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The Battle at El Adde: The Kenya Defence Forces, al-Shabaab, and Unanswered Questions

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Introduction

In January 2016, Kenya suffered its largest ever military defeat at the battle of El Adde in the Gedo region of Somalia. However, the precise extent of that defeat and many of the details have not been made public. Despite an inquiry within the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and an ongoing parliamentary inquiry, there is not yet a full public account of the battle and the lessons that should be drawn from it. Nor has there been much public debate about what it means for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) more generally.

El Adde was the third AMISOM forward operating base overrun by al-Shabaab in seven months. Al-Shabaab's tactics should thus have been predictable. Yet most of the available evidence suggests the main problems at El Adde were the poor operational setup and procedures and the decision to deploy such vulnerable forward operating bases in remote areas garrisoned by so few troops. To address these issues, this report provides a preliminary analysis of the battle and some of the wider issues with respect to AMISOM and raises some of the unanswered questions that should be addressed by Kenya's parliamentary inquiry and others interested in defeating al-Shabaab.

The Battle

On the morning of January 15, 2016, al-Shabaab fighters attacked and overran an AMISOM forward operating base garrisoned by KDF troops from the 9th Rifle Battalion.[1] Following several failed rescue attempts, KDF ground troops finally reached the base on January 18th and took full control of the camp the following day.[2]

Initially al-Shabaab claimed the attack was the work of its Saleh Nabhan brigade.[3] Al-Shabaab spokesmen declared their fighters killed more than 100

1 Testimony from a local resident recalled the attack starting at about 5:30am. Aislinn Laing, "Bodies of Kenyan Soldiers Dragged through Somali Streets after al-Shabaab Attack on Base," *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2016, available at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/somalia/12101407/Bodies-of-Kenyan-soldiers-dragged-through-Somali-streets-after-al-Shabaab-attack-on-base.html . A KDF hostage talking on al-Shabaab's video says the attack started at 5:00am. Al-Shabaab, "The Sheikh Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Raid (Al-Kataib)," April 10, 2016, at 36:41 in the video. General Mwathethe said his government first received news of the attack at 6:30am. Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," January 21, 2016, p. 2, available at www.mod.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CDF-press-conference-Elade-21-Jan.pdf .

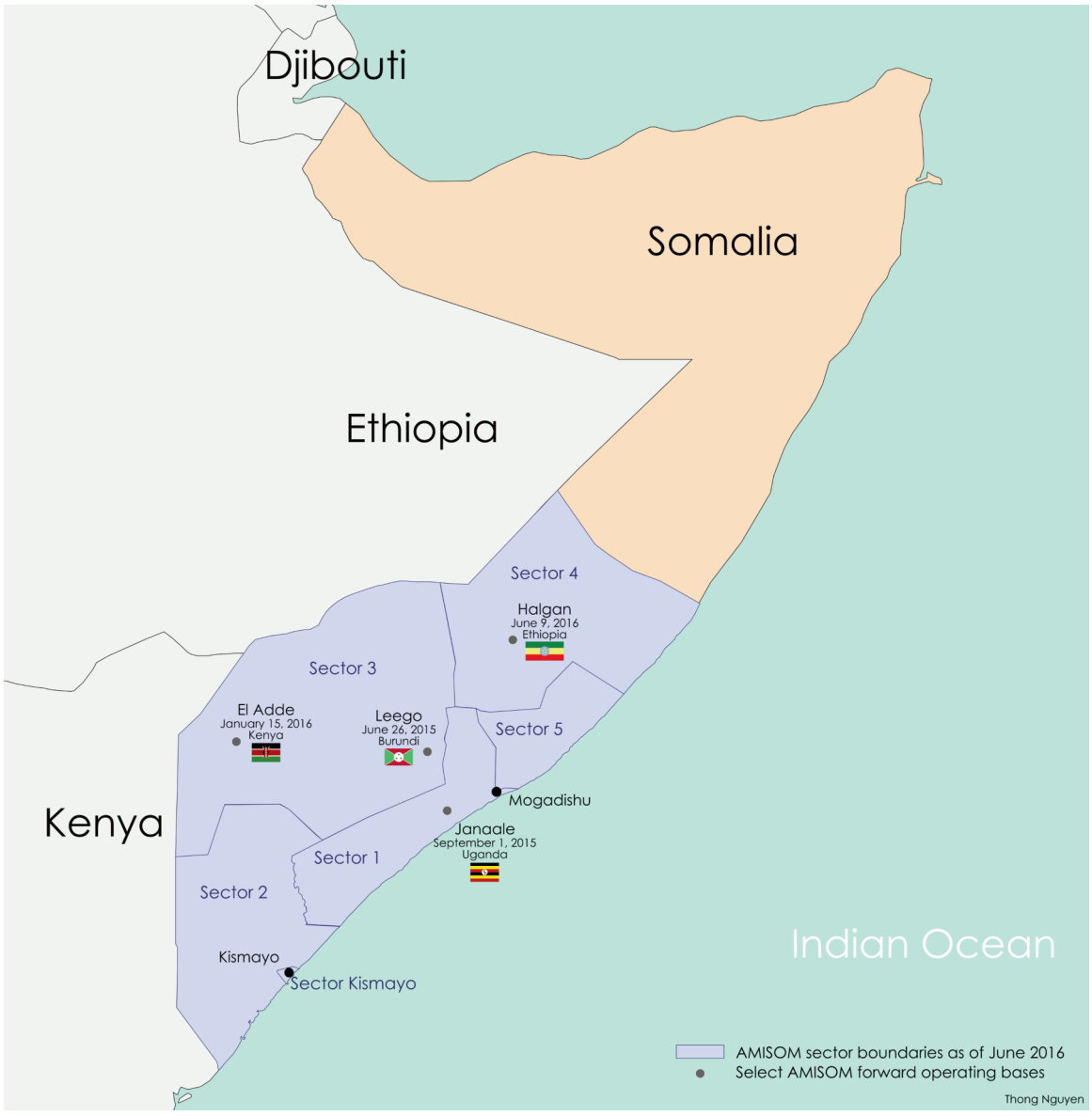
2 Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," p. 3.

