

Transcript

Warpod S2E6 – Somalia’s security sector after the African union withdrawal

LEWIS

Welcome to Warpod, a podcast brought to you by Saferworld, asking experts from around the world about the impact of security policy on contemporary conflict.

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ALI

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In this episode, we will be discussing the security challenges facing Somalia, the interventions made by international partners, and what impact this has had on the country.

LEWIS

As we record this episode in mid 2024, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, ATMIS, is due to withdraw from the country. The armed group Al -Shabaab continues to be a cause of insecurity in much of the country, and there has been a recent upsurge in piracy in the Red Sea.

We'll touch on these dynamics within this episode, but also delve beneath the headlines to look at how security challenges impact Somali citizens in their everyday lives.

To discuss these issues, we are joined by Samira Gaid, regional security analyst based in Mogadishu.

Perhaps if we start with quite a broad question, what would you say are the main security challenges facing Somalia today?

SAMIRA

I would say the challenges are threefold. Number one, you have the Al-Shabaab insurgency that's been ongoing since 2007. It's now 17 years in the making. There's been some gains, but then there's also been some setbacks in the fight against the group over the past two years. So, I would say that would be the first threat to Somalia's security.

And number two is the security sector reform that's very much needed after the state collapse in 1991. The government has been slowly re-establishing the security forces. So that takes quite a bit of time and effort alongside the fighting.

And then number three would be that right now, the real major threat to security is the ATMIS drawdown and the lack of clarity of what would follow up - a new mission or not post December 2024.

LEWIS

I guess many, many different directions which we can take those broad national level threats, but perhaps let's start with Somalis themselves. How does the everyday Somali experience those security challenges? What are the dangers to them sort of emanating from these kinds of more national dynamics?

SAMIRA

I would say for the common person, you face quite a bit of challenges because you're faced by both the Somali government that you see sometimes as a predator because they are re-establishing rule of law, there is new ways of doing things, they've been living without formal government for quite a bit, so they do not, I think sometimes the public do not recognise the authority of the government and sometimes the government does institute laws without proper communication to the public or new ways of doing things.

So I would say they're faced with that on one side, they're faced by very harsh laws by Al-Shabaab on the other end. Al-Shabaab in the capital cities doesn't much exist physically, but through extortion or if you have court cases, sometimes you might be summoned to respond to a court case that's been taken under Al-Shabaab courts. So you do face that as well.

Then you do face also just the regular, you know, lack of services and governance that happens after you've been, you know, through 30 years of no state/collapse. So the regular Somali, I think, is faced by dual problems. You know, on one side, a government that's

reinstating itself, number two, on the other side, Al -Shabaab, that's also trying to displace this government.

LEWIS

Does that change depending on different parts of your identity? So, if you're a woman in Somalia, does your experience of security change? Are there very specific threats and challenges that you have to navigate? Also, if you're from a minority clan say, would you again find different challenges compared to other Somalis?

SAMIRA

I think the major threats are faced by women and people from marginalized groups, especially and then also people who are coming into cities as IDPs. You'd find that most of the time the bigger clans are able to accommodate their people if there's a conflict in the regions and they have to migrate, they're accommodated quite well by their clan members in the city, but people from this marginalised clans or women, find themselves in the IDP camps, the internally displaced people camps in the city.

And in those places, they face even more challenges just because they're already losing out on livelihoods. They're looking for new livelihood. There's already people who manage those camps who see things a certain way and work through things a certain way.

So I would say the major challenges are faced most of the time by these people who find themselves in these IDP camps and of course women.

Women face different challenges in Somalia, not because of specifically just being a woman, but because most of the time they are the breadwinners. The men have either gone off to join the federal government or the security forces, or they are part of Al - Shabaab. So the women remain behind to take care of the families. They become the breadwinners. When they are displaced, they are the ones who are packing up the families and moving them.

So they find themselves in the IDP camps there without any male support or huge clan support. They might find themselves again under even more difficulties. So I would say the challenges that face women are enormous in Somalia, but it would depend on which part of the country they're coming from. We do find quite a bit of women finding themselves in politics and in government, but they're usually the top 5% who have managed to do well for themselves or really fight through the communities to find themselves at the top levels.

