

AL-SHABAAB UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP

By Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee

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In an image taken and released by the African Union-United Nations Information Support Team Thursday, Aug. 22, 2013, Kenyan soldiers serving with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) inspect a destroyed vehicle belonging to Al Qaeda-affiliated extremist group al-Shabaab at Kismayo Airport in southern Somalia. (Source: AP Photo/Ramadaan Mohamed/AU-UN IST/AMISOM.)

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SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENSE REFORM—STUCK IN LOW GEAR

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The [February 27, 2014 issue](#) of *Africa Watch* reported that South African President Jacob Zuma had announced that the long-delayed South African Defense Review, commissioned in mid-2011, would be acted upon by his cabinet before the May 2014 elections. The [cabinet](#) did in fact approve the [Review](#), which is an impressive and comprehensive report, in March 2014. Since then, the South African government and parliament have been wrestling with the dilemma of how to begin implementation of the Review's recommendations under the current, austere defense budget. Without supplemental provision of funds for South Africa's defense establishment, the South African National Defense Force (SANDF) will be hard pressed to arrest its decline and to redress the imbalance between capabilities and assigned missions. [more...](#)



Defense and Military Veterans Minister Nosivive Mapisa-Nqakula in Johannesburg, South Africa. (Source: AP Photo/Themba Hadebe.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of IDA's Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses. He is a former U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Namibia.

About IDA

The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Godane's Legacy

Godane has been credited with expanding al-Shabaab's mandate beyond Somalia's borders and into the East African region. Whereas al-Shabaab was originally focused on domestic objectives, namely ousting the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), Godane initiated a major shift in strategy. In 2010, he committed his group to [international jihad](#) and the liberation of "Eastern and Horn of Africa community who are under the feet of minority Christians" while pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda. Shortly after this announcement, al-Shabaab launched an attack and killed over 70 people in Kampala, Uganda, as [retaliation for Ugandan support](#) for AMISOM. In 2013, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the [Westgate Mall attack](#) in Nairobi, Kenya, in retaliation for Kenyan forces entering al-Shabaab's heartland in southern Somalia.

Who Is Abu Ubaidah?

After deliberation over [four prospective successors](#), al-Shabaab announced that Abu Ubaidah would be the organization's next leader. He is believed to have been one of Godane's [most trusted lieutenants](#) and leader of the clandestine internal security service known as "[Amniyat](#)," which Godane set up for his own personal protection. He was purportedly involved with Godane's 2013 purge of internal rivals in an effort to rid the organization of any threats to his authority. Just as important, Abu Ubaidah is also a proponent of prioritizing global jihad over a localized, national insurgency.

Abu Ubaidah, like Godane, is from the minority [Dir clan](#). Although al-Shabaab objectives are religious in nature and the organization was not created along ethnic lines, ethnic cleavages may be powerful forces influencing internal politics, especially where differences already exist. Abu Ubaidah, 40, was [deputy governor](#) of al-Shabaab in the Lower Juba region, then later became the governor of Bay and Bakool regions before being promoted to Godane's adviser. He is also a Koran teacher who has been [described as](#) "a difficult, polarizing person who believes in Takfiri ideology," a belief system that holds non-believing Muslims should be punished. According to one [journalist](#) with access to his friends, he was trained in jihadist camps in southern Somalia and Kenya in the 1990s.

How Effective Will Leadership Decapitation Be for Al-Shabaab?

The United States has pursued a counterterrorism [strategy](#) that includes removing terrorist organizations' leaders, among other goals. It is believed that doing so will decrease their organizations' capacity to operate effectively by depriving them of the individuals who provide guidance on direction, discipline, and motivation. Academic [research](#) suggests, however,



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that the effectiveness of leadership decapitation depends on several factors. It has been most effective in organizations that are hierarchically structured, revolve around one singular individual (i.e., a “cult of personality”), and generally lack a viable successor. Al-Shabaab, like most modern-day Islamic extremist organizations, does not fit these criteria. Multiple factions led by different leaders have created a relatively decentralized organization that is able to “backfill” leadership positions when individuals are killed or arrested. In addition, some [researchers](#) assert that religion inspires a level of dedication not seen in other movements that are more personality based, resulting in greater resilience and longer organizational lifespan. Al-Shabaab demonstrated its resiliency when Godane seamlessly assumed control after his predecessor, Aden Hashi Ayro, was [killed](#) in a U.S. strike in 2008.

What Does Godane’s Death Mean for Al-Shabaab and the Region?

When it announced Abu Ubaidah as its new leader, al-Shabaab [reaffirmed its alliance](#) with al-Qaeda. Any speculation that the loss of Godane would be a devastating blow to the organization appears to be invalidated by the killing on September 8 of at least 12 civilians in a suicide bombing that targeted African Union troops. Coupled with warnings from the Somali government that al-Shabaab is planning attacks on [schools and medical facilities](#) in retaliation for Godane’s death, it would appear that the organization retains significant operational capacity. The group seems [intent](#) on avenging the death of its former leader, [calling it](#) “a binding obligation on our shoulders that we will never relinquish nor forget, no matter how long it takes.”

Looking Ahead

Leadership decapitation ought to be just one line of effort in the fight against radical Islam. It is also important to degrade an organization’s ability to finance its operations. To weaken al-Shabaab, this means removing the ability to profit from illicit trades in [charcoal](#) and [sugar](#), as well as from revenue-raising activities such as kidnaping, extortion, and piracy. The Uganda People’s Defence Forces, under AMISOM, have [attacked al-Shabaab’s strategic stronghold of Baraawe](#) in an effort to cut off the group’s main supply point and source of revenue. Undermining popular support is another key factor in reducing the appeal to potential recruits. It remains to be seen whether the [offer of amnesty](#) to al-Shabaab militants by Somalia’s president, who urged militants to embrace peace after the death of their leader, will be effective in this regard.