3 "Al-Shabaab's Nabhan Brigade Resurfaces and Raids AMISOM Base in Somalia," Somalia Newsroom, January 15, 2016, available at https://somalianewsroom.com/2016/01/15/al-shabaabs-nabhan-brigade-resurfaces-and-raids-amisom-base-in-somalia/ . It is likely that al-Shabaab uses different names to refer to its tactic of massing formerly dispersed forces into a battalion to undertake a major attack. The most common label has been the Abu

KDF soldiers at El Adde and had taken an undisclosed number hostage. Shortly after the battle, al-Shabaab posted numerous photographs of the fallen KDF soldiers on the Internet, making its claim plausible.[4] The group also exhibited roughly a dozen identity cards of KDF soldiers it claims were among the dead at El Adde.[5] Following the battle, residents of El Adde told the BBC that al-Shabaab dragged the bodies of some of the Kenyan soldiers through the streets.[6]

Nearly three months later, al-Shabaab released a forty-eight-minute propaganda video about the

Figure 1. AMISOM sectors and locations/dates of major attacks on forward operating bases



Zubeyr brigade, but the name of Saleh Nabhan was probably invoked to draw a connection with earlier attacks by al-Shabaab forces inside Kenya. See "Al-Shabaab Now," Our Man on the Horn, June 12, 2016, available at https://ourmanonthehorn.com/2016/06/12/al-shabaab-now/ .

4 For example, see https://archive.org/stream/InPictures100KenyanInvadersMassacred/In%20Pictures%20-%20100%20Kenyan%20Invaders%20Massacred#page/n0/mode/1up . It is very difficult to arrive at an accurate total of KDF fatalities from these pictures alone, not least because some of the photos appear to be of the same bodies but taken from different angles.

5 These are shown in both "The Sheikh Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Raid (Al-Kataib)," released April 10, 2016, and in another video released by al-Shabaab, titled "El Adde: Part 1," released on February 22, 2016.

6 Laing, "Bodies of Kenyan Soldiers."

battle.[7] It included scenes where al-Shabaab paraded and interrogated several wounded KDF soldiers. The militants also captured approximately thirty military vehicles and a range of weaponry and ammunition.[8]

El Adde's Significance

The battle at El Adde is significant for several reasons. For al-Shabaab, the battle provides a significant psychological boost and grist to its propaganda mill. For Kenya, on the other hand, it has the opposite effect. First, the loss of almost an entire company of troops is an extraordinary military event. The Kenyan government has not publicized how many soldiers were deployed at the El Adde base when the attack occurred, nor has it confirmed if all those garrisoned there were present when the battle commenced. AMISOM's register listed 209 troops assigned to El Adde (in a company-plus formation).[9] But other AMISOM sources suggested there were 160 KDF troops in El Adde on January 15th.[10] A KDF prisoner speaking on al-Shabaab's propaganda video says 200 KDF troops arrived in El Adde just two weeks earlier.[11] Officials familiar with the subsequent recovery operations told a recent CNN investigation that "at least 141" Kenyan soldiers were killed.[12] The El Adde battle might therefore represent al-Shabaab's deadliest attack on Kenyans, even surpassing the earlier massacre at Garissa University on April 2, 2015, where al-Shabaab militants killed 148 people.

Second, it is likely that the battle at El Adde represents the largest loss of life that AMISOM has suffered in a single battle (the other principal contender occurred on October 20, 2011, when al-Shabaab fighters killed a large number of Burundian troops in the battle of Dayniile on the outskirts of Mogadishu). It is therefore crucial that AMISOM and other peace operations engaged in counterinsurgency campaigns learn the lessons of the attack in order to ensure it is not repeated.

Next, El Adde was the third AMISOM forward operating base overrun by al-Shabaab in seven months.[13] The other two were the Burundian base in Leego, overrun on June 26, 2015, and the Ugandan base in Janaale, overrun on September 1, 2015 (see Figure 1). Al-Shabaab's Sheikh Abu Zubeyr battalion claimed the attacks, which both resulted in heavy AMISOM losses and al-Shabaab stealing a significant number of vehicles and materiel. Each of these attacks became the subject of al-Shabaab propaganda videos. Among other things, these videos document numerous war crimes committed by al-Shabaab fighters during all three attacks and in their immediate aftermath.

