



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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“ON THE HORIZON” FEATURE ARTICLE

## Going the Distance

The emergence of long-range, stand-off terrorism

DON RASSLER

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Christopher Maier

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-  
INTENSITY CONFLICT

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### FROM THE EDITOR

Long-range aerial attacks by the Iran-backed Houthi terrorist group, including a ballistic missile that traveled at least a thousand miles toward Israel before being intercepted (reportedly in space) on October 31, 2023, are focusing minds on long-range stand-off terrorism. In this month’s feature article, which conceptualizes, outlines, and examines the implications of this emerging threat vector, Don Rassler argues that the notion that terrorists could strike the United States across the oceans with unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) is becoming increasingly less far-fetched.

Rassler writes that “over the coming decade, hydrogen fuel cell and solar UAS technology will evolve and mature, and will also likely become more available and accessible to the average consumer, which will make longer ranges more accessible as well. Other disruptive technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence, will also mature and will likely be used by extremists to help them optimize system performance and to overcome, or devise creative solutions to, technical long-range UAS challenges.” He warns that “long-range stand-off terrorism will be attractive to some extremists because it opens-up new attack pathways, can enable surprise, and has the potential to deliver a potent psychological, ‘we can strike you from afar’ punch. Over the next decade advancements in commercial technologies and systems will also make range, and extended range, more accessible for violent non-state-entities, making it likely that in the future long-range terrorism will become even more of a threat.” Rassler’s article is the first in a new recurring series in *CTC Sentinel* entitled “On the Horizon” that will examine emerging counterterrorism challenges.

Our interview is with Christopher Maier, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. “We need to have sustainable CT operations that prevent terrorists’ actions, principally al-Qa`ida and ISIS, to ensure we are not distracted by what we view as the longer-term strategic priorities, such as peer adversaries,” he says. “As the rest of the Department and other parts of the U.S. government are doing less CT, [this] means that those who are doing it have to do it better and, in many respects, do it more proportionally to the rest of the national security enterprise. This is why SOF is looked to as the lead for the CT fight in the Department.”

Daisy Muiibu examines the state of Somalia’s military campaign against al-Shabaab. She writes that: “A year and five months after the Somali government launched its offensive against al-Shabaab, the initial optimism that characterized its first few months have diminished as the counterinsurgency’s momentum has stalled in the central regions of the country.” She adds that “with only a year left until African Union forces are mandated to fully draw down, significant obstacles remain that cast doubts over the government’s ambitious goals to defeat al-Shabaab and assume full responsibility for securing the country by December 31, 2024.”

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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Cover: *Shahed-136 Iranian loitering munition unmanned aerial vehicles (ODIN TRADOC)*

# Going the Distance: The Emergence of Long-Range Stand-Off Terrorism

By Don Rassler

The attack on Tower 22—an outpost in Jordan used by the U.S. military—that killed three U.S. service members was an important reminder about the threat posed by stand-off weapons, especially armed one-way-attack drones. While few details have been publicly released about the location from which the hostile drone was launched, the U.S. military’s response points to the drone having been operated by a nearby Iranian proxy. Over the past several years, this type of threat—the targeting of U.S. military facilities in Iraq and Syria by shorter-range stand-off weapons—has become common. But there have also been signs of a broader threat that has emerged, the threat of long-range stand-off terrorism. This article conceptualizes, and attempts to define, this emerging threat vector. It also traces signs of its emergence and initial evolution, and discusses implications associated with this coming, on-the-horizon problem. Recent long-range drone and missile attacks attributed to the Houthis, a capability that Iran has helped to strategically shape, highlight how the Houthis are both a first mover and a leading-edge indicator of the threat. While adoption will likely be limited and constrain the scope of the threat, at least initially, long-range stand-off terrorism will be attractive to some extremists because it opens-up new attack pathways, can enable surprise, and has the potential to deliver a potent psychological, ‘we can strike you from afar’ punch. Over the next decade advancements in commercial technologies and systems will also make range, and extended range, more accessible for violent non-state-entities, making it likely that in the future long-range terrorism will become more of a threat.

In August 2003, in what was an important breakthrough in remote-control aviation, Maynard Hill—“a pioneer in unmanned and model aircraft”<sup>1</sup>—successfully flew a radio-controlled model airplane he built from commercial parts nearly 1,900 miles across the Atlantic Ocean, from Newfoundland to the coast of Ireland. The six-foot balsa-and-Mylar plane that made the transatlantic flight weighed 11 pounds and utilized less than a gallon of gas.<sup>2</sup> The flight “set records for distance in a straight line ... and flight duration: 38 hours, 52 minutes, 14 seconds.”<sup>3</sup> It was an incredible and enterprising achievement for a private citizen.

Despite having occurred more than 20 years ago, the flight is still immensely relevant today, particularly when considering its implications for terrorism. Not only does Hill’s feat demonstrate that such a long-range flight is possible, highlighting a capability

that could be mirrored by other individuals or non-state teams, it also provides a window into a not-so-distant future when non-state actors will be able to deploy systems to conduct attacks, and other operations, from large stand-off distances or what might have previously been considered unfathomable ranges, like a flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Enabled by Iran, the Houthi movement’s reported ability to conduct missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and more recently Israel,<sup>4</sup> from great distances, including those that exceed 1,000 km, highlights how the era of long-range stand-off terrorism has already—in part—emerged.

This article<sup>a</sup> conceptualizes and gives definition and form to this new strand of terrorism, a type of terrorism that while already visible still holds much room for growth and evolution. The article first provides a general overview of the attractiveness of stand-off weapons, and the concept of long-range stand-off terrorism. The second part of the article explores factors that shape terrorist interest in and adoption of new technologies and approaches and discusses how long-range stand-off terrorism is emerging as a new threat vector. The article’s third section highlights key accelerants and limiting factors that will likely shape the timeline of long-range stand-off terrorism and its potential proliferation as a threat and capability area. Section four highlights several real-world examples that provide insight into how range, and the extension of range, is a capability area that state, non-state, and proxy actors are actively pursuing and, in some cases, have already operationalized. The article concludes with a review of key implications.

## Terrorism and the Concept of Long-Range Stand-Off Attacks

Stand-off weapons, or weapons that can be used to attack adversaries from a distance, have been embraced by terrorists, and are not new.<sup>5</sup> This is because these types of weapons provide the same types of benefits to violent non-state actors as they do to states: They reduce force attrition and make it harder for the targeted party to identify

a Editor’s Note: This article is the first in a new recurring series in *CTC Sentinel* entitled “On the Horizon” that will examine emerging counterterrorism challenges.

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the source of the attack and respond quickly.<sup>b</sup> Hamas' brutal attack on October 7, 2023, for example, involved the integrated use of many different types of weapons, including direct contact weapons, such as small arms and bladed weapons that allowed Palestinian militants to attack Israeli civilians in close and more intimate ways, and stand-off weapons, typified by rockets and drones, that allowed the group to attack—and repeat those attacks—from a longer stand-off distance. Terrorists have also sought out and attempted to conduct attacks utilizing surface-to-air missiles, another type of stand-off weapon. For example, in November 2002, two surface-to-air missiles were fired at an Israeli charter Boeing 757 airplane after it took off from Mombasa, Kenya. Fortunately, the missiles missed the aircraft, which was carrying 260 passengers.<sup>c</sup>

Long-range stand-off weapons, as the name denotes, are weapons that can be deployed a greater distance away from the intended target(s). There does not appear to be a lot of agreement, however, about what constitutes a “long-range” weapon system generally. This is because different frameworks are used to classify range in relation to the type of system or platform. For example, a short-range ballistic missile is often categorized as having a range of between 300-1,000 km, while medium-range, intermediate-range, and intercontinental ballistic missiles are usually viewed as, respectively, having the following ranges: 1,000-3,000 km, 3,000-5,500 km, and more than 5,500 km.<sup>7</sup> Cruise missiles, alternatively, are often categorized by their purpose or modality, such as whether they are used to target ships, conduct land attacks, or carry nuclear payloads.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense uses a separate framework to classify unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). That framework breaks UAS into five different group categories, with those groups primarily being organized by UAS weight, operating altitude, and flight endurance.<sup>9</sup> NATO's UAS classification scheme has three UAS classes instead of five.<sup>10</sup> Other frameworks developed by researchers, industry, and drone enthusiasts also exist online. One such framework proposes a guide that breaks down UAS by five range limits: very-close range (5 km), close-range (50 km), short-range (150 km), mid-range (644 km), and long-range (more than 644 km).<sup>c</sup>

An initial, proposed way to define what constitutes long-range stand-off terrorism is to build off this latter range framework, and for it to include three key components: 1) the deployment of an unmanned weapon or system by 2) an individual, non-state group, or network from a stand-off distance greater than 800 km (nearly 500 miles) from its intended target(s) to 3) conduct a terror attack—or other type of operation to advance a terror movement's agenda. It should be stressed that the proposed 800 km range threshold is an initial marker that is being shared to provoke debate and conversation among stakeholders about what the ‘right’ or most

**“Like other players, terrorists and extremists need to navigate tradeoffs and explore the costs and benefits of experimenting with and adopting new technologies and systems. This is because adopting new or novel weapons, systems, and capabilities have the potential to amplify existing risks and introduce new ones.”**

appropriate range threshold for a long-distance stand-off terror attack should be. In using this type of range threshold, long-range stand-off terror attacks could include, for instance, the deployment of an armed UAV, cruise missile, or another type of delivery vehicle, across an ocean, from one region of the world to another region, across multiple countries, from one country to another, or over a large distance within a country.

This type or modality of attack is different from other methods, such as remotely inspired attacks, that enable terror networks to conduct attacks in countries located a far distance from the operation's principal planners and/or controller. In those types of attacks, the violent non-state actor inspires, provides support to, or helps guide a human operative or team of operatives located in (or who can gain access to) a separate country where the attack takes place. This method has allowed groups such as the Islamic State to achieve long-range attack capability without having to go through the hassle, and associated risk, of inserting an operative, or team of operatives, in a foreign country located far away.<sup>d</sup> The core difference between long-range stand-off attacks and those that are remotely inspired is that the former involve incidents where the weapon is delivered by a machine that has been programmed and launched (or is being controlled) by an actor from afar—a great distance away from the target—rather than where a human, armed with a weapon, serves as the direct agent of violence.<sup>e</sup>

### Preferences, Tradeoffs, and Long-Range Stand-Off Terrorism as an Emerging Threat Vector

Like other players, terrorists and extremists need to navigate tradeoffs and explore the costs and benefits of experimenting with and adopting new technologies and systems. This is because adopting new or novel weapons, systems, and capabilities have the

b Indeed, as astutely noted by Brian Michael Jenkins in 1975, “We must not overlook the potential utility to terrorists of easily concealable weapons that give their users great accuracy at long distances, thus increasing the chances of success while reducing the risks of capture.” Brian Michael Jenkins, “High Technology Terrorism and Surrogate War: The Impact of New Technology on Low-Level Violence,” RAND, 1975.

c This framework is found in many places online, including journal articles and on the site of a Chinese drone company. The earliest version of the source that the author could find was Kamlesh Kumari, “Review of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) Technology,” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 6:2 (2018).

d The Islamic State's deadly November 2015 terror attack in Paris highlighted in dramatic fashion the group's ability to conduct international terror attacks utilizing its own members, in addition to non-group members inspired by the Islamic State who conducted attacks in foreign countries so the group could claim credit.

e Another example that is important to highlight—which can help to differentiate long-range stand-off terror incidents from other terror attacks that have been executed from a distance, such as the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which involved the use of a timed bomb smuggled onto that flight that exploded after take-off—is that long-range stand-off terror involves the use of an unmanned system or weapon as the delivery vehicle instead of a human-occupied platform such as a commercial airliner.



Screen capture from footage published on a Houthi Telegram channel on November 1, 2023, purporting to show a UAS launch by the group

potential to amplify existing risks and introduce new ones. As part of its calculus, a group, network, or individual must also examine whether the deployment or utilization of a new technology or approach will advance their specific goals and whether they have the resources, knowledge, and know-how to utilize the new addition in an effective way. These and other reasons help to explain why most extremist and terrorist entities usually prioritize and prefer more ‘tried and true’ or reliable weapons and methods, such as the use of the gun and/or a bomb in attacks.<sup>11 f</sup>

Over the course of time, that has been an enduring feature of terrorism. But there have always been important exceptions and outliers, first movers and innovators that have been bolder and more risk accepting in terms of how they approach, experiment with, and adopt new technologies and weapons. The access that violent non-state actors have to advanced commercial technologies and systems, and technical know-how (which is often widely shared) has been disrupting how extremists and terrorists innovate and the capabilities that are now within their reach.

The Islamic State’s successful and effective weaponization of drones, and the group’s ability to scale that threat, is an important example in this regard. Through some creative and simple tinkering, the group was able to transform commercial quadcopters into affordable, small, and viable bomb-dropping weapons of war, which for a period were a nasty and effective nuisance. In doing so, the Islamic State’s breakthrough drone innovation demonstrated what was possible, paving the way for other actors to follow, further develop, and push this new aerial capability in new directions. Today, terror drone usage and terror drone weaponization is more

diffused and common, and future historians will likely give due credit to the important role the Islamic State played in helping to shift the terror drone threat from a more novel, niche threat to a more ubiquitous one.

