

Somalia's Divided Islamists

I. OVERVIEW

The growing internal schisms and factionalism within Somalia's Islamist movement risk plunging the country even deeper into violence and bloodshed, with dangerous implications for the wider region and beyond. These divisions are also aggravating the political crisis by polarising groups further along ideological, theological and clan lines. However, a limited opportunity may now exist for Somalia's political actors and the international community to capitalise on these divisions and re-alignments to reach out to the increasing numbers of domestic militants disenchanted with the growing influence of foreign jihadis and extremist elements bent on pursuing a global agenda.

The divisions have always existed, but remained hidden, largely because of the unifying factor of Ethiopia's in-country military presence since December 2006. The Ethiopian pullout in early 2009; the formation of a coalition government led by a prominent Islamist, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed; and the adoption of Sharia (Islamic law) caught hard-line insurgents and groups, especially Harakat Al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen (Al-Shabaab, Mujahidin Youth Movement), off guard. Thereafter, they had to justify their existence and continued armed opposition to the Sharif government. Personality and policy frictions escalated within the movement, and the gulf widened between those amenable to some form of a political settlement and those wedded to al-Qaeda inspired notions of a permanent global jihad.

The failure of the major offensive by a combined Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam (Islamic Party) force against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in May 2009, attributable, in large measure, to the decision by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to mount a robust defence of the government, catalysed internal dissent and fragmentation. The insurgents' mistakes were their failure to anticipate AMISOM's reaction and, more crucially, their misjudgement of the international community's resolve to come to the TFG's defence. The rise and military gains of a TFG ally, Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a (ASWJ, the Followers of the Prophetic Way and Consensus), composed of groups opposed to Al-Shabaab's fundamentalism, have put significant pressure on the hard-line insurgency.

Although Al-Shabaab has regained Kismaayo and key towns and villages in the south by routing its rival (and erstwhile ally) Hizb al-Islam, it is now on the defensive and feels beleaguered. The movement is forced to fight on many fronts and to disperse its assets and combatants through broad swathes of hostile territory, far from its Jubba and Shabeelle strongholds in the south. But unless TFG forces perform significantly better, the balance of power will not be much altered.

Al-Shabaab's military troubles have been compounded by the steady erosion of its popularity and credibility. The attempt to forcefully homogenise Islam and zealously enforce a harsh interpretation of Sharia, as well as the general climate of fear and claustrophobia fostered by an authoritarian administrative style, has deeply alienated large segments of society, even in areas once regarded as solid insurgent territory. Adding to the public disquiet has been the movement's increasing radicalisation and the internal coup that has consolidated the influence of extremists allied to foreign jihadis. The suicide bomb attack in Mogadishu in December 2009, in which over two dozen civilians and officials were killed, caused an unprecedented public backlash. The widely-held perception that it was ordered by foreign jihadis prompted high-level defections and seriously undermined Al-Shabaab's standing. Many feel it has irreparably harmed the movement's political prospects.

However, Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam are far from spent forces. They continue to radicalise Somalis at home, in the region and in the diaspora and remain a threat to the TFG and neighbouring states. Concern especially for their links to al-Qaeda extends to the U.S. and other leading Western states. Consequently, the TFG and its international partners should:

- pay more attention to, and try to counter-act, the increasingly extremist ideological evolution of the Islamist movement;
- step up the battle for the hearts and minds of the Somali people, including by articulating an argument that the radicalisation is largely driven by a unique set of beliefs that are alien to Somalis and an extremist and literal interpretation of holy texts; and by presenting a strategy to de-radicalise Somalia's youth; and

- place much greater emphasis on reconciliation. The TFG should exploit divisions within Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam by reaching out to less extreme elements in both organizations. Bans of those organisations or their designation as terrorist should not preclude efforts to talk with and reach understandings with individuals and factions amenable to political settlement; the international community should insist the TFG do more in this endeavour.

II. FROM ISLAMIC REVIVALISM TO ISLAMISM

Somalis have practised Islam for over 1,000 years. There have always been many branches of Islam in Somalia, and the various schools of thought and sects have generally coexisted peacefully until recently. Most follow a Shafi'i version of Sunni Islam that incorporates the veneration of saints, including the ancestors of many Somali clans, and has traditionally been dominated by apolitical Sufi orders.¹

The emergence of a modern political Islamic consciousness began to gather momentum in the 1960s, with the formation of the Wahdat al-Shabaab al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Youth Union) and the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group), both of which were inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.² Others were exposed to more conservative Salafi ideas and the militant undercurrents later associated with the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. In Somalia, a particular orientation of Salafism – Wahhabism – was aggressively promoted by wealthy local and Gulf groups.

A. WAHHABI PURITANISM AND SALAFI JIHADISM

Saudi Arabia – flush with petro-dollars after the oil shocks of the 1970s – was particularly instrumental in promoting Wahhabism.³ Well-funded madrasas (religious schools)

and Islamic charities sprang up in all the major urban centres and even in the remote countryside. Thousands of Somali youngsters were brought to Saudi universities – principally Medina and Umm al-Qura – to study Wahhabi jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and missionary work (*da'wa*).⁴ Running parallel with this ambitious educational scheme was a generous bilateral aid project essentially aimed at weakening Somalia's dependence on the Soviet Union and by extension communist influence.⁵

Then-President Barre no doubt appreciated this aid but was increasingly irritated by and wary of the overtly Islamist agenda behind it.⁶ In particular, he was concerned about a group of Saudi-connected clerics who were beginning to use the pulpit to organise a public campaign against some of his policies. Matters came to a head in early 1975, when he forced a confrontation with religious conservatives over the status of women in Islam.⁷ A bloody crack-

viewed as “the conservative shield”, capable of stopping the march of communism in the Muslim world. Additionally, there was competition with Egypt and its brand of Sunni orthodox Islam promoted by al-Azhar University. Equally significant was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, with Shiism replacing communism as the perceived threat. However, Saudi Arabia has lost much of the control it once had over the powerful Wahhabi groups it sponsored with the emergence of Salafi jihadi groups like al-Qaeda. Today it is itself under threat from the so-called *al-fi'at al-zala* (deviant group) – a codename for the Salafi jihadists.

⁴ A critic of this Wahhabi proselytisation project in the 1970s and 1980s said the scholarship scheme was primarily designed to create a Somali elite – mainly Islamic teachers and preachers – whose role was to propagate Wahhabism. The exclusive focus on Islam, he added, was regrettable, given the crying need for doctors, engineers, administrators and other professionals. Crisis Group telephone interview, Cairo, November 2009.

⁵ Hundreds of millions of dollars were disbursed to fund infrastructure projects and, more crucially, to enable the Somali government to purchase weapons from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and other Eastern Bloc states. The aid was especially critical for efforts to modernise the army in preparation for the 1977 Ogaden War and arguably emboldened President Barre to defy Moscow's warning against attacking Ethiopia. Crisis Group interview, former senior army general, Nairobi, September 2009.

⁶ A group of Saudi-trained clerics, led by Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed (“Garyare”), began a discreet campaign to organise Islamist resistance to Barre. In July 1987, Garyare and his friends launched the al-Islah (Reform) movement in Saudi Arabia. It was accepted as a member of the Islamic Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) and formed an alliance with two Somali armed opposition groups – the SSDF (Somali Salvation and Democratic Front) and USC (United Somali Congress). The alliance broke down after al-Islah failed to dissuade the Somali rebel groups from getting too close to Ethiopia.

⁷ Barre suggested publicly that the Koranic verses on inheritance, which appear to favour men, needed re-interpreting. Clerics were outraged by what they regarded as blasphemy. Barre liked playing to the left-wing gallery and was keen to be seen as a

¹ Notably the Qaadiyaa, Ahmediyya and Saalihiyya. Crisis Group Africa Report N°100, *Somalia's Islamists*, 12 December 2005, p. 1. For an in-depth analysis of the origins and evolution of Islam in Somali society, see I.M. Lewis, *Saints and Somalis: Popular Islam in a Clan-Based Society* (Lawrenceville, 1998).

² Roland Marchal, “Islamic political dynamics in the Somali civil war”, in Alex de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (Bloomington, 2004), p. 119.

³ Crisis Group telephone interview, prominent Somali cleric, Toronto, January 2010. The Saudis were motivated by two reasons: one religious, the other geo-political. The promotion of Wahhabism is closely tied to the identity of the Kingdom, its modern history and sense of mission. Wahhabism was also

down followed, during which ten well-known clerics were executed.

Despite these setbacks, Wahhabism continued to gain adherents rapidly, and by the early 1980s it was the strongest Islamic sect in the country.⁸ Its rise was aided by the defeat of the Somali National Army in the 1977 Ogaden War with Ethiopia, when the dream of a socialist pan-Somali state collapsed. More importantly, public confidence in the ideals of secularism, modernity and progress were shaken. The collective angst, breakdown of old certainties and the powerful sense of humiliation combined to create a potent psychological dynamic, conducive for the Islamist project. In addition, a number of armed groups stepped up a coordinated military offensive to overthrow the regime.

