

20

March
2024

BRIEF ANALYSIS
POWERED BY
THE GTTAC
DATABASE

GTTAC Snapshot



About GTTAC

The Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) was created by Development Services Group, Inc., and our partner TraCCC of George Mason University to support our work for the U.S.

Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism (No. GS10F-0166K, 19AQMM18F2561). The GTTAC Record of Incidents Database (GRID) collects and classifies opensource data on terrorism incidents globally and is used to support the development of the Annex of Statistical Information for the Country Reports on Terrorism. Data used in this report are from the GRID.

Views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United States government.

For more information

gethelp@gttac.com

www.gttac.com



Who Is al-Shabaab?

Origins

Al-Shabaab originated in the early years of the new millennium as the militant wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia. Initially responding to local power struggles and external interventions, the group evolved from radical elements within the ICU into an independent jihadist entity with distinct objectives, aiming to establish its interpretation of Islamic law in Somalia.

Ideology

Al-Shabaab's ideology, Salafi jihadism, is deeply entrenched in a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam. At its core is the fervent aspiration to institute an Islamic state in Somalia governed by a stringent application of Sharia, Islamic law based on the Quran. The group vehemently opposes any form of foreign intervention, particularly denouncing the presence of African Union forces and Western influences in East Africa. Beyond its regional goals, al-Shabaab has expressed broader pan-Islamist ambitions, aligning its ideological stance with a global jihadist narrative.

Capacity

Al-Shabaab has exhibited military prowess, employing sophisticated guerrilla warfare and asymmetric tactics to navigate the complex terrain of Somali conflict. It acts in central and southern Somali, across the border to Kenya, and, by 2023, into Ethiopia. Despite facing territorial losses, the group remains remarkably resilient, effectively controlling rural areas and strategically launching attacks in urban centers. Its adaptive strategies, combined with an intricate recruitment apparatus, sustain its operational capacity, estimated at some 12,000 fighters. In regions under its influence, al-Shabaab administers a form of governance influenced by its strict interpretation of Sharia. This governance model involves the imposition of a unique judicial system, meting out harsh punishments, and providing limited social services. The group exercises control over educational institutions, enforcing gender segregation in schools and imposing restrictions on cultural and recreational activities such as music and sports. GTTAC's GRID data shows that while the group's activity has waned over the past few years to less than 250 incidents in 2023, the incidents they perpetrate remain highly lethal with over 1,100 fatalities again last year.

Visit GTTAC.COM for more custom content based upon the most up-to-the-minute data available in our industry.

Our staff routinely cover topics currently in the news as well as topics likely to become headline news in the coming weeks and months.

Common Tactics

Al-Shabaab is one of the top terror organizations, claiming responsibility for close to the highest number of incidents. It employs a diverse array of tactics, including suicide bombings, targeted assassinations, and well-coordinated ambushes. The group has gained notoriety for its frequent use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne IEDs. Despite an overall decline in the number of its terror incidents, al-Shabaab's growing skills have enabled it recently to pull off more highly complex attacks. High-profile attacks on civilian targets, such as hotels and markets, serve dual purposes: instilling fear among the populace and challenging the legitimacy of the Somali government.

Funding

The group secures funds through a multifaceted approach, engaging in extortion, imposing taxes in areas under its control, and participating in illicit activities such as smuggling charcoal. Financial support from the Somali diaspora and sympathizers abroad further contributes to its resources. Al-Shabaab's affiliation with transnational jihadist networks, notably al-Qa'ida, adds another dimension to its funding streams, reinforcing its financial resilience.

International Relations

Since affiliating with al-Qa'ida in 2012, al-Shabaab's ties to the global jihadist movement have attracted international attention and condemnation. The group faces sanctions imposed by the United Nations and is designated as a terrorist organization by numerous countries. Regional efforts, spearheaded by the African Union Mission in Somalia (or AMISOM), aim to counter al-Shabaab's influence, contributing to ongoing endeavors to restore stability in the region. As al-Shabaab continues to navigate the intricate geopolitical landscape, its capacity to adapt and sustain itself presents persistent challenges to regional and international efforts seeking peace and stability in Somalia.



al-Shabaab Timeline: Major Events

2006: Formation and Emergence

- Al-Shabaab originates as the armed wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia.

