAV. On the same day, they carried out a sniper attack against Shabwa Forces in Wadi Omran, although this was only reported later.

On 17 January, AQAP conducted another sniper attack on Shabwa Forces in Al Baqira, which had occurred on 15 January but was announced subsequently. On 20 January, AQAP reported an operation involving the use of drones to target the positions of Shabwa Forces at the Al Humaimah site, resulting in two soldiers being injured.

In a separate statement released on the same day, AQAP acknowledged the deaths of two high-ranking leaders who were targeted in US airstrikes conducted in the Shabwa region of Yemen. The group identified the individuals as Abu Saleh Al Dayouli, whose real name was Ammar bin Saleh bin Muhammed Al Awlaki, and Muhammed bin Saleh Al Mughi, also known by his aliases Abu Ali Al Disi and Sheikh Abu Ali Al Hadrami. Both figures were considered instrumental in AQAP's operational planning and leadership structure. The loss of these senior leaders marks a significant blow to the group's hierarchy and its ability to coordinate future operations effectively.

Jihadist Groups' Usage of Drones

Both Al Qaeda and ISIS in Puntland have increasingly incorporated drones into their operations, favouring them alongside the traditional use of IEDs for conducting attacks. While only AQAP has so far executed successful drone strikes, the adoption of similar tactics by ISIS suggests these groups are adapting to modern warfare methods.

Captured drones displayed by Puntland Forces have been identified as Chinese-manufactured FPV (First-Person View) models. These drones have also been widely used on the Yemeni battlefield, with Legitimate Yemeni forces intercepting them on multiple occasions. This indicates that ISIS in Puntland may have sourced their drones through the Houthis in Yemen, pointing to a potential arms trade between the groups despite ideological differences. This concerning trend, previously highlighted by SeaHawk Maritime Intelligence, underscores the complex dynamics of arms procurement within terrorist networks.

SOURCES

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