ALI

One thing that comes to mind actually is Somalia being on the Horn of Africa and the challenges that we see in the Gulf, on the coast. We've had previously challenges with piracy, which seems now to again to be re-emerging. Are there any security challenges you think, Samira, from just the geographical location of Somalia that the country is facing?

SAMIRA

I would say the first thing, especially in the north of the country, has been the differences between the federal member states in that part of the country, between Somaliland and Puntland. And then related to that is the influence of the Gulf states in the Horn of Africa that has led to securitization sometimes of the northern part of Somalia.

And we do see that very, very much so there's been sometimes conflicts between some of these forces that are set up by these countries. We had that most recently a month ago between the PMPF, the Puntland Maritime Police Forces and the PSF, the Puntland Security Forces. So that happens quite a bit. But then I would say just because of the geographical location in Somalia, the status of the security inside the country is reflected in what happens on the high seas. Piracy has seen itself coming back again and not just because of the status of security in Somalia, but because of what's happening in Gaza and father field, because of the Houthi attacks, the focus on the maritime trade at this moment we see a rise again in maritime insecurity and piracy back again in the coast of Somalia. I would say this is opportunistic and it's also though facing quite a bit of a coalition. We do see the Indian Navy doing quite a bit of the waters of Somalia. We still have challenges around, around curbing that on the Somali side, but we see the international coalitions working hard to curb piracy.

ALI

Thanks a lot, Samira. I mean, like you mentioned, there's a lot of international presence in Somalia. And I'm just wondering what the

intervention of these international actors has had on security in Somalia, but also on the challenges that you just mentioned Somalis are facing?

SAMIRA

So the international interventions sometimes are welcome. I would say, you know, Somalia faced the first 10 years after state collapse in isolation, and then after that, an increased interest in Somalia after the 9/11 attacks in the US and, you know, the rise of terrorism and all of that.

Since then, we have had quite a number of missions that the effort have been, these military missions have been to remove al-Shabaab and reinstall state government in Somalia. I would say this have worked. AMISOM, the African Union mission in Somalia that's been funded largely by the international partners – the EU funding the stipends and the UN doing the logistics – has achieved quite a bit. It started off in 2007.

We had them pushing the group outside, Al-Shabaab group outside of Mogadishu. The next 10 years, 2012 to 2022, we could say they were moved out of major cities and then there was a bit more of governance entrenching federal member states were set up.

Now we have a transition mission, Somalia insisting that it can take over security responsibilities, though there is a bit of a challenge around the buildup of the security forces.

So we'd say some of these missions have achieved their objectives, but aside from these formal missions, we do have quite a number of

other partners on the ground. We have the U.S. as a major security partner, building up one of our forces, the Danab force, the special forces. You have the Turks who have built the largest military camp outside of Turkey in Somalia. They train officers and also train special forces. We have the UK operating outside of Baidoa, training Somali security forces in Baidoa. We have the UAE, we have Qatar, we have Egypt. Then it becomes too many to count.

Unfortunately, the international partners do not coordinate as well as they should. We see some duplication in some areas. We see some duelling interests in some areas. That's really part of one of the biggest challenges that we have is that we get a lot of support. But because the support is not coordinated and sometimes conflicts in its very nature, that we have Somalis having to choose between partners or having to choose between positions.

The other partners that I haven't mentioned are the neighbouring nations who have been part at parcel of the African Union mission in Somalia and now ATMIS, most notably is Kenya and Ethiopia. They have historically had difficulties with Somalia, but being part of the African Union mission are viewed differently because they have to provide security alongside training and capacity building of Somali forces.

So I would say we have quite a number of partners on the ground. A challenge around coordination, but I think a slowly strengthening Somali government that's starting to choose between the partners.

ALI

Thanks, you've mentioned the challenge on coordination, which of course is very important. But I also assume that when you have so many actors in Somalia, their approaches to security would probably be also different. And they may have different impacts in different parts of the country. Do you see that as a significant challenge, considering the number of international actors that are involved in security in Somalia?

