

Analyst Mark Schroeder examines the pressures facing al Shabaab from a military offensive by Somali government and African Union forces, and internal divisions about how to respond to Somali populations suffering from severe drought conditions impacting Somalia.

Somali government forces backed by African Union peacekeepers are launching a fresh offensive against al Shabaab positions in the Somali capital Mogadishu. This comes amid a couple of reports of strains and dissent within the Somali insurgent group al Shabaab that are compounded by a significant drought that is impacting Somalia and much of East Africa.

Now this offensive is not the first time that TFG forces and African Union peacekeepers have gone after al Shabaab, and in fact it's been part of a campaign going back a couple of years, but they've never been able to gain full control over Mogadishu. Al Shabaab to this point controls roughly half of Mogadishu and the TFG might control the other half, but if were not for the African Union peacekeepers, the TFG would have very little under its control and probably would've been ejected from Mogadishu a long time ago.

Now reports of this new offensive against al Shabaab also comes amid this widespread drought that is impacting Somalia and much of East Africa, and this drought has raised lots of humanitarian concerns for the population of Somalia and others in the region. Al Shabaab itself is divided over how to handle and respond to the drought impacting the country. Some within al Shabaab desire that foreign aid and relief organizations come in the country and help to respond to the populations impacted by the drought. There are others however, notably the faction led by the overall al Shabaab commander Godane Abu Zubayr, who do not want foreign relief organizations to come into Somalia. Godane's fear is that the relief organizations can be taken advantage of by people who wish to better understand the strengths and weaknesses and to exploit that to undermine al Shabaab.

Al Shabaab is not expected to yield very easily its gains in Mogadishu, its territory that to this point it controls, but al Shabaab has a proven track record of melting into the background, withdrawing from the battlefield, pulling back to positions in the rural areas of central and southern Somalia. So this fresh offensive in Mogadishu against al Shabaab should be seen as an effort -- a limited effort -- to try to extend the TFG's control in Mogadishu, but nothing more than that at this point.