The collapse of the Barre regime in 1991, followed immediately by a bloody internecine clan war, further increased the appeal of the Islamist project. No less auspicious for the Islamists in Somalia was the prevailing political mood in the Muslim world.

1. Appropriating Wahhabism

Wahhabism generally regards other sects as “deviants”.⁹ Sufi Islam is particularly disliked because of “saint worship” and other “idolatrous” (*shirk*) acts.¹⁰ Most Salafi movements hold similar views, but Wahhabis have been more energetic in their quest to reform “deviant” sects – in effect to homogenise Islam. Somali Wahhabism evolved

champion of women’s empowerment. To his credit, he did more to improve the status of women than any leader, but by questioning the “fairness” of the Koranic law of inheritance, he was in effect seeking a confrontation with the conservatives.

⁸ Traditional Sufi *dugsi* (Koranic schools), where students wrote on wooden slabs (*lohi*) and often sat under trees, were no match for the well-funded modern Wahhabi *madrasas*. Impoverished families felt drawn to the *madrasas* because students received meals, clothes, small allowances and, if lucky, scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia. Saudi charities also funded many orphanages which doubled as *madrasas*.

⁹ Wahhabi clerics often refer to a saying of Prophet Muhammad suggesting Muslims will divide into 73 sects (*madhhabs*), only one of which will go to heaven. Sunan Dawud, vol. 3, Hadith no. 4580. Some scholars deem this *hadith* (saying) not credible.

¹⁰ Wahhabi hostility to the veneration of Sufi saints stems from a puritanical conception of *tawhid* (monotheism). Sufis believe saints (*awliyaa*) have powers of intercession, and invoking their names or worshipping at their tombs enhances spiritual closeness (*taqqarrub*) to God. Wahhabis believe this is a diminution of divine powers, a deification, an association of a mortal being with God, and thus tantamount to *shirk*. Wahhabis also oppose the annual festival of *Mawlid* to mark Prophet Muhammad’s birthday for similar reasons. *Mawlid* is viewed by Wahhabis as *bid’a* (an innovation).

into Salafi jihadism, a highly intolerant and belligerent jihadi theology and culture that fuels and complicates intra-Islam conflict in Somalia.¹¹ It is the reason that elements of Al-Shabaab have gone to great lengths to desecrate and destroy Sufi shrines.¹²

Islamist ideologues, like Hasan Dahir Aweys, transformed Wahhabism into a potent revolutionary theology to mobilise Somalis and effect socio-political change. But there were numerous reasons why the Islamist groups found Wahhabism uniquely attractive. First, its reformist zeal¹³ could be harnessed for revolutionary change. Secondly, it had a strong anti-clerical tendency, something which Somali Islamist leaders – largely without any formal theological training – found advantageous. Thirdly, maintaining Wahhabism meant official and non-official Saudi funding was guaranteed.

To appropriate Wahhabism for socio-political activism, to give it an uncompromising militancy and to imbue it with jihadi verve, it was combined with Salafi jihadism.¹⁴ This led to the formation in the early 1980s of al-Ittihaad al-Islami.¹⁵ The organisation, though overtly nationalist in orientation, fostered ties with like-minded jihadi groups, seeing itself as part of a global Islamist vanguard aimed at expanding Islamic control. It developed especially close links with, and provided support to, Somali insurgent

¹¹ Wahhabism predates the modern Salafism of Rashid Rida, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Hassan al-Banna. The two tendencies have much in common and in many parts of the Muslim world are increasingly indistinguishable. They share a harsh, austere outlook, a literal interpretation of scripture and *hadith* and intolerance of other Muslim sects. Salafi jihadism in Somalia is a convergence of Wahhabism and modern Salafism. For an in-depth analysis of Wahhabism and Salafi jihadism, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°100, *Somalia's Islamists*, 12 December 2005; and Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

¹² The destruction of religious sites began with desecration of an Italian colonial cemetery by Aden Hashi Farah (“Ayro”) and his militia in 2005. This then evolved into the more recent campaign to destroy Sufi shrines.

¹³ Wahhabism was a reformative theology at its inception by Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab that sought to “cleanse” or “purify” the Muslim faith from all forms of syncretism, in particular the influences of Hellenic ideas, Indian and Persian metaphysics and mysticism. It is thus an attempt to reclaim and maintain a perceived “purity” of the Islamic faith against Sufi *inhiraf* (deviations). See Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit.

¹⁴ A similar process was under way in many parts of the Muslim world, especially North Africa, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan. See *ibid*.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Somalia's Islamists*, op. cit., p. 3.

groups in Ethiopia,¹⁶ but was ultimately defeated in the mid-1990s by the Ethiopian army.¹⁷

Al-Ittihaad's defeat did not diminish the powerful hold Salafi Jihadism had over Islamist radicals in Somalia. If anything, it intensified the process of radicalisation and may – a number of observers believe – have pushed some to embrace the most extremist theology: Takfiri jihadism.¹⁸

2. The rise of Takfiri jihadism

The core Takfiri doctrine contends that the modern day Muslim community has lapsed into a state of *kufir* (apostasy). This is an elevation of the Salafi doctrine which holds that modern day Muslims are in a state of *jahiliyah* (pre-Islamic age of ignorance). Takfiri ideas have a long pedigree in Somalia and remained a dormant sub-strand within the larger body of the Salafi jihadi ideology of radicals after the collapse of the Barre regime.¹⁹ Since the beginning of 2009, a fanatical fringe of the Salafist jihadis have revived and instrumentalised Takfiri ideas in its ideological war with Sheikh Sharif and his government. They regard these ideas as a “purifying” progression – as the next theological rung in the Salafi jihadi ideological ladder – and divide the world into two simple and neat categories: *Dar al-harb* (the abode of war) and *Dar al-Islam* (the abode Islam).

¹⁶ This included al-Ittihaad al-Islamami ee Soomaaliya Galbeed (the Islamic Union of Western Somalia) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. In 1995-1996, al-Ittihaad was involved in terrorist attacks in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa. Ibid, pp. 4-9.

¹⁷ In August 1996 and again in January 1997, Ethiopian forces crossed the border into Somalia to attack and destroy al-Ittihaad bases. Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, January 2010.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Roland Marchal, scholar, Nairobi, February 2010. Al-Shabaab Emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane, is now believed to be the prominent local Somali exponent of Takfiri jihadism. Takfiri ideas have a long pedigree and can be traced to the Khawarij, a fanatical group that emerged in the seventh century and waged a bitter campaign against the fourth Muslim Caliph, and last of “The Rightly-Guided Caliphs” (*Khulafa al-Rashidun*), Ali Ibn Abi Talib, whom they killed in 661. The original *al-Takfir wal-Hijra* was formed in Egypt under the leadership of Shukri Mustafa, a member of the Muslim Brothers who acquired his revolutionary views through exposure to Sayyid Qutb's writings and his own experience of detention in Egypt's prisons. The original *al-Takfir wal-Hijra* was responsible for the kidnapping and murder of a former government minister. Shukri Mustafa was subsequently executed but militants inspired by Takfiri ideas, including Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been associated with extremist violence ever since. For a fuller description, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°13, *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004, pp. 3-4; and Crisis Group Report, *Somalia's Islamists*, op. cit., p. 12.

In Takfirism, the correct existential role and vocation of the “true believer” is to wage permanent jihad to recreate the utopia of *Dar al-Islam*. There are no subtle gradations of the Islamic faith, as recognised by mainstream Sunni and Shia Islam. One is either a *mu'min* (true believer) or a *murtad* (apostate). Pragmatism, compromise and engagement are mortal sins and proof of apostasy, punishable by death. In the eyes of the Takfiris, Sharif and the TFG are guilty of these sins.

III. DIVIDED ISLAMISTS

Although many variations of Islam remain in Somalia, currently the struggle is largely between Salafi groups, principally Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam, and traditional Sufi groups, organised under the umbrella of Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a (ASWJ).²⁰ The rise and appeal of Islamist groups was linked to the belief that they could transcend the schisms that have so divided Somali society, but despite a gloss of unity, most Islamist groups are equally divided along ideological and clan lines.²¹ Initially, Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam shared a similar vision and model of Sharia,²² but they are divided on two crucial issues, pan-Somali nationalism and the political utility of clans. ASWJ is much more tolerant of ideological differences, but it remains deeply divided along clan lines.²³

Building even a modestly coherent profile of Somalia's Islamist groups remains a great challenge, because there is no primary written material on policy, ideology and organisational structure.²⁴ Despite the recent frictions and divisions, they remain highly secretive. One consequence is the over-emphasis on personalities. Inevitably, not enough

²⁰ Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a was a phrase coined by main-stream Sunni scholars to distinguish themselves from the Shia branch of Islam. By implication they suggest that Wahabbis, especially Al-Shabaab, are not part of Islam's four orthodox schools.

²¹ See, for example, Crisis Group Africa Report N°147, *Somalia: To Move Beyond the Failed State*, 23 December 2008.

²² Harsh punishments like amputation, stoning, and flogging are common in all Hizb al-Islam and Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. It is also mandatory for women to wear the *jilbab* and the *niqab* face-veil.

