

Query response

Somalia: Al-Shabaab and local employees of AMISOM, the UN and other international organisations

- To what extent are local employees of AMISOM, the UN and other international organisations al-Shabaab targets?
- Do local employees risk other reactions from al-Shabaab?
- Do families of local employees risk reactions from al-Shabaab?

Sources and limitations

Information on issues relating to al-Shabaab in Southern Somalia, particularly outside Mogadishu, is generally very limited. As there are no records of people that have been killed by al-Shabaab and the causes thereof, the situation is difficult to ascertain. This query response is mostly based on information gathered during a fact-finding trip to the cities of Mogadishu and Beled Weyne in February 2015. The source material is limited and the information is either anecdotal or reflects the source's subjective ideas or assessments. The sources have retained anonymity due to the potential consequences of being cited in a public report.

Local staff are Somalis working for the African Union's forces in Somalia (African Union Mission to Somalia – AMISOM), the UN or other international organisations in Southern Somalia. The term does not include returning Somalis with citizenship in other countries. Local staff primarily perform simple tasks such as construction work and cleaning, but may also have duties that involve a greater degree of exposure and contact with the local community, such as guarding and interpreting. Somalis who perform duties directly related to military operations against al-Shabaab, such as espionage, are not included in this category.

Local staff of AMISON

AMISOM is at war with al-Shabaab in support of the Somali government (Somali Federal Government - SFG). A number of incidents, including the attack on Halane Base Camp, AMISOM's headquarters in Mogadishu, 25 December 2014, show that AMISOM is a priority target for al-Shabaab (AMISOM 2014). Landinfo has no information on the number of locals employed by AMISOM, nor how many may have actually been exposed to reactions from al-

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Shabaab because of their employment. Some of the representatives of the international organisations that Landinfo met during the fact-finding trip to Mogadishu in February 2015 said that local employees of AMISON were more exposed to al-Shabaab threats than local employees of the UN or other international organisations (source F, meeting in Mogadishu, 10 February 2015; source X, meeting in Nairobi 17 February 2015; source K, e-mail, 28 April 2015). However, source F emphasised that in his opinion the risk local staff have of being killed by al-Shabaab is generally low no matter what international organisation they work for. The source justified this view by saying that al-Shabaab has limited resources and therefore puts a priority on higher targets. None of the sources referred to specific figures.

During a three day stay in Mogadishu in February 2015, Landinfo on several occasions drove past Medina Gate, the gate to Halene Base Camp, which was attacked in December 2014.¹ We noticed that many of the local staff were queueing every morning outside the gate to go to work. They were easily identifiable because they were wearing work clothes. Our local assistant during the stay, source H, confirmed that these were local staff of AMISON (conversations in Mogadishu 10-12 February 2015; e-mail 27 March 2015; e-mail 5 May 2015). Source H explained that the local staff did get some threats, but that they took the risk to support their families. A few had been killed by al-Shabaab, but such incidents were few, according to the source. The source explained that the local employees were relatively safe because of their sheer numbers and because they lived near the airport area. Source H did not refer to any figures.

In Landinfo's opinion, it is likely to assume that the situation for local employees of AMISON largely corresponds to that of local employees of the UN, as both AMISOM and the UN are al-Shabaab targets.

Local staff of the UN

Just like AMISOM, the UN is also an al-Shabaab target due to its political support of SFG. This is reflected by repeated al-Shabaab attacks on UN targets, most recently when a vehicle from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was blown up in Garowe in April 2015 (UN Security Council 2015). The UN Common Compound, the UN headquarters in Mogadishu, was reopened in April 2014 (UN Security Council 2014).² A representative of an international organisation (source B) also pointed out that the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF moved into their own building complex along Airport Road outside the airport area in 2014 (e-mail, 13 May 2015). However, there is no doubt that the fear of being attacked by al-Shabaab is still present within the UN.

When Landinfo visited the city of Belet Weyne in February 2015, we stayed in the UN camp there, which at the time was under construction and not fully operational. The camp is located near the airstrip outside the city, right by the base of the Djiboutian AMISOM contingent. During the stay in the camp we met a local Somali who worked for the UN (source O, conversations in Belet Weyne 14-15 February 2015; e-mail 27 May 2015). He explained that

¹ The camp is located next to the airport in the southern part of Mogadishu. Medina Gate is also used by the UN and other international organisations to get to and from the airport.

² The UN Common Compound was attacked by al-Shabaab on 19 June 2013 (UN News Centre 2013). After the attack the UN moved their offices inside the airport area, a heavily guarded area that is physically separate from the rest of the city (WFP 2014, p. 2).

he commuted daily between work in the UN camp and his home in Belet Weyne. He also claimed that all employees in the UN (and AMISOM), including local employees, were al-Shabaab targets. When asked whether he feared being killed by al-Shabaab, he said that he was affiliated with a strong clan in the area and therefore felt relatively safe.

A representative of an international organisation (source D) emphasised that all local employees are al-Shabaab targets and explained that the UN uses a lot of resources to ensure their safety (meeting in Mogadishu, 10 February 2015; e-mail, 26 March 2015). Source D pointed out, amongst other things, that local employees seldom use public transport and that lists of local employees are not shared with the Somali government for fear that al-Shabaab will obtain them. The source also explained that local employees had been pressured to cooperate with al-Shabaab because al-Shabaab threatened to kill family members.

According to source D about 2,000 local employees worked for the UN throughout Somalia, directly and indirectly.³ During the period from May 2014 to February 2015, al-Shabaab killed at least four of them. All the sources Landinfo spoke with during the fact-finding trip in February 2015, including source D, also stated that al-Shabaab has the capacity to gather information and the ability to carry out attacks in SFG areas. In Landinfo's opinion the number of casualties does not indicate that the killing of local UN employees is a priority for al-Shabaab. This is in line with source F's opinion that al-Shabaab has limited resources and therefore puts a priority on higher targets.