The arc of terror drone weaponization and its diffusion is a useful parallel to situate the threat of long-range stand-off terrorism today. More than 15 years ago, in 2005 and 2008, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) and RAND, respectively, released two key reports that explored the idea and threat posed by future terrorist use of UAVs and cruise missiles to conduct attacks at stand-off ranges.<sup>12</sup> The RAND report concluded in 2008 that UAVs and cruise missiles were a novel and “niche threat”—“potentially making some contribution to the overall asymmetric and terrorist threat, rather than being an attack mode likely to be widely embraced by such actors.”<sup>13</sup> That finding, and way of characterizing the threat, generally holds true today. If the Houthi case is set aside, the modality remains boutique and niche. But the Houthis’ long-range missile and drone attacks—particularly those against specific civilian or mixed-use infrastructure such as airports, which there is a stronger rationale to view or consider as being acts of terrorism—challenge this characterization.<sup>g</sup> As will be outlined below, attempts attributed to the Houthis to strike Eilat in southern Israel challenge it as well. While long-range stand-off Houthi attacks have largely been focused on striking military targets and national infrastructure, such as Saudi Aramco facilities, the Houthis cross-border aerial warfare campaign has been just that—a multi-year campaign during which long-range stand-off attacks have become a steadier and more regular, and not niche, attack feature.

This is troubling because advancements in commercial technologies and systems are helping to make range, and extended range, more accessible generally, making it likely that over the coming decade more violent non-state actors will engage in longer and longer-range stand-off attacks.<sup>h</sup> In that sense, the Houthis’ long-range stand-off attacks are just an early manifestation, or leading-edge indicator, of a broader, coming problem. Thus, while long-range stand-off terror attacks remain niche for non-Houthi

g This issue is complicated by the existence of military air bases or military aprons co-located at various Saudi and UAE airports, such as the existence of Al Reef Air Base at Abu Dhabi International Airport in the United Arab Emirates and King Abdullah Air Base at King Abdul Aziz International Airport in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The Houthis have repeatedly struck Abha airport in Saudi Arabia, a closer target, but the Houthis have repeatedly claimed, despite civilian injuries and deaths resulting from attacks, that their strikes were focused on military targets. Houthi attacks against the King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh also deserve scrutiny, as while the Houthis have sought to defend those attacks by stating that they were targeting military infrastructure (i.e., Patriot Missile Batteries), Human Rights Watch has suggested that at least one of these strikes was a war crime. For background see, “Yemen: Houthi Strike on Saudi Airport Likely War Crime,” Human Rights Watch, November 7, 2017.

h One important issue to consider is how the availability of commercial technologies and systems that make it easier to conduct attacks at range could or will have an impact on the ‘distance-decay effect,’ a theory that posits that the “further the distance from home, the less likely the recruit is to engage in the attack.” For quote and background, see Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Emily Corner, “The Rational Foraging Terrorist: Analysing the Distances Travelled to Commit Terrorist Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31:5 (2019). See also Claude Berrebi and Darius Lakdawalla, “How Does Terrorism Risk Vary Across Space and Time? An Analysis Based on the Israeli Experience,” *Defence and Peace Economics* 18:2 (2007).

f As “Brian Jenkins famously observed in 1985 . . . terrorists ‘appear to be more imitative than innovative.’” For quote, see Bruce Hoffman, “Low-Tech Terrorism,” *National Interest*, March/April 2014.

groups at the moment,<sup>i</sup> over time it seems likely, and arguably quite probable, that they could evolve into a more common threat feature for categories of violent non-state actors.

**Accelerants and Limitations: Factors Shaping Long-Range Stand-Off Terrorism and Future Adoption**

Several key factors will shape the timeline associated with long-range stand-off terrorism and its future adoption. At a high-level, these factors can be framed as accelerants (dynamics that are helping to enable the emergence of long-range stand-off terrorism) and limitations that work to slow and constrain violent non-state actor adoption of this operational modality.

One key accelerant, as Hill’s transatlantic flight demonstrated more than two decades ago, is that commercial technologies and systems can be leveraged to execute long-range missions. The capability exists and has been proven. But the power and potency of this accelerant is itself constrained, as just because the capability has been demonstrated does not mean that mirroring Hill’s flight would be an easy thing for a violent non-state actor to do. A lookalike of Hill’s long-distance flight—reimagined for terror purposes—for example, would require the right know-how and technical expertise, and access to and creative use of key commercial equipment and components. Hill and the team that supported him were seasoned experts, and they worked together to overcome technical challenges<sup>14</sup> that any other non-state team would face. Terrorist actors would likely face significant additional challenges including air defense as well as drone detection and countermeasure systems.

i One exception was the interception of three drones above unpopulated areas of the United Arab Emirates on February 2, 2022, thwarting an attempted attack claimed by Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH), or the True Promise Brigades. According to a profile published by analysts writing for Militia Spotlight at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, this is a “facade group with unique ties to” the Tehran-backed Iraqi Shi`a militia Kata’ib Hezbollah. According to these analysts, the drones targeting the UAE on February 2, 2022, were launched from Muthanna in southeastern Iraq. This Iraqi governorate sits at the northwestern edge of the Persian Gulf at a distance of around 1,000km from the UAE. After the February 2, 2022, intercepted attack, then Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby was quoted telling the Alhurra news outlet that an Iraqi group’s targeting of Abu Dhabi was part of the ongoing support that Iran provides to these militias in Iraq and other places throughout the region. “UAE says it blocked drone attack, shadowy group claims responsibility,” Reuters, February 3, 2022; Arwa Ibrahim, “Iraqi militia attack on UAE a ‘message from Iran,’” Al Jazeera, February 4, 2022; Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, and Michael Knights, “Profile: Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 7, 2024. For the reported location of the launch, see Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith, “Iraq’s New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State,” CTC Sentinel 16:11 (2023): footnote CO. For Kirby’s remarks, see Alhurra, “[US Department of Defense spokesman John Kirby told Al Hurra ...],” X, February 8, 2022.

**“Some of the core issues and challenges that a non-state team would need to navigate to extend UAS range include the size, weight, and design of the drone; propulsion and power; control, navigation, and communication; and environmental factors.”**

	TAM 1	TAM 2	TAM 3	TAM 4	TAM 5
<b>Launch date:</b>	August 8, 2002	August 10, 2002	August 19, 2002	August 8, 2003	August 9, 2003
<b>Launch time:</b>	8 p.m. local time	8 p.m. local time	6 p.m. local time	8 p.m. local time	7:45 p.m. local time
<b>Flight duration:</b>	At least an hour	17 ½ minutes	8 hours	7 hours, 7 minutes	38 hours, 52 minutes, 19 seconds
<b>Flight distance:</b>	N/A	N/A	479.0 miles	430.0 miles	1,881.6 miles
<b>Cause of failure:</b>	Possible servo	Engine shut off	Rainstorm and severe turbulence	Uncertain	Successful flight!

Figure 1: Overview of Maynard Hill’s Five Transatlantic Model (TAM) Flights, Including Failure Points<sup>15</sup>

Some of the core issues and challenges that a non-state team would need to navigate to extend UAS range include the size, weight, and design of the drone; propulsion and power; control, navigation, and communication; and environmental factors (e.g., wind and weather).<sup>16</sup> Further, if a terror entity wanted to use a long-range stand-off weapon, such as an armed UAS, some of these challenges (e.g., weight) would be compounded and involve system tradeoffs (e.g., a UAS with a longer range, but with a more limited explosive payload to make the UAS lighter). The system’s ability to avoid detection and mitigate any defensive UAS countermeasures would also be a key consideration. Precision would be an issue as well, especially if the actor wanted to strike a moving/non-fixed target. These obstacles would likely deter all but the most committed and boldest of actors—limiting the scale of the threat, at least initially.

A second accelerant is ongoing advancements made to commercially accessible technologies that could be leveraged to conduct a long-range stand-off terror attack. Today’s commercially available drones, for example, are more efficient, more capable, and can fly farther, faster, longer, and with heavier payloads than drones that were available to consumers a decade ago. Stepwise and more radical advancements in consumer UAS will continue to elongate range and make longer-range UAS attack pathways more viable for violent non-state actors. The predominance of commercial UAS that are available today are powered by lithium-ion batteries, which constrain how far and for how long those drones can fly. But

alternative powering options, such as UAS powered by hydrogen fuel cell technology or hybrid fuel/powering systems (i.e., solar), are already commercially available. In 2022, for example, the South Korean company Doosan won the CES' Best Innovation Award for its DS30W—the “world’s first mass manufactured hydrogen fuel cell drone.”<sup>17</sup> Honeywell and other companies produce and sell hydrogen fuel cell drones as well.<sup>18</sup> UAS powered by hydrogen fuel cell technology are attractive because they are “smaller, lighter, more versatile and more resilient than alternatives like batteries or small gasoline and diesel engines,” offering what is claimed to be “three times the range of flight time of lithium battery powered drones.”<sup>19</sup> The H2D250, a hydrogen powered UAS made by Heven Drones, for instance, reportedly has an eight-hour flight endurance and has a 10 kg payload capacity.<sup>20</sup> Over the coming decade, hydrogen fuel cell and solar UAS technology will evolve and mature, and will also likely become more available and accessible to the average consumer, which will make longer ranges more accessible as well. Other disruptive technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence, will also mature and will likely be used by extremists to help them optimize system performance and to overcome, or devise creative solutions to, technical long-range UAS challenges.

A third accelerant that is likely to make long-range stand-off terrorism an attractive option for select categories of terrorists is the benefits the attack modality offers. At a strategic level, two important advantages stand out. The first is surprise: For the first movers and lead innovators, long-range stand-off attacks will likely be unexpected, allowing the group, network, or individual to surprise and likely shock its enemy. Surprise may be fairly easy for these first movers to achieve, as if these types of long-range attacks have not happened before, as they have already in the Middle East, terrorists will likely have a broad attack surface area with many undefended and vulnerable targets from which to choose. The second strategic benefit and point of attraction is the symbolic power of being able to conduct such an attack. Symbolism is especially relevant for terror groups, proxies, and states that have been targeted by armed drones. The deaths of Qassem Soleimani (the former leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force) and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (the commander of the Iranian proxy Kata'ib Hezbollah) who were both killed in a January 2020 U.S. drone strike are an important case in point. If Iran, or an Iranian proxy, were able to conduct a long-range stand-off assassination of a key U.S. figure using an armed drone, the operation would be a powerful and symbolic form of revenge. The significance of Iran using a similar type of weapon to assassinate a high-profile U.S. person, or partner, would not be lost on the world. Such an attack would also carry another important psychological message: ‘You—the United States—are not as secure as you think you are, and we have the ability to strike you from afar.’

There are related operational and tactical benefits to long-range stand-off terror attacks. The 2008 RAND study discussed earlier identified five key benefits, or adversary operational problems, that UAVs and cruise missiles can solve. These included enabling 1) attacks over perimeter defenses, 2) attacks over national borders, 3) multiple simultaneous attacks, 4) attack campaigns, and 5) aerial

## **“As range becomes increasingly accessible to violent non-state actors, it is also possible that the emergence of long-range stand-off terrorism could empower other types of existing actors or lead to the creation of new ‘players.’”**

attack of area targets with unconventional weapons (i.e., WMD terrorism, especially chemical and biological attacks).<sup>21</sup>

Just because these accelerants and benefits exist does not mean that terrorist groups will broadly seek out and/or adopt long-range stand-off terrorism as an attack modality. The approach, given the technical hurdles involved when weighed against the ease of use associated with other methods or weapons, will only appeal to those types of extremist networks that have an interest in attacking targets from a long range, and that believe such an attack would advance their specific cause and/or goals. Terror networks that are more concerned with local issues, for example, would likely not want to expend the resources or take on added risk to experiment with and develop the capability. But terror networks, or regimes, that have more resources, that have key enemies located a great distance away, and/or that embrace a ‘far-enemy’ targeting mindset would likely be more interested in long-range stand-off terrorism. Given that resources will be a key determining factor for first movers, it is not surprising that the initial instances of long-range stand-off terrorism have been tied to the Houthis—a state-supported entity.

Yet, as range becomes increasingly accessible to violent non-state actors, it is also possible that the emergence of long-range stand-off terrorism could empower other types of existing actors or lead to the creation of new ‘players.’

### **Current Threats and the Stretching of Range**

Concern about non-state groups—including terrorists—utilizing UAS to conduct long range stand-off terror attacks is not new. For example, in 2017, Owen West, who was then serving as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), warned that “in about five years”<sup>22</sup> that “non-government groups would be able to acquire and weaponize drones which could cross the Atlantic.”<sup>23</sup> When asked, also in 2017, whether “the commercial market is really headed toward building small drones that might fly thousands of miles across the unforgiving open air of an ocean,” Matt Scassero, the director of the University of Maryland’s UAV test site, stated: “the short answer is yes.” In his view, “the technology will be there to support that kind of flight operations ... Long-range drones will be able to fly across oceans within a fairly short amount of time, possibly five years.”<sup>24</sup> So, the future during which terror actors who possess the intent and interest in conducting a long-range stand-off attack might be here sooner than most expect. If the predictions of individuals like West

j CES is an annual trade show put on by the Consumer Technology Association (CTA). The CES acronym is an initialism for Consumer Electronics Show that CTA used to use. The event today is just known as CES.

hold true, we should already be at, or approaching that, moment.<sup>k</sup> There is also a strong case to be made that the threshold has already been crossed by the Houthis some time ago.