²³ ASWJ has not articulated a position on pan-Somali nationalism, and given its close ties with Ethiopia, will – like many other groups – want to keep its position ambivalent.

²⁴ This is deliberate. Islamist groups in Somalia – especially al-Ittihaad al-Islami and the Union of Islamic Courts – generally tended to avoid discussions on theological and ideological differences. It was thought they would divide the Islamist movement, inflame sectarian tensions and sap its political and military strength. However, the reality is that there was always a strong undercurrent of homogenisation – to impose the puritanical Wahhabi brand of Islam across the country.

attention has been paid to the ideas, motives and theology which animate these groups and fuel their uniquely uncompromising brand of politics. But an understanding of the core ideological and theological elements shaping that intransigence and which are at the root of the current infighting is critical for the peace process. Any serious initiative by the TFG to reach out to the insurgency and draw up a list of possible interlocutors will have to be based on such an understanding if progress is to be made at all.²⁵

One area of division is Somali nationalism. Hizb al-Islam's two traditional leaders, Sheikh Hasan Dahir Aweys and Sheikh Hasan Abdullahi Hirsi, "Hasan Turki", are nationalists and strong advocates of the creation of a greater Somalia, which incorporates all the Somali-inhabited regions into one state.²⁶ Al-Shabaab sees its agenda as much broader than the Somali-inhabited regions of the Horn of Africa. It aspires to creating a new global Islamic Caliphate, with undefined geographical boundaries.²⁷ Hard-liners in the organisation see nationalism as a legacy of colonialism and part of the problem. They argue that modern nationalism and the idea of a nation-state are alien concepts meant to fragment the *umma* (the global Islamic community).

The other difference is views about clans. Hizb al-Islam also takes a pragmatic view of the clan system, which it tries to exploit to achieve its strategic aims. The four main Hizb al-Islam affiliates were chosen with a view to achieving some semblance of clan balance.²⁸ Both Aweys and Turki have in the past enjoyed cordial relations with elders from their clans – the Ayr and the Ogaden, respectively. Their seniority in age and political longevity has allowed them to build a good rapport with clan elders and thus access to clan support. In fact, the decision by the clans in Mogadishu and in southern Somalia to back the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in their struggle against the warlords in 2006 and its decisive victory were precisely due to the Courts' ability to engage with clan eld-

ers. In the heady days when the Courts enjoyed near universal support, Aweys and his colleagues were not only viewed as credible national leaders, but more significantly, as champions of their respective clan interests.²⁹

Views on the clan system within Al-Shabaab are mixed. The hardliners are ideologically opposed to it and see any manifestation of "clan bias" as proof of insufficient commitment to Islam. Less extreme figures sometimes manipulate the clan system to mobilise and achieve short-term objectives but are equally uneasy about getting sucked into Somalia's clan politics.

A. AL-SHABAAB

Al-Shabaab (the Youth) grew to prominence during the rise of the UIC.³⁰ After the Ethiopian invasion that toppled the UIC, it energetically conducted an extensive military, political and propaganda campaign aimed at recapturing southern Somalia. It has largely recruited from radicalised young men and sees the struggle with its adversaries as essentially ideological.³¹ Initially a loose network of Islamist groups opposed to Ethiopian occupation, it has become over the last couple of years more centralised and increasingly extremist. There are two main reasons, one political, the other ideological.

²⁵ The caveat is that better understanding of the ideological nuances will not – in and of itself – help to produce a clearer image. These groups are evolving and mutating in a fluid political environment in which alliances are constantly shifting. See Crisis Group Report, *Somalia's Islamists*, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁶ There are large Somali-inhabited regions in Ethiopia and Kenya; most people in Djibouti (former French Somaliland) are also Somali.

²⁷ Al-Shabaab radio in southern Somalia is called Radio Andalus – a name that evokes the memory of the Islamic empire that controlled southern Spain (Andalusia), a period considered by many as Islam's golden era.

²⁸ Apart from the four principles, other significant figures drawn from the major clans included Dr Omar Iman Abubakar (Baadi-Cadde); Mohammed Mire (Majerten); Hasan Mahdi (Reer Aw-Hasan); Abdiqadir Komandos (Gaadsan, Dir); and Abdullahi Khatab (Reer Aw-Hasan).

²⁹ There is no evidence Hizb al-Islam favours an "Islamist bottom-up approach", although, in the UIC days, it appeared that was the general direction in which things were evolving. Mogadishu was governed as a city state (Banaadir), and that administrative model and success was to be replicated elsewhere. That should not be confused with regionalism. Islamists of all stripes generally dislike the concept as a recipe for further fragmentation. Even moderates in Sharif's camp are reluctant federalists, which explains the hostility of Puntland towards the Sharif TFG.

³⁰ There are conflicting views on when Al-Shabaab was formed. One is that it was created in 1998 by Islamist leader Hassan Dahir Aweys as a crack military unit of the Islamic Courts. The other is that it was created in mid-2006 by an Aweys protégé, Ayro, as part of a special unit of the courts militia to carry out "dirty war" and later to spearhead the insurgency against the Ethiopian and Somali government forces.

³¹ Al-Shabaab in particular has been using aggressive media techniques. Various Somali jihadi websites, mainly hosted in Europe and North America, promote its militant ideology, which sees "pure" Muslims as being in a permanent state of war with "infidels". It also tries to popularise the "culture of martyrdom". CDs and video tapes are distributed showing young men reading out their last testaments and conducting suicide operations and clerics extolling the virtues of jihad and martyrdom. The Al-Shabaab web-site, Kataaib.net, is adorned with pictures of young "martyrs" who have died in suicide operations.

1. Reactions to Sheikh Sharif's election

The dramatic changes in the political landscape in early 2009 triggered a series of shock waves that jolted Al-Shabaab to the core. An Islamist leader, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was elected the new president of an expanded TFG – briefly renamed Government of National Unity – on 31 January. Ethiopia's phased troop withdrawal that began in December 2008 ended in early February 2009. The new government shortly thereafter declared its commitment to codify and implement Sharia. Discreet back-channel negotiations got underway to convince key Al-Shabaab leaders to abandon the armed struggle and join the government.

The speed, scale and potential implications of the changes threw Al-Shabaab and the other insurgent groups momentarily off balance, sending them scrambling for an effective response. Their well-rehearsed discourse and rhetoric, largely pegged on what they were opposed to and waging the armed struggle for, appeared to ring hollow, if not altogether disingenuous to many Somalis. They were now expected to articulate what they stood for, and more importantly, in what way their project to Islamise the country was better or different from that of the new TFG.

When it came, Al-Shabaab's response was overwhelmingly negative and stridently adversarial. Sharif was a traitor. His Islamist credentials were dubious and his intentions to implement Sharia suspect.³² He was a Western puppet, a tool to dismember the Islamist movement. AMISOM was not a peacekeeping or neutral force but the continuation of the Ethiopian occupation by another name.

³² The campaign by the hardliners to portray Sharif as an Islamist fraud and his moderate Islamism as not authentic began immediately after the collapse of the UIC in January 2006. It gathered momentum during the Djibouti process. At the superficial level, it was an attempt to discredit his Islamism and pre-empt public support. The real target was not Sharif's political Islam but his very faith. Led by its chief ideologue, Ahmed Godane, a team of theological scholars was assembled as early as late 2007 to build a case that he is an apostate. Throughout the first months of 2009, Godane, Shongole, Zeyli'i and others, criss-crossed Al-Shabaab territory, giving sermons to warn people against embracing Sharif. Al-Shabaab-affiliated web sites – now defunct – posted clips of Godane's sermons denouncing Sharif and the Djibouti process. By March 2009, the TFG was being openly called "*kooxda ridada*" (the apostate group) and Sharif "*amirka kooxda ridada*" (the emir of the apostate group). This was not simply a rhetorical device to escalate the war of words, but carefully chosen, precise theological terminology designed by the Takfiri wing of Al-Shabaab to pass the judgment of apostasy on Sharif and his government, though largely by skirting a formal theological declaration (*fatwa*), which would have been hugely controversial and most likely rejected as spurious by other scholars.

The propaganda onslaught to besmirch Sharif's personal character and cast aspersions on his brand of Islamism betrayed the degree to which Al-Shabaab felt threatened by him. The hard-line camp was jittery at the prospect of large defections to the TFG. This fear of dissent from within became more acute when reports emerged in February 2009 that Sharif was conducting secret, indirect talks with some key insurgent leaders, like Mukhtar Robow and Yusuf Indha Adde.³³ Shortly afterwards, two Al-Shabaab factions – Anoole and Ras Kamboni – joined the newly-formed Hizb al-Islam. Therefore, in the calculation of the hardliners, the battle with Sharif was urgent and imperative for survival. It had to be primarily fought on the ideological front, and the target was not only the wider public, but also the internal ideological ditherers.