SAMIRA

Most definitely, I would say each partner comes with a degree of independence. They don't normally go through the UN or the AU in their approaches. So, we do see these challenges around coordination on the ground in actual, you know, the conflicts between partners happening on the ground physically.

You would say, for instance, the US forces are very much interested in CT approaches and special forces conducting operations. You would find sometimes the European member states are more interested in the governance aspects of stuff, in the political primacy, and try to solve the challenges through the social contract between Somalis.

So I think these two approaches are very much what we see on the ground. Those who believe that military response is integral and the buildup of the Somali security forces is a first thing. And others who think the politics is more important and try to push on the political reconciliation and political dialogue. We see that on the ground.

And then also now when it comes to how long the challenge has taken, we've had most recently a Gulf state investing in the buildup of the Somali security forces, a rapid buildup of around 10,000 forces. And then those forces were straight away sent to the front lines because most partners were very interested in Somali ownership and leadership. They really supported this offensive operations.

But we do see that, you know, other partners who know that a short-term approach is not viable, who are asking for others to take more time in the buildup of the security forces, take more time in sending out these forces to lead offensive operations.

So we do see that discontent between the international partners. But for the Somalis, I think the Somali side has now become very interested in taking the leadership. And I think this is very welcome. Most partners who are always asking, where is the Somali partner that's supposed to take over security responsibilities?

Now we do have that Somali partner. What we needed is sometimes to temper the expectations of our partners or sometimes even the Somali government, that wasn't happening, but I do think that at this point, two years after offensive operations were taken against Al - Shabaab and the setbacks that we have witnessed, there's a bit more reality and tempering of expectations and we do see a bit more planning towards offensive operations than there was previously.

LEWIS

Samira, just to come in on that, I mean, when you're talking about tempering the expectations of partners, is it that they're too ambitious in what they think can happen quickly militarily? Is that what you're talking about? Or are they seeing that if they just follow that military approach, then that's going to solve everything and they don't need to worry so much about governance or about, you're talking right at the start of the episode, about service delivery and things like that?

So just intrigued to understand a bit more about what unrealistic expectations the partners are coming with?

SAMIRA

Yes, so Somalia security infrastructure and situation is quite complex when we had offensive operations starting sometime May 2022 that were really brought about by a civilian uprising.

Communities in central Somalia were really fed up of al-Shabaab and took arms. And the government decided to lead, co-lead these offensive operations.

This went quite well for a while. But the expectation was for the international partners was that template could be plastered around the rest of the country and we would see similar civilian uprisings around the rest of the country.

Well, this was just specific to that community. And so, the Somali government now being offered the leadership and the international partners recognising the leadership the Somali government had

shown in central Somalia also trusted that this would be the same in in Galmudug, in you know, offensive operations further south.

What we saw is immediately that it left the specific community. There was very serious setbacks and the setbacks, you know, led to forces pulling out of many, many other cities and many other towns that had been previously captured.

And so I think there was not a right contextual understanding of those offensive operations. And then the partners wanting a win. I do think that there's quite a number of challenges outside of Somalia that are facing international partners, be it Ukraine, be it economic and other issues that are facing international partners. They really want to see successes on the Somali story so that they can move on to other problems.

I mean, Somalia has been in this state for quite a bit. It's been 17 years since Al -Shabaab started. And so for them, they wanted this offensive operations to be the decisive factor that really sets back Al -Shabaab and actually finishes this threat once and for all. I don't think that was realistic then and even now I think they do recognize that it wasn't well thought through.

LEWIS

And in terms of the threats that these partners are focused on, is it primarily Al -Shabaab or do you see either through the military and security side or through the development side, and some of the aid and trading relationships, that they are addressing kind of broader

security challenges, some of those that you mentioned at the beginning?

SAMIRA

Here you also see that conflict. They are those partners who are heavily invested in counter-terrorism operations. And so even when they support counter-terrorism operations within the police forces or within the intelligence forces, it's mainly again, anti -Al-Shabaab offensive operations. And so we do see that.

Then we do see some partners, traditional partners, such as the EU really investing in the police, joint police program or joint justice program, trying to see what the the buildup of the police forces and the judiciary is and support through that.