The problem of vulnerable forward operating bases has therefore been a general problem for AMISOM, not just for the KDF. From AMISOM's perspective, the immediate priority was to ensure that al-Shabaab could not overrun any more of its bases. The El Adde battle prompted a major reassessment of AMISOM's reliance on forward operating bases garrisoned by a company of troops or less. AMISOM's subsequent reconfiguration of its forces suggests that the mission's leadership now recognized that the risks of operating such small bases outweighed the benefits. Moreover, some progress seems to have been made when a similar al-Shabaab attack on the Ethiopian AMISOM base at Halgan on June 9, 2016, was repelled, not least because the Ethiopian defenders received rapid support from some of their national helicopter gunships and UN utility helicopters.

Fourth, the aftermath of the El Adde battle once again highlighted the murky politics and at times strained relations that characterize the interaction between AMISOM's leadership and its national contingents. It was also notable that the battle came at a time when AMISOM was missing its head of mission and force commander. Having first deployed to Mogadishu on December 4, 2015, AMISOM's new special representative of the

7 "The Sheikh Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Raid (Al-Kataib)." The video contains no evidence of al-Shabaab suffering even a single casualty, suggesting it has been heavily edited.

8 An al-Shabaab spokesman claimed his fighters had captured twenty-eight military vehicles and destroyed three more. Laing, "Bodies of Kenyan Soldiers."

9 Confidential communication.

10 Confidential communication.

11 "The Sheikh Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Raid (Al-Kataib)," at 36:41.

12 Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, "Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre," CNN, May 31, 2016, available at http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/31/africa/kenya-soldiers-el-adde-massacre/index.html .

13 On September 18, 2015, al-Shabaab fighters also launched a major attack on an SNA base at Yaaq Baraawe.

chairperson of the AU Commission (SRCC), Francisco Madeira, was out of the country when the attack occurred and had yet to visit any of the mission's sectors outside of Mogadishu. AMISOM was without a force commander because nobody had been appointed to replace Kenyan Lieutenant General Jonathan Rono, who departed in late December 2015 after a fifteen-month tour of duty.

The Whole Truth—But Not Yet

Kenya's president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and chief of defence forces, General Samson Mwathethe, likely learned from the survivors of El Adde what happened on the day of the attack and in its immediate aftermath. Following the battle, some returning soldiers were paraded in front of cameras, several of them with injuries. For example, four injured KDF soldiers were flown back to Kenya on January 17th on two private jets.[14] Sixteen survivors were reported as returning to Kenya the following day.[15]

A few days later, the Kenyan government promised its citizens a full and frank account of the episode, once it had gathered all the facts. This would have represented a radical departure from the way Kenya conducted its operations since it intervened in Somalia in October 2011. Since then, the Kenyan press has been unable to report many details of KDF operations, except when journalists are escorted by the military, and Kenyan authorities have curtailed discussion of such issues.[16] There have also been very few discussions of earlier KDF casualties, making the news of El Adde all the more shocking.

Instead of a full account, General Mwathethe gave journalists a briefing in which he narrated a preliminary chronology of the battle.[17] Among other things, he said that al-Shabaab used three vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to breach the camp's defenses and that these IEDs had had an impact as powerful as the devices used in the 1998 attack on the US Embassy in Nairobi.[18] He also stated that two other vehicles, carrying at least fifteen al-Shabaab suicide bombers, were used in the attack and that the KDF had killed Maalim Janow, the leader of al-Shabaab's Abu Zubeyr brigade.

"Given the magnitude of the attack," Mwathethe said, "the information needs to be accurate. This may take long.... I ask you to be patient and to support their families."[19] He noted that "we will be able to give Kenyans answers to questions they have been asking" but also that "I am not aware of prisoners of war as alleged by some local dailies."[20] The latter statement contradicted al-Shabaab's subsequent propaganda video of the battle, which showed several KDF hostages, as well as Mwathethe's earlier statement that al-Shabaab fighters had used KDF troops as "human shields."[21] Mwathethe also told reporters that the KDF had formed a board of inquiry "to go to Somalia and carry out a full investigation of what really transpired,"[22] adding that the team was already on the ground (although no report has been publicly released).

Finally, General Mwathethe made the important and accurate point that "AMISOM did not have the necessary capacity and capability to assist our troops in Elade. We were therefore compelled to act and therefore mobilize our own resources to

14 Cyrus Ombati, "Four Injured KDF Soldiers Flown to Nairobi after al Shabaab Attack," *The Standard*, January 17, 2016, available at www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000188464/four-injured-kdf-soldiers-flown-to-nairobi/ .

15 Fred Mukinda, "16 More KDF Survivors of Shabaab Attack Arrive in Nairobi," *Daily Nation*, January 18, 2016, available at www.nation.co.ke/business/KDF-survivors-Shabaab-attack-Nairobi/-/996/3038322/-/66powk/-/index.html .

16 See, for example, Ismail Einashe, "Kenya Clamps Down on Journalists Covering War on al-Shabaab," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2016, available at www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/27/kenya-clamps-down-on-journalists-covering-war-on-al-shabaab?CMP=share_btn_tw .