Ahmed Abdi Godane, the movement's emir (leader), and his foreign jihadi allies had been conducting a discreet purge of the organisation from late 2008 and now saw an opportunity to initiate a wide-ranging shakeup. Dozens of middle-ranking and low-level commanders and local administrators deemed ideologically too soft were replaced.³⁴ For example, Mukhtar Robow (Rahanweyn Laysan) was removed as spokesman of the movement and pushed out of his Bay and Bakool stronghold.³⁵

³³ Although Robow repeatedly denied he was in communication with Sharif via intermediaries, many credible sources say prominent clan leaders in Mogadishu approached Robow on many occasions to convince him to make a deal with Sharif. The talks collapsed in April 2009, largely because of pressure from hardliners and elements in the TFG who felt Robow could upset its delicate clan balance if he joined the government. Indha Adde defected shortly afterwards to the TFG. He was a big catch, not only bringing hundreds of fighters with him, but also a wealth of crucial information on Al-Shabaab.

³⁴ The first casualties were overwhelmingly officials affiliated with clan-based groups that had primarily joined Al-Shabaab for financial reasons. Initially, Al-Shabaab had cultivated their support and offered them money and other inducements in order to mollify the clans in the territories under its control and appear representative. Their clan networking skills were deemed a vital political asset. Once some of the key clan-based factions like Anoole and Ras Kamboni had defected to Hizb al-Islam, and leaders like Robow were sidelined, their continued stay became untenable. In any case, because Al-Shabaab now had a relatively secure hold on much of the south, there was less need to retain officials whose commitment to the Salafi jihadi ideology was suspect in hardliners' eyes. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu, Kismaayo, Nairobi, January 2010.

³⁵ Robow's ouster from the powerful post of spokesman and his subsequent marginalisation was instigated by Godane. The two had a long-running feud, which was partly ideological and partly based on competition for political supremacy. Though Godane was the "*emir*" – a title that conferred considerable power and prestige – many viewed him in comparison with Robow as a political dwarf. Lacking a loyal clan constituency, uncharis-

Tellingly, clan still played an important role in selecting his successor, Ali Mahmud Rage (“Ali Dheere”), a youthful Murursade leader. Rage’s personal and ideological profile hardly differed from Robow’s, and he has since proved to be less hard-line. His appointment was probably intended as a reward for the Murursade, who, with the Duduble, now constitute the backbone of Al-Shabaab in the Banaadir region (Mogadishu and environs).³⁶ Whatever reservations the hardliners may have about Rage’s style and his “misdemeanours”, it is unlikely they will seek to move against him now. That would certainly invite retaliation from the Murursade. A mass defection of the clan would be counterproductive and ill-timed, given the TFG’s plans to launch a military offensive in the coming months to regain territory from the insurgency.

2. Take-over by foreigners and centralisation

Al-Shabaab was formally renamed Harakat Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin in 2009 to buttress its jihadist identity and the global nature of its aspirations. Although Godane is often portrayed as the main beneficiary of the changes and his position as emir reinforced, real power was now

matic and living a reclusive life for fear of assassination, he has failed to match Robow’s public appeal. However, Godane convinced powerful elements in the foreign jihadi camp to sideline his rival. Robow had enjoyed close and cordial relations with the foreign jihadis, playing host to dozens on his Bay and Bakool home turf. Relations turned frosty after the fall of Baidoa and allegations he gave safe passage to some clansmen who were TFG officials, in defiance of instructions to take them hostage. Confidence in him was further eroded when he agreed to talk with Sharif emissaries. Godane exploited this to drive a wedge between Robow and his former friends.

³⁶ Rage’s public pronouncements have been cautious and well-crafted, clearly designed not to alienate the public. His statement denying involvement in the Hotel Shamow bombing appeared to many reporters at his news conference as genuine. His denunciation of the attack and regret at the civilian losses has since raised speculation about his influence within the organisation. Sources such as Roland Marchal suggest the attack was ordered by the Takfiri wing or the foreign jihadis, and Rage may not have been privy to its organisation and possibly had no prior knowledge. When an audio clip of a jihadi song in Swahili, *Nairobi tutafika* (Nairobi here we come) carrying lyrics explicitly threatening attacks on Kenya surfaced in February 2010 on the pro-Al-Shabaab web site, Al-Qimmah (the summit), Rage swiftly denounced it as a fake and said the movement had no such intentions. This position contradicts that of the hardliners such as Shongole and Zeyli’i, who in the past publicly threatened Kenya. It would appear that Rage is keen to be his own man and speak for the large “nationalist” camp disenchanted with the foreign jihadis. This intriguing view seems to be given credence by reports Rage and Robow have been making discreet attempts in recent months to create a new forum for dissidents. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu, February, March, 2010.

vested in a small group of foreign jihadis (*muhajirin*) and a handful of locals (*ansar*).³⁷ It is this small, but well-resourced and powerful faction which is the driving force behind Al-Shabaab’s ideological drift to the far extreme. It sees itself as the true custodian of the “pure” faith and feels the movement is losing its ideological mooring and commitment to the tenets of Salafi jihadism, as a result of indiscipline and infiltration by “clan jingoists”.³⁸ A more centralised command structure appears to have been adopted, with foreign jihadis taking exclusive and direct tactical and operational command. The net result of all the changes was that Al-Shabaab moved closer to the al-Qaeda orbit, and the links have become more solid in the past year.³⁹

³⁷ Al-Shabaab officially uses the terms *ansar* and *muhajirin* to designate the movement’s two main components. They were first used in Medina around 640 during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed. The first Muslim émigrés from Mecca fleeing persecution were called *al-muhajirin* (the émigrés); their Medinite hosts were called *al-ansar* (the helpers). There is obvious religious symbolism and spiritual resonance in the terms. By using them it seeks to revive the spirit of Islamic brotherhood which characterised relations between the historical *ansar* and *muhajirin*. The first generation of Muslims – made up of the *ansar* and *muhajirin* – were categorised in Sunni theological discourse as *salaf al-salih* (the virtuous); imitating their life was deemed a worthy act of faith. Salafism elevated this concept of “virtuous imitation” to an act of supreme faith. Based on these theological ideas, a true Somali Salafi jihadi was expected to openly embrace a *muhajir* and offer refuge, hospitality and protection without regard for race or nationality, like the historical *ansar*. This principle – cleverly exploited by the foreign jihadis – has been at the root of Somalia’s tense relations with the West. While the conventional Western view sees the *muhajirin* as freelance terrorists hopping from one conflict to the next, Somali Salafists – not all violent or extreme – may feel compelled out of genuine religious conviction to give refuge and succour to fellow Salafi fugitives, thereby attaining *thawab* (spiritual rewards). For many pious Muslims, the act of “pleasing” Allah and attaining *thawab*, overrides any earthly considerations. There are probably several hundred foreign fighters, recruited from various parts of the Muslim world and Somali diaspora communities. Probably half are Kenyan nationals, including Kenyan Somalis; many of the rest come from Bangladesh, Chechnya, Pakistan, Sudan and Tanzania. See “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)”, S/2010/91, 10 March 2010, p. 51. There are also smaller numbers of fighters from the West, including Denmark, Sweden, the UK and the U.S., most of them from the Somali diaspora. For a list of key foreign figures in Al-Shabaab, see fn. 45 below.

³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Al-Shabaab defector, Mogadishu, January 2010.

³⁹ Al-Shabaab’s evolution in the last year in particular has alarmed those fearful of Somalia becoming a haven for al-Qaeda. For the Obama administration, which has been signalling it wants a review of Somalia strategy, this has been disconcerting. Sup-

That agenda is being discreetly and firmly resisted by influential local figures within the movement and arguably the bulk of its base.⁴⁰ The so-called “dissidents” appear, so far, keen on avoiding an all-out power contest to wrest control from the *muhajirin*.⁴¹ Despite the numerical strength and advantage enjoyed by the *ansar*, such caution is prudent, considering the firepower, battlefield prowess and tactical superiority of the *muhajirin*. The “dissidents” currently lack the capacity, resources and the wherewithal to mount an effective challenge. They are also keen to avoid actions that could further split and weaken Al-Shabaab, at a critical time when the Western-backed TFG is planning a major offensive.

So far, a shaky truce – reportedly brokered by local and foreign Salafi clerical supporters, after months of secret talks inside and outside the country, appears to be holding.⁴² Both sides now appear keen on maintaining some semblance of unity. Their leaders increasingly sound the same in their pronouncements, careful not to veer off the standard jihadi rhetoric. However, it is difficult to see how real unity can be achieved without a major confrontation that may well turn violent and bloody.

Al-Shabaab's extensive purge has been accompanied by a less visible and comprehensive organisational restructuring to restore hierarchy and tighten the grip of the hardliners. The primary target was the decentralised and less hierarchical command and control model adopted in early

porters of a hard-line counter-terrorism strategy have felt vindicated. Drone surveillance patrols over southern Somalia have been stepped up, and a senior al-Qaeda fugitive, Saleh Ali Nabhan, was killed near the port city of Kismaayo in late 2009 in a U.S. special forces operation. The mood has also hardened among regional states – principally Kenya and Ethiopia, who now portray the situation as an existential threat – but also for countries much farther away.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Al-Shabaab defector, Mogadishu, January 2010.

