



Situation Report

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Somalia: Understanding Al-Shabaab

Summary

On 8 May 2009, Al-Shabaab reinforced by a faction of Hizbul Islam and former Islamic Courts Union's (ICU) leader Sheikh Aweys began what they claimed was a final assault on the capital Mogadishu in an attempt to destroy President Sheikh Sharif's fragile National Unity Government. A wave of targeted assassinations of ICU officials and Al-Shabaab commanders in mid-April onwards,² the reshuffling of military and political alliances among Islamist factions and inflammatory rhetoric that has led to a polarization of political positions has all but eliminated prospects for reconciliation between the government and the opposition.

At the time of writing the government is managing to keep hold of southern Mogadishu. Nevertheless Al-Shabaab continues to gain ground in central Somalia and is positioning itself for what it hopes will be a decisive military victory.

This report briefly examines the nature of Al-Shabaab's ideological stance, their political ambitions and why this movement constitutes the gravest threat to the survival of Sheikh Sharif's government and the Djibouti peace process that gave it birth.

Introduction

Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidin (The Youth) is today the strongest, best organised, financed and armed military group and controls the largest stretch of territory in southern Somalia. Ahmed Abdi Godane (aka Sheikh Abu Zubeyr)³ leads the movement, deemed the Emir of the jihadist organisation, and is assisted by a ten-member council (Shura). In accordance with the general structure of jihadist organisations, this consultative council would be comprised of sub-emirs in charge of different areas: military, theology, political information, external relations etc.

Al-Shabaab apparently is divided into independently functioning cells covering distinct geographic areas, which have distinct political and military commanders. The Bay and Bakool command is led by Mukhtar Robow (former spokesperson for Shabaab); the Juba command is led by Hassan Al-Turki (although not directly affiliated to Shabaab); the Mogadishu Command is apparently led by Sheikh Ali Fidow and three other commanders. Some of Al-Shabaab's top commanders are originally from relatively stable regions of the country, including Abu Zubeyr and Ibrahim Haji Jaama 'al-Afghani', who are both from Somaliland, and notorious commander and Swedish national Fuad Mohamed Shangole. The Shura council and operational autonomy of different cells allows each commander to pursue his own military strategy and administer the areas conquered independently, but

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this decentralisation also makes the group difficult to monitor and oppose, as the removal of the top leadership would not render the organization inoperative.

The organisation also has two branches, or sub-units, the military branch *Jaysh Al-Uusra* (the army of hardship), and the branch that maintains law and order *Jaysh Al-Hesbah* (the army of morality).⁴

In 2008 Shabaab was designated a terrorist organisation by the US government. It is alleged to have links to Al-Qaeda, although its form of jihad has a regional rather than a global focus. Shabaab's ranks have also apparently been reinforced by foreign fighters from the US, Europe and Central Asia⁵.

There is no consensus on exactly when or how Shabaab emerged,⁶ and specific details about its command and operational structures are difficult to obtain, given that the group is not a monolithic movement but is very fluid, with internal variations in leadership, tactics and ideology.

In 2006 the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a coalition of Sharia courts, united Mogadishu and helped restore peace and stability in a lawless and chronically insecure South/Central Somalia, providing this region with its first period of relative order and governance since the demise of Siad Barre's regime in 1991. Al-Shabaab was an important military element within this coalition. Citing national security concerns, Ethiopia launched a major military offensive into Somalia in December 2006, ousting the courts and effectively changing the local power balance. A new period of civil war followed with a distinctive theatre of war, in which the nationalist rhetoric of defending the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, further stimulated by the heavy-handed counterinsurgency tactics of the Ethiopian and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces, created a fertile ground for organized radical responses. Dysfunctional governance, together with a maturation of the general rejection of factional politics, warlordism, successive failings of transitional arrangements and the widespread violations of human rights and the laws of war by the Ethiopians and TFG allowed Shabaab to gather momentum and become a force to reckon with.