News reports and information about key conflicts provides plenty of evidence about how state and non-state actors continue to extend the range from which they can attack. One of the most relevant examples, as discussed above, is the long-range drone and cruise and ballistic missile attacks conducted by the Houthis. According to data compiled by ACLED, between “2015 and 2 April 2022, the Houthis engaged in nearly 1,000 rocket/missile attacks and over 350 distinct drone attacks.”<sup>25</sup> Attacks against Saudi Arabia were a steady feature of the Houthis cross-border aerial warfare over that period, but in 2018 there was a noticeable shift in the capability and range of Houthi missiles and drones, and an expansion of targets.<sup>26</sup> For example, in 2018, “the Houthis claimed to have struck Dubai airport more than 1200 km away with a new long-range drone called Samad-3. They also claimed to have attacked Riyadh airport.”<sup>27</sup> At the time, there was some skepticism about the Houthis’ claims about the range of its Samad-3 UAS variant. But as David Hambling reported:

*In early 2019 a UN panel examined four examples of a new type of drone recovered by Saudi forces. Smaller than a light aircraft, it had a wingspan of 4.5 meters and unlike other Houthi drones, it was built from parts sourced internationally. The rear-mounted engines were either German-made 3W110i B2 or a Chinese DLE 170s bought on the open market. Some examples were equipped for reconnaissance, others were on one-way missions as cruise missiles, with a forty-pound payload of explosives mixed with ball bearings. The UN panel assessed the speed of the new drone at 200-250 km/h and maximum range of 1500 km. What was clear was that the long-range Samad-3 was real.<sup>28</sup>*

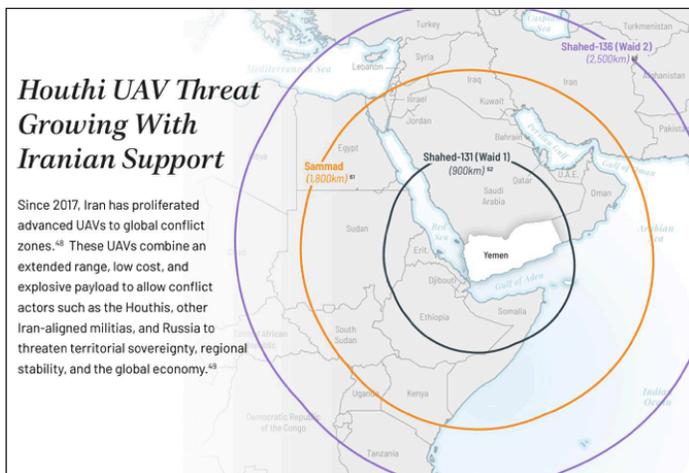


Figure 2: Screen Capture of DIA Graphic - Range Ring Estimates of Houthi UAS

A report released this month by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) spotlighted the same general range conclusion, and provided

k If the Houthis are considered a terrorist group, and long-range is defined as anything beyond 800 km, then there is a case to be made that the era of long-range, stand-off terrorism has already arrived.

additional evidence about how the Houthis continue to extend the range of their UAS and missiles due to help provided by Iran. The DIA report, for example, included two regional maps with range rings: one for UAS systems utilized by the Houthis and another for missiles. DIA estimated the range of the following key Iranian / Houthi UAS: Shahed 131 (Waid 1) – 900 km, Sammad – 1,800, and Shahed 136 (Waid 2) – 2,500 km.<sup>29</sup>

The DIA report highlighted eight different missiles. The three missiles with the longest range included: Qiam/Rezvan (Burkan-3) ballistic missile – 1,200 km, Shahab-3 (Toofan) ballistic missile – 1,950 km, and Project 351/Paveh (Quds-4) land-attack cruise missile – 2,000 km.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 3: Screen Capture of DIA Graphic - Range Ring Estimates of Houthi Missiles

Drone and ballistic and cruise missile attacks attributed to the Houthis over the past two years demonstrate the long-range threat, and how the movement’s capabilities are far from being just a theoretical problem. It is a serious one. Two examples bring the issue into focus. First, on January 17, 2022, the Houthis claimed to have conducted an attack in Abu Dhabi utilizing explosive-laden drones and ballistic missiles that struck a key state-owned oil facility, which killed three civilians, and that caused a fire at Abu Dhabi’s international airport.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. government and United Nations both classified that attack as an act of terrorism.<sup>32</sup> A week later the Houthis reportedly launched more ballistic missiles at the UAE. In response to that attempt, “U.S. forces at Al Dhafra Air Base, near Abu Dhabi... [shot down] two inbound missile threats with multiple Patriot interceptors.”<sup>33</sup> It is believed that the Houthis launched the missiles for the second attack from a site in Yemen’s al-Jawf province, a distance of “around 1,350 kilometers (840 miles) southwest of Abu Dhabi.”<sup>34</sup>

Second, since the October 7 terrorist attack in Israel the Houthis have repeatedly attacked and attempted to attack military and

l As noted by DIA, the range estimate for the Sammad UAS is based on “Houthi Claimed Maximum Range,” while the range estimates for the two Shahed systems are “Estimated Range” based on analysis.

m As noted by DIA, the Burkan-3 range estimated is based on demonstrated range, while the range estimates for the two other missiles are based on Houthi-claimed range.

commercial vessels<sup>35 n</sup> in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Another component of the Houthis response has been efforts to strike Israel with ballistic missiles directly. On October 31, 2023, for example, the Houthis reportedly fired a medium-range ballistic missile at southern Israel, believed to be intended for the city of Eilat, located over 1,000 miles (1,600 km) away from western Yemen.<sup>o</sup> That attempt was a ‘first’ and broke barriers in three ways. The first barrier was distance, as according to reporting by *Popular Mechanics*, “the Houthi missile traveled 1,000 miles, making it... the longest range ballistic missile attack ever.”<sup>36</sup> The second barrier the Houthi attempt broke was that the “Houthi missile warhead was technically in space when it was destroyed, making it the first hostile action to take place off-planet.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, as two Israeli officials told *The Economist*, this was the “first ever combat interception in space.”<sup>38</sup> The third barrier, or ‘first’, that the event triggered lay in how Israel responded to the in-bound threat. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted the Houthi missile above the Negev desert using the Arrow-3 component of its air defense system.<sup>39</sup> Israel’s use of its Arrow-3 capability to intercept the Houthi missile is noteworthy because the Arrow system, which is comprised of Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 components,<sup>40</sup> is the “top tier of Israel’s multi-layered integrated air defenses.”<sup>41</sup> While Arrow 2 is focused on defense on regional and medium range threats, which are concerning in their own right, Arrow 3 is an “exo-atmospheric missile capable of long-range interception by traveling through the lowest layer of space during its flight path.”<sup>42</sup> Israel’s successful Arrow-3 intercept of the ballistic missile fired by the Houthis in late October 2023 was “the first operational success since the weapon entered service in 2017.”<sup>43</sup> That initial long-range Houthi attempt to strike Israel was not a one-off or one-time capability, however, as in early February 2024, the Houthis tried again. The IDF also intercepted that missile, marking the second successful operational Arrow-3 intercept.<sup>44</sup> And on February 22, 2024, the Israelis intercepted yet another Houthi attempt.<sup>45</sup>

The Houthi’s long-range capabilities are a concern as a stand-alone threat, but they raise other concerning questions about proliferation and additional terror threats as well. For example, recent reports from the United Nations Monitoring Team have suggested that the Houthis have been providing al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with drones<sup>46</sup> and components,<sup>47</sup> and with operational training in how to use them.<sup>48</sup> If these reports are true, they elevate concerns about proliferation and the extended chain of proliferation.

It is well known that Iran provides support and weapons to the Houthis, and that the development of Houthi UAS and missile

capabilities has been strategically enabled by Iranian platforms, designs, technology, training, and advice. For example, when asked in a *60 Minutes* interview aired in mid-February 2024 whether the Houthis could be engaging in its campaign of attacks in the Red Sea without Iranian support, the Deputy Commander to U.S. Central Command, Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, responded: “No. For a decade the Iranians have been supplying the Houthis, they have been resupplying them ... they are advising them, and they are providing targeting information. This is crystal clear.”<sup>49</sup> He went on to add: “The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] is inside Yemen and they are serving side-by-side with the Houthis ... advising them and providing targeting information.”<sup>50</sup>

Prior analysis of ‘long-range’ drone and missile attacks claimed by the Houthis also indicates that there might be ‘more than meets the eye’ about Houthi capabilities and the entities responsible. For example, in 2020 an independent panel of U.N. experts concluded “that, despite their claims to the contrary, the Houthi forces did not launch the attacks on Abqaiq and Khureys [Saudi Arabia] on 14 September 2019.”<sup>51</sup> At the time, the investigators doubted “the uncrewed aerial vehicles and land attack cruise missiles used in that attack had a sufficient range to have been launched from Yemeni territory under the control of the Houthis.”<sup>52</sup> They were also concerned about evidence that the targeted facilities in “Abqaiq and Khurais were approached respectively from a north/northwestern and north/northeastern direction, rather than from the south, as one would expect in the case of a launch from Yemeni territory.”<sup>53</sup> Months prior, in May 2019, there was another drone attack against oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis claimed responsibility for that incident as well,<sup>54</sup> but it appears that the drones actually came from Iraq.<sup>55</sup> As Michael Knights astutely noted in 2021, after the 2019 attacks, “Iran and its proxies now seem more adept at controlling the narrative about where these strikes originate...”<sup>56</sup>

There are still questions about whether the same approach and strategy to deflect or mask attribution has been used in more recent attacks. For example, as *The Economist* noted in November 2023, it “remains unclear whether the Houthis or their Iranian patrons launched the October 31st [ballistic missile] attack” that targeted Israel.<sup>57</sup> But, as also highlighted by *The Economist*, that “is part of the appeal” because then “Iran’s revolutionary guards can blame strikes on Houthi militants.”<sup>58</sup> These dynamics highlight how there is a need for care and caution in how Houthi capabilities are described and just how quickly and authoritatively long-range attacks should be attributed to the movement.

Analysis of recovered Houthi UAS by Conflict Armament Research (CAR) provides additional insight into the Houthi-Iran system and capability overlap.<sup>59</sup> In 2017, for example, “evidence documented by CAR ... suggests that the Qasef-1 UAV is not of indigenous design and construction, but is Iranian-manufactured and has been supplied in batch to Houthi and Saleh-aligned forces in Yemen.”<sup>60</sup> Another CAR publication released in 2020 analyzed a Sammad-pattern UAV recovered by UAE forces, and CAR found that “several of the components” of the Sammad drone “resemble those of the Qasef-1, but with a few notable differences.”<sup>61</sup>

Iran’s sharing of its technology and systems is much broader problem. As noted by *The Economist*:

*Over the past 20 years Iran has supplied drones, rockets and missiles, as well as the know-how to make them, to Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, sundry militia in Iraq and Syria*

n According to reporting by Politico in mid-February 2024, “Houthi rebels in Yemen have launched 46 attacks against shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since the campaign started Nov. 19.” See Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward, and Nahal Toosi, “UAE restricts US ability to launch retaliatory airstrikes against Iran proxies,” Politico, February 14, 2024.

o The Israeli military initially described it as one missile. Various outlets have reported on this incident differently. For example, *Popular Mechanics* describes the incident as having involved one ballistic missile, while *The Economist* describes the incident as having involved more than one ballistic missile. Emanuel Fabian, “In first, Arrow downs Eilat-bound missile from ‘Red Sea area’; Houthis claim attack,” *Times of Israel*, October 31, 2023; Kyle Mizokami and Sébastien Roblin, “This Groundbreaking Ballistic Missile Intercept Was Also the First Combat in Space,” *Popular Mechanics*, November 17, 2023; “The Deadly Missile Race in the Middle East,” *Economist*, November 7, 2023.

and, most notably, *Hizbullah in Lebanon*. In 2007 Hamas had several hundred rockets, according to Israeli estimates. That jumped to 10,000 in 2014 and then tripled to 30,000 in 2021. *Hizbullah's more sophisticated arsenal went from around 15,000 missiles in 2006, the year it fought a war with Israel, to some 150,000 today. Around 400 of those are long-range missiles which can hit anywhere in Israel.*<sup>62</sup>

Not only has this activity from Iran been “changing the military landscape of the Middle East,”<sup>63</sup> it has also been shaping conflicts much further afield. Initial CAR analysis of Shahed drones employed by Russia in Ukraine in 2022, for example, found that “they were in fact all Iranian-made Shahed-131 and Shahed-136 UAVs.”<sup>p</sup> CAR’s study of Russian Shahed drones in Ukraine has also highlighted the importance and centrality of commercial components to the Shahed platform. According to CAR, “more than 70 manufacturers based in 13 countries and territories produced” the components they found, “with 82 per cent of them manufactured by companies based in the United States.”<sup>64</sup>

A tactic and capability that Iran recently claimed heightens the concern about what other systems and know-how Iran might be sharing, as it demonstrates that there are creative ways to ‘shrink’ range and make longer range strikes possible and to conceal or disguise those attempts. In February 2024, for instance, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) released a video that highlighted how it “fired two ballistic missiles from launchers disguised as standard shipping containers that were hosted aboard one of its sea base-like vessels.”<sup>65</sup> It will be interesting to see if this is a capability that is shared with the Houthis or other entities.