Local employees of other international organisations

Other international organisations are not necessarily targets of al-Shabaab in the same way as AMISOM and the UN. International organisations may be perceived as agents of Western influence, but some organisations get permission from al-Shabaab to operate in al-Shabaab-controlled areas (Jackson & Aynte 2013, p. 15).⁴ Whether other international organisations are considered targets of al-Shabaab thus varies depending on the degree to which they are associated with SFG/AMISOM, the degree to which they have permission and support from powerful clans in the area and the position al-Shabaab leaders have towards such organisations (source X, meeting in Nairobi, 17 February 2015). During the fact-finding trip in February 2015 Landinfo met representatives of four international non-governmental organisations with long time experience and presence in various parts of Southern Somalia (source E, source F, source K and source X). The source material is thus limited and not necessarily representative of all international organisations. The organisations Landinfo met do not operate in al-Shabaab-controlled areas, but emphasised that this does not mean that al-Shabaab did not have influence in the areas.

Sources E, K and X said that al-Shabaab is a threat to their local employees, and that this was taken seriously. However, none of them had experienced local employees in their organisations having been killed by al-Shabaab because of their employment.

³ According to the source about half of them worked directly for the UN.

⁴ The organisations must then pay taxes to al-Shabaab and submit to their rules.

Source K (e-mail 28 April 2015) explained that none of their local employees had been killed by al-Shabaab, but emphasised that the local employees were required to follow a number of rules and other security measures to avoid being subjected to any reactions from al-Shabaab.

Source E (meeting in Mogadishu 10 February 2015; e-mail 29 April 2015) said that they had about 300 local employees in Somalia, and that none had been subjected to direct attacks by al-Shabaab.⁵ Some local employees received threats by SMS, but it was difficult to determine whether these threats in fact came from al-Shabaab. The source assumed that the majority of the threats were made by other people, and explained this with high unemployment rates. Nevertheless, the source said that the threats from al-Shabaab were real. Many local employees did not even tell their own families that they worked for an international organisation. The source also said that the organisation discouraged their employees from travelling into al-Shabaab-controlled areas, as being associated with international organisations can be tantamount to being suspected of espionage.⁶ Some local employees still travelled into such areas for personal reasons, but they took precautions not to have Western contact names on their mobile phones and not to have ID documents or other objects that might reveal that they work for an international organisation.

Source X (meeting in Nairobi 17 February 2015; e-mail 27 May 2015) explained that they had about 30 local employees in Somalia, and that none had been killed by al-Shabaab. The source emphasised that clan relationships may influence whether local employees risk reactions from al-Shabaab. This is in line with the experience of source O, the local UN employee in Belet Weyne. Source X pointed to two incidents where local employees were almost executed by al-Shabaab because they worked for an international organisation. The first incident took place in 2011 in an area that in principle should have been free of al-Shabaab. The local employee was attacked because he handed out aid without permission from al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab threatened to kill him, but elders from his own clan and elders from other clans in the area intervened and rescued him. The local employee was whipped before being released.

The other incident took place in 2013, when two local employees were attacked because al-Shabaab suspected them of spying for the Americans. This time as well elders from the clans in the area intervened to rescue the local employees. The clan that the local employee belonged to threatened to perform revenge killings against members of the local al-Shabaab leader's clan, after which the local employees were released. Furthermore, source X said that it was not unusual for some members of a clan to work for an international organisation, while other members of the same clan joined al-Shabaab. This way the clan can reap benefits from both sides. The source also pointed out that al-Shabaab members sometimes tipped off clan members who worked for international organisations to stay away from certain areas or a particular stretch of road that was vulnerable to attack.

As previously mentioned, source F (meeting in Mogadishu 10 February 2015) emphasised that in his opinion the risk of being killed by al-Shabaab is generally low for local staff, no matter what international organisation they work for.

⁵ A local employee was killed when al-Shabaab bombed an eatery in Mogadishu. The source explained that the local employee was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

⁶ People who are suspected of espionage risk being killed by al-Shabaab.

Use of local employees as informants

Source F pointed out that local employees can be valuable informants for al-Shabaab. Source D also explained that local employees can be pressured to cooperate with al-Shabaab. Both sources said that al-Shabaab pressured people to cooperate by threatening to kill family members. According to source F such threats are often made by phone. The source also explained that al-Shabaab compensates families financially if they cooperate.

This information is corroborated by the report "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia" from the Institute for Security Studies and Finn Church Aid of September 2014.⁷ The report also indicates that information gathering is crucial to al-Shabaab's ability to plan and carry out attacks, and that local employees of international organisations are pressured to provide or obtain such information (Botha & Abdile 2014, p. 13). According to the report the recruitment of informants occurs through bribery, intimidation, threats and the use of violence. Refusing to cooperate with al-Shabaab or give them information can lead to reprisals. Many cooperate for fear of being killed. According to the report close family and friends may also be subjected to pressure from al-Shabaab to obtain information.

Summary

As there are no available records of people that have been killed by al-Shabaab and the causes thereof, it is difficult to ascertain the situation. Al-Shabaab poses a potential threat to local employees of international organisations, particularly AMISOM and the UN. However, the information presented in this Response does not suggest that the killing of local employees working for AMISOM, the UN or other international organisations is a priority for al-Shabaab.⁸ However, local employees may be valuable informants to al-Shabaab. Family members of local employees may also be subjected to pressure in this context.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

⁷ The report states that it is based on information from 95 former al-Shabaab members in Mogadishu (Botha & Abdile 2014, p. 2).

⁸ However, individuals might of course get killed by al-Shabaab.

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Translation provided by the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Belgium.

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