17 Cited in Nancy Agutu, "AMISOM Failed to Give Resources to Help Kenyan Soldiers after al-Shabaab Attack—Mwathethe," *The Star*, January 21, 2016, available at www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/01/21/amisom-failed-to-give-resources-to-help-kenyan-soldiers-after-al_c1280806 .

18 This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it would be very difficult to accurately measure the force of an explosion in bush terrain compared to the urban setting of the Nairobi embassy bombing. Second, it is highly unlikely that enough explosives to generate such a huge blast could fit into one vehicle, especially if that vehicle was an armored personnel carrier.

19 Cited in Agutu, "AMISOM Failed."

20 Ibid.

21 Nancy Agutu, "Al Shabaab Using KDF Soldiers as Human Shields," *The Star*, January 17, 2016, available at www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/01/17/al-shabaab-using-kdf-soldiers-as-human-shields-mwathethe_c1277829 .

22 Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update."

respond to the situation."[23] What Mwathethe did not mention was that Ethiopian forces were the closest AMISOM troops to the stricken Kenyans at El Adde. Located about thirty miles southwest of Garbaharey in Somalia's Gedo region, El Adde formed part of AMISOM's Sector 3, which is comprised mainly of Ethiopian troops. It was one of three KDF bases in the predominantly Ethiopian sector. The nearest KDF troops within AMISOM Sector 3 were a company stationed in another forward operating base in Busaar, to the southwest of El Adde.

In late January, it was reported that the Kenyan inquiry team was trying to determine why "the Somali side [Somali National Army (SNA) troops in their nearby base] desert[ed] their camp before the attack without sharing the intelligence."[24] This was in stark contrast to earlier reports that the SNA had given the Kenyan troops advance warning about an attack. Specifically, the commander of Somali troops in the Gedo region, General Abbas Ibrahim Gurey, told Voice of America that the commander of KDF troops at El Adde was warned of a possible attack hours before the battle. "It was information we knew, the information was received, and they were ready for it," Gurey said.[25]

The battle and the Kenyan government's response initially prompted some opposition politicians to call for the KDF's withdrawal from Somalia.[26] President Kenyatta, however, took the opposite stance, saying the KDF would stay until al-Shabaab was defeated.[27]

Over a month passed before President Kenyatta publicly provided more analysis of El Adde. He blamed an unprecedented threat from a resurgent al-Shabaab and suggested AMISOM's mandate had hindered the KDF's ability to defeat the group. Both claims were questionable and ignored the operational shortcomings behind the attack.

First, speaking at a summit of AMISOM's troop-contributing countries in Djibouti in late February 2016, President Kenyatta claimed that "the attack was unprecedented in scale and impact, demonstrating a changing pattern of planning and execution by the Al Shabaab and their allies."[28] But al-Shabaab used almost identical tactics to overrun the El Adde base as it had at both Leego and Janaale months earlier.

President Kenyatta also noted that his government had conducted an internal review of AMISOM following the battle of El Adde.[29] President Kenyatta said that this review had concluded AMISOM's mandate was inadequate. He asked the summit attendees to "focus attention on whether the mandate of AMISOM as currently provided can deal with today's threat dynamics. Our assessment in Kenya suggests not." Specifically, the mandate did not allow AMISOM "to completely destroy and annihilate the terrorist threat that is upon us. This requires recalibrating the mandate of AMISOM accordingly. The mandate of such future AMISOM [*sic*] must be commensurate with the level of the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and other terrorist groups."[30]

On the contrary, AMISOM's mandate had long enabled it to conduct offensive operations against al-Shabaab. It was AMISOM commanders and their political bosses back home who decided not to conduct more offensive operations against al-Shabaab. Indeed, as noted above, AMISOM had a Kenyan force commander for all of 2015. But he was criticized for his use of overly simplistic and bombastic rhetoric—"we will deal the final blow [to al-Shabaab] in the next few days," he said in 2014—

23 Ibid., p. 1.

24 David Ohito, "KDF Probe Team Seeks Role of Somali Troops in El Adde Ambush," *The Standard*, January 31, 2016, available at www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000189970/kdf-probe-team-seeks-role-of-somali-troops-in-el-adde-ambush .

25 Harun Maruf, "Somali General: Kenyans Were Warned of Al-Shabaab Attack," *Voice of America*, January 18, 2016, www.voanews.com/content/somali-general-kenyans-were-warned-of-al-shabab-attack/3151456.html . It should be noted that Gurey's relationship with the KDF was turbulent, as he had been briefly detained by KDF troops in Kismayo in June 2013. Matilda Nzioki, "Questions over Somali Army's Partnership with KDF, AMISOM," n.d., available at https://tuko.co.ke/86024-concerns-grow-whether-somali-army-betrayed-kdf-el-adde-attack.html .

26 Including Raila Odinga. See "President Leads Kenyans in Honouring Troops Who Sacrificed Their Lives for the Country," *Daily Nation*, January 23, 2016, available at www.nation.co.ke/news/united-in-mourning/-/1056/3045034/-/1484dkpz/-/index.html .