While the Houthi example provides a window into non-state actor capabilities, or that of a state-supported proxy, recent long-range UAS attacks conducted by the Ukrainian government highlight how states are devising ways to strike targets at longer and longer stand-off ranges as well (as one would expect). As Stacie Pettyjohn has noted, “over time, it has become clear that adapted commercial or homemade kamikaze drones played an increasingly important role and enabled Ukraine to hit targets deep inside Russia.”<sup>66</sup> In mid-January 2024, Ukraine claimed to have used a domestically produced drone to strike targets in St. Petersburg, Russia, a distance of 1,250 km (close to 800 miles) away.<sup>67</sup> In August 2023, Ukraine had reportedly used cardboard drones developed by an Australian company to attack an airfield in Russia’s Kursk Oblast.<sup>68</sup> The airfield in Kursk was a closer target, but that attack reportedly “damaged a Mig-29 and four Su-30 fighter jets, two Pantsir anti-aircraft missile launchers, gun systems, and an S-300 air surface-to-air missile defence system.”<sup>69</sup> Ukraine’s innovative and effective use of unmanned drone boats, including extended range ones, to conduct stand-off attacks against Russian ships highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the coming threat and

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its potential.<sup>q</sup> In that sense, as Marc Jacobsen has highlighted, Ukraine’s innovative use of drones and other unmanned systems provides a “window into the future of warfare.”<sup>70</sup>

Extremists recognize that the Ukraine conflict, and the drone-related innovations emerging from that conflict, provides that window. In 2023, a PhD student in the United Kingdom, Mohamad al Bared, was found guilty of a “terror offence after designing [a] ‘kamikaze’ drone for ISIS.”<sup>71</sup> Russian drone attacks in Ukraine were a key inspiration for him. To develop his drone prototype, al Bared “copied the design of a Tomahawk missile and produced the wings on a 3D printer, sending weekly updates to ISIS, so they could be replicated.”<sup>72</sup> The prototype was designed to deliver an explosive payload across an 8 km range.<sup>73</sup>

This Islamic State interest in such a prototype is not surprising, as the group has sought to enhance the capabilities of fixed-wing drones. For example, according to additional CAR analysis in 2020, the Islamic State “attempted to develop high-speed drones powered by pulse jet engines like those used in V-1 bombs dropped on the UK during World War Two.”<sup>74</sup>

These recent real-world examples showcase how different types of actors are seeking out ways to extend range and engage in stand-off attacks from afar. They also highlight how different types of actors, state and non-state alike, learn from and receive inspiration from one another.

## Conclusion

Long-range stand-off terrorism is an on-the-horizon threat that lurks. It is a threat vector that is already visible, and it is also a threat that will likely, over the next decade, become more of a menace as commercial technologies make range more and more accessible for non-state entities. While adoption will likely be limited and constrain the scope of the threat, at least initially, long-range stand-off terrorism will be attractive to some extremists because it opens up new attack pathways, can enable surprise, and has the potential to deliver a potent psychological, ‘we can strike you from afar’ punch.

Now is the time to think about and advance efforts to prepare for

p More recent CAR analysis has found that the “Russian Federation has started producing and fielding its own domestic version of the Shahed-136.” See “Documenting the domestic Russian variant of the Shahed UAV,” Conflict Armament Research, August 2023. Analysis by DIA has also highlighted the overlap between Iranian and Russian UAS used in Ukraine. For background, see “Iranian UAVs in Ukraine: A Visual Comparison,” Defense Intelligence Agency, August 2023.

q In July 2023, CNN reported the following about Ukraine’s drone boats: “The latest versions of the drone seen by CNN weigh up to 1,000 kilograms (2,200 pounds), with an explosive payload of up to 300 kilograms (661 pounds), a range of 800 kilometers (500 miles) and maximum speed of 80 kph (50 mph).” Sebastian Shukla, Alex Marquardt, and Daria Martina Tarasova, “Exclusive: Rare Access to Ukraine’s Black Sea Drones, Part of Ukraine’s Fight Back in the Black Sea,” CNN, July 30, 2023.

the threat so it can be more proactively mitigated. One important issue that needs to be considered is the ‘art of the possible’ and what a non-state team can achieve utilizing commercial and other accessible technologies, components, and systems. Maynard Hill unwittingly planted an important capability marker in 2003. Since then, there have been other initiatives and efforts, such as Solar Impulse 2 and the Pacific Drone Challenge, that have sought to push the boundaries of what it is possible for non-state teams to achieve.<sup>75</sup> If it is not doing so already, the United States should evaluate the pros and cons and consider sponsoring a competition for non-state teams to replicate Maynard Hill’s flight using more advanced technologies as a way to further probe the feasibility of long-range commercial UAS flights. Since Iran’s Shahed 136 UAS boasts a range of 2,500 km, another similar idea would be for a government, or consortium of governments, to run an effort to test and identify the actual range of a recovered Shahed 136, a reconstructed one, or a newly constructed platform built to spec. Both approaches would provide useful data to better understand the current ‘art of the possible’ and how this threat vector is evolving—potentially minimizing the risk of surprise. These types of efforts would also highlight key technologies, components, and software that are critical to the extension of range, and that require care and potentially enhanced monitoring.

Indicators are another important issue to consider. Maynard Hill’s five TAM flights are instructive in this regard. As highlighted in Figure 1, Hill’s first four TAM attempts failed for various issues, ranging from power failure to weather and an uncertain reason. Those four failed flights serve as an important reminder about how failure is an integral part of the development of any new capability. Like Hill, violent non-state actor teams, will likely need to test and trial-run their system before engaging in a successful long-range stand-off operation. If not executed carefully, these trial run efforts will leave an observable signature. The United States and its partners should remain on the lookout for evidence and data points that speak to long-range terror intent and the development and deployment of a system capable of executing such a mission. This could include, for example, UAS that crash under mysterious

circumstances in unexpected areas, especially those similar in design to known UAS of concern; attempts by specific actors or networks to acquire or field specific components; rumors about a terror network’s interest in such a weapon; evidence that speaks to the recruitment or placement of key technical experts; recovered plans or plots; and other types of indicators.

The availability of commercial systems and components, and the open-source character of the terror UAS threat, also means that partnerships will be key to mitigating the future scale, scope, and intensity of long-range stand-off terrorism. This would obviously include meaningful partnerships with industry and key companies that produce and/or sell or distribute specific systems, hardware, software, and components that could be exploited by non-state teams, and that could be used by governments to detect, defeat, and/or counter those efforts. Weapons-tracking experts—individuals and organizations, such as CAR, that document and investigate components and systems used by militaries and non-state armed groups on the frontlines of key conflict zones—and experienced hobbyists are two other key groups where bolstered partnerships should be explored and ideally pursued. These types of partnerships will enable governments to learn more about the problem and how it is evolving, which will allow states to better anticipate and proactively mitigate future long-range stand-off threats, including those motivated by terrorism.

The architecture to detect and counter long-range threats, to include those from small, unmanned platforms, is another obvious area that deserves additional consideration. Today, compared to a decade ago, there is a copious and diverse number of counter-UAS options that are available, and that are more capable. But the campaign of drone, missile, and rocket attacks against closer U.S. targets in Iraq and Syria by Iranian supported groups after Hamas’ October 7 attack,<sup>76</sup> to include the January 2024 one-way drone attack against Tower 22 in Jordan, which resulted in the death of three U.S. service members, highlights how localized air defense gaps and seams still exist—even for closer-to-the-frontline military outposts that knew such attacks were likely. **CTC**

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- 76 For background, see Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis,” Washington Institute, February 7, 2024.

# A View from the CT Foxhole: Christopher Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

By Sean Morrow, Don Rassler, and Kristina Hummel

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*Christopher P. Maier is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Among his responsibilities are all special operations, irregular warfare, counterterrorism, and information operations policy issues and the oversight of special operations peculiar administrative matters, on behalf of the Secretary. He previously led the Department of Defense's Defeat-ISIS Task Force from its inception until disestablishment, charged with policy and strategy development, international negotiations, oversight, authorities review, and national-level interagency implementation of the Department's role in the U.S. government's campaign to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS. In this role, he also directed the Secretary of Defense's leadership of the Defense Ministry components of the 80+ international members of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition.*

*From July 2015 to September 2017, Maier served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism. Before moving to the Department of Defense, Mr. Maier held several positions at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), including Senior Advisor to the Director, Chief of Strategic Assessments and Regional Planning, and Chief of Staff in the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning. From 2009 to 2013, Maier served on the National Security Council Staff as a director for counterterrorism.*

**CTC:** Many of our readers will be familiar with the function and role played by the ASD SO/LIC team, but some of our readers may be less familiar. Could you provide a brief overview of your position, the role of your office and your team, how CT fits into it, and some of the key initiatives that you're working on?

**Maier:** SO/LIC came about the time the U.S. Special Operations Command was stood up in 1987, and it was meant to be the civilian arm of it to provide oversight. It is the original assistant secretaryship that Congress created.

SO/LIC has evolved, especially in the last six years, to be more than just a policy organization. The ASD and the deputy assistant secretaries support the Under Secretary for Policy across a range of issues such as counterterrorism [CT], counternarcotics and now, information operations, and stabilization in various forms.

SO/LIC's service secretary-like role is akin to what the Army, Navy, and Air Force have on the uniformed side. Now, SO/LIC doesn't have the same comprehensive set of authorities over the Special Operations enterprise, but what has really changed in the last six years or so is that Congress has progressively strengthened the service secretary role.

The ASD SO/LIC is in the chain of command for the administrative oversight of Special Operations Command. What that means is Special Operations Command is both a Title 10

Combatant Command, much like Central Command or European Command is, with operational authorities directly to the Secretary of Defense, but also has a unique role focused on the organizing, training, and equipping Special Operations Forces [SOF] across all the services.

As ASD SO/LIC, I have the civilian oversight of that organize, train, and equip role and report directly to the Secretary of Defense while still serving as the senior advisor to the Under Secretary for Policy on all SOF and low-intensity conflict issues.

It's a bit of an unusual organization within the Department to have a dual reporting chain with two different jobs. But what I see as the value of that is we can figure out on the policy side what it is we should be doing and looking towards, while on the service side, how we're going to do that, i.e., budgets, programming, analytics, resources, all these kinds of things.

To your question about initiatives, we're working on a broad range of things. Specific to CT, we are focusing on how the CT mission fits into an increasingly crowded field of priorities for Special Operations.

In other cases, it's the flip side of that. We are making the case that the SOF enterprise is not just the 'CT force.' It's key for us to balance the right allocation of not only what training and how we are building our forces but also making sure that operationally we are deployed to the right places with the right proportion of forces.

**CTC:** Over the course of your career, you've worked on CT issues in a variety of different roles, including time at the National Counterterrorism Center, the National Security Council, and as director of the Pentagon's Defeat ISIS Task Force, which you helped to stand up. What are some of the key things that you learned from each of these CT-focused roles?

**Maier:** There are certain evergreen issues that I've taken away as I build my professional experience toolkit. One of those is risk and how risk is managed from several different perspectives. There's operational risk, of course: risk to mission, risk to force, and having a much better understanding of how our Special Operations enterprise goes about thinking through that. Again, not only at the tactical, but also on the operational level. Then there is also risk in terms of how much we invest in certain areas and partnerships.

From my NCTC time and especially at the National Security Council staff, understanding how that risk plays into the broader national security or policy risk is key. Things that might seem obvious to the CT professional to do can change once compared against a whole series of other things. It could be the public optics of doing something, working with a government, or simply not being too invested in certain areas that could reduce your decision space.

I think for many of your readers, understanding those differences as they relate to risk and accepting risk are a key part of the 'CT value

## “The evolution of CT is a testament to what the U.S. government and in particular the Special Operations enterprise can do to evolve against the problem set.”

chain.’ We also have to consider what authorities we can operate under and if we are working alongside our allies and partners and what are their limits.

**CTC: When you look back on where CT has been, how would you characterize its evolution and how would you describe where we are at the current moment?**

**Maier:** I think the evolution of CT is a testament to what the U.S. government and in particular the Special Operations enterprise can do to evolve against the problem set. If you think back to what the world looked like in 2001 or 2002, and some of the decisions that were made to go ‘big and loud’ into areas like Iraq, Afghanistan, proved that ‘big and loud’ was not a particularly sustainable approach. More importantly, not sustainable with small SOF teams going it alone either. We’ve looked for hybrid ways from the military perspective to get after this problem.

One of the things that I think is a profound takeaway is the integration across the U.S. government and the CT community. I used to be surprised when I would step out of the CT role and see that other communities in our own U.S. government didn’t have nearly the degree of integration or breadth [that] we have in the CT environment—by that, I mean working with law enforcement, the State Department, the intelligence community, and our allies and partners. This is something the CT community continues to do well and build upon.

Within DoD, especially in the SOF enterprise, we’ve proven how being ‘joint’ can be a force multiplier. In SO/LIC, we often talk about the idea of needing to maintain a degree of jointness at a very low level. It could be the O4-O5 level that’s interchangeable parts between a Navy Special Warfare Operator or an Army or Marine Corps or even Air Force Special Operator being able to fill similar roles. This is a particularly profound degree of integration that we want to keep going.

Your question of where the CT problem set is now, I feel it’s gone through a couple generations. We went through the al-Qa`ida generation, broadly in the 2010s, and then the ISIS generation over the last decade. Watching some of the changes in how the U.S. government approached these CT threats, they are admittedly not the same problem set. But we’ve learned much more in the ISIS problem set as a coalition, bringing everybody along.

We now have 86 countries in the Defeat -ISIS (D-ISIS) coalition, which doesn’t get nearly enough attention, but we meet with them regularly. All 86 of those countries, and other organizations such as Interpol, get something out of their involvement. The coalition we have worldwide has become a foundation to build upon for so many other things.

I think this is the future, as we look at trying to do more with the same or more with less in the CT fight, finding ways to keep some

of these sustainable elements going. A lot of that is looking to our allies and partners, looking to the U.S. government as the convener of those allies and partners to be the magic that makes the entire enterprise go smoothly and be productive. The classic ‘sum greater than the individual parts.’

**CTC: In a recent interview, you mentioned that you are the oldest of seven children. What impact has that part of your background had on how you fulfill your responsibilities here in this position, particularly in advocating for SOF within the Department?**

**Maier:** I might have a different answer than my brothers, sisters, or my parents; they would probably say that I was the bossy one. But it’s a good question because I think it taught me early on that building coalitions is important, and I’ve seen how important coalitions have been throughout my career, especially in the CT fight.

