

Not Just “Mowing the Grass”: Unconventional Warfare in Somalia

Description

By Colin Robinson

In June 2022, US Army captain Sean O’Brien [wrote](#) that “mowing the grass” – continual degradation of Al-Shabaab leaders, effectively via airstrikes and small swift raids (in military doctrinal terms, direct action, or DA) – was the most useful option to avoid threats to US interests in Somalia. Since 9/11, the US has worked to deny terrorists any sanctuary in Somalia, which means ensuring stability across the whole country. Securing the sea routes around the Horn of Africa is also important. But many countries, including the US and close allies and regional partners, have struggled for decades to achieve this aim.

The civil war in Somalia [began in the late 1980s](#) as dictatorial repression tightened. Al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, gained prominence fighting the Ethiopian incursion of 2006, and is now the principal threat to stability. It has long been a tenacious enemy, car-bombing and illicitly taxing cities and dominating large swaths of rural Somalia. War and constant political infighting have so torn Somalia apart, O’Brien wrote, that the country is now “fractured, with a paralyzed federal government. As a result, he warned, “mowing the grass” by continuously degrading al-Shabaab’s capabilities is arguably the best option available – if not the only one.

But while direct action continues, it is not the only doctrinal tool. Special operations forces (SOF) have been engaged on the ground [since shortly after 9/11](#), often supporting partner forces. [US efforts in Somalia have also built up the surrogate Somali SOF, Danab](#). The Danab SOF are in good shape, guarded from political turmoil and given enormous US resources, [including for their families](#). But the remainder of the bitterly divided, less elite, “line” army is not. Supporting armies through foreign internal defense (FID) is the longest-established mission of Army Special Forces. FID aims to support a sovereign state’s army with SOF on the ground. The importance of this kind of mission set was highlighted when Captain William Doyle of 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) [received the Silver Star for heroically restarting a Kenyan advance in Gedo in July 2015](#).

Moreover, Somalia has *always* been “fractured.” The concept of the unified sovereign state is a bedrock part of the way Americans see the world. America’s classical liberal values – individualism, liberty, freedom, and justice, among others, shape this view. But Somalis [do not share](#)

[that view](#), instead [following very un-classical liberal values](#). In Somalia, as in [Afghanistan](#), and indeed [many parts of Iraq](#), a sovereign state is simply not seen as absolutely vital. [Somali political life has never been governed by such formal institutions](#). Kinship ties â?? clan ties â?? at different levels have always been much more important, regardless of the official government structure. Every man has the right to speak in clan councils, which decide future actions. And Somali customary law prescribes [collective reparation, rather than individual trials](#), for many crimes.

In part because the bedrock values are different, repeated efforts to strengthen the Somali National Armed Forces (SNAF) have produced very poor results. Despite the many countries whoâ??ve contributed to training Somali troops, [few remain in any formed units; enormous amounts of funding have produced few results](#). The horrendous devastation dictator Mohamed Siad Barre caused in the early years of the Somali Civil War, such as the destruction of Hargeisa in 1988, [also seared distrust of centralized government into large parts of the national consciousness](#). Over 35 years of civil war since the late 1980s have meant that most Somalis see clan ties, not the national government, as their last refuge in times of need.

Al-Shabaab, accordingly, [grew stronger in the first half of 2021](#), as a Somali president with dictatorial tendencies, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed â??Faarmajo,â?• struggled to hold onto power. Joint Special Operations Task Force â?? Somalia and hundreds of contractor affiliates were tasked to train, advise, assist, and accompany â??Somali National Army brigades,â?• largely [loose collections of clansmen that fight and plunder for their clan aims, but receive national funding](#). The clansmen in these â??Somali National Army brigadesâ?• are known to ruthlessly exploit their government status to move far beyond their own clan areas to pillage and oppress other clans. In the capital, there is almost no foundation for a centralised state to attain strong military capability, as national government departments are exploited by [changing sets of rival warlord-politicians. They have little or no interest in building a state; instead, survival, power, and profit are the priority](#). Foreign internal defense can be a foolâ??s errand where local combatants have little genuine interest in building a state. Indeed, the threadbare façade of government in Mogadishu is often used to [extract foreign money that is then diverted into private hands](#).

Thus, while SOF are operating on the ground, FID can be almost completely counterproductive. When rural clansâ?? anger [started to boil over at Al-Shabaab from mid-2022](#), US SOF and Bancroft private military contractor personnel were much better placed to support locally appropriate forces with greater motivation â?? because Al-Shabaab has long brutally oppressed the rural clans. I wrote about the potential of these local forces in an article published in mid-2020. Supporting the rural clansmen, a resistance movement fighting to throw the Al-Shabaab occupying power off their own lands, is almost pure unconventional warfare (UW), defined by the US Army as [â??activities conducted to enable a](#)

[resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power.](#)• There is a mental adjustment that unfolds here; when UW was defined, the enemy was always expected to be an opposing state. But Special Operations doctrine is a [guide for action, rather than a set of fixed rules](#). Al-Shabaab has occupied and oppressed rural clans in Somalia for decades, and is a designated foreign terrorist organization, so the change is logical.

Continual direct action is a tool for Somalia, but not the only one. Solutions for Somalia in coming decades need not revolve around a central national government in Mogadishu. Distrust of any national government over the last 35 years of war since have reinforced Somalis' historical tendency to rely on their clan ties. Trying to suppress clan ties to build up the national army has failed time and again. Despite headwinds, US direct action has fostered a competent Somali partner, the Danab SOF. But the foreign-supported SOF are the only truly useful central state forces. The rural clans, Danab SOF, and fragments of the SNA clan brigades supported by US and contractors, have inflicted [real damage on Al-Shabaab](#). AU-authorized Ethiopian forces have only provided logistical support. This approach has not been tidy or consistent, works through collections of uniquely Somali cultural networks, and hardly resembles any US Army or Marine Corps doctrine, but it has worked. Significant ground has been gained in Galmudug in central Somalia. This kind of partnership reflects the way power is now held in southern Somalia's federal system. It also recognizes and supports the central role clans play in rural life, and offers a better template for the future.

Supporting the downtrodden has been one of the core motivations of Army Special Forces since its creation in 1952. SOF are inherently innovative and adaptable. Here, adapting to support the downtrodden clans is the best way to succeed. Both direct action and unconventional warfare, together, offer the best option to damage Al-Shabaab and create more opportunities for stability in southern Somalia.

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Main image: A Green Beret assigned to 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) trains alongside a Nigerian soldier participating in urban assault training during Exercise Flintlock 2018 in Agadez, Niger, April 14, 2018. U.S. Navy photo by MC3 (SW/AW) Evan Parker/Released)

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