The Islamists were thus able to make the case that political Islam was the only real alternative to clan politics and failed Somali nationalism. Shabaab merged Islam with nationalism, and in the months after the fall of the ICU proved to be the most resilient and principal source of armed resistance to the occupation, successfully framing its cause as a just war⁷. Part of Shabaab's legitimacy also stemmed from the fact that it never placed its leadership outside the country and the battlefield and managed to regroup weeks after the Ethiopian offensive, and begin staging attacks.⁸

It can be argued that the civil war that ensued after the Ethiopian occupation and the dislodging of the ICU resulted in key social processes that altered the national social and psychological landscape. The creation of endemic insecurity and fear, due to indiscriminate shelling, targeted assassinations, summary executions, and widespread abuses on the civilian population⁹, might have led to the destruction of Somalia's risk society¹⁰. The sheer scale of the destruction, political violence, and displacement of populations, that consequently plunged 3.2 million Somalis into what is considered the world's worst humanitarian crisis, also devastated the coping mechanisms that the civilian population had developed in the last 2 decades of statelessness. In addition to destroying the strategies used by communities to mitigate and manage risks, the actions of Ethiopians and the TFG created some predisposition for extreme responses.

Analysts point to the fact that the two year occupation left Somalis radically angry¹¹, a sentiment echoed nationally and abroad with the Somali Diaspora Network accusing the TFG and the Ethiopians of pursuing a campaign of collective punishment and genocide. Al-Shabaab's ascendancy can thus be understood within the context of a different rationality, as well as how the political and military context transformed social institutions that may have led to the de-laicization of Somali society.

A Liberation movement – religious nationalism

- *Aims and Recruitment:* Al-Shabaab's appeal and motivation for recruitment is extremely varied. There are elements within the group that truly believe in the ideological stance of radical Islam, but there are others who have joined either as a means for empowerment and economic survival, as power-seekers hoping to further their political stance, or merely to fight against the Ethiopians and the TFG.¹² Shabaab's aims, although unclearly expressed, are the establishment of a Somali Caliphate, to wage jihad against the enemies of Islam, including the elimination of other forms of Islam contrary to its own Salafi-Wahhabist strand, and the removal of Western influence.
- *Social Transformation:* Shabaab has also propagated the use of religious ideology as a tool for a social transformation using Salafi-Wahhabism as a way to refute local social structures, create cross-clan alliances, and thus providing a truly revolutionary alternative. One practice has been the insertion of Shabaab leaders to administer conquered areas that belong to clans that do not have representation in the area.¹³
- *Governance:* Al-Shabaab also filled a vacuum in the country by providing the population with essential services and welfare – clearing of roadblocks, repairing roads, organizing markets, and re-establishing order and a justice system through the use of Sharia courts – similar to the way the Islamic Courts proceeded in 2006. Activities at the community/grassroots level seem to be a fundamental element in Shabaab's strategy to sustain jihad by continuously expanding its local community infrastructure and support.
- *Political pragmatism:* Important military victories, such as the capture of Kismayo and Merka in mid 2008 and Baidoa in early 2009, and the manner in which these areas were administered subsequently have highlighted a shift in strategy. In Kismayo, a strict implementation of Sharia law and overtly strict practices and prohibitions has alienated the population. In Baidoa, Shabaab apparently has adopted a new approach aimed at winning the support of the community, and building its economic, social and educational infrastructure, by staging well choreographed rallies and holding talks with the traditional clan leaders.¹⁴ Shabaab's new strategy thus appears from its rule in Baidoa, which is the first step in establishing a model Islamic administration, and a new phase where it intends to consolidate its rule. This pragmatic shift in approach points to Shabaab's willingness to adopt a political strategy.

The radical shift in political dynamics in Somalia in 2009, initiated by the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, followed by the resignation of TFG President Yusuf, and the consequent creation of the new Unity government, provided a significant challenge for Shabaab's ability to maintain its relevance in the national setting. Given that the movement had lost one of its principal rallying points, of fighting against foreign occupation, Shabaab has had to take on a new enemy: the new government headed by former ICU leader Sheikh Ahmed Sheikh Sharif, which it portrays as infidel, and the troops of the AMISOM contingent supporting it.

For the Salafi-Wahhabist movement to continue extending its influence and maintain its military strength, it must be able to sustain its source of external funding and the Diaspora's support, and must extend its territorial control to the capital¹⁵. In addition, it must also continue obtaining support at the community level, and must also decide to what extent it will pursue a rigid ideology or will accommodate itself to the moderate tradition of Somali society.

Will Shabaab's apparent pragmatism lead it to take the Hamas-approach and will it transform itself into a political party? An apparent power struggle within Hizbul-Islam has seen Sheikh Aweys emerge as the leader of this alliance; is this an indication of the movement's political pragmatism in aligning itself with the former ICU leader?