My father was a civilian for the Navy his whole career, which drew me and many of my siblings into public service. I think, especially in my formative years when CT was the ‘fight,’ it made sense to really lean in on the value of coalitions. I’ve built on that to understand, at least from the perspective of not being a military member of the SOF enterprise, but as a civilian, what makes the community tick. How the community is viewed by the outside and [how it] views itself can be very different. Does that all come from fighting over who gets what at the dinner table, I don’t know. But these are things that have forced me to think more comprehensively at times than maybe I would if I had a different experience growing up.

**CTC: Over the past several years, the U.S. counterterrorism community and the U.S. government in general have been trying to navigate how strategic competition and counterterrorism intersect or interplay with one another so that the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise can be calibrated to open up space for the U.S. government to focus more intently on the pacing challenges from countries like China. Your office sits at the policy and practical intersection of those issues and questions. What does that response and adaptation look like from your vantage point, and are there any examples that you can share that speak to those?**

**Maier:** We’re at a point of both continuity and change. The continuity pieces of CT are not going away, and are in fact certainly implied, if not explicit, when you look at some of the goals in the National Defense Strategy: preventing strategic distraction or making CT central to our national security thinking once again.

We need to have sustainable CT operations that prevent terrorists’ actions, principally al-Qa`ida and ISIS, to ensure we are not distracted by what we view as the longer-term strategic priorities, such as peer adversaries.

As I mentioned earlier, as the rest of the Department and other parts of the U.S. government are doing less CT, [this] means that those who are doing it have to do it better and, in many respects, do it more proportionally to the rest of the national security enterprise. This is why SOF is looked to as the lead for the CT fight in the Department. The big change is the National Defense Strategy asks us to do integrated deterrence and campaigning. From a SO/LIC



*Christopher Maier*

and SOF enterprise perspective, it is shaping activities prior to conflict to prevent a full-blown, large-scale combat situation.

But if we do have to go into conflict, then you want the best odds for your side as possible. For SOF, that relies on our ability to build key ally and partner relationships. That's making sure we have the right people in the right place who are making the right decisions for senior leaders. SOF has been fighting [the] CT [fight] for a long time, as shown in a lot of movies about SOF's CT fight; we've been doing the integrated deterrence piece and campaigning for years and years.

If you look back to the example of some of the seeds planted in Ukraine, we're now reaping the benefits of 2014 training and engagement opportunities. Those are the core issues that we're working through and how we consider the SOF value proposition in the places that don't get a lot of attention. As the entire Department, maybe even the U.S. government, tries to figure out what it means to grapple with an emergent China and certainly a Russia that's hard to predict, but it's also about figuring out where SOF fits.

Everybody knows the Special Operations piece, but the low-intensity conflict piece is a bit of an antiquated term. But it refers to many of the same things we're talking about such as shaping the information environment and leveraging things like irregular warfare as a concept.

We're trying to work across the Department to expand this idea beyond just a SOF value proposition, and how the Department thinks in asymmetric ways. There is value in being able to operate in ways that the military may not be the primary lead but can create dilemmas for our adversaries and decision space for our senior leaders.

**CTC: You mentioned integrated deterrence. When you think**

**about integrated deterrence and how CT can be a component of it, what does that look like to you? How would you describe that? What role does counterterrorism play as a form of or part of deterrence?**

**Maier:** Take the term first—integrated deterrence. There are lots of people smarter than me that have spent a lot of time defining this term, but I will break it into its core parts. 'Integrated:' when that first came out, it was like, 'We're golden. SOF knows how to do integrated.' 'Deterrence:' causes somebody to do something that they otherwise wouldn't want to do or don't see as in their interest to do.

There are many elements in CT that are very applicable. People don't talk about it as much, but the degree of operational prowess that the United States has because we've been doing difficult things in an operational sense for 20 years, is in and of itself a deterrent against adversaries who may have not gone to war for generations.

We have the ability to do very exquisite things from great distances in a very precise and risk-managed way. That is something lots of people study but something not many militaries in the world can execute. That in and of itself is a deterrent.

Then there are the pieces more commonly talked about: having that placement and access, having the ability to operate in a number of places in proximity to adversaries on their periphery is something that they have to spend time thinking and worrying about.

Our allies and partners are also a critical piece to the SOF enterprise. In fact, in many cases, the value proposition of things like 'by, with, and through' is predicated on having allies and partners increase their capability and coexisting with them. There's just a depth there of partnership that doesn't exist in the same way in some other warfighting disciplines and certainly not for adversaries who are hard pressed to find one ally or partner. It's not a surprise that Russia and China are having to become closer with one another as partners, because there isn't anybody else that's wants to be on their side of the table.

These are all things that are huge advantages for us, and whether we're looking at it through the narrower SOF perspective or broader as a U.S. government, we have several advantages that have been fundamentally built over the last 20 years of the CT fight. That's something we continue to lean into, and we should see those as mutually reinforcing, not in competition with one another.

**CTC: What advice would you offer for how our community can think about—particularly in the counterterrorism realm—how our efforts to pursue and navigate these complex set of priorities is being effective? How would you think about that?**

**Maier:** The measure of effectiveness is challenging for a number of reasons. One, the 'absence of' is often our measure, and that's a particularly concerning measure. You're trying to ensure something doesn't happen. Let's take China and Taiwan, for example. We're very focused on there not being some sort of cross-straits military aggression towards Taiwan, and that means every day—when there is no aggression, it is a good day for us. Similarly, we would have said, 'Hey, there hasn't been any terrorist attacks.' But that is the very basic, most simplistic way of thinking about it.

We need to then pull on those threads and figure out—and this is where our intelligence community is absolutely our number-one partner—how we think the capabilities of groups or countries are

going and where do we see that intent going?

Capabilities are often much easier to track than intent. Where the CT fight becomes a little bit harder to use as a model for the nation-states' struggle or competition is we always assume that the intent was there for most of these individual terrorist groups, networks, cells, whatever groups, and it was just the capability that was going to determine the level or type of threat. There was very little to deter them, and this is what they were ideologically focused on.

Nation-states, especially in the case of adversaries like Russia and China, have a lot of other things they're weighing, and that makes it that much more challenging to measure. We probably need to be humble from the DoD perspective that we're not the lead lever, especially in nation-state competition, the same way we were in the in the CT fight.

The classic 'have hammer, see nails'—if the military instrument is how we're thinking about this—we need to be very cautious about how we fit into that, but at the same time not necessarily always assume that we're in the supporting role. There may be times that the military instrument—especially short of war, back to the SOF value proposition—can be particularly compelling in creating a value chain.

We talk here a lot about kill chains, but if we think of it through a more interagency perspective, there may be elements where SOF can be a key node in a network that helps to build access for collection in support of the intelligence community and perhaps using some non-lethal effect in a different way than maybe we thought about in the past.

So, there's the measure of 'are you actually having impact on the enemy' and increasingly, I think that's going to be in the cognitive space. But then as we look at our own way of projecting capabilities and ability to achieve the effect we want as precisely and risk informed as possible, [it] is something the DoD is going to have to figure out. Where do we fit into an all-of-USG or all-of-allies-and-partners approach? That's something that is very challenging to do because it's going to be very fact-specific, too.

**CTC: You've talked about partnerships quite a bit. If we could hone in on the future of CT partnerships specifically, how would you describe the appetite for that partnership? How do you ensure that the future of those partnerships is strong and that they continue to evolve in the way we want, and our partners want as well?**

**Maier:** If these partnerships aren't nurtured, they will start to fade away. Not because some of our closest partners won't want to work with us, but because they will begin to invest in other things. At the end of the day, they'll be watching us and will be making their own national decisions.

I'll go back to the heyday of when we were doing combined operations with Five Eyes partners, NATO or other capable, global partners. We're doing less of that now, so that puts more onus on finding ways to continue to stress-test our own ability to work together, and it also means investing in the same types of interoperable capabilities, too.

As we've seen in places like Ukraine and still in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, if we can still work with other partners, we're going to be able to respond in a credible way much more quickly. But if some of that intense cooperation starts to fade—here, I'm

talking about not only TTPs in the human dimension of different operational elements being able to work together, but also having complementary technology, if not the same technology—it's going to be important.

The CT space, though, is still one where we do things more operationally than we do in some of the other areas that might be priorities. We need to continue to look for opportunities to bring our allies and partners into that, even if the problem set reduces.

For example, in the mid-2010s in Iraq and Syria, we had a lot of partners who had deployed forces that were supporting different parts of the D-ISIS mission. There is now a much smaller force footprint, so that means fewer opportunities where we're working together. Recognizing that is probably a sign of success, but at the same time, it presents some challenges for how we retain a credible combined force. We're going to need to continue to lean into areas where we can work together, more jointly, such as exercises and experimentation, recognizing that they might seem more artificial or more contrived. That's the reality we are facing.

There's a lot of emphasis around the Department toward broadening how we engage in our partnership building. There are a lot of other capable, credible partners that we're going to need especially if we're looking at the Russia or China scenario.

**CTC: Technologies like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data science-driven approaches have already begun to revolutionize and in some cases have revolutionized how DoD and SOCOM approach data, what can be done with data, and the speed of those decisions. Can you provide a high-level view of how that world's evolving? How can the Special Operations community, as it moves towards that AI/machine learning-driven future, maintain focus on other core principles in addition to the speed of Special Operations success, including simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, and purpose, as Admiral McRaven outlined them several decades ago.<sup>1</sup>**

**Maier:** Obviously, technology is extraordinarily important, and it's going to be fundamental to how we fight or prevent wars in the future. From a SOF perspective, we need to be conscious of continuing with the term of art 'SOF-peculiar.' What is the SOF value proposition of some of [the] things you listed: AI, man-machine teaming, call it decision-support capabilities. Everybody's trying to develop these, and there are several initiatives here in the Department to try to do it as jointly as possible, even as the services create their own specific ones for a maritime environment, an air- or land-based one.

We need to be conscious of the fact [that] we have a much smaller budget and a lot less ability to generate, even with some of our unique acquisition authorities in the SOF enterprise, those things that are adding value on top of what the rest of the Department is doing for those SOF-type missions.

There are some elements of the SOF enterprise that are important to keep in mind. For example, many of the information forces in the Department fall in the SOF enterprise. We need to be very focused on building capabilities that can affect the cognitive space of not only our adversaries, but also in some respects the broader set of people who are looking at what we're doing. By that, I mean our allies and partners, and our own nation. I'm not at all suggesting that from a DoD perspective, we should be influencing the information environment, but the reality is that we need to be

able to play defense against adversaries who are much more inclined to take a less principled approach to how they use information—truth versus fiction—and recognize that that’s ubiquitous. We need to be able to harness some of those aspects of the information space from a SOF perspective to make that one of our warfighting competencies.

Some of the other things that you’re talking about need to be viewed in the context of how SOF can operate: probably still in austere environments far away from where large military formations are going to be. We’re going to need forces that can do a lot of things simultaneously.

By that I mean, the colloquial is, the Swiss Army Knife. You might be one day part of a SOF unit doing training or building partner capacity for a unit, and, if something happens in a crisis situation, you have to call in fires, use cyber capabilities or maybe it’s the placement and access that will contribute more to bringing space or electronic warfare tools to bear. It’s going to have to be done in a small enough unit so as not to attract attention the same way a large formation would. Looking at technology in the context of the actual operational use and value is going to be important, and something this community has long done well.

We often talk about the overhead intelligence collection platform. Increasingly, we’re seeing opportunities to use large amounts of data for more horizontal information situational awareness. Obviously, the intelligence community is very focused on these uses as well. I think our value proposition is how are those operationally useful, not just for the purposes of collecting intelligence and analysis, but for things that have to be collected, quickly analyzed, and put into practice. Especially if you’re talking about a small entity with probably austere challenges and likely far away from any traditional infrastructure. This is a lot of where I think we’re already going, but I think we’re going to need to continue to lean in on that. Again, I go back to how we started the question, which is looking for those unique value propositions that only SOF can bring and really leaning in on the technology assistance to that.

**CTC:** As you know well, as the United States is evolving and adapting its approach and embracing technology and experimenting and innovating with technology, its adversaries—particularly on the non-state actor side and the proxy side—are always trying to do the same thing. In January 2021, the DoD released its counter small unmanned aircraft systems strategy and identified SOCOM as the responsible party for developing and implementing the left-of or prior-to launch component of that strategy.<sup>2</sup> Can you provide an overview or an example or two that illustrates how the ASD SO/LIC team and SOCOM have been dealing with the challenges that dual-use technologies present, which sits at this heart of the counter-small UAS problem set?

**Maier:** First, let’s talk about unmanned systems. We have long used unmanned systems and those were big; like most technology evolution, they are now getting smaller and smaller. It’s been a comparative advantage for us operationally and strategically. I would say the rest of the world is starting to catch up at a much faster pace, as these things tend to go. Not only are we in a situation where the dual-use aspects of this increasingly have a military element to them, but the barriers to entry have significantly declined. We must spend time not only thinking about how we project, but also

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how we would defend against. I think the current Israel-Gaza crisis demonstrates just how much adversaries—in this case, Iran and Iranian-aligned militia groups—have been able to quickly move up that technology sophistication. Ukraine is maybe the poster child of the unmanned fight.

From SO/LIC, working with SOCOM, figuring out ways to get at this problem set before you have to interdict it on the battlefield is really important. One of the things that SO/LIC brings to the table is being a Washington-based interagency manager, we have several interagency relationships and a lot of experience in working with them. The way we’re thinking about this particular issue of counter-small UAS is SOCOM working through a lot of the operational initiatives and different concepts. Additionally, SO/LIC works with the intelligence community and other partners that are a little less traditional, like Departments of Commerce and Treasury, who have the ability to sanction countries that prevents some of these things from going to other places. We’ve done some of this over the years in the CT space, but usually not as directly against a unitary problem set, and I think that’s a bit of a blueprint for a lot of other areas.