27 Barnabas Bii and Wycliff Kipsang, "KDF Soldiers 'Will Fight on until There Is Peace in Somalia,'" *Daily Nation*, January 28, 2016, available at www.nation.co.ke/news/Troops-will-fight-on-until-peace-returns-to-Somalia/-/1056/3051874/-/dg4ycez/-/index.html .

28 Uhuru Kenyatta, statement at the AMISOM Summit, Djibouti, February 28, 2016, available at www.president.go.ke/2016/02/28/statement-by-his-excellency-hon-uhuru-kenyatta-c-g-h-president-and-commander-in-chief-of-the-defence-forces-of-the-republic-of-kenya-during-the-summit-of-amisom-policetroops-contributing-countrie/ .

29 It is unclear whether this was the same inquiry as the one General Mwathethe mentioned.

30 Kenyatta, statement at the AMISOM Summit.

while taking numerous leaves of absence and proving unable to effectively connect with other national contingents.[31] Finally, President Kenyatta did not mention that the idea of carving AMISOM into distinct nationally controlled sectors, thereby "creating areas of responsibility for each [troop-contributing country]," came about because of a Kenyan proposal. Indeed, the KDF had boasted about this in its official account of its Somalia campaign.[32] AMISOM's mandate is thus not to blame for the events that transpired at El Adde.

Operational Problems

Although many important questions remain unanswered, the available evidence points to a long list of operational challenges and problems that reduced the KDF's ability to repel al-Shabaab's attack. The underlying problem was the KDF's poor operational setup and procedures at El Adde, coupled with the decision to deploy such vulnerable forward operating bases in remote areas garrisoned by so few troops in a part of Somalia where al-Shabaab retained considerable freedom of movement.

First, the KDF contingent that was attacked on January 15th had only been in the camp for about three weeks. As General Mwathethe put it, "The troops had just rotated."[33] This had also been the case in the al-Shabaab attacks against the AMISOM bases at Leego and Janaale. Periods of troop rotations are particularly vulnerable because outgoing troops tend to "switch off" and focus on returning home, while incoming troops may take time to acclimatize to their new environment. The new soldiers in El Adde had been deployed after Kenya conducted a "relief in place" from December 15 to 21, 2015.[34] A cross-AMISOM relief in place had occurred during November and December 2015. It is not clear if the KDF troops at El Adde were undertaking their first tour of duty in AMISOM or if they were already veterans of the mission. Either way, assuming none of them had previously deployed to El Adde, the newly arrived troops had relatively little time to learn their local environment and detect any warning signs. In this early period it would have been particularly difficult for troops to discern what types of events and patterns were normal for this area and which were signs of extraordinary activity.

In retrospect, it is also probably relevant that there had been an increase in al-Shabaab attacks (probing and ambush) against KDF troops in AMISOM during the week before the battle (in Sectors 2 and 3).[35] Moreover, it remains unclear how often the troops were able to rehearse coordination points, defensive positions, and procedures to adopt in case of attack. The breakdown in defensive procedures might explain the claims that, early on in the battle, as many as twenty KDF troops escaped the base in two trucks.[36] It is probably these soldiers who were hunted down by al-Shabaab after escaping the base.[37]

Mutual support by proximate friendly units is a crucial part of ensuring that dispersed forces can operate effectively. But a second operational challenge was the fact that the KDF troops in El Adde were faced with the added complication of being part of AMISOM Sector 3, which was under Ethiopian command. At the time of the attack, the El Adde base was one of three Kenyan camps in Sector 3. The closest AMISOM base to El Adde was garrisoned by Ethiopian soldiers, which further complicated coordination and communication. Just prior to the attack, al-Shabaab forces destroyed the local Hormuud telecommunications tower, effectively severing communications.[38] Military best practice would suggest that any communication towers beyond the immediate control of the base must be considered expendable and not relied

31 "US Comes to Struggling AMISOM's Aid," Africa Confidential 57, no. 10, May 5, 2016.

32 Kenya Defence Forces, *Operation Linda Nchi: Kenya's Military Experience in Somalia* (Nairobi: Ministry of Defence, 2014), p. 26.

33 Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," p. 4.

34 A KDF prisoner speaking on al-Shabaab's video says his KDF contingent arrived in El Adde on January 1, 2016. "The Sheikh Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Raid (Al-Kataib)," at 36:41.

35 Confidential communication.

36 Confidential communication.

37 It was reported that three KDF soldiers who had escaped and sought refuge in a village elder's house some five kilometers from the El Adde base were hunted down by al-Shabaab and lynched, together with their host, after being allegedly betrayed by the villagers. Cyrus Ombati, "Local Clan in El Adde Might Have Betrayed the KDF," The Standard, January 25, 2016, available at www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000189296/local-clan-in-el-adde-might-have-betrayed-kdf .

38 The KDF suspected this was the case. See Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," p. 2.

on. The destruction of this tower would not have been a problem if AMISOM had had a secure military communications system, but it did not. In addition, AMISOM troop-contributing countries had a long history of struggling to coordinate their actions. As a result, the initial rescue attempts were undertaken not by the closest AMISOM personnel but by KDF troops based in Kenya (at Mandera, Elwak, and Wajir), not Somalia.