Will Shabaab's attempt to rule the territories it conquers be enough to sustain its military significance, political relevance, and the ability to increase its legitimacy through the support at a grassroots level, or will it fail as a militant radical Islamic movement because it cannot provide a workable model of governance?

A definitive military victory over Shabaab is an unlikely outcome for Sheikh Sharif's government given the strength of the insurgency, the weakness and fragility of the new unity government, and the lack of professional police and security forces. Although the best option would be to engage Shabaab in political dialogue, in particular the moderate elements who do not want to be regarded as terrorists, this also seems improbable at this stage. An alternative would be to adopt a policy of incremental containment – aimed at reversing extremism and the movement's following by tackling Shabaab's legitimacy at the community level. This will take time. The international community, through the UN and the African Union, is also bringing pressure to bear upon the government of Eritrea, which is seen as a principal source of material support for the insurgents.

If the new government is to succeed in neutralizing Shabaab it must create a broad-based forum that will allow for the incorporation of other Islamist movements and civil society, implement Sharia law in a way that will not alienate certain segments of the Somali society, and ultimately – as the centerpiece of its strategy – will have to separate Shabaab from the population, and roll back the wave of propaganda. Shabaab's use of aggressive media techniques and indoctrination also have to be tackled at the grassroots level.

Another way of effectively challenging the jihadist movement is by exposing its contradictions and deviant ideology by giving the religious leaders and elders the political space and security to conduct this exercise. This could be done through the issuance of *fatwas* (Islamic religious rulings) from recognized religious authorities in Somalia like the Islamic Clerics Council.

All this will pose a serious test to the ingenuity and cohesion of a government that has already been forced into a dangerous over-reliance on Hawiye clan warlords and militias. This development makes it all the more difficult for the government to reverse Shabaab's consolidation of power and influence by cutting into its cross-clan alliance building, political networking, and its relationship with the business community.

In the longer run efforts should also focus on erasing the perception among the Somalis that the state is an extractive vehicle used in the pursuit of narrow economic and political interests of one group to the detriment of other groups. The reestablishment of the rule of law and state-building should not be seen as a threat or a structure of repression, but as a means to ensure a safe, just, accountable and orderly existence. In addition, programmes aimed at rehabilitating the youth, through schooling and employment, need to be created to curtail Shabaab's recruitment pool.

This, however, assumes that the government can survive the latest offensive. Final military victory is likely to prove elusive for either side in the context of the fluidity of alliances that have characterised South/Central Somalia's political environment for the past twenty years. Uncertainty and insecurity appear destined to be the lot of the local population for the foreseeable future, with any negotiations and agreements highly conditional and probably temporary.

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- 1 Paula Cristina Roque is a researcher with the African Security Analysis Programme of the ISS and the coordinator of the Somalia Working Group
 - 2 See "Battle for Mogadishu – Round One", by Michael Weinstein, posted May 18th 2009, www.garoweonline.com
 - 3 Sheikh Abu Zubeyr replaced Aden Hashi Ayro, who was killed in a US missile strike in May 2008.
 - 4 For further details see UN Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1811(2008), 10 December 2008
 - 5 Interviews with Somali analysts, May 2009, Nairobi
 - 6 See Menkhaus, Ken, "Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America", Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, US Senate, 11 March 2009.
 - 7 See Roland Marchal's paper "A Tentative Assessment of Harakat Al-Shabaab in Somalia" to be published in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, June 2009
 - 8 See Roland Marchal, *ibid*

- 9 See “So Much to Fear: War Crimes and the Devastation of Somalia” , Human Rights Watch Report, December 2008
- 10 Defined as a society that develops a system of strategies to secure and manage the lives of its members; regardless of whether the risks are real or constructed, they are rendered calculable and governable, in “ Hamas and the Destruction of Risk Society”, by Neve Gordon and Dani Filc, Constellations Volume 12, Number 4, 2005
- 11 See Ken Menkhaus, *ibid*
- 12 See Menkhaus, Ken, “Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America”, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, US Senate, 11 March 2009.
- 13 See Roland Marchal’s paper “A Tentative Assessment of Harakat Al-Shabaab in Somalia” to be published in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, June 2009
- 14 According to the International Crisis Group analyst Rashid Abdi, see December 2008 ICG report “Somalia: To move Beyond the Failed State”, Africa Report N147
- 15 According to the Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder on Al Shabaab, by Stephanie Hanson, 27 February 2009