Now, let’s talk about AI. AI certainly is going to be something that we will find is ubiquitous to increasing lethality of foreign militaries as much as it will be for us. Finding ways to think of how these components, how these different approaches often come from outside conflict areas, often from areas that are ‘first world’—if we can use that term—and figuring out how some of those components don’t flow in a way that they can be quickly used to create battlefield effects for our adversaries.

When we started out doing CT in the first few years after 9/11, we didn’t talk much about ‘agnostic finishes.’ Now we spend a lot of time and invested a lot of resources in helping law enforcement take terrorists off the street, so to speak, or finding ways to interdict financial transactions that aren’t a military effort in the first order. But if we have information that can then be systematically provided to these other elements of the U.S. government or allies and partners, we have found a way to do that.

I think we’re going to need to have a similar approach to technologies that we want the good to get through, but not the bad. How we create that filter across much different enterprises, systems, and economies is going to be something we’re going to have to think about.

**CTC:** You mentioned technology being a component of the

**ongoing conflict in Israel, Gaza, in Hamas' attack, and the dynamics that have been playing out with other players after that incident as well as with the conflict in Ukraine. Is there anything else when you look at those two conflicts that you think is important to take away as key aspects to think about when it comes to counterterrorism?**

**Maier:** The most obvious one in Israel-Gaza is the idea that this terrorist group isn't the same as we saw with ISIS and al-Qa`ida. To mean, one that has terrorist elements but also governs and does a lot of other things, and one that we probably weren't as focused on because it was an Israel-Gaza problem. I think it underscores again, what feels like has been the case in the last couple of years anyway, a lot of surprising, destabilizing global events.

In the case of Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza, these are areas that have flared up in the past, and we probably didn't think that they were going to flare up quite the same way that they have. So, we're trying to look to what we see as the future strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific and an ascendant China that probably has a lot of designs on dismantling the world order we've come to depend on. I think it's being able to do all those things and figure it out from a SOF perspective.

There's a continuity aspect of being able to provide our allies and partners those capabilities that we've developed, and have learned in many respects, how best to transfer them and continue to do that work with our allies and partners in the lead as we manage crisis responses that always comes up in each one of these incidents. Things like where U.S. personnel are located, whether those official or unofficial U.S. personnel are being prepared to provide what I think is our sacred responsibility to keep them safe in a SOF-lead mission.

And then the other piece of this is recognizing we must do all that, but at the same time, we've got to create the advantage for the United States—that prior-to-conflict piece. It's really being able to do a lot of things with a budget that isn't getting bigger, even though we have a massive budget in the Department of Defense. The challenges seem like they're getting broader, and they're a lot more expensive when you're talking about the kind of technology we've already talked about, and being able to, in some cases, provide large outlays of equipment and munitions to allies and partners as well.

From the SO/LIC perspective, SOF is involved in all of these. We're at that intersection between non-state and state actors all the time, and it's those things we've learned, especially in the CT fight against non-state actors, that translate to supporting a state in some cases, resisting the aggression of another state. While at the same time, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we need to continue to develop our capabilities against non-state actors because they seem to be of all different ilks, and they continue to cause significant national security challenges for us.

**CTC: As our over-the-horizon strategy reallocates limited resources to accommodate changing priorities, you look at something like the al-Zawahiri strike, which is an exquisite example of it, but the further we get from boots on the ground, the harder it is to do some of these things. Do policymakers still expect the same results, and how do we mitigate some of that?**

**Maier:** I feel like policymakers—and it's easy to talk about them in a

general sense—still expect the same results, and I think that puts an onus on how the CT fight has had to change, and for good reasons. I'm not sure in all instances the proximity necessarily created a better outcome in some of our large combat points or even smaller ones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I think there's a balance between being able to be proximate enough to be able to mitigate some of these threats and being able to do that with our partners and allies. In many cases, we're talking about partners who are not that capable, often dealing in a semi-permissive, if not permissive environment, for these non-state actors or CT problems because there's fundamentally not a lot of governance in these places.

How we strike that balance is going to be important. It's a fundamental feature of many of our policy debates and how much you need to invest to get the effect you want, but also how do you avoid overinvesting or underinvesting while at the same time needing to put this in the broader context of other strategic objectives we're trying to achieve?

I personally hate the term 'over the horizon.' We've used it ourselves in the Department, but in CT, we've always been doing it to some degree 'over the horizon' because not all the capabilities were right there. As we're increasingly challenged by adversaries for our own placement and access, even in places like Iraq and Syria, we're going to have to rely on some of those technology solutions, but also understanding what are the necessary components of a partnered strategy and what can partners do for themselves or with different tools, perhaps with less than we've been able to provide in the past? That's always taken in the context of what the actual threat is to the United States as well.

**CTC: What terror threats concern you the most as we look towards the future?**

**Maier:** The one that continues to concern me is the one that we're not seeing. We've often thought of terrorism in a very specific and directed way, such as the 9/11 attack, that is fully cooked up overseas and brought to the United States. Then, there's one that's more facilitated that got some overseas support, but they also had local folks doing it.

And then there's the inspired one that increasingly has been a function of ISIS and al-Qa`ida in large portion because they can't do one and two; those are hard to track because all it takes is an individual to make a decision to do something.

I am particularly concerned about those that probably have the hallmarks of a small group of radicalized individuals that might be well below the radar screen of what we're looking at, [but] that can harm Americans. To be frank, what is not clear to me at this point is how much our resilience as a nation over the last 20 years has evolved. Does an attack, especially if it is particularly damaging to Americans, cause us as a country to change our overall national security strategic approach? Or is it going to be something that we look at and look to mitigate the reasons for it, but keep our focus on the strategic objectives? I think we spend a lot of time playing that out in systematic ways and in some cases, informal ways to figure out what are we missing here.

Unfortunately, in this line of work you're always looking for what you might have missed, because it's what you missed—an attack that was unanticipated—that will force us to take our eye off some of these strategic challenges. **CTC**

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# Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Taking Stock of Obstacles

By Daisy Muibu

**A year and five months after the Somali government launched its offensive against al-Shabaab, the initial optimism that characterized its first few months have diminished as the counterinsurgency's momentum has stalled in the central regions of the country. Certainly, clan mobilization against al-Shabaab remains a significant development, while the initial recapture of significant swathes of territory in central Somalia by forces led by the national army and Somali partners demonstrates political will from the federal government to fight al-Shabaab. However, with only a year left until African Union forces are mandated to fully draw down, significant obstacles remain that cast doubts over the government's ambitious goals to defeat al-Shabaab and assume full responsibility for securing the country by December 31, 2024.**

Launched in August 2022, the federal government of Somalia's offensive against al-Shabaab was initially followed by much optimism. Unlike previous offensives, which were often foreign-led, the Somali National Army (SNA) was taking a leading role in fighting al-Shabaab.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, clan militia (known as Ma'awisley), who had prior to August 2022 organically mobilized against al-Shabaab's predation in central regions of the county, were now supporting the government's offensive.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, U.S. and Turkish drone strikes were inflicting higher costs on the operations of al-Shabaab's command and control bodies.<sup>3</sup> In light of these positive developments, analysts expressed cautious optimism about the opportunity the federal government had to enduringly weaken al-Shabaab.<sup>3</sup> What was perhaps one of the most promising sources of optimism in the early months of the offensive was the significant swathes of territory that the government, with support from the Ma'awisley, initially recovered from al-Shabaab in the central regions of the country, particularly in Hirshabelle and Galmudug river and in Galgaduud located in the federal member states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug, respectively.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported in April 2023 that government forces in the first phase of the offensive had managed to recapture over 215 locations, mostly in Hirshabelle and Galmudug.<sup>5</sup>

a U.S. drone strikes impact the functions of the group's Shura Council and *tanfid* (equivalent of a cabinet). See Stig Jarle Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 16:1 (2023); Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Harun Maruf, Senior Editor, Voice of America Somali," *CTC Sentinel* 15:11 (2022): p. 13.

On August 17, 2023, the president of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, announced the government's plans to liberate the country from al-Shabaab or diminish its influence to only small pockets of the country within five months.<sup>b</sup> However, in the spring and summer of 2023, the momentum of the government's offensive took a turn, facing significant setbacks that have cast a cloud over the government's ambitious goals for defeating al-Shabaab. By January 2024—the five-month mark proclaimed by President Mohamud—al-Shabaab remained active and still capable of exerting influence, especially in its southern strongholds. Today, the government is steadfast in its rhetoric about plans to extend its offensive beyond central territories in Hirshabelle and Galmudug and to defeat al-Shabaab in its southern Somalia strongholds by the end of December 2024. But at the moment, the government's counterinsurgency operations have stalled in the central regions of the country.

In light of these developments, there is a need to take stock of the Somali government's offensive and the obstacles that are undermining efforts to not only consolidate its gains, but that are also threatening its efforts to liberate the country from al-Shabaab and stabilize recovered territories. This article is organized in two parts: The first briefly outlines the current status of the government's offensive as of early 2024. This is followed by a discussion on the obstacles to consolidating the government's gains in the central regions of Somalia, as well as broader challenges for stabilization.

## Part One: The Stalling Offensive Against al-Shabaab

Launched following a set of clan uprisings against al-Shabaab in 2022, the first phase of the government's offensive against al-Shabaab in Hirshabelle and Galmudug meaningfully degraded the group's territorial control in the region within its initial months.

b This proclamation was even more ambitious than a previous remark made in January 2023 where the government declared its plans to defeat the militant group by the end of the summer of 2024. See Harun Maruf, "Plan is to remove al-Shabaab within 5 months . . .," X, August 17, 2023.

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Much of the early gains the federal government experienced occurred between August and December 2022. During this period, the SNA, supported by clan militia (i.e., Ma'awisley) and Turkish and U.S. drones,<sup>6</sup> recaptured much of al-Shabaab's territory in Hiraan east of the Shabelle River in Hirshabelle state, as well as strategic territory such as Adan Yabaal, al-Shabaab's regional center of operations in Middle Shabelle.<sup>c</sup> Support from the Ma'awisley and local power brokers was particularly consequential for the government's initial successes due to their ability to provide operational information and legitimize the government's efforts.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of 2023, the offensive still had some momentum, recapturing key territory, such as the strategic towns of Ceel Dheere and Xarardheere in Galgaduud (region in Galmudug state).<sup>8</sup> However, over the same period the government faced losses. For instance, in January 2023 and for the first half of the year (January to June 2023), the offensive experienced significant setbacks, including a string of al-Shabaab attacks in Hirshabelle and Galmudug that slowed the pace of the offensive and resulted in some territory that had been recently recovered in Hirshabelle being recaptured by al-Shabaab.<sup>9</sup> Despite plans for a second phase of the offensive (Operation Black Lion) in collaboration with the leaders of Somalia's five federal member states as well as neighboring countries Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti, the federal government's ambitious plans to extend its offensive south to al-Shabaab's strongholds in Jubaland and South West State have faced significant delays.<sup>10</sup> Rather than launching this planned second phase in June 2023 as a lightning advance against al-Shabaab, the government was forced to push back plans for Operation Black Lion in order to focus on central Somalia.<sup>11</sup>

The period since July 2023 has been characterized by even more setbacks amidst the federal government's efforts to revitalize the offensive. In early August 2023, President Mohamud temporarily relocated from Mogadishu to Dhusamareb, the capital of Galmudug state, to revive support for the offensive from the frontlines and oversee preparations for a new phase of military operations against al-Shabaab in Mudug and Galgaduud.<sup>d</sup> On August 6, the federal government announced the launch of the second phase of its offensive, mainly focused on Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle.<sup>e</sup> Despite capturing key al-Shabaab-controlled towns, Wahbo and El Buur, in Galgaduud in late August,<sup>12</sup> at the end of the same month government forces faced a significant misfortune. Al-Shabaab launched a deadly attack on a recently captured base in the village

## “As of mid-February 2024, al-Shabaab remains entrenched in its strongholds of southern Somalia and still poses a countrywide threat.”

of Cowsweyne in Galgaduud.<sup>13</sup> The attack inflicted heavy losses on SNA brigades in the area, causing them to retreat from frontline towns and villages they had captured in preceding months.<sup>14</sup>

Since August 2023, the government's campaign has remained centered in Galmudug state, mainly in Mudug and Galgaduud regions, but between mid-October and November, there appears to have been a halt in the offensive in the region.<sup>15</sup> Although the government has managed to maintain some of its gains in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle (Hirshabelle State), and parts of Mudug (Galmudug), in Galgaduud the offensive is stalled.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the attack in Cowsweyne in August 2023 and the resulting collapse of the government's frontline in southern Galmudug, revealed shortcomings that remain obstacles to the government's efforts to consolidate its early gains in central Somalia. Moreover, these shortcomings further undermine the government's prospects for a broader offensive against al-Shabaab in its southern territories and overall stabilization once the African Union (A.U.) peacekeeping forces known as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) draw down. These obstacles are discussed in the following section of the article.

### Part Two: Obstacles to Further Progress Against al-Shabaab

The recent setbacks faced by the government's offensive in central Somalia underscore a set of obstacles that have and continue to impact the prospects for successfully countering al-Shabaab and stabilizing recovered territories. These include overly ambitious timelines for the offensive; donor fatigue and lukewarm regional support; logistical and holding challenges; political infighting and clan divisions; and al-Shabaab's ability to stall progress.

