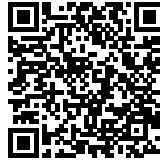




A DIFFICULT RESTART FOR A FAILED STATE

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On May 3, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the UN Security Council, the US State Department and the European High Representative Josep Borrell issued harsh statements condemning an attack by the Islamist Al-Shabab militias on an advanced base in Elbaraf, in the Middle Shabelle region, held by Burundian troops, of ATMIS, the recently activated stabilization operation of the African Union, established at the end of the mandate of AMISOM.

There are conflicting reports of the attack. Officially, there were about ten killed among the "green helmets." Other sources report instead of almost two hundred killed and that the base was briefly occupied by Islamist militiamen, who after having sacked and burned it, abandoned the position. The gravity of the incident was however confirmed by the fact that the President of the Commission of the African Union (former Chadian foreign minister Moussa Faki) also broke silence by condemning the incident. Although AMISOM (like ATMIS) is, albeit in a politically ambiguous way, an articulation of the Union, a declaration from Addis Ababa reveals the gravity of the moment (especially considering that the regional organization has always been very sparing regarding public statements about Somalia, which is considered the most difficult area for the organization).

The attack on the base, in central Somalia, part of the Al-Shabab, was a grave signal to the AU, but also to the UN (whose Security Council Resolution 2628 of 31 March 2022 sanctioned the end of AMISOM and the activation of ATMIS), and to the EU, which has several operations on site, such as EUTM-Somalia (which has been operating since 2010 and in which military instructors from Italy, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Romania, UK and Serbia take part), the EU CAP-Somalia (which has been operating since 2013), and the EUNAVFOR "Atalanta" (activated in 2008). It also means that the change of name means nothing and the Islamicists will continue to strike.

ATMIS (African [Union] Transition Mission in Somalia) replaced AMISOM (African [Union] Mission in Somalia) on 1 April, in line with a decision by the AU Peace and Security Council. The new mission has the mandate to support the Somali government in the implementation of the Transition Plan and in the transfer of greater responsibilities to the Somali armed forces and police. The activation of ATMIS was scheduled for December 2021 but disagreements with the Somali authorities delayed it and an agreement was finally reached on what appears to be more only a change of name and an extension of the existing mandate. ATMIS will operate until the end of 2024, after which all responsibilities will be transferred to the Somali security forces.

The ATMIS "capacity" of approximately 18,000 soldiers, 1,000 policemen (from Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Djibouti, Burundi, Uganda, Sierra Leone) and a hundred civilian staffers (all diplomats seconded from their respective nations and based in Nairobi) seems a mirror of its predecessor, as well as a large part of its mandate. The work of AMISOM, which began in March 2007, was focused on degrading the military capacity of Al-Shabab and strengthening the capacity of the Somali army and police, so that the mission could eventually withdraw as soon as possible. This happened only in part; the pan-African forces engaged in violent clashes with the Islamist militias, suffering heavy losses (some sources refer to up to 3,000 KIA), and even carried out an amphibious assault in 2012 in Chisimaio.

The mandate of the "green helmets" has been renewed several times and came to a difficult end in 2021. However, the exit did not happen, as the security threats that necessitated the arrival of pan-African soldiers continue to exist and Somalia continues to face three emergencies: security, governance, and development. These emergencies continue to grip the country and AMISOM, which was supposed to be the first response to security challenges, and the start of a positive loop, in which governance and development would lead the country out of the condition of a failed state (in existence since the fall of the never sufficiently deprecated regime of Siad Barre, which laid the foundations of the current instability). There has only been control of the situation, but no reversing of the negative trend.

To determine the future of AMISOM, the AU and the UN conducted independent assessments last year and various options were proposed. An agreement was required on the mandate, composition, size, strategic and specific objectives of a new mission and the tasks of the military, civilian and police components. These processes have made the relations between the international community and the Somali authorities very tense, which although divided over everything, were unanimous in the very strong opposition to any possible reduction of forces and substantial modification of the mandate of AMISOM due to the slow process of integration between the national armed and security forces and those of the autonomous regions of Puntland and Jubaland.