2008: Break From Islamic Courts Union and Territorial Expansion

- Al-Shabaab formally breaks ties with the ICU and begins its independent operations.
- The group seizes control of key towns and expands its territorial influence in southern and central Somalia.

2010: Kampala Bombings

- In July, al-Shabaab claims responsibility for twin bombings in Kampala, Uganda during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, targeting crowds watching the matches. The attacks result in numerous casualties.

2011: AMISOM and Kenyan Intervention

- The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces, including troops from Kenya, intensify efforts to counter al-Shabaab.
- Kenyan forces launch Operation Linda Nchi, aiming to push al-Shabaab out of border regions.

2012: Al-Qa'ida Affiliation

- Al-Shabaab formally announces its allegiance to al-Qa'ida, deepening its ties to the global jihadist network.

2013: Westgate Mall Attack

- Al-Shabaab perpetrates a high-profile attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, resulting in numerous casualties and drawing international attention.

2015: AMISOM Operations and Internal Divisions

- AMISOM forces, in collaboration with Somali government troops, launch offensives against al-Shabaab strongholds.
- Internal divisions within al-Shabaab surface, with factional infighting reported.

2017: Mogadishu Truck Bombing

- Al-Shabaab carries out a devastating truck bombing in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, killing hundreds and injuring many more. This is the deadliest attack in Somalia's history.

2019–20: U.S. Airstrikes and Attacks

- The United States conducts airstrikes against al-Shabaab targets in Somalia as part of counterterrorism efforts.
- Al-Shabaab continues to launch attacks, including assaults on military bases and urban areas.

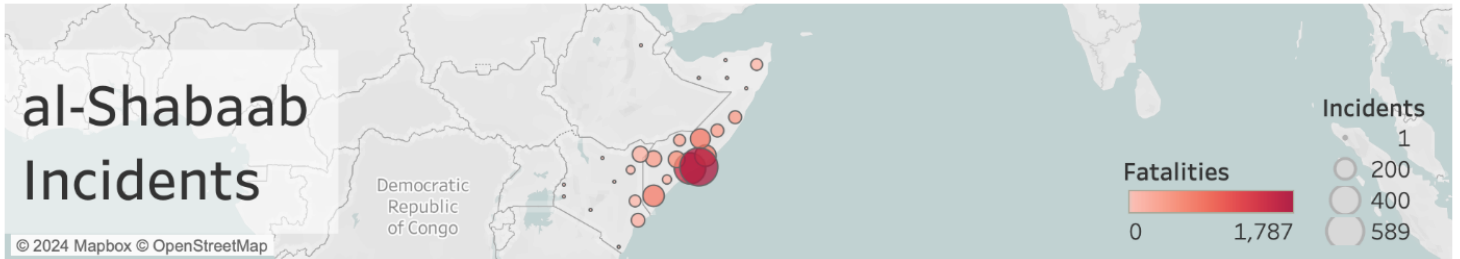
2021: Withdrawal of U.S. Troops and Ongoing Attacks

- The United States announces the withdrawal of its remaining troops from Somalia, shifting its counterterrorism strategy.
- Al-Shabaab remains active, carrying out attacks against both military and civilian targets in Somalia and neighboring countries.