#### *Overly Ambitious Timelines*

Speaking at a town hall meeting in Dhusamareb on August 17, 2023, President Mohamud declared his administration's intention to “eliminate al Shabaab from the country in the coming five months,” or diminish the group to only a few pockets where it will be harmless.<sup>17</sup> The declaration came only a week after the second phase of the government's counterinsurgency operations was announced and less than two weeks before the deadly attack on two military brigades in Cowsweyne<sup>18</sup> that set back the offensive. These and other events underscore concerns among analysts about the government's overly ambitious timeline for operations. As of mid-February 2024, al-Shabaab remains entrenched in its strongholds of southern Somalia and still poses a countrywide threat. Meanwhile, the government aims to build up a full national army and federal security sector by the end of 2024.<sup>19</sup> This timeline corresponds with the withdrawal deadlines negotiated by the former president, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, for ATMIS troops to leave Somalia. Much skepticism surrounds both deadlines: skepticism about whether Somalia's federal forces will be prepared to take over once

c Adan Yabaal was recaptured in December 2022. “Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab,” *Crisis Group Africa Briefing* 187 (2023); Ahmed Mohamed, “Somali Army Dislodges Al-Shabab From Key Stronghold,” *Voice of America*, December 6, 2022.

d President Mohamud remained in Dhusamareb until late October. His presence in the region demonstrated his commitment to the offensive as well as his efforts to build political support and was met with a lot of praise. See “President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud embarks on a crucial mission to Dhusamareb,” *RadioDalsan*, August 5, 2023; Alan Boswell, Omar Mahmood, and Sarah Harrison, “Somalia's Stalling Fight Against Al-Shabaab and America's Wobbly Strategy,” November 6, 2023, in “The Horn,” *International Crisis Group* podcast; James Barnett, “Faltering Lion: Analyzing Progress and Setbacks in Somalia's War against al-Shabaab,” *Hudson Institute*, September 28, 2023; and “Situation Update September 2023.”

e Initially, the second phase was intended to push al-Shabaab from its strongholds in southern Somalia, but the government has focused its efforts in central Somalia for its second phase. “Situation Update September 2023;” Barnett.



*Somalia (Brandon Mohr)*

ATMIS leaves; skepticism about whether the government forces have enough capacity and local support to meaningfully defeat al-Shabaab in its strongholds by end of 2024; and skepticism around the federal and member states' preparedness to establish governance in liberated territories.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Somali army has assumed a larger role in securing the nation today than it has done in the past,<sup>21</sup> it is far from a strong defense force capable of taking on full responsibility for securing the country in only a year. As the journalist Harun Maruf explains, "Somalia, despite all its attempts, is still on a journey to recruit and train and have a viable army," and "it seems it's going to be a very long journey."<sup>22</sup> Much of the challenges surround the lack of funding to train the army and pay salaries, as well as political difficulties in convincing federal member states to integrate their regional forces into the national army.<sup>23</sup> In December 2023, the national security adviser to the president, Hussein Sheikh-Ali, reported that a security sector development plan was endorsed in a meeting in New York that includes plans to generate up to 30,000 land forces, 40,000 police at the federal and regional levels, and 8,500 members of the prison system custodial corps.<sup>24</sup> Although these plans are a positive development, the types of reforms and political negotiations with federal member states that the federal government would need to undertake to thoroughly implement these decisions, and ultimately have professional forces capable of stabilizing and providing adequate governance to liberated territories, will require consistent, sustained effort over a prolonged period of time, not just a few

months.<sup>25</sup> A previously agreed upon national security architecture provided for coordination and cooperation between the forces of the federal government and federal member states.<sup>26</sup> However, since the agreement was reached in 2017, progress toward meeting the benchmarks set forth in it have yet to be reached due to funding challenges and tense relations between the federal government and regional states.<sup>27</sup>

Similar skepticism exists around the possibility of defeating al-Shabaab in its southern strongholds by the end of 2024. As the analyst James Barnett has noted, "at present, the FGS [Federal Government of Somalia] has not generated sufficient federal security forces to carry out the Black Lion offensive without significant support from either local militias or regional militaries."<sup>28</sup> The spontaneous and organic uprising of clan militia (i.e., Ma'awisley) against al-Shabaab that has occurred in the central regions is unlikely to manifest across the southern member states due to the complex and combustible nature of clan dynamics in the south, while regional support for the offensive among Somalia's neighbors has been lukewarm (further discussed below).<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, without support from clan militia and regional forces in the south, it is far from clear that Somali forces will be able to combat and defeat al-Shabaab by December 2024. Mobilizing the local support needed to fight al-Shabaab in these southern territories would first require negotiating a meaningful political settlement and resolution of the longstanding grievances and disputes among local populations and politicians, which will take time (further discussed below).<sup>30</sup> Without such a settlement, there is a risk of further fragmentation into clan rivalries that benefit al-Shabaab.

More recently, delays in the ATMIS troop drawdown have brought to the fore questions about Somali forces' preparedness to take over after December 2024 and what this implies for overall plans for regional and/or international assistance once ATMIS leaves. The first phase of the drawdown concluded in June 2023 when 2,000 troops withdrew from Somalia.<sup>31</sup> However, in September 2023, the government requested a three-month pause in the planned second phase of withdrawals due to the significant military setbacks its forces faced in the central regions.<sup>32</sup> In December 2023, ATMIS resumed handing over security responsibilities to Somali forces after the three-month pause elapsed, with the aim to withdraw 3,000 soldiers by December 31, 2023, and the ultimate goal of a full withdrawal in December 2024.<sup>f</sup> Over the month of December 2023, ATMIS handed over control of three forward operation bases (FOBs)—State House, Parliament, and the Qorillow FOBs—and the process of the second phase of the drawdown was completed over January 2024, with a total number of seven FOBs handed over

<sup>f</sup> In December 2023, ATMIS handed over the Presidential Palace and Parliament Forward Operating bases to the Somali National Army in compliance with the transition plan. ATMIS is estimated to have had 22,000 troops in Somalia ahead of the drawdown process. See "Somalia: AU Forces hand over security of State House and parliament to Govt troops," Garowe Online, December 17, 2023; Harun Maruf, "AU Mission in Somalia Resumes Drawdown After 3-Month Pause," Voice of America, December 17, 2023; and "ATMIS, FGS and UNSOS Announce Resumption of Second Phase Troop Drawdown," ATMIS, December 2, 2023.



*Somalia's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, is pictured at a demonstration at Banadir stadium in Mogadishu, Somalia, on January 12, 2023. (Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP Photo)*

and 3,000 troops withdrawn by the end of the month.<sup>8</sup>

But there is a growing sentiment that an end to the ATMIS mission in Somalia in December 2024 does not mean the end of regional support in some capacity.<sup>33</sup> The federal government of Somalia proposed that the African Union lead a successor to ATMIS during a December 2023 conference.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, recent reports suggest that A.U. support to Somalia may continue into January 2025, with the establishment of “a new mission with a new mandate.”<sup>35</sup> Speaking to the Voice of America-Somalia, the A.U. envoy to Somalia and the head of ATMIS, Mohamed El-Amine Souef, explained that the new mission would support the SNA in terms of building capacity, protecting the public in populated areas, and safeguarding strategic infrastructure in Mogadishu and other capitals of federal member states.<sup>36</sup> Questions remain about the funding for such a mission, however, and the number of troops that

could possibly be deployed. What is clear is that it is unlikely that, on its own, Somali federal and regional forces will be prepared to fully take on responsibility for securing the state and stabilizing recovered territories come December 2024, without some type of external support.

#### ***Donor Fatigue and Lukewarm Regional Support***

Closely linked to concerns around the timelines for the offensive and ATMIS' withdrawal is the perennial issue of funding and external support. In its plans to defeat al-Shabaab and stabilize the country, the federal government has been counting on its external partners for financial aid and support. Notably, plans for the Black Lion operation intended to counter al-Shabaab in its southern strongholds depended on the contributions of 20,000–30,000<sup>h</sup> regional forces from neighboring countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in planning for its stabilization efforts, a government official speaking to the International Crisis Group in February 2023 explained that without international support the mission would not succeed.<sup>38</sup> On both fronts, questions around funding and external actor support will remain obstacles for the Somali government's efforts.

Notably, plans for “frontline states” Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti to contribute their forces as part of Operation Black Lion have not materialized and appear to be, at best, on pause

<sup>g</sup> Prior to the three-month technical pause in September 2023, two FOBs—Bio Cadale and Raga Ceel—had already been handed over. In addition to these two FOBs, State House, Parliament, Qorillow, Burahache, and Kismayo Old Airport FOBs have also been handed over during the resumed second phase of the ATMIS withdrawal. Additionally, two FOBs were closed down, Sarille and Kismayo Old Airport. See “Somalia: AU troops hand over strategic base to Somali forces ahead of exit,” Garowe Online, December 12, 2023; Maruf, “AU Mission in Somalia Resumes Drawdown After 3-Month Pause;” and “ATMIS hands over Qorilow military base to Somali Security Forces,” Reliefweb, December 20, 2023. See also ATMIS, “Today, 20 December 2023, #ATMIS, handed over Qorillow . . .,” X, December 20, 2023; “Atmis hands over 9 military bases to Somalia in troop withdrawal,” East African, January 30, 2024; and ATMIS, “On Monday, #ATMIS successfully concluded Phase Two Drawdown by signing the official handover . . .,” X, January 31, 2024.

<sup>h</sup> Initial plans for Operation Black Lion to counter al-Shabaab in its strongholds depended on neighboring countries contributing non-ATMIS forces to support the offensive.

**“What is clear is that it is unlikely that, on its own, Somali federal and regional forces will be prepared to fully take on responsibility for securing the state and stabilizing recovered territories come December 2024, without some type of external support.”**

without a clear path forward.<sup>39</sup> The delay is not only the result of operations stalling in the central regions of the country, but also due to waning enthusiasm from Somalia’s neighbors due to financial considerations. There has been a lack of clarity on where funding to support the operation would come from.<sup>40</sup> Initially, it seemed as though the operation would be funded by the regional actors themselves, but this became a tough proposition, especially due to the economic circumstances within the region.<sup>41</sup> There was some hope that Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, would step in to fund the operation, but that never materialized.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, internal developments in both Kenya<sup>i</sup> and Ethiopia<sup>j</sup> have also distracted the regional actors’ attention away from Somalia. While the federal government in Somalia initially envisioned that Kenyan and Ethiopian forces would play a central role in directly fighting al-Shabaab, these regional actors appear to be more keen on preventing a spillover of al-Shabaab violence across their borders than engaging in a major offensive in southern Somalia.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the recently signed memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland (announced on January 1, 2024) that would grant the former access to the Red Sea and the latter official recognition as an independent country has provoked significant outrage from Mogadishu, which views the move as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>44</sup> The public protests in Mogadishu over the decision and the federal government of Somalia’s strong rejection of the memorandum of understanding cast further doubts on the feasibility of Ethiopian support in offensive operations.<sup>45</sup>

There is also a general sense of donor fatigue among longtime external partners such as the European Union, United Kingdom, and the United States, which have provided humanitarian and security assistance for decades.<sup>46</sup> On the part of the United States, the Biden administration continues to maintain a few hundred forces (no more than 450 troops) in Somalia to support the national army, with the special unit known as Danab being the priority.<sup>47</sup> The United States has also bolstered the Somali government’s campaign against al-Shabaab by donating military assistance (including weapons, ammunition, etc.) and carrying out airstrikes that assist Danab forces in recapturing territory from al-Shabaab.<sup>48</sup>

i Kenya is gearing up to possibly lead a multinational security force in Haiti, while the tough economic policies the government has taken at home have raised concerns among locals. See Nyaboga Kiage, “Haiti mission: Police deployment on course despite court injunction,” *Nation*, December 11, 2023, and “Schools in Kenya close over cost-of-living demonstrations,” “Focus on Africa” podcast, July 19, 2023.

j Ethiopia’s federal government has been battling rebellions in the country. See “Ethiopia’s Ominous New War in Amhara,” *International Crisis Group Briefing* 194, November 16, 2023.

In February 2024, the United States signed a memorandum of understanding with Somalia for the construction of five military bases for Somalia’s National Army’s Danab Brigade.<sup>49</sup> As the Somali offensive continues, U.S. policy toward Somalia seems likely to continue to be focused on containing the threat posed by al-Shabaab through military assistance.<sup>50</sup> This military support has played an important role in helping Somalia’s federal forces counter al-Shabaab.