It seems apparent that the death of Godane will not cause al-Shabaab to crumble. Its decentralized structure coupled with its religious bent will fuel its survival, although [ideological divisions](#) may well play out in a leadership struggle at some point. The real question is in what direction will Abu Ubaidah lead the organization. Will he, like Godane, pursue a regional agenda including strengthening ties to al-Qaeda? Will he opt to focus more on domestic objectives? Or will Abu Ubaidah seek to establish his own brand of al-Shabaab, possibly switching allegiance from al-Qaeda to the [Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq](#)?

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Defense and Military Veterans Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula in Johannesburg, South Africa. (Source: AP Photo/Themba Hadebe.)

SANDF in a Financial Vise

In February 2014, South African [web media reported](#) that the financial resources made available to the Department of Defense, which includes the SANDF and the Department of Military Veterans, had been increased by an amount just under the rate of inflation. Expert commentators pointed out that during the prior year the South African Rand had depreciated by over 20 percent against the U.S. dollar, radically raising the cost of fuel, spare parts, and equipment. Under these circumstances, and with 70 percent of the SANDF's budget being spent on salaries, there would be little room for maneuver in meeting South Africa's increased defense commitments. Budget increases proposed for 2015 and 2016 that are also less than the probable rate of inflation will only aggravate the problem.

In the weeks after the release of the budget numbers, a media chorus called attention to the mismatch between the SANDF's responsibilities and the resources available to it. Those responsibilities are heavy and seem to be increasing. Over the past year, the SANDF has maintained a battalion-sized commitment to the peacekeeping force in Darfur, tipped the balance against the rebel M23 group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by reinforcing the UN's Force Intervention Brigade with attack helicopters and elite troops, and maintained an anti-piracy patrol in the Mozambique Channel. In addition, the SANDF has been required to maintain standing deployments of ground forces to police South Africa's long borders and to combat wildlife poaching. If past accusations that South Africa was not pulling its weight on African security were ever true, they no longer seem to apply.

Defense Minister Speaks Out

In her [budget presentation speech](#) to the Extended Public Committee of the National Assembly on July 23, 2014, Defense Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula laid out the current situation and the need for change in polite but pointed terms. Emphasizing that "the SANDF is in a state of decline characterized by force imbalance between capabilities; ageing technology and unaffordability of many of its main operating systems," the minister outlined the way forward as recommended by the Defense Review. She noted that the Defense Review had specified five "milestones" for the SANDF:

- To arrest the decline
- To rebalance the force by reprioritizing
- To ensure capacity meets current needs

- To develop capability to meet future challenges
- To build the strength to deal with a limited war should the need arise.

She related these milestones to four Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) periods of five years each. Thus, under the best of circumstances, the SANDF would attain the full capability seen as necessary in the Defense Review only in 20 years. She did not propose a specific amount of additional funding for the SANDF and said that not all the changes needed would require additional funding. She looked forward to “adjustment estimates” that would be determined by the National Treasury, and she emphasized that those adjustments would need to take account of the long-term plan for the SANDF. She looked to the National Assembly for further action.

Parliament Moves Slowly

Perhaps the minister’s presentation was too subtle, because with the defense reform ball firmly in its court, the National Assembly seems to have done little. In late August, the shadow defense minister lamented the [absence of a joint standing committee](#) on defense and advocated for the prompt establishment of the same. Earlier, the defense minister’s spokesperson had [admitted](#), “we have no control over the Parliamentary program or which committees the Speaker and chairman of the National Council of Provinces will refer it to.” As of this writing, there has been no indication of parliamentary action, and it is difficult to envision rapid movement, despite the need for additional funding.

What If Resources Fall Short?

According to the [Defense Review](#), South Africa spends less than 1.2 percent of GDP on defense, which is less than 5 percent of government expenditures. The Review portrays the SANDF as 24 percent underfunded. Examples of the effects of this underfunding abound in media reports. [One report](#) called attention to unacceptably low ammunition stocks and shortage of airlift capabilities and related those to the inability of the SANDF to reinforce its contingent in the Central African Republic during an engagement in Bangui in 2013 in which 13 South African soldiers lost their lives. Many of the Army’s trucks are 30 years old, the Navy’s ships are often laid up for repairs, and the Air Force’s flying hours are severely restricted.

To achieve all five milestones detailed in the Defense Review, the authors of the Review estimate that an investment of 2.4 percent of GDP would be required. Just as the current level of defense expenditures in relation to GDP is low, an effective doubling of the proportion of GDP devoted to defense would be extraordinary in the South African context. According to [CIA data](#) from 2012, only six sub-Saharan African countries devoted more than 2 percent of GDP to defense. Interestingly, however, five of the six were in the Southern African subregion.

Perhaps the South African executive branch and parliament will add real resources to the lip service they have given to the recommendations of the Defense Review. The examples of other subregional neighbors might move them in that direction. If that does not happen, the SANDF will be able to maintain itself as an effective force only if makes more efficient use of available resources. There would be political obstacles in the way of removing some of the more inefficient aspects of South African defense expenditures. For example, the high percentage of budget spent on salaries is to a large extent driven by the political decision to maintain on active duty large numbers of aging former combatants from the African National Congress’s military component. Likewise, funding of veterans’ benefits through the defense budget is a political mandate.

If additional financial resources are not appropriated and the political will to overcome some of the existing inefficiencies in the defense structure is not available, then South Africa will need to consider reducing the missions assigned to the SANDF. In such a scenario, the recent, wider regional role of the SANDF in peace and coalition operations might be the first casualty, and the prospects for greater security on the African continent would be weakened.

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