⁴¹ Dissidents within the organization rarely speak out publicly, fearing they would be killed by hardliners.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, Mogadishu cleric, December 2010. According to his credible account, the talks began in earnest in mid-2009 and continued to November. Some were held in Mogadishu, Afgooye, Kismaayo, Baraawe (Brava), Marka and Doobley. Some were mediated, direct face-to-face talks, involving the theological heavyweights of the two sides, such as Godane and Robow. Others were conducted for security reasons through proxies and trusted intermediaries, with position papers and decisions in Arabic and Somali circulated in letter form. A prominent Gulf-based cleric was allegedly drafted into the process and his interventions – especially his theological judgment on contentious issues (clan identity politics, Sharia, jihad, Islamic ethics of warfare and the concept of a just and harmonious society as understood from the Salafi perspective) – were deemed decisive in, temporarily, ending months of deeply polarizing debate.

2007, which allowed affiliated factions greater operational and administrative flexibility and autonomy. That model certainly contributed to the insurgency's initial overall military effectiveness, and enabled it to be more responsive to public concerns.

However, once greater territorial and administrative control was achieved and the insurgency's hold appeared relatively more secure, from mid-2008 onwards, that model began losing its attraction for the hardliners. In their view, ambitious elements with a clan agenda had exploited it to build their own power base and clan fiefdoms. To rein in men like Robow and Turki, who were increasingly viewed as the key beneficiaries of the model,⁴³ it was not enough to simply replace or marginalise them. It was necessary to restructure the movement in such a way that power reverted to elements committed to all the ideals and principles of Salafi jihadism, at the top of which was a global jihad.⁴⁴

The result is that Al-Shabaab has been transformed in ways unrecognisable just two years ago. Godane, Shongole and Ibrahim Jama “al-Afghani” now preside over a centralised leadership structure, supported by a foreign jihadi cabal.⁴⁵ The presidium-style decision-making system – given the Islamic euphemism *shura* – ensures that

⁴³ Robow (Abu Mansur) is arguably the most respected Al-Shabaab figure in the south, especially in Bay and Bakool regions, the areas dominated by his Rahanweyn clan. During a brief takeover of the central town of Dinsoor in late March 2007, he addressed a large and enthusiastic crowd for two hours. A reporter described the scene as “remarkable”, like “an inauguration of a president”. Crisis Group interviews, Baidoa, April 2008. Between 1996 and 1998, he ran a camp, Al-Hudaa, for Somali Islamist fighters in Xuddur and took part in the al-Ittihaad al-Islami battles against Ethiopian troops in Gedo, south-western Somalia. He left Somalia in 2000 and trained for a year with the Taliban in Afghanistan. He was a top military commander in the fighting between the Islamists and the coalition of warlords (the Anti-Terrorism Alliance) in mid-2006. He rarely appears in public without his trademark Taliban-style black turban; see www.kataaib.net/Aba%20Mansuur.htm.

⁴⁴ The official declaration that Al-Shabaab is linked to al-Qaeda and the numerous statements linking it with the jihad in Yemen and Palestine should be understood in this light.

⁴⁵ These, and their Al-Shabaab functions, include: Fazul Abdullah Mohamed (Comoros Islands), commander in chief of Al-Shabaab; Sheikh Mohamed Abu Faid (Saudi-born), financier and “manager” of Al-Shabaab; Abu Suleiman Al-Banadir (Somali of Yemeni descent), Godane adviser; Abu Musa Mombasa (Pakistan), recently arrived to replace Saleh Ali Nabhan, killed in U.S. military operation, in Al-Shabaab security and training; Abu Mansur Al-Amriki (U.S.), finance of foreign fighters; Mohamoud Mujajir (Sudan), recruitment of suicide bombers; and Abdifatah Aweys Abu Hamsa (Somali national trained in Afghanistan), commander of the Mujahidin of Al-Quds. Confidential AMISOM document made available to Crisis Group.

political and military policies are crafted collectively and more tightly supervised as they are relayed down the implementation chain.⁴⁶ Godane personally administers Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Mogadishu, using loyal commanders selected from local clans.⁴⁷ Al-Afghani administers Kismayo and the Jubba valley, also using loyal commanders from local clans.⁴⁸

The hardliners, led by the foreign jihadis, wield enormous influence and have access to resources and the means to dictate their wishes to the less powerful factions. Robow, Turki and the other leaders are dependent on them materially to maintain their fighters. This is critical in a country where troop numbers matter, and where lack of military muscle – however miniscule – often means political irrelevance. Robow wants to maintain this relationship, strained as it may be, mainly to ensure that the hundred of fighters loyal to him do not defect. So too does Turki, who in addition may want to utilise Al-Shabaab's influence in the Jubba Valley to salvage what is left of his own influence with the Ogadeni sub-clans.

3. Public backlash

Greater territorial and administrative control, as well relative military dominance, has done little to enhance Al-Shabaab's popularity. It is finding the challenge of governance much more complicated than the guerrilla struggle. Its short governance record has been disastrous, fuelling public disillusion and intensifying the pace of ideological and policy infighting within the leadership.

There is a discernible shift in public opinion. Al-Shabaab's extremist and atavistic vision of Islam and coercive drive to impose religious and social homogeneity are creating huge public disaffection and a new and unprecedented category of refugees: men and women who feel stifled and persecuted for their beliefs and lifestyle. Reports about the disproportionate influence and power wielded by the foreign jihadis, coupled with the widespread speculation

that they ordered the deadly suicide bomb attack at the graduation ceremony in Mogadishu, have provoked unprecedented public outrage inside Somalia and among the Somali diaspora. A renewed campaign by Al-Shabaab to destroy Sufi shrines in northern Mogadishu in late March 2010 caused widespread consternation and disgust.⁴⁹ Many supporters of ASWJ now refer to Al-Shabaab as "*xabaala gothato*" ("the grave diggers").

It is now clear the foreign jihadi factor is a key driver of the Somali conflict. Their belligerence, fanatical attachment to an uncompromising brand of politics and extremist theology is seriously undermining, if not thwarting, any potential chances for finding a political settlement. The foreigners see Sharif and the TFG's moderate Islamism as a serious threat. They fear moderate Islam may prove irresistible for the movement's "dissidents", as well as the large population now trapped under their rule, and trigger a process that could culminate in a political settlement. That would make their stay in Somalia untenable. It is this fear, more than anything else that is at the core of their determined push to use every tool at their disposal to fan the flames of the Somalia crisis.

B. HIZB AL-ISLAM

Hizb al-Islam was created in February 2009, shortly after Sharif was elected in Djibouti as president of the TFG.⁵⁰ It was a vehicle for Aweys to salvage his dwindling political fortunes. He knew his ambition to regain control of Al-Shabaab was unattainable, especially now that Ayro, his youthful protégé and relative, was no longer alive.⁵¹ The hope was to create a forum that would unite the opposition against the Sharif government. Hizb al-Islam was an alliance of four Islamist dissident organisations opposed to the UN-sponsored Djibouti peace process: Aweys's Asmara-wing of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, ARS (Habar Gedir/Ayr/Asiye); Anool, led by a close Aweys ally, Sheikh Abdullahi Ali Hashi (Arab

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews Nairobi, and telephone interviews, Mogadishu, February 2010.

⁴⁷ These include: Ali Mohammed Hussein (Abgaal), governor of Benadir; Ahmed Korgab (Murusade), military commander; Mohammed Fidow (Murusade), principal officer; Sheikh Yusuf Mo'allim esse (Abgaal), chief operating officer, Yakshid District; Sheikh Hassan Afrahoow (Saleeban), chief operating officer, Mogadishu; Sheikh Bashir Mohammed Mohamuud (Saleeban), chief operating officer, Hodan District; and Kalif Addalle (Habar Gedir/Ayr), deputy chief operating officer. Confidential AMISOM document made available to Crisis Group. Godane's clan is Isaaq/Arab, from the north.

⁴⁸ These include: Hassan Yacub; Ali Hog, head of security Middle Jubba; and Hussein Gedi (Ogaden), governor, Lower Jubba. Confidential AMISOM document made available to Crisis Group. Al-Afghani's clan is Isaaq/Habar Awal, from the north.

⁴⁹ Apparently Al-Shabaab now has a *waaxda kahortega shirkiga* (anti-idolatry department), whose sole purpose is to demolish Sufi shrines and tombs of holy men built inside mosques. The campaign began in the Jubba Valley, especially Kismaayo, in late 2008 and has spread to Mogadishu. One of the Sufi shrines targeted in north Mogadishu is that of a prominent saint, Sheikh Mohammed Biyamalow, whose followers hold a colourful spiritual festival there annually, attracting pilgrims widely. In early 2006, when the UIC was in power, the pilgrims were allowed to convene at the mosque, and dozens of armed men were sent by the authority, then led by Sheikh Sharif, to provide security. He was helped by Eritrea. See "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)", S/2010/91, 10 March 2010, pp. 21-22.

⁵¹ Ayro was killed by a U.S. missile strike on 1 May 2008.