But I would say the majority of investment goes towards the buildup of anti -Al-Shabaab efforts and anti -Al-Shabaab capacities.

LEWIS

It's very interesting Samira that you mention the EU, because recently we've seen this big change in the EU where it's historically been a economic and diplomatic actor, but increasingly we're seeing this interest in security and defence issues, and even in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the provision of lethal aid to Ukraine for the first time, which itself has set a precedent for the provision of lethal equipment to countries like Somalia.

So it sounds like from what you're saying that there are still some risks actually if the EU goes down the path of working on security and defence and moves away from some of those broader challenges in terms of governance that you've mentioned. Does that sound accurate to you?

SAMIRA

Definitely. I think we have sensed that shift in the EU. Initially, they were providing non-lethal support to the Somali security forces, and now they have just started. I think the new facility will be able to provide lethal support.

I think the Somali government will welcome this because that lethal support has not necessarily come from traditional donors. It has been up to the Somali government to procure it. And then we did have the arms embargo. We don't have that anymore. So we do see opportunities in that sense.

But I think the EU has played a major role in the politics and governance and good governance aspects of the Somali landscape and would expect that they continue to do so. But then I would have to mention that because of Ukraine war and Gaza war, we do sense that there is less focus on Somalia, especially in terms of funding. There is, I think, funding cuts that are coming our way. And so we would expect those to also impact on what they can really do tangibly in Somalia.

ALI

If I can just follow on one small other question. As we know, Somalia has been recently accepted to be a member of the East African community. And although it's largely a trade bloc, but there are also security dimensions to it.

It's been previously said that the East African community helped to stabilise the situation in Rwanda, in Burundi, also played a role in South Sudan.

Do you think there is anything in the pipeline that the Eastern African community might do to help also the security situation in Somalia? And if there is, what would be the best approach then for such a body to do?

SAMIRA

To be honest, I really think the joining of the East African Community was more of a political statement. The posture of this administration for the past two years has been quite global and regional looking to how we can re-enter the nations go back to showing that Somalia is part of this unit is doing its part in the region, it's doing its part as a member of the United Nations. I've not mentioned the number of positives that have happened on the ground.

Number one is that, of course, joining East African community. Number two was reaching decision completion point with the debt relief agenda. Number three was lifting of the arms embargo that was done December last year. It was completely lifted after 30

years. I think the fourth aspect I would say would be the offensive operations that showed great Somali leadership.

And then Somalia also pitching for the United Nations Security Council seat, which I think is more or less guaranteed as a member of the Eastern Bloc. And so I think Somalia has projected that it is back. It's no longer the poster child for problems in the Horn of Africa.

And so this, to me, the joining of the EAC was more of a political statement to show that we are back. We are now a partner, equal partner to other members of the East African community, or other members of the African Union and so on and so forth.

I don't see the EAC really investing in security responses. I see them doing more of the integration and the movement of people, movement of goods is more important. I think at this point, a lot of the trade that comes out of Somalia, I don't think is registered or it comes through the formal means of formalizing the markets that are coming between Somalia and the Horn of Africa, I think would be more important.

I do think that's where the focus will be and not in security responses. When you talk about security, you have the African Union, which has the mission in Somalia. You also have IGAD that is always having these conferences whenever there's political challenges sometimes within Somalia and sometimes within Somalia and its partners.

For instance, I think IGAD did try to call for a meeting on the Ethiopia Somaliland MOU most recently. So we have a number of regional

organisations that can play that role. I don't see EAC moving out of its mainly trained role to get involved in this aspect.

LEWIS

I guess on the subject of regional security dynamics, we should talk a bit more about the ATMIS withdrawal as well and that transition. I know Ali, this was something you're quite interested in as well.

ALI

Yes, thanks. I mean, there is, of course, a lot of concerns about what the transition of ATMIS is going to be like. Of course, for programs in the country, for the general security in the country, there's a lot of concern around that. Although, on the other hand, people feel that the African Union forces have largely been securing the government installations and less around community security as such. Is that a right sentiment, Samira, or do you think there's something that we're really worried about with the transition of ATMIS?