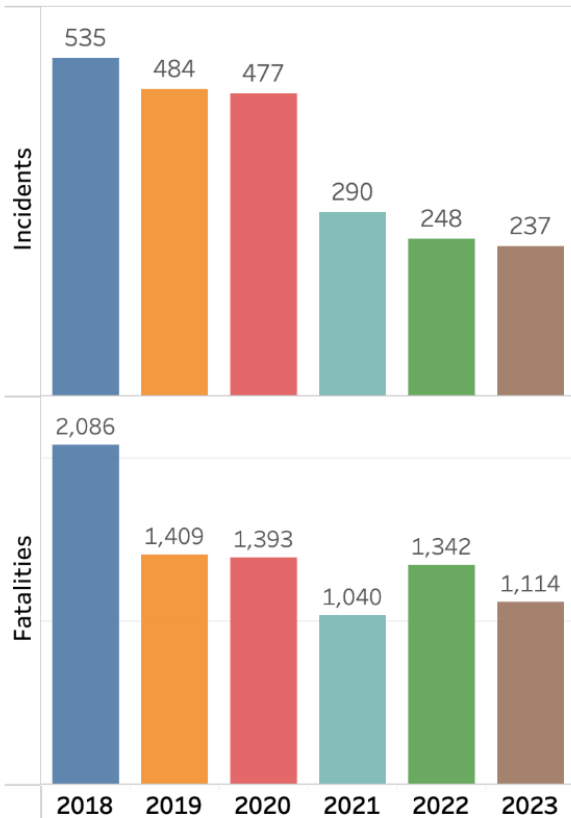
2022–24: Ongoing Operations

- Al-Shabaab maintains its presence in rural areas, continuing guerrilla warfare tactics against Somali government forces and AMISOM troops.
- The group expands its attacks into Kenya and Ethiopia.

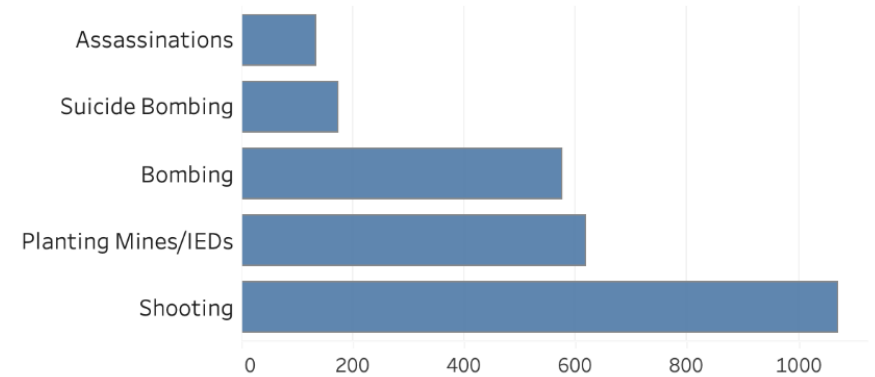
Figure 1



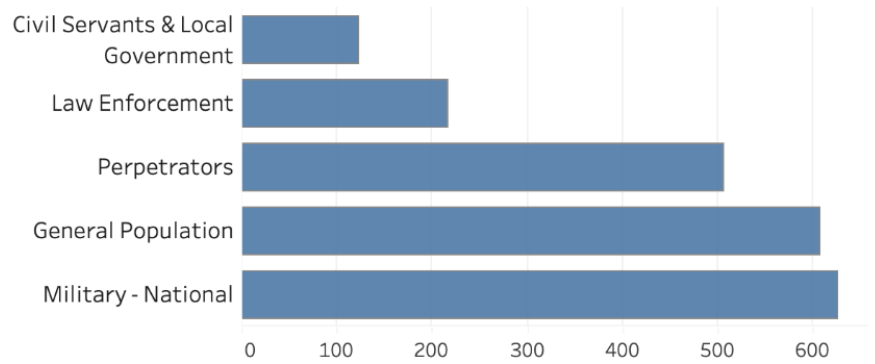
Incidents by year



Incidents by tactic type (2018-2023)



Incidents by victim type (2018-2023)



Contributing Authors: Eoin B. Healy, Suat Cubukcu

Note: GTTAC data collection for Yemen and al-Shabaab is still incomplete for 2023.