A third operational problem stemmed from the poor working relationship between the KDF and SNA soldiers based at El Adde. Although the full details of this relationship are still unclear, it is apparent that they operated from distinct (but nearby) bases. It is not clear how much interaction occurred between SNA and KDF troops or, for example, whether liaison personnel were embedded in each other's camp. The KDF's initial statements about the battle suggested al-Shabaab had attacked the SNA base, not its own.[39] Later KDF statements contradicted this claim, as did General Mwathethe's statement that the first al-Shabaab vehicle-borne IED "drove through the adjacent Somali National Army camp and exploded at the centre of the KDF defensive position."[40] This implies that either the SNA base was empty, or its troops posed little obstacle to the driver of the first vehicle-borne IED.

In fact, there were no SNA troops in their El Adde base at the time of the attack. This point requires some explanation.[41] When the base at El Adde was initially established, about 300 SNA soldiers were stationed there as part of the forces Kenya had trained in 2011. Since then, however, their numbers had dwindled considerably. Some troops left because of lack of pay, others became bodyguards for politicians in Kismayo, and others went to Dolow to work for Barre Hirale—former minister of defense of the Somali Transitional Federal Government who had long opposed Kenyan dominance of the areas around Kismayo. The week before the attack, it is likely that fewer than thirty SNA troops remained in El Adde. Elders in the town told these remaining troops that an al-Shabaab attack was possible. The elders claimed al-Shabaab had granted them three options: melt into the town's populace, leave El Adde and go to Garbaharey or Elwak, or die alongside the Kenyans. Some of the SNA soldiers agreed to go to Garbaharey, some to Elwak, while some melted into El Adde. As a result, the SNA base was empty at the time of the attack.

Assuming that the KDF received some warning of a possible attack a few hours before the battle, a fourth, and related, problem remains: the garrison was either unable to detect al-Shabaab's forces as they assembled to launch the attack or did detect them but was unable to respond effectively. Presumably, al-Shabaab was able to conduct sustained reconnaissance and surveillance of the El Adde base before planning and launching the attack. It is unclear when al-Shabaab did this or whether it was noticed by the KDF soldiers located there. But the KDF troops should have expected to be observed by their enemy. If some al-Shabaab activity was detected, what actions were taken in response? It is notable that, unlike the al-Shabaab propaganda video of the Leego battle in June 2015, most of the deceased KDF soldiers at El Adde appear to be wearing their full uniforms, which suggests they were not caught entirely unawares, or they assembled rapidly.

A fifth problem stemmed from the poor configuration and design of the El Adde base. At over one kilometer long and nearly a kilometer wide, the El Adde forward operating base was much too big for a company-plus formation to adequately defend. This raises questions about the decision to site it there. It would also have been better for a company-sized base to have a triangular rather than a roughly circular perimeter. This would have reduced the number of fronts from which an enemy could attack. It is also not clear if the KDF soldiers operated external sentry points or regular patrols around the base, particularly at night. If sentry positions were not manned, the concentric circles of perimeter vegetation (thorn bushes) would probably have done little more than obscure the sight and firing lines of the defenders, allowing al-Shabaab attackers to advance to a close distance

39 Kenyan Ministry of Defence, press release MOD/12/33/91, "Elade Attack," January 15, 2016, available at https://somalianews.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/kdf-statement.png .

40 Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," pp. 4–5.

41 Confidential communication.

without receiving much defensive fire. This appears to be reflected in al-Shabaab's propaganda video.

A sixth important issue concerns the size of the attacking al-Shabaab force: were KDF troops overrun because they were heavily outnumbered, or was al-Shabaab able to defeat the base with a relatively small attacking force? Several factors are relevant here. As noted above, presumably the larger the al-Shabaab force, the longer it would have taken to muster, leaving some opportunity to detect and warn about an impending attack. Given the attack was launched just before dawn, al-Shabaab must have mustered its force during the night.

Moreover, it is unclear whether the KDF defenders adopted the recommended tactics and procedures of standing-to before dawn and dusk. If the El Adde base was considered permanently under threat of attack, it would likely have been wise to man the garrison's heavy weapons and armored vehicles 24/7. It is unclear whether this was being done. Although al-Shabaab's video has certainly been edited, the level of audible gunfire heard just prior to the first vehicle-borne IED explosion raises the question of whether the KDF contingent was indeed standing-to just before dawn. On the other hand, al-Shabaab's video and photos of the deceased Kenyan soldiers show that most of them were wearing full uniform and had access to their weapons. This was not the case, for example, during the earlier al-Shabaab attacks on Leego and Janaale. Given these extensive defensive challenges, the attacking al-Shabaab force probably did not need to have the 3:1 attack-to-defense force ratio recommended by most contemporary military doctrines.

A seventh problem was the clear vulnerability of the base to vehicle-borne IEDs. Were basic defensive obstacles (such as chicanes, ditches, and barriers) placed in front of the main entrance to stop any approaching vehicle? If not, why not, particularly given that this was the same tactic al-Shabaab had used in its earlier attacks on the AMISOM bases in Leego and Janaale?