Funding for ATMIS in the last year of its mission, in particular, remains a key challenge to a successful transition in December 2024.<sup>51</sup> By the end of 2022, the mission was already facing an overall funding shortfall of EUR 25.8 million, which only increased over 2023.<sup>52</sup> In a communique issued by the African Union Peace and Security Council that was publicized in April 2023, the Council expressed “deep concern over the inadequate, unsustainable and unpredictable financing for ATMIS, including the significant funding shortfalls, which continues to persist.”<sup>53</sup> As mentioned, the A.U. mission is scheduled to draw down in phases, with the full drawdown in December 2024, but technical pauses have financially strained the mission. By April 2023, the mission was unable to meet the cost of the delayed drawdown, further raising ATMIS’ financial deficit.<sup>54</sup> The financial strain was further exacerbated by the most recent request in September 2023 for another technical pause.<sup>55</sup> The European Union remains the biggest financial contributor to ATMIS<sup>k</sup> but has substantially reduced its contribution in support of ATMIS’ military component from Euro 140 million for 2022 to 85 million for 2023.<sup>56</sup> The federal government of Somalia and the African Union have considered non-traditional donors such as Turkey and the Gulf States to support ATMIS, but thus far, no other external actors, including longtime external partners, have stepped up to fill the gap.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Logistical and Holding Challenges***

The August 2023 attack in Cowsweyne laid bare another set of obstacles to the government’s counterinsurgency efforts, namely logistical and holding challenges. The ambitious timelines set by the government have meant that its military strategy has been hurried, resulting in vulnerabilities. Rather than prioritize the consolidation of early territorial gains by securing surrounding roads and highways and cordoning them off to al-Shabaab’s retaliatory attacks, the government has instead focused on quickly recapturing many large towns over a short period of time.<sup>58</sup> As a consequence, federal forces have faced difficulties in *holding* recently recovered territories. For instance, al-Shabaab managed to recapture some of the territory it had lost in the early months of the offensive in Hirshabelle once the government expanded its offensive to Galmudug state.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, in August 2023 in Cowsweyne, the national army’s hastily erected garrisons were overrun by al-Shabaab militants only days after the insurgents withdrew from the area.<sup>60</sup>

Compounding the hasty pace of the offensive is the reality that the government is still in the process of building up its national army, with a goal to have a full army and federal security sector by end of 2024. In addition to skepticism about the ability of the

k The European Union supported the ATMIS military component with EUR 85 million in 2023, and a further EUR 33 million to the civilian and police components in 2023 and 2024. See “EU Statement: UN High Level Meeting on ATMIS Financing and Resourcing for the Somali Security Transition,” European External Action Service, March 22, 2023.

**“Compounding the hasty pace of the offensive is the reality that the government is still in the process of building up its national army, with a goal to have a full army and federal security sector by end of 2024. In addition to skepticism about the ability of the government to deliver on its force generation plans, the lack of a fully developed army has meant that the government has been over-reliant on its more professional and foreign-trained special units: Danab (lightning) forces trained by U.S. forces and the Gorgor brigade trained by Turkey.”**

government to deliver on its force generation plans, the lack of a fully developed army has meant that the government has been over-reliant on its more professional and foreign-trained special units: Danab (lightning) forces trained by U.S. forces and the Gorgor brigade trained by Turkey.<sup>61</sup> Despite being primarily suited to special operations raids, these forces have been used to clear territory and at times function as holding forces.<sup>62</sup> The challenge with this approach is that it can, as is the case with the Gorgor during the Cowsweyne attack, make these forces “sitting ducks” for an al-Shabaab attack.<sup>63</sup>

Additionally, the government’s strategy does not fully explain which forces are responsible for holding territory. Without a comprehensive strategy that clearly coordinates federal, state, and clan forces, among other stakeholders, “there is a high risk the current effort will eventually falter” and counterinsurgency operations will be disjointed.<sup>64</sup> Forces such as the national army, Danab, and Gorgor may be useful for offensive operations but lack the training in community engagement, while state-level security forces are better suited to engage local populations but vary significantly in their capabilities.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, with a national army that is still in development, and state forces with varying capacity to significantly contribute to the offensive, there is a risk that if and when the government regains more territory from al-Shabaab, it may stretch its human and financial resources as it has done before.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, rather than being drawn into the offensive simultaneously, the way that different clan militia have mobilized themselves against al-Shabaab has occurred separately, resulting in a “lack of concurrent operations,” which tends to advantage al-Shabaab who is able to counter one community at a time.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the federal forces’ inability to hold recovered territory and questions about which forces are appropriate to play a holding role are recurring issues. Several key cities, towns, and villages across Somalia have exchanged hands between al-Shabaab and the government’s forces and its allies for years.<sup>68</sup> For years, Somali and A.U. forces would gain control of territory in the countryside, hold

it for a few weeks, and then retreat and al-Shabaab would return.<sup>69</sup> This pattern of temporary gains and quick losses impacts broader efforts toward stabilization. For populations living in these often-rural territories, confidence in the government’s ability to deliver security wanes and, as is discussed in the next section, can leave residents hesitant to collaborate with government forces.

### *Political Infighting and Clan Divisions*

Another obstacle to the government’s offensive has been the difficulty the federal government has faced in gaining support for its offensive among some clans. Clan alliances have been integral to the government’s initial success in dislodging al-Shabaab from their strongholds in central Somalia particularly during the first phase of the offensive. While some clans naturally rose up against al-Shabaab, the government has had to work to persuade others to join its offensive in the central regions of the country, facing resistance in some cases.<sup>70</sup> For instance, some communities in Hirshabelle and Galmudug have been hesitant to collaborate with government forces due to fear of al-Shabaab reprisals in the event the government is unable to hold territory.<sup>71</sup> In areas of Hiraan and Mudug, some sub-clans<sup>1</sup> have signed agreements with al-Shabaab stipulating that they would not participate in the government’s offensive for their safety.<sup>72</sup> In other cases, such as in the Mudug region, tensions between government and local clans have been the result of local perceptions of the government’s previous failures to assist local communities against al-Shabaab.<sup>73</sup>

Al-Shabaab has also engaged in its own countermobilization efforts.<sup>74</sup> According to the International Crisis Group’s reporting, offensive operations into Galgaduud in the fall of 2022 initially stalled south of Qaayib due to al-Shabaab’s mobilization of sub-clans to counter the government’s recruitment efforts.<sup>75</sup> Since December 2022, al-Shabaab’s efforts to recruit its own clan support have continued, particularly in Galmudug state. As James Barnett has outlined, “none of the clans that it [al-Shabaab] has rallied to its side are particularly powerful or well-armed.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, mobilizing these communities not only signals al-Shabaab’s willingness to partner with other clans, but also increases the possibility of clan conflict within federal member states.<sup>77</sup> Reports from September 2023 also indicate that al-Shabaab has partnered with clan militias to defend areas in Galmudug state—such as Ceel Buur and Ceel Dheere, among others—from security forces.<sup>78</sup>

The competition for local clan support also has direct implications for stabilization in regions recovered. In areas where militia rose up against al-Shabaab, public support for the counterinsurgency offensive does not automatically mean those people decisively support the government or view it as legitimate. As the International Crisis Group reports “clan militias and government forces are making common cause against a common enemy, and the appeal of jointly fighting Al-Shabaab lies in the prospect of a better future.”<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, locals living in the hinterland areas that the government’s offensive operations are trying to recover have significant needs and high expectations of a government that has already made ambitious promises.<sup>80</sup> If the government fails to deliver or is perceived to have broken its

<sup>1</sup> Sub-clans reported to have entered such agreements with al-Shabaab include the Haber Gedir/Salebaan in Xarardheere town in Mudug in December 2022, and the Hawadle Galible Hassan Agoon sub-clan (among other sub-clans) in Bulo Burto district in April 2023. See “Somalia: Counter-Insurgency Operation;” “Sustaining Gains in Somalia’s Offensive against Al-Shabaab.”

promises, it will most certainly lose the local public trust it needs to legitimize its efforts, creating room for a possible al-Shabaab return.

Beyond competing with al-Shabaab for clan support, political infighting and clashes between sub-clans have also undermined the government's efforts to recruit local support and threaten to fragment security responses into clan rivalries. In Hirshabelle state, political turbulence between the Hirshabelle State President Ali Abdullahi Hussein and the Hiiraan Governor Ali Jeyte Osman triggered disorder in the state in June 2023 that soured the federal government's relationship with some sub-clans, particularly the Hawadle.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile in the southern member states, longstanding tensions between Jubaland's president, Ahmed Madobe, and the regional administration in the Gedo region threaten to fragment efforts to counter al-Shabaab.<sup>82</sup> In South West State, disputes between clan-based security forces over tax collection resulted in violent clashes in June 2023 involving members of the Somali army mostly from the Hawiye clan clashing with South West police forces hailing from the Rahanweyne clan in Lower Shabelle.<sup>83</sup> The federal government has made efforts through a series of National Consultative Councils with member states to address political rivalries and refocus efforts toward countering al-Shabaab.<sup>84</sup> However, without meaningful settlement of these often-longstanding disputes and grievances, there is a risk that rivalries will impede meaningful cooperation in the fight against al-Shabaab. Furthermore, with the next round of member state-level elections<sup>m</sup> due in November 2024, political tensions across most of the member states are mounting over significant delays of the electoral dates and a lack of clarity over the modality of the elections.<sup>85</sup> If the polls prove not to be fair, transparent, and inclusive, or if the federal government is seen to interfere with state-level elections, then there is a risk these tensions could further fragment member states.<sup>86</sup>

### *Al-Shabaab Stalling Progress*

Lastly, al-Shabaab has proven capable of stalling the government's progress in the offensive. Despite losing key territory in Hirshabelle and Galmudug during the first phase of the offensive, al-Shabaab has since the beginning of 2023 managed to regroup, conduct retaliatory attacks, and attempt to reclaim lost territory. In addition to entering agreements with local clans and countermobilizing its own clan support against government forces,<sup>87</sup> as discussed earlier, the group has maintained a steady pace of guerrilla attacks in Hiraan and Galmudug's more remote territories.

Since early 2023, these attacks have included the frequent deployment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) followed by fighters with small arms and light weapons targeting government holding forces,<sup>88</sup> a common tactic the group deploys.<sup>89</sup> For example, in January 2023, the group reportedly deployed 12 vehicle-borne IEDs against Somali forces in towns located in central Somalia.<sup>90</sup> In one instance, al-Shabaab managed to hit Danab forces in Galcad (Galmudug state), resulting in significant losses that set back the offensive in the region in the following weeks.<sup>91</sup> Since then, the insurgent group has continued to attack towns and villages such as Massagaweyne in Galguduud region (Galmudug state), and has even regained some lost territory in Hirshabelle.<sup>92</sup> Other notable attacks include the August 2023 Cowsweyne attack that caused

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government forces to retreat from recently captured territory,<sup>93</sup> while the following month saw the highest number of suicide bomb attacks (14) conducted by the group since 2006.<sup>94</sup> Al-Shabaab has also targeted Somali state officials in an effort to discourage them from supporting the federal government's offensive or in retaliation for those who have supported the campaign.<sup>95</sup> According to ACLED reporting, 76 instances of al-Shabaab perpetrating violence against local Somali state officials occurred between August and October 2023.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, in February 2024, al-Shabaab attacked a military base in Mogadishu, killing four Emirati troops and a Bahraini military officer in the country on a training mission.<sup>97</sup>

These attacks should come as no surprise as this is not the first time al-Shabaab has had to recover from territorial losses. In its more than 15 years of existence, the group has proven to be resilient. Al-Shabaab has previously been pushed out of Mogadishu and major cities between 2011 and 2015, experienced significant battlefield losses, and endured internal divisions that have threatened to erode its internal cohesion.<sup>98</sup> Despite these challenges, the group has adapted, controlling large swathes of rural territory and small towns across southern and central Somalia, embedding itself within local communities as a viable alternative to the state, and managing to build up significant influence in areas beyond its territorial control.<sup>99</sup>

Al-Shabaab has also honed its ability to deploy guerrilla tactics shortly after withdrawing from controlled territory.<sup>100</sup> This often involves initially withdrawing its forces deep into al-Shabaab-controlled territories, then after a few days beginning to isolate the towns and villages liberated by the government and A.U. forces, conducting hit-and-run attacks on surrounding roads and highways, and at times directly attacking garrisons within the liberated territory.<sup>101</sup> Accordingly, it is important to remain cautious about equating the number of cities, towns, or villages taken over by the government as proof of success against al-Shabaab.<sup>102</sup> The insurgent group may be pushed out of territory, but it frequently returns as a spoiler, deploying its guerrilla tactics and stalling the government's progress.

### **Conclusion**

The initial optimism that characterized the first few months of the Somali government's offensive against al-Shabaab has over time diminished as the counterinsurgency's momentum has stalled in the central regions of the country. Certainly, clan mobilization

<sup>m</sup> All federal member states, aside from the semi-autonomous Puntland, are due to hold concurrent elections in November.

against al-Shabaab remains a significant development, and has arguably been the most consequential for the government's initial gains against al-Shabaab. However, moving forward, significant obstacles need to be overcome before the government can effectively consolidate its gains and fully liberate and stabilize the country.

Importantly, the government needs to align its goals with more realistic timelines. The president's proclamations about defeating al-Shabaab within months and fully building up Somalia's federal security capacity by December 2024 unnecessarily inflate public and partner expectations and risk stretching the national army's limited human and material resources as a result of a hurried military strategy. In the near term, the government's strategy should consider prioritizing the consolidation of its security forces' hold on the territories it has recovered, rather than attempting to expand its operations further southward into al-Shabaab's strongholds. The Somali government needs to demonstrate that it can administer recently recovered areas well before it tries to liberate more. A focus on consolidating gains should be accompanied by efforts to meaningfully settle longstanding political disputes and clan rivalries that impede meaningful cooperation in the fight against

al-Shabaab.

On the part of international and regional partners of the Somali government—such as the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Turkey, UAE, Qatar, and the African Union—efforts should be made to step up support for a stabilization project in the near term and after the ATMIS drawdown date in December 2024. Importantly, there needs to be more explicit discussions and planning on what type of stabilization support would need to follow a potential ATMIS exit and where funding would come from to support such an effort.

Lastly, recent developments, such as Somalia's entry into the East Africa Community<sup>n</sup> and the recent lifting of the 31-year U.N. arms embargo,<sup>103</sup> and how they will impact Somalia's operations against al-Shabaab and prospects for stabilizing the country are yet to be seen but should be closely followed. **CTC**

n Though it remains unclear, and it is too soon to say, observers have questioned whether EAC's regional force would possibly replace ATMIS. See "Assessing Al-Shabaab's Threat to the Region as Somalia Joins the East Africa Community," ACLED, December 8, 2023.

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