Such was the hostility that last November the deputy head of the mission, the Ugandan diplomat Simon Mulongo was expelled, and a week after the start of ATMIS (!). The same was done with the Special Representative of the African Union Commission Chairperson for Somalia (SRCC), the Mozambican diplomat Francisco Madeira.

Now the mission is guided by an acting head, and Addis Ababa is negotiating with Mogadishu for another head of mission; and clearly the problem is not in the choice of the person but what the mission

should do. This shows how for ATMIS the scenario is difficult and all uphill even without Al-Shabab. Somalia's government wants ATMIS to focus on implementing the Transition Plan, developed in 2018, to transfer security responsibilities from AMISOM to the country's security forces, but with substantial cash flows to equip and train them. It has recently been revised and will be implemented (hopefully) over the next three years. The AU and the UN agreed to this approach. Bankole Adeoye, the Nigerian diplomat who is the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs and Head of the Peace and Security Council, said the stabilization and construction goals of the Somali state and the activation of ATMIS will be fully in line with the Transition Plan.

The AU Peace and Security Council outlined a mandate for the new mission which included reducing the military capabilities of Al-Shabab and other terrorist groups, providing security, building the capabilities of security forces, justice and local authorities and support for peace and reconciliation. But as well, the mandate of AMISOM was the same and was aligned with the Transition Plan, so there was nothing new in ATMIS in this regard, compared to the previous one.

The biggest change is perhaps that the emphasis on the idea of a "transition" is most strongly rooted in the logic of the new mission, which has a four-step timeline for working with the Somali government to implement the Transition Plan. In addition, some minor adjustments should also occur, such as realignment of ATMIS facilities relative to those of AMISOM and greater command and control authority under the mission force commander; but these are limited overall. In terms of operational changes, ATMIS will differ from AMISOM in increasing mobility, lethality, and efficiency in every sector of the mission, with the main goal of rapidly degrading the capabilities of Al-Shabab and other extremist militant groups.

This capacity should increase soon, after it was dramatically reduced when the US forces present in Somalia were withdrawn in a controversial decision by President Trump in December 2020. Just after the election of the new President of Somalia, the Pentagon notified the return of a substantial presence. This presence, with special forces operators and drone units, and after the withdrawal was re-deployed in Djibouti, will increase the capabilities of the pan-African troops.

Regardless of the May 2 attack, Al-Shabab continues to exert strong pressure on international and Somali forces and the group still controls vast territories of central and southern Somalia. It carries out deadly raids in the Somali capital itself and has substantial financial resources (according to a research institute based in Mogadishu, in 2021 it has collected about \$180 Million in revenue [taxes and customs])

and has spent 24 million dollars on weapons). In recent months, many attacks have been reported, aggravated by social strikes and riots in Mogadishu and Beledweyne which caused over 53 deaths.

As mentioned, the presence of the "green helmets" was envisaged as an element of activation of a process of national unification, albeit in a federal context. Thus, prioritizing the political deadlock would help resolve the country's security challenges; but the replacement of AMISOM with ATMIS comes at a critical time. Political tensions in the country still threaten the modest progress made over the years. The divisions among the Somali elites over the distribution of power and resources are at the heart of all problems. Two peaceful transitions of power occurred in 2012 and 2017, but the third faltered due to disputes over election management. President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmaajo," in power since 2017, remained in office after his term expired in February 2021 and he was re-elected on 15 May, ending, at least formally, the institutional stalemate and re-activating a more serene dialogue also with the international community.

Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble (the defeated competitor of "Farmaajo" in the presidential run) has been tasked with reforming the electoral process. But progress has been slow, despite the tireless mediation work of UNPOS (UN Political Office for Somalia). The country's future is unpredictable, with the political impasse sometimes leading to armed clashes and persistent external interference, such as by Turkey, Qatar and the UAE, which have their own agendas (and substantial military presences on the ground) and which do not necessarily coincide with the plans of the UN and the EU. (But then the UK also has its own bilateral training mission of the Somali armed forces, the "Tangham" operation, with about sixty instructors; and Italy, the former colonial power, has a similar one, MIADIT-Somalia, which is focused on training the Somali and Djibouti police forces and which works closely with EUCAP-Somalia).