Mahmud Salah);⁵² Ras Kamboni, led by Sheikh Hasan Abdullahi Hirsi, "Hasan Turki" (Ogaden Mohammed Subeer); and Jabhatul Islam, also known by its Somali acronym Jabiso and led by Sheikh Abdullahi Ahmed Umar (Gaalje'el).⁵³

Aweys and his long-time allies from the al-Ittihaad days – Turki and Hashi – saw Sharif's election as an affront to their stature and seniority in the Somali Islamist movement. Perhaps even more crucially, they viewed the entire Djibouti process as an elaborate Western "conspiracy" to further divide the Islamists and lend legitimacy to a flawed partial peace process aimed at disempowering "true nationalist forces" committed to the creation of "a genuine Islamic state" in Somalia.⁵⁴ As far as they were concerned, Sharif's installation and the profuse Western praise for his "moderate" views were deeply disingenuous – a cynical policy designed to ensure the continuation of the status quo ante.⁵⁵

Aweys returned to Mogadishu in late April 2009. He quickly rallied opposition to Sharif and orchestrated disorganised, but ferocious attacks on the TFG forces in May. This was facilitated through a tactical alliance with Al-Shabaab, especially the skilled and ideologically committed nucleus comprising local and foreign jihadis around Godane. Alarmed by the scale and ferocity of the combined Al-Shabaab/Hizb al-Islam offensive, AMISOM was forced to join the fighting to save the TFG from imminent collapse. With its superior skill and firepower, AMISOM quickly repelled the attack and inflicted heavy losses on the insurgents.

1. Conflict with Al-Shabaab

The tactical alliance and partnership of convenience between Hizb al-Islam and Al-Shabaab fell apart almost immediately after the failed May 2009 offensive. Leading

Al-Shabaab figures, including Godane and Shongole, blamed Aweys and Turki for press-ganging them into an ill-conceived military campaign that led to heavy casualties, drew in AMISOM and alienated the public.⁵⁶

In early October 2009, a long-simmering dispute in the southern port city of Kismaayo, mainly over distribution of port revenues, the way in which the town was administered and rivalries between Ogaden, Harti and Marehan clans, escalated into an all-out conflict for its control. Ras Kamboni, keen not to antagonise and alienate its Ogadeni support base, hastily assembled a small force to face down Al-Shabaab. Ras Kamboni commander Ahmed Madobe sought help from two of the other Hizb al-Islam factions, Anoole and Jabhatul Islam, but was rebuffed.⁵⁷ Interventions by Aweys and others to avert a showdown failed, and Madobe's men were decisively routed by a superior Al-Shabaab force led by Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee'ad "Al-Afghani" (also known in Kismayo as Abubakar al-Zeyli'i), with the support of foreign jihadis. Al-Shabaab quickly followed-up with a series of coordinated attacks all across Ras Kamboni's heartland in the Lower Jubba Valley, taking control of major towns, like Afmadow, Jilib, Jamame and Doble.

The fighting between the former allies, which is still raging in districts near the border with Kenya, has put an end to any prospect of Hizb al-Islam and Al-Shabaab mending their rift and re-forging their alliance, at least in the short to medium term.⁵⁸

2. Anoole and Jabhatul Islam – juggling clan and ideology

Anoole and Jabhatul Islam were created in early 2008 with the aim of safeguarding the perceived interests of two clans – the Harti and Gaalje'el, respectively – within the Islamist insurgency spearheaded by Al-Shabaab.⁵⁹ Their

⁵² Sheikh Hashi is a native of Puntland (with family ties in Garowe), he is in his mid-50s/early-60s. A prominent member of al-Ittihaad he was part of the ARS-Asmara group and Aweys's personal emissary to the Yemen talks in late 2008 aimed at reconciling the two ARS wings. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, January 2010.

⁵³ Sheikh Abdullah Ahmed Umar is Hizb al-Islam's logistics secretary. Born in Buq Aqable, Hiiraan, central Somalia in 1963, he was a logistics officer with the defence ministry in the 1980's, became a businessman in the 1990's and ran Islamic charities in the Hiiraan Region and Mogadishu. Crisis Group interview Nairobi, January 2010. The Gaalje'el are a Hawiye clan.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, December 2009.

⁵⁵ In numerous media interviews after Sharif was elected, Aweys described his former protégé as a "traitor" and U.S. "stooge", no different from Abdullahi Yusuf, whom he replaced as president of the TFG. See, for example, Abdiaziz Hassan, "Somali opposition leader vows to fight on", Reuters, 5 March 2009.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, December 2009. Apparently, Al-Shabaab favoured encirclement to gradually choke off Mogadishu rather than a frontal assault. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu and Nairobi, December 2009.

⁵⁷ Anoole's and Jabhatul Islam's reasons for refusing Madobe may have been motivated by rivalries and divisions within Hizb al-Islam. Madobe's intentions were suspect, and some saw the bid to retake Kismaayo as an attempt to ingratiate himself with the Ogaden and thus enhance his chances of succeeding the elderly, ailing Turki as chairman of Ras Kamboni. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, December 2009.

⁵⁸ This despite reports local commanders at times cooperate against their common ASWJ enemy in central Somalia. For example, they worked together to retake the strategic south-western town of Beledweyne in January-February 2010.

⁵⁹ Estimates of the military strength of the two factions vary, though sources suggest their combined fighters do not exceed 400. The number has declined since December 2009, mainly

leaders, Sheikh Abdullahi Ali Hashi (Harti Darood/Arab Mahmud Salah) and Sheikh Abdullahi Ahmed Umar respectively, are ideologically more in tune with the hard-line jihadi Islamism of Al-Shabaab and had links with some top leaders, such as Godane and Turki, dating back to the early 1990s, but they are pragmatic about their clan interests.⁶⁰ The public rationale for joining Al-Shabaab was antipathy to Sharif and all he represented.

The primary motive, however, was clan calculations. Anoole's agenda was to ensure that Harti interests in southern Somalia – especially in the port city of Kismaayo – were not jeopardised. The aim of Jabhatul Islam was to represent the interests of the Gaalje'el and the other minor clans threatened by the rise of the ASWJ in the central regions of Hiiraan and Galgudud.⁶¹ As long as leaders who favoured pragmatic engagement with the clans were at the helm of Al-Shabaab, they had little cause for concern.⁶² Once it became clear that power had shifted to a hard-line faction ideologically opposed to playing the “clan game”, their situation became untenable.⁶³

When Hizb al-Islam emerged in February 2009, Anoole and Jabhatul Islam saw it as a natural home and a way out of their dilemma. By joining, they could hope to retain their “rejectionist” and jihadi identity, without abandoning their clan agendas, which were carefully concealed beneath the rhetoric of Somali nationalism.

from defections. The two factions hold no territory on their own. Crisis Group telephone interview, Mogadishu, January 2010.

⁶⁰ Mohammed Mire (Harti Darood/Majerteen) is military commander of Anoole.

⁶¹ The ASWJ, though an alliance of traditional Sufi Islam adherents, was widely perceived as an attempt by Habar Gedir clans – especially the Ayr, Saleban and Sa'ad – to seek an alternative vehicle to secure their interests and gradually shift from their traditional anti-TFG role.

⁶² Al-Shabaab's “political pragmatists”, who favoured greater interaction with clan leaders, were led by Robow, who was supremely adept at engaging clan leaders. This partly explains why he remains popular with his Rahanweyn clansmen and even with Hawiye elders in Mogadishu.

⁶³ The anti-clan lobby within Al-Shabaab is led by the emir, Godane, and includes other hardliners, like Shongole and al-Afghani, who believe a true Salafi jihadi eschews all forms of “clannish” behaviour and attitude. Its main complaint against Robow is that he is a “clannist”. In late 2008, when the Ethiopians announced their intention to pull out of Baidoa, Digil and Mirifle clan leaders sent emissaries to him to take over the town so a security vacuum did not lead to serious factional fighting. Robow did and also gave safe passage to some parliamentarians and ministers from his clan. This “misdemeanour” irritated Godane, who seized upon it as “proof” of a clannish tendency. They met shortly afterwards and had a “serious row” over that and other matters. Godane used the incident to push Robow out of his spokesman post. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Baidoa, Nairobi, January 2010.

That choice soon proved as discomfiting as and even more politically risky than the previous choice. Hizb al-Islam lost momentum after the failed May 2009 offensive and its alliance with Al-Shabaab collapsed. Worse, when the former allies began fighting over Kismaayo, Anoole was powerless to influence events there and to protect the Harti Darood clans – the Majerten and the Dhulbahante. At the same time, Jabhatul Islam's attempts, without Al-Shabaab, to challenge ASWJ in the central regions also failed.

Unconfirmed reports suggest both factions are gradually disengaging from the south and moving further north, to the central regions of Hiiraan, Galgudud and Mudug.⁶⁴ Some speculate that they are seeking to forge new alliances.⁶⁵ While this is plausible, it is also possible they desire to re-establish links with their clans or need to find new means of sustenance and benefactors. So far, they have been spared the vicious infighting and power struggles that have bedevilled their counterparts in the wider Islamist movement, but this is less a function of good leadership than a reflection of the unity and cohesion fostered by the single clan constituencies they represent.