A related problem was the poor defensive structures at the El Adde base. These are clearly shown in al-Shabaab's propaganda video. The outer perimeter defenses were comprised of thorn bushes and razor/barbed wire. As shown in al-Shabaab's propaganda video, its fighters simply threw tarpaulin over the razor wire before jumping over it. Toward the inner perimeter of the camp, there were periodic HESCO defenses and foxholes. These shortcomings reflected the broader challenges AMISOM has faced in deploying military engineering units to construct base defenses. In sum, the mission has lacked the engineering capabilities to provide more sophisticated defenses for its troops in forward operating bases like El Adde. It has also been extremely difficult to get the engineering units AMISOM does possess out to these remote locations because of the poor state of the local infrastructure and al-Shabaab's tendency to target the mission's main supply routes.

An eighth problem was the apparently poor state of the relationship between the KDF forces at El Adde and the local population. Based just to the east of El Adde town, Kenyan troops had poor relations with the local population, particularly with some of the local elders in the Marehan clan, who are dominant in that area.[42] This was not simply the fault of the commanding officer in El Adde but stemmed from Kenya's longstanding policy of supporting Ahmed Madobe's leadership in and around Kismayo, which had angered some Marehan elders. Furthermore, some people in the Gedo region were angry with the KDF because Kenyan jets had regularly bombed some rural communities they mistook for al-Shabaab forces. At the more operational level, some locals had also complained that the KDF troops did not share their rations with the SNA and other locals and occupied local water sources. This stood in stark contrast to the practices adopted by the Ethiopian forces in the rest of Sector 3.[43] As noted above, reports also emerged of the KDF's unwillingness to proactively engage the locals or to work effectively with the SNA. It was for these reasons that, in April 2016,

42 Ombati, "Local Clan in El Adde Might Have Betrayed the KDF"; "Details of Al Shabaab Attack on Kenyan Forces Emerge," The Standard, January 18, 2016, available at www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000188497/details-of-al-shabaab-attack-on-kdf-emerge .

43 Confidential communication.

the Kenyan government and Marehan elders held a high-level meeting to improve their relationship.[44]

As noted above, General Mwathethe was correct when he pointed out that AMISOM had no rapid reaction force with which to respond to the attack. Indeed, at the time of the attack, AMISOM had no military helicopters, which might have been used to form part of a reserve rapid-response force. In such circumstances, the decision to deploy troops to such a remote location in a part of Somalia where al-Shabaab retained considerable freedom of movement placed them at a high level of risk and vulnerability. Moreover, the two earlier attacks at Leego and Janaale had already demonstrated AMISOM's inability to deploy rapid-response reserve troops.

With no chance of rapid-response forces from AMISOM, the initial rescue operation came from the KDF, from troops based in Mandera, Elwak, and Wajir. But herein lay a final problem: al-Shabaab predicted and was prepared for such a response. Its fighters had laid IEDs on the route and ambushed the rescue column. AMISOM sources believe that the two KDF reinforcement efforts mentioned by General Mwathethe also took casualties.[45] In the first few days after the attack, and in lieu of recapturing the base with ground troops, KDF F4 Phantom jets and helicopters struck at suspected al-Shabaab targets in the surrounding area. Al-Shabaab reportedly used antiaircraft weapons to return fire.[46]

Honoring the Dead?

At the African Union summit in late January 2015, the AU Commission chairperson, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, expressed her "deep appreciation to our peacekeepers…for their heroic contribution to peace and to service of their continent and its people."[47] She went on to say, "We should have a monument for our AU peacekeepers who have lost their lives in the duty of the peoples of the continent." At the very least, this means AMISOM's fallen peacekeepers deserve to be publicly recognized for their sacrifice. In some African Union missions, including the most recent AU-led operation in the Central African Republic (MISCA), the AU publicly declared all of its dead. In contrast, AMISOM has not, although it has publicly released some fatality figures.[48]

With regard to El Adde, Kenya's government has chosen not to publicly recognize its fallen peacekeepers: "There has been no national day of mourning, no roll call of honor, and no explanation."[49] Instead, the government has intermittently released the bodies of fallen soldiers, with CNN estimating that there have been "at least thirty funerals" across the country.[50] Nearly six months on, some families of soldiers in the El Adde contingent are still being kept in the dark about the status of their loved ones.[51]

This approach seems peculiar to AMISOM. When Kenyan peacekeepers have died during deployment in UN peacekeeping operations, for example, they are all publicly recognized.[52] As of May 31, 2016, fifty-eight Kenyans have died while serving as UN peacekeepers.[53] It seems strange not to publicly recognize the sacrifice of peacekeepers killed while performing tasks mandated by the United Nations Security Council and the African Union. Yet neither the Security Council nor the AU appear to have asked, let alone pressured, AMISOM's troop-contributing countries to publicly declare their dead.

44 "Meeting of the Marehan Clan to Address Issues in the Gedo Region of Somalia," communiqué, April 24–26, 2016, available at https://minbane.wordpress.com/tag/marehan-community/ .

45 Confidential communication.

46 General Mwathethe said al-Shabaab had deployed two antiaircraft guns against them. Kenyan Ministry of Defence, "The Chief of Defence Force's Press Statement on Elade Update," p. 2.