In terms of the wider regional dynamics, how the new government will position itself in the neighbourhood will have implications in terms of realignment of regional politics and may affect the project of a tripartite alliance of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The outcome of the election will also affect Somalia's relations with Gulf countries. Qatar is said to have supported Farmaajo's re-election, whereas the UAE has maintained ties with Roble and some of the federal member states.

ATMIS will also suffer the same financial problems as AMISOM. The United Nations has provided logistical support to the mission, and will continue to do so with the UNSOS (UN Support Office for Somalia). The new (or old) AU presence in Somalia will impact also in the format and mandate of UNSOS, which will get a "technical" extension mandate in the month of May from the Security Council

in the perspective of a strategic assessment of the mission and a possible re-tailoring.

The EU, it is supposed, will continue to pay the salaries of ATMIS military and police personnel, as it had done for AMISOM. But the EU has progressively reduced its support in recent years (also to protest the internal policies of some countries participating in AMISOM, especially in the areas of political and civil liberties), and its intentions for ATMIS are not yet clear, even if the EU Delegation in Somalia assured that the organization is ready to contribute and ensure predictability of funding as long as the configuration plan is realistic, pragmatic and focused.

Thus, it appears that ATMIS will not differ substantially from AMISOM in its ultimate purposes. It will mainly be a continuation of the current military support which, although essential for the security of the country, will not be new.

As political deadlock is at the heart of Somalia's social and security problems. Resolving these should be the priority; and the recent election of a new President is not a guarantee for such a resolution, given the controversial and conflictive political life of the country. If it is to differ from AMISOM, the mandate of ATMIS and the reconfiguration of international and local forces should include a solid political commitment to support reconciliation between the country's divided political groups and better political cooperation between the UN and AU (and EU). Otherwise, the exercise of simply renaming the mission without addressing the institutional and political problems in the first place that afflict the country and that keep it anchored to the condition of a "failed state," will not help much to change. Analyzing the recent developments in Somalia and the Horn of Africa, a region of increasing importance, naturally leads to a broadening of view, considering, or at least trying to consider, the possible future regional and sub-regional repercussions of the war in Ukraine. Russia's relations with Africa are under heavy pressure in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine and amidst the articulate reactions from the continent's states to the new war in Europe.

In recent years, Moscow has strengthened ties with countries across the continent, especially those plagued by internal violence and which are also disillusioned with Western powers. Russia remains a leading arms supplier and Russian private military contractors continue to expand their presence, most recently in Mali, Central Africa, Cameroon, and Sudan (not counting the political-diplomatic forays into Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad). Whether Russia is pursuing a broader strategy, or simply engaging in tactical power plays, focused to disturb the role and presence of Western powers in Africa, remains a matter of debate. Russia has long sought a naval base on the Red Sea and holds its

permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council to influence the Continent.

Africa's response to the Ukrainian crisis has been far from united. During the historic session of the UN General Assembly in early March, the emerging rifts were clearly shown: only about half of African states supported the resolution's denunciation of Russian aggression; one, the only one of the Continent and furthermore belonging to the Horn of Africa, Eritrea, has opposed. While some countries have strongly condemned the invasion as a flagrant violation of crucial norms, others have been more hesitant, often emphasizing the West's inconsistent commitment to these same principles in other situations, and the West's murky and contradictory statements and actions.

It is a fact that in the African Continent, and in the very sensitive region of the Horn of Africa and its surrounding areas (the Suez Canal/Red Sea/Bab-el-Mandeb Strait axis), the situation remains open to interference, if not directly Russian, possibly by other players (such as Iran, present in Yemen), with further upheavals in an already fragile region.

Enrico Magnani, PhD, is a UN officer who specializes in military history, politico-military affairs, peacekeeping and stability operations. (The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations).

Featured image: mural by Nujuum Hashi Ahmed, 2020.