SAMIRA

100 percent, I would say that's true that, you know, ATMIS has really maintained its presence right now around government installations, not just federal government, but federal member state. And so it's more around security of those key governance installations. That's true.

But I would also say that that should be the expectation. I don't want to see us imagining that, you know, a military force coming from the African Union would provide security to communities. But rather support the Somali security forces in providing that security.

I don't think if they've been very successful in that regard. I don't think that we've had, you know, a devolution of security infrastructure from the federal government to the federal member state capitals all the way to the district levels. I think that's one concern.

On the ATMIS debate, we had, as I said, since May 2022, great offensive operations, you know, the capture of quite a number of cities, and towns and villages from Al -Shabaab. Then slowly after in a year, we had again a number of setbacks.

Because of those setbacks, we didn't see a pause on the drawdown. We saw the drawdown continue. I would say in May 2022, we were at 19,000 forces. Today we stand around 14,000 forces – of ATMIS forces. We do expect by June of this year, a further drawdown of 4,000 forces. And so that really worries some of us who know what that would mean.

ATMIS provide security guarantees for, I think, Somali security forces and Somali governance infrastructure, but also for the international partners who provide humanitarian support, who are moving around the country to deliver development aid or humanitarian support. So there's a question around how they will continue to do that post –ATMIS and with lesser numbers of ATMIS, that will now be more focused on their own security and their own

delivery of supply than on trying to secure this other international partners' work.

So on the debate around ATMIS, we've seen there's been a number of challenges. Number one on the number of the post –ATMIS mission. I think finally there's agreement on a post –ATMIS mission.

But the numbers are not agreed with Somalis asking for lesser numbers and the international partners asking, not international partners actually, the AU asking for more numbers.

There's a question around the mandate. What kind of force would this be? Would it be just securing those key installations like Ali mentioned, or will this force be conducting offensive operations?

I think this part is critical because we still have quite a number of offensive operations to be conducted around Jubaland area where there's a huge area that Al -Shabaab still controls and where we expect their leadership is. And so there's that question around will this force be offensive in nature, mobile in nature.

And then there's a question around the composition, which troop contributing countries will be part of this mission, knowing the challenges that are happening between Somalia and Ethiopia and Somalia's apprehension possibly of Ethiopia being a member of the troop contributing countries in this post –ATMIS mission.

And then finally, the big elephant in the room always is the financing of this mission. The EU, I think, has made quite clear that post 2024, they would prefer not to be the ones funding an AU mission. And so we have seen the Somali government ask for this support to come through United Nations Security Council resolution 2719. I believe

that talks of 75 % funding by the UN assessed funds, and 25 % funding by the AU.

So the Somali government has put through this proposal. We don't know if this proposal will be accepted. We do have, I think, six, seven months to go to the end of the ATMIS mission and possibly a new mission. I think it's quite late in the day to still be discussing these four major differences. And so I think the risk is really in a delay in agreeing this agenda and then having forces out in the front lines that are not sure of their next or the next move, the next posture, their pay and all of that. I think the risk comes around that.

In terms of communities, I don't think communities will be any safer or any worse off. I really think this is a risk to the government and the existence of the federal member states and the federal government in the periphery.

ALI

I know a lot has been said about international military approaches to security in Somalia. I mean, like you say, Al -Shabaab showed up from 2007, so for 17 years, this is still ongoing.

But there are also those that ask, why not take a different approach? I mean, if you use the examples of Puntland or Somaliland that have been largely stabilised without international forces. Maybe that's the way to go and these international forces in Somalia haven't really delivered for the Somalis.

Would that be a fair comparison? Would that be something the international military approaches can be accused of?

SAMIRA

I would say Somaliland and Puntland have a different set up. They have, you know, I would say they're not as diverse. The challenges, the grievances are not as deep as you would see happening further south. I think as you go south central Somalia, you find much more diverse communities and much more challenges around, you know, the social contract, the agreement between how communities live with each other.

I truly believe that that really is the approach, trying to find an agreement between communities, trying to invest in that dialogue and reconciliation among communities rather than the military approach. The military approach can take you so far, especially when it comes to Al -Shabaab, but eventually what you need is communities that actually agree to coexist and support each other and agree on a security infrastructure.

