

# More Emirati Military Involvement in Somalia Could Help Curb al-Shabab

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Jun 27, 2023

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Brief Analysis

**The United Arab Emirates has much to offer if it chooses deeper military involvement in the fight against al-Shabab, but it would need to coordinate closely with other actors, especially the United States, to optimize its contribution.**

**O**n June 16, the UAE carried out its first publicly reported airstrike in Somalia, targeting a jihadist-controlled village in the country's Galguduud region with a Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drone. This is the first overt Emirati kinetic military operation conducted in Somalia and follows deepening UAE involvement in the country over the past year. The airstrike could signal that Abu Dhabi is willing to upgrade its involvement in the war against the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group al-Shabab. This analysis considers the current situation in Somalia and the UAE's military intervention record to assess the prospects for deeper Emirati involvement.

## The UAE Presence in Somalia

**I**n 1993-94, the UAE contributed the 640-man al-Wajeb Battalion to the 37,000-strong Unified Task Force (UNITAF) humanitarian mission in Somalia. It also contributed to the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II) peacekeeping mission, providing several units and a field hospital. Three Emirati soldiers were killed in action. As the Somali civil war ground on and international forces withdrew, the UAE assumed more of a donor role.

Afterward, the UAE was involved at various levels with the federal government of Somalia; the autonomous Puntland region; and Somaliland, which had declared its independence from Somalia in 1991:

- In 2010, in the wake of rising piracy off the Somali coast, the UAE began funding training for the Puntland Maritime Police Force by a South African security contractor. That contract ended scandalously

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/africa/private-army-leaves-troubled-legacy-in-somalia.html>) in 2012, though Abu Dhabi apparently continued funding the force and maintained good ties with the Puntland administration. In 2017, DP World, through subsidiary P&O Ports, signed a thirty-year contract to develop and manage Puntland's port of Bosaso on the Gulf of Aden coast.

- In 2016, Emirati firm DP World signed a deal with Somaliland to upgrade the port of Berbera. In addition, the UAE committed to building a military base next to the city's airport and seafront; training the Somaliland police and army; and constructing a highway from Berbera to the Ethiopian border town of Wajaale. The project would augment the Emirati presence in the Gulf of Aden, as Berbera is 300 miles south of an Emirati base in Assab, Eritrea. The Emirati presence in Berbera, Assab, and Bosaso has helped counter piracy, interdict Iranian arms smuggling to Houthi rebels in Yemen, and ferry in Sudanese fighters for anti-Houthi operations in southern Yemen.
- The UAE officially began a program to train Somali federal government forces in 2014. A year later, it [opened a training center \(https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/\)](https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/) in Mogadishu, where Emirati forces have trained Somali commandos. It also provided vehicles to Jubaland state forces and the federal government's Ministry of Internal Security and Police. By 2018, the UAE said it had trained thousands of Somali soldiers, built training centers and a hospital, and paid 2,407 soldiers' salaries. Abu Dhabi terminated the training mission after Somali troops boarded an Emirati plane in Mogadishu on April 8, 2018, and seized \$9.6 million, which the Somali government claimed was undeclared U.S. dollars. Tensions had been rising prior to that, as Somalia chose to remain neutral after the [2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qatar-diplomacy-unraveling-complicated-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qatar-diplomacy-unraveling-complicated-crisis), though the UAE had urged Mogadishu to take its side.

Relations with the federal government started improving after [Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned to power \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-old-leader-presents-new-opportunities-somalia\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-old-leader-presents-new-opportunities-somalia) in the May 15, 2022, presidential election with substantial Emirati financial backing. The \$9.6 million that had been seized by Somali troops was released days later. In February 2023, Mogadishu approved an official security cooperation agreement with Abu Dhabi, and a month later, Emirati military vehicles arrived in the Jubaland region to begin construction of a new base to be owned and operated by the UAE.

Overall, Emirati contributions in Somalia have been largely positive, if less noticeable. They include helping to fund development of the Somali National Army (SNA) and upgrading Berbera's airport, which U.S. Africa Command is now [considering \(https://twitter.com/USAfricaCommand/status/1524757031768530949\)](https://twitter.com/USAfricaCommand/status/1524757031768530949) using. Some Emirati operations are low profile, such as those in Puntland against Iranian weapons smugglers.

Abu Dhabi's funding has earned it allies at various levels of Somali politics, including, as noted, President Hassan Sheikh. In addition, Ahmed Mohamed Islaam—the president of Jubaland state, where the UAE is building its base in Somalia—has a strong relationship with Abu Dhabi and previously received Emirati military aid.