47 Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, statement to the AU Executive Council, January 26, 2015, available at www.au.int/en/speeches/statement-chairperson-african-union-commission-he-dr-nkosazana-dlamini-zuma-26th-ordinary .

48 Paul D. Williams, "How Many Fatalities Has the African Union Mission in Somalia Suffered?" Global Observatory, September 10, 2015, available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/09/amisom-african-union-somalia-peacekeeping/ .

49 Kriel and Duggan, "Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre."

50 Ibid.

51 Magati Obebo, "Still Waiting for Soldier Son's Return," *Daily Nation*, June 17, 2016, available at www.nation.co.ke/counties/Still-waiting-for-soldier-son-return/-/1107872/3253368/-/67jbkc/-/index.html .

52 For example, see here for the names of the 129 UN peacekeepers who lost their lives while serving on UN missions in 2015: https://twitter.com/theuntimes/status/733353259390410753 .

53 See www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_2.pdf .

Some Kenyans have argued that revealing the identities of the dead soldiers would hinder the KDF's battlefield effectiveness. But it is long-established practice to name the fallen soldiers in many of the world's most effective militaries, including the US and UK.[54] If anything, publicly honoring fallen peacekeepers is likely to enhance their performance because they would know that if they die, they would be publicly recognized, and their families could claim the financial compensation to which they are entitled.[55] Moreover, the public silence over the status of the KDF hostages is unlikely to inspire confidence among their comrades that they would be taken care of should they be captured. It is therefore notable that the KDF recently announced the creation of a special elite unit to rescue soldiers stranded in battle or lost in enemy territory.[56]

It is also important to note that reports persist that compensation payments to next of kin are sometimes delayed for long periods and might not always be for the amount stated in the memoranda of understanding signed between AMISOM's troop-contributing countries and the AU.[57] On May 26th, for example, it was reported that families of the soldiers killed at El Adde would receive a total of 341.27 million Kenyan shillings (about $3.4 million, or the equivalent of sixty-eight payments of $50,000) in insurance payments from the Jubilee Insurance Company, which provided coverage for KDF soldiers for accidental death or disablement.[58] No mention has been made, however, of the compensation due from the African Union, which would be difficult to investigate without an official list of the dead.

Some Kenyans have argued that revealing the identities of the fallen soldiers would hand al-Shabaab a propaganda victory. But Kenya's deliberate policy of keeping such information secret has arguably contributed to undermining its own (and AMISOM's) credibility to the extent that many Kenyans and Somalis perceive its strategic communications to be unreliable. No modern peace operation can succeed if it does not have the support of the local population, and greater clarity about the issue could help reestablish AMISOM's credibility and demonstrate the sacrifice AMISOM's troop-contributing countries have made in the effort to bring peace to Somalia. Similarly, secrecy hands al-Shabaab a propaganda victory by allowing its narratives (and videos) to go uncontested and shape the dominant narrative of the event.

Conclusion

The battle at El Adde was a significant event for the KDF, for AMISOM, and for all peace operations engaged in various forms of stabilization and counterinsurgency. As in all battles, there were numerous factors at play, and it is unlikely that the public will learn all the relevant details. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that the KDF's poor operational setup and procedures and the decision to deploy company-sized forces in such remote and hence vulnerable forward operating bases are key to understanding the defeat.

But it is also important for AMISOM to learn from the other shortcomings that were exposed at El Adde:

1. It is crucial for AMISOM to develop positive relationships with local communities, without which the mission will struggle to acquire information and earn trust and support, including from the SNA.
2. AMISOM needs better intelligence-gathering capabilities to ensure it is aware of the movements of major al-Shabaab formations.
3. The lack of communication and coordination across AMISOM's different national contingents—in this case Kenya and Ethiopia—played

54 See, for example, the list of US military casualties: www.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/main.xhtml .

55 As set out in the memorandum of understanding that the AMISOM troop-contributing countries sign with the African Union, the next of kin of fallen peacekeepers are entitled to $50,000 in death compensation. Compensation rates for wounded peacekeepers vary depending on the extent of injuries.

56 "KDF Train with Americans to Build Special Rescue Unit," Daily Nation, June 22, 2016, available at www.nation.co.ke/news/KDF-train-with-Americans-to-build-special-rescue-unit/-/1056/3260746/-/t8731yz/-/index.html .

57 Mohammed Yusuf, "Injured AMISOM Soldiers, Families Go Years without Compensation," *Voice of America*, August 18, 2015, available at www.voanews.com/content/injured-amisom-soldiers-families-go-years-without-compensation/2922561.html .

58 Neville Otuki, "Sh341m for Families of El Adde Attack Soldiers," *Business Daily*, May 26, 2016, available at www.businessdailyafrica.com/Sh341m-for-families-of-El-Adde-attack-soldiers/-/539546/3220374/-/5mvud5z/-/index.html .

into al-Shabaab's hands.

4. The lack of an AMISOM rapid-response force and military air assets under the force commander's control meant there was no hope of rescue in the event of an al-Shabaab attack.

Not only must these lessons be learned and used to prevent a similar attack in the future, but Kenya's fallen peacekeepers also deserve to be honored for their sacrifice, and their families compensated. This cannot happen without a full public accounting of how and why they died.

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