Some of the challenges around the offensive operations that we saw that were quite successful was that not all communities joined the government in the fight against al -Shabaab. Some of them saw that if the government won against al -Shabaab, that they would be dominated by previously dominant clans.

And so a lack of agreement in that regard, a lack of discussion on what a post al -Shabaab infrastructure will look like, I think will also hamper whether communities join the Somali government or join the security forces in a positive way.

So I think there is no alternative to that. Eventually, they will have to come to communities agreeing among themselves how they live and who rules and who governs and how they share resources. But until that is done, I think the ATMIS forces have provided a sort of balance of power in the meantime.

But I think it's an unstable peace that will be, you know, thrown off as soon as we have debate around drawing down of numbers and existence of a new mission.

LEWIS

It sounds like Ali has prompted you Samira into quite a clear recommendation for Somalia's allies and friends in terms of investing in reconciliation, in terms of supporting Somalia to address the social contract and using dialogue among Somali's different clans, different groups to address security challenges. Yeah, I assume that sort of seems to be the main recommendation that you're kind of pulling, pulling out of this conversation?

SAMIRA

Yes, I think we have had this conflict for 17 years with Al -Shabaab and before that the state collapsed in 1991. And so we've had 30 years of experience on what works and what doesn't work. And military might works for a short period of time, but what works much longer is actually the communities agreeing on a way forward and a sharing of resources, sharing of power, sharing of authority.

So in the long term, your investment should really be in getting that agreement between communities. There is, of course, scarcity of resources. There's, of course, other difficulties that exist, but there are countries that are way poorer than Somalia. There are countries that have similar difficulties but are able to co-exist. Communities are able to coexist and that's because of agreeing on being part of a whole. I don't think that agreement has been sought or it's going to be found in this way.

ALI

I just wanted to pick on that last point. I mean, the emphasis is placed on the need for having communities reconciliations to ensure this longer term peace in the country. But also when you look on the flip side, you get a sense also that the Somali government keeps getting into defence agreement with multiple international actors.

I mean, most recently we've seen an agreement entered into with Turkey that came quick on the heels of the memorandum of understanding that Ethiopia got into with Somaliland.

So if the government continues investing so much in getting into this kind of defence agreements with different countries, it gives the impression that very little investment is being made into community reconciliation and support.

So where will we eventually end up if the government heads in one way and the aspirations of the communities are quite different?

SAMIRA

It is, I think it is a quite challenging outlook, but as you know, the government does not fund most of these processes. The processes are funded by the international partners. And so it's our hope that, you know, the international partners also invest in the right things. The Somali government, especially around this military framework with Turkey and the MOU with Ethiopia, can argue that this was brought to their table by Ethiopia in January 1st of this year by signing this agreement with Somaliland.

So their argument is it's an existential threat. It's a threat to territorial integrity, and they have to seek partners that can support them in assuring that they can retain that. And so the Somali government aside, I think it's all partners and contributors to the security infrastructure in Somalia to start to do things a bit differently.

Even I think we haven't had a chance to talk about reconciliation with groups such as Al-Shabaab, where there's been discussion previously about, you know, “after we have gone so far with the military win, when do we begin to talk to these groups? Is there a room ever for talking to groups such as Al-Shabaab?”

I think the pressure has to come from within. I don't think it will come from outside. I think for Somali communities to insist on a different way of being governed and a different way of being ruled. We do see a bit of that, but unfortunately now there's quite a bit of support around, you know, this federal member state, federal government infrastructure, the NCC. No talk about whether those

structures really are representative of Somali communities, Somali people.

I think so long as we don't question that, then we continue investing in the wrong things.

LEWIS

Thank you so much, Samira. You covered so well all the different levels of security challenges in Somalia there from what affects the community right up to the international dynamics, as well as having some really clear recommendations for Somalia's international partners and how they support more dialogue, reconciliation and support Somalis to help the social contract. So thank you so much. Great to have you on.

ALI

Thanks for listening, that's all we've got time for

OUTRO –

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