## Other International Actors in Somalia

**T**he UAE is by no means the most prominent international military actor in Somalia. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), previously known as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), whose major donor is the European Union, today numbers about 22,000 troops from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda and has been indispensable in securing Mogadishu and other cities. AMISOM led the fight against al-Shabab for a time, filling in for the dysfunctional SNA, whose brigades have remained [subject to political misuse \(http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110878/\)](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110878/), such as involvement in clan feuds and intimidation of political opponents. With territory controlled by al-Shabab confined to rural south and central Somalia, the elite [Danab Brigade \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2045967?journalCode=uter20\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2045967?journalCode=uter20)—created, trained, and funded by the United States and insulated from clan politics—has increasingly taken on the burden of

offensive operations. Recently, government-allied Macawisley tribal fighters have shown themselves to be effective in conducting joint operations with Danab and holding liberated territory.

Turkey has emerged as **another important actor** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkish-influence-sub-saharan-africa>). In 2011, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled with his family to Somalia to show support during the famine, and Turkish humanitarian aid followed shortly after. That same year, Turkey reopened its embassy in Somalia, which had been closed since 1991. In 2013, Turkish firm Favori LLC began running Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport, and two years later, the Turkish Albayrak Group took over operations at Mogadishu International Port. In addition, Turkey has constructed health facilities in Somalia, and its new embassy building in the country, opened June 2016, is its largest in the world.

Ankara also opened its largest overseas military training facility, Camp TURKSOM, in Somalia in 2017. The Turkish-trained Gorgor commando unit has demonstrated its combat effectiveness, though during the tenure of the previous president, Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" Mohamed, it gained notoriety for political misuse, as seen when he deployed Gorgor members to compel political support. Moreover, Turkish-operated TB2 drones are now being used on the battlefield, bolstering Somalia's capacity to strike al-Shabab targets. While the United States provides better air support, Turkish airstrikes require approval only from a Turkish officer in-theater, whereas U.S. strikes require approval from Washington. This could confer an advantage when time-sensitive targets appear, though this option should not be used carelessly in populated areas.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

The UAE has proven in its recent missions in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, **and Yemen** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/25-days-aden-unknown-story-arabian-elite-forces-war>) that it can contribute real military capability when it desires to do so. Emirati forces have **proven adaptable and capable** (<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sizing-up-little-sparta-understanding-uae-military-effectiveness/>) in both direct action and **"by, with, and through"** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fighting-jihadists-and-through-us-partners-lessons-learned-and-future-prospects>) operations. Most important, in a range of environments, the Emiratis have developed a strong record of building capable partner forces that can take on local adversaries and regularly accompanying such partners into battle with a light footprint of special forces advisors and airstrike controllers. Thus, increased Emirati military involvement in Somalia could be a significant force multiplier to efforts by the United States, Turkey, and African Union if this is coordinated properly with the other military actors in the country.

If the UAE does decide to deepen its involvement in Somalia, the United States should ensure that it can properly coordinate operations and promote transparency between the UAE and other pro-government forces. In the fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, the UAE enjoys a remarkably close working relationship with the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and this could be a model to replicate in Somalia. Yemen has seen the development of what Michael Knights calls the **"trilateral operations"** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lessons-uae-war-yemen>) model of counterterrorism operations, in which local forces do the bulk of the ground fighting and operate local human intelligence sources. U.S. forces control the technical intelligence assets overhead, and embedded UAE special forces provide the forward-deployed connective tissue between the two. In Yemen, this worked better than operations exclusively by local forces or bilateral operations involving local forces and U.S. or UAE forces. This model has also worked to some extent in Afghanistan, where the UAE brought Islamic and some cultural and linguistic capability to an environment that was not predominately Arabic speaking.

Most important, the United States must keep its own modest yet indispensable military presence in Somalia. U.S. support has proven paramount in the fight against al-Shabab, and the period of U.S. withdrawal from Somalia

between January 2021 and May 2022 emboldened the group and saw stagnation among pro-government forces. Now, U.S. support, coupled with determined Somali political leadership, has enabled a serious offensive campaign aiming to deprive al-Shabab of all its territory. While Emirati activity in other countries—such as deep involvement in Yemen or provision of drones to Ethiopia—has stabilized frontlines and expanded government control to an extent, a large-scale offensive in Somalia would be extremely challenging for the UAE to undertake alone. In the fight against al-Shabab, the United States remains the indispensable international actor.

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