3. Ras Kamboni: Ahmed Madobe and the battle for succession

Ras Kamboni has been embroiled in a bitter internal power struggle in recent months. Key commanders are striving to shore up their positions in anticipation of a power transfer that looks increasingly likely, following credible reports the elderly Hassan Turki is terminally ill.⁶⁶ No clear leader has emerged. Earlier expectations that Turki favoured his relative and fellow clansman, Ahmad Madobe, have proved to be misplaced. The two have drifted apart, and their recent political choices leave no room for doubt as to the deep personal antipathy and political differences.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, January 2010.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Bosaaso and Nairobi, January 2010. Anoole is said to have been sending feelers to a former Al-Shabaab commander, Mohammed Sa'id (“Atom”), reportedly operating in parts of Puntland's Bari Region, especially around the Galgala (Galgalato) mountains. The sheikh, who is a Warsangeli (a clan of the Harti Darood) is said to have camps in the mountains and a force of some 300. The Puntland government has recently been trying to engage him. Some reports suggest U.S. intelligence officials have been in Puntland to verify events and generally to find out what Atom is up to. See “Garowe: Siirdonka USA ayaa soo Ghaadhay”, Dayniile (Somali-language website), 16 February 2010.

⁶⁶ Reports of Turki's illness have been around for some time. His exact ailment is a matter of conjecture. Some reports suggest one of his main organs is failing. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu and Nairobi, January 2010.

Madobe's "unilateral" political and military actions smacked – to critics – of unbridled ambition and opportunism and, worse, betrayed callous lack of the decency and decorum demanded by Turki's ill health. The decision to attack Kismayo, against the advice of his allies, reinforced this perception. Although Madobe claimed he was motivated by a moral imperative to challenge extremist Al-Shabaab, the real reason – in the eyes of his rivals – was more prosaic. To them, Madobe was playing the clan card, projecting himself as the next Ogadeni strongman and protector of the clan's interests in the Jubba regions. This amounted to a betrayal of the Islamist principles and pan-Somalia ideals on which Hizb al-Islam was founded. The suspicions of Turki and his allies turned to open hostility in late 2009, when credible reports emerged that Madobe was negotiating secretly with the TFG and the Kenyan authorities.⁶⁷

Kenya and Madobe

The TFG's failure to embrace Madobe and its reservations have not deterred Kenya from viewing him as an ally with whom it could do business.⁶⁸ Nairobi's Somalia policy has dramatically shifted in 2010. Pragmatic, quiet engagement with Al-Shabaab has been abandoned. Containment of the group is now regarded as a national security imperative. Key details remain a state secret, but a major component is military. Some 2,500 young Somali men from both sides of the border have been recruited and trained and are ready for deployment to fight alongside TFG forces in southern Somalia.⁶⁹

If this happens, Kenya would risk becoming more deeply embroiled in the Somalia conflict. In fact, Al-Shabaab has threatened repeatedly in recent months to conduct terror attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi.⁷⁰ Opinion is divided whether the group could extend its operations regionally without endangering its political project, sparking a public backlash and inviting a crackdown on its clandestine support infrastructure and networks.⁷¹ Western governments, wary of Kenya becoming embroiled in Somalia, have privately urged caution and appear, on the whole,

unenthusiastic about supporting the plan.⁷² Kenya could not maintain such a large force without adequate support from its Western allies and that looks at the moment unlikely. At some point, this force will have to be either formally handed over to the TFG or disbanded.⁷³

Ras Kamboni and the return to Al-Shabaab

The decision by other elements of Ras Kamboni to return to Al-Shabaab, widely reported in the media in early February, caught many by surprise.⁷⁴ The decision was by no means unanimous. Hasan Turki is claimed to have endorsed the deal, but there are doubts about this, given his delicate health. Barre Ali Barre, a long-time commander and a close friend of Aweys, dismissed the affair as the work of "malcontents and fifth columnists working for enemies".⁷⁵

4. The end of Aweys?

While Aweys may have been good at juggling religious ideology and clan interests in the past, he is now widely seen as less influential, especially within Ayr clan politics.⁷⁶ His diminishing national stature also reflects his

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, March, 2010.

⁷³ It has also raised concerns in Ethiopia that an Ogadeni-dominated local administration could emerge in southern Somalia which would support their kin in the Ogaden National Liberation Movement fighting in Ethiopia. To allay those concerns, the force has integrated a Marehan component, but it is unclear how power is distributed and what that would mean if the force did set up a local administration in Somalia.

⁷⁴ "Ururkii Raas Kamboni oo ku biirey Al-Shabaab", Somali-kudhan (Somali-language news website), 2 February 2010, <http://somalikudhan.com/detail.asp?id=1697>. They include the leaders Mohammed Mahmud Ali "Dhul Yadayn", Kajoje'ed and Isse Kamboni. See also "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia", op. cit., p. 16. Mohammed Dhul Yadayn is engaged in a power struggle with Ahmed Madobe for leadership of the Ogadeni Islamist factions.

⁷⁵ Barre Ali Barre was sent by Turki with about 150 men in mid-2008 to join the jihad in Mogadishu. He worked alongside other Al-Shabaab groups but maintained close links with Aweys and was assassinated at the Bakaaraha Market on 9 March 2010. One theory is that he may have been killed by those in Al-Shabaab and the Ras Kamboni faction who recently announced the deal in Baidoa. Another is that those responsible saw him as an obstacle to their ambitions to take control of Ras Kamboni, particularly Madobe allies.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu, and Nairobi, January 2010. Aweys is blamed by some Hawiye leaders for being unnecessarily intransigent and belligerent and failing to secure an accord with the TFG. He has a penchant for radical posturing, something which sometimes causes some analysts to portray him as more hard-line than probably he is. But to solely blame him for the failure to reach a deal with Sharif is unfair. The talks in Khartoum in April 2010 with the TFG were mis-handled. The TFG had little to offer Aweys beyond the vague

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, November 2009.

⁶⁸ Madobe's overtures were all rebuffed. Elements within the TFG were unwilling to cede power, distrusted Madobe and argued there was little utility in engaging him. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Nairobi, March 2010.

⁶⁹ See "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia", op. cit., p. 54.

⁷⁰ Abdi Guled and Ibrahim Mohamed, "We shall make their people cry!", Reuters, 23 October 2009. Security experts agree the Somali militant group has the capacity to conduct terrorist operations in Kenya and beyond.

⁷¹ Kenya's large Somali community and the porous border with Somalia contributed to its emergence as a major base for Somali-armed opposition groups. "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia", op. cit., pp. 24-26.

marginal role within the Ayr and wider Hawiye clan politics. More youthful and charismatic Ayr leaders, like the former deputy prime minister, Ahmed Abdisalam, have emerged. Also, the members of the clan inhabiting the central regions of Galgudud and Hiiraan are now solidly behind the pro-government ASWJ.

Aweys has become entirely dependent on his confidante and right-hand man, Dr Omar Iman Abubakar, to keep Hizb al-Islam operational. Having seen off the challenge by Yusuf Siad Indha Adde (Habar Gedir/Ayr/Achi),⁷⁷ Omar Iman's position appears secure. However, Hizb al-Islam's overall prospects look increasingly bleak. Its most pressing political problems are to rebuild its military capacity after Ras Kamboni's pullout in February 2010 and to persuade the two remaining partners – Anoole and Jabhatul Islam – to stay in the alliance.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to write off Aweys, who retains the potential to cause trouble for Sharif and the TFG.⁷⁸ In May, Hizb al-Islam took control of the central coastal town of Xarar-Dheere (also spelled Haradheere), an infamous pirate hide-out. Though the group claimed the motive was to tackle piracy and impose Sharia, the real reason was to demonstrate that Aweys could impose law and order and is still relevant. Hizb al-Islam is also attempting to expand its control in Afgoye, a town outside of Mogadishu, and surrounding districts.

Efforts should be made to find ways of rehabilitating him without necessarily empowering him.⁷⁹ One option is retirement and exile in Saudi Arabia in return for a formal process of "de-stigmatisation" by the U.S. and the UN. Ayr leaders generally view him now as a problem figure and

are clearly frustrated by his hard-line stance, but on the whole, many would welcome steps to rehabilitate him.⁸⁰

C. AHLU SUNNA WAL JAMA'A (ASWJ) AND THE TFG

The ASWJ was established in 1991 to bring together traditional Sufi leaders in an attempt to resist encroachment of reformist Islamic groups, but it was of only limited military importance until mid-2008.⁸¹ In July of that year, however, clashes broke out between it and Al-Shabaab militias in areas where Al-Shabaab tried to ban Sufi religious practices. In December, ASWJ obtained military support from Ethiopia and started a campaign to expel Al-Shabaab. By late 2009, it was the largest TFG-allied force in south and central Somalia.⁸²

ASWJ is predominantly a clan alliance that brings together major Hawiye sub-clans inhabiting the central regions of Hiiraan and Galgudud. The main sub-clan spearheading its military and political campaign is the Habar Gedir/Ayr. The Sa'ad and Saleban sub-clans are also increasingly joining its bandwagon. So too are other non-Hawiye clans, prominent among which is the Marehan (Gedo region), a Darood clan that has traditionally been hostile to Hawiye ambitions. Other ASWJ militias operate in the eastern Galgudud and Middle Shabelle regions (Abgaal Wa'eysle) and in Hiiraan region (Hawaadle).⁸³ Some other militia leaders, such as Barre Aden Shire "Hiiraale" (Marehan) and Yuusuf Ahmed Hagar "Dabageed", have tried to portray themselves as ASWJ in order to attract greater domestic and international support.⁸⁴

The alliance of clans is animated, the ASWJ claims, by an aversion to the extremist brand of Islam espoused by Al-Shabaab and in defence of traditional Sufi practices. That may be, but territorial and clan calculations also motivate it. Sheikh Omar Mohammed Farah, a cleric from Abuud-waq, is the de facto overall leader but is officially described only as the leader in the central regions. The movement is amorphous, straddles major clan divides and appears to lack a coherent leadership and direction. Fragmentation appears not so much a possibility as an inevitability following the recent power-sharing deal with the TFG – a process that will have winners and losers.

promise that his name would be "lifted from the terrorism list". There were also powerful foreign interests – U.S., Ethiopian and British – which did not want to see him rehabilitated and which may have actively undermined the Arab-led initiative (Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia).

⁷⁷ Indha Adde, now state minister (defence), defected to the TFG after losing the power struggle with Omar Iman in mid-2009.

⁷⁸ Factors that could potentially aid Aweys if he tried to improve his political prospects could include: a deal with Sharif; a serious breakup of the ASWJ, triggering a mass return of the Ayr to the opposition; and ferment within Al-Shabaab triggering a shift of power toward the jihadi nationalists now in a power struggle with the foreign jihadis.

⁷⁹ The tide turned against Aweys after a major offensive he orchestrated against the TFG collapsed. Many blamed him for an ill-advised, poorly-coordinated offensive largely motivated by his "egotistic" desire to teach Sharif a lesson and show his spoiler capacity. Clan elders blamed him for causing further civilian suffering. He could be offered a comfortable retirement package similar to Abdullahi Yusuf's.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mogadishu and Nairobi, December 2009.

⁸¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Somalia's Islamists*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

⁸² The Monitoring Group estimates the total strength of these disparate forces at approximately 2,000 fighters. "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia", op. cit., p. 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Estimates regarding ASWJ's military strength and political clout vary. The number of fighters is probably around 2,000, operating in small autonomous units scattered across the vast plains and scrublands of central Somalia.⁸⁵ Although ill-trained and poorly-equipped, their morale and fighting skills appear much superior to those of the TFG forces. Thanks to them, Al-Shabaab is now under tremendous pressure and largely on the defensive there. ASWJ's territorial control remains modest, confined to small pockets where its grip is tenuous. It recently lost the strategic town of Beledweyne to a combined Al-Shabaab/Hizb al-Islam attack.

Ethiopia is increasingly providing significant military and logistical support. While beneficial in the short-term, this may prove counter-productive in the long run. Ethiopia's motive is to use ASWJ to create a buffer region hostile to Al-Shabaab, but it is also keen to prevent the rise of a formidable future adversary, which is perhaps why it is seeking an ASWJ-TFG merger.

Relations between ASWJ and the TFG have oscillated between mistrust and pragmatic acknowledgement of the need to make common cause against Al-Shabaab. After months of prodding by Ethiopia and the international community, a power-sharing agreement was signed on 15 March 2010. It gives ASWJ five ministerial seats, diplomatic posts and senior positions in the police and intelligence services. Some sections of ASWJ have vowed not to recognise the deal. Led by the foreign relations officer, Sheikh Bashir Abdi Olaad, and his colleague, Sheikh Abdiqadir Abdurahman (Abu-Zakariya), they have described it as a betrayal that will cause the group to disintegrate.⁸⁶

IV. THE TFG REPOSE

The TFG has been ineffective thus far in meeting the Islamist threat. Despite significant training and military assistance, its forces are largely confined to a small section of Mogadishu; a long-announced offensive remains stalled. The government also lacks a clearly-articulated reconciliation strategy and seems reluctant to reach out to groups. Most importantly, it is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the Somali people.

A. LIMITED MILITARY STRENGTH AND LACK OF RECONCILIATION STRATEGY

The total planned strength of the Somali National Security Forces is 8,000 troops, but it currently has only about 3,000.⁸⁷ The TFG is also supported by a number of militia, probably numbering several thousand men. The recent agreement with ASWJ and its some 2,000 fighters has significantly increased the military potential, but these forces remain under local control and are focused on fighting Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam in central Somalia.

The TFG security sector as a whole lacks structure, organisation and a functional chain of command. According to an international assessment, "the culture, mentality and behaviour of 'militias' remains extant in the Army".⁸⁸ Training by the AMISOM and other international partners has failed to address these challenges. The TFG has been unable to capture from the insurgents and hold large sections of Mogadishu. Because of its limitations, any future offensive will probably only take territory piecemeal and gradually.⁸⁹

The government also lacks a clearly articulated reconciliation strategy and seems reluctant to reach out to other groups. Although there were notable defections, for example Al-Shabaab leader Inda Adde, soon after Sheikh Sharif assumed power, little has been done since to entice factions to leave Al-Shabaab or Hizb al-Islam. Even the seemingly obvious decision to formalise the ASWJ alliance required more than a year and intense pressure from Ethiopia and other international partners.

It is likely that the TFG's lack of a reconciliation strategy stems from three factors. First, sharing power might lead to an even more unwieldy and fractious government. Secondly, important ministers fear loss of power. Thirdly, powerful Western allies are apprehensive that outreach could empower radicals. Yet, there is clearly no military solution to the conflict. This has been attempted numerous times, most recently in Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed's failed presidency (2004-2008). Initially, his government was largely confined to Baidoa and was nearly defeated by the UIC. He only entered Mogadishu after Ethiopian forces invaded and took control of the capital in December 2006. TFG forces and their Ethiopian allies were then locked in a bloody struggle with the Islamist insurgents.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ See, for example, "Ahlu Sunnah Members Reject Agreement With TFG", Garowe Online (Garowe, Somalia), 18 March 2010.

⁸⁷ In May, AMISOM, which disburses donor support to TFG forces, paid salaries to 3,021 individuals. Crisis Group interview, AMISOM official, Nairobi, May 2010. Many trained soldiers and policemen have left because they were not paid by the TFG.

⁸⁸ Quoted in "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia", op. cit., p. 11.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, AMISOM official, Nairobi, March 2010.

That phase of the conflict only ended with the election of Sharif and Ethiopia's formal withdrawal.

B. LOSING HEARTS AND MINDS

The hard-line factions are well ahead of the TFG in the battle for hearts and minds. In the last three years, they have proven to be supremely adept in this struggle. Exploiting the Ethiopian occupation, the widespread aggrieved sense of Somali nationalism and, lately, Western support for Sharif, they have managed to create a mood of hostility and suspicion towards the TFG. In particular, their energetic propaganda campaign portraying Sharif as a Western puppet and a traitor to the Islamist cause has been very damaging to his credibility and has facilitated efforts to radicalise and recruit, inside and outside, the country.

Under-resourced and often lacking political resolve, the TFG has failed to challenge the hard-line message. Until recently it had no radio or website with which to do so. Worse, Sharif has failed to take advantage of his superior knowledge of Islam and excellent oratory skills to counter Al-Shabaab propaganda.⁹⁰ The result is that moderate voices are often drowned out by hard-liners. Public discourse is dominated by extremists and opinion is shaped by a conspiratorial narrative that is radicalising a young and gullible generation bereft of education inside the country, and another young generation of the psychologically vulnerable and alienated in the diaspora. Suicide bombs, the culture of martyrdom and diaspora jihadism are outcomes of this powerful propaganda campaign by the extremist factions. The TFG, its moderate Islamist supporters and international partners need to factor these issues into their overall strategy for defeating Al-Shabaab and Hizb al-Islam and end the current complacent, half-hearted attitude to the ideological struggle.

The government should highlight that radicalisation is largely driven by a set of beliefs alien to Somalis and an extremist, literal interpretation of holy texts. The tendency has been to avoid raising this matter, in the mistaken belief that it could exacerbate sectarianism and antagonise powerful Arab constituencies and potential benefactors, especially Saudi Arabia. The TFG's rhetoric of one Islam is disingenuous. There are many branches of Islam, but a particular strain, aggressively promoted, has spawned a destructive, intolerant and belligerent jihadi ideology that fuels and complicates the conflict in the country. At the same time, space must be found for moderate Wahhabism to co-exist peacefully with other Islamic sects.

⁹⁰ One likely effective strategy would be for Sharif to record a fifteen-minute Friday sermon for broadcast on government-controlled Radio Mogadishu.

A major task before the TFG and countries hosting Somali communities is to rehabilitate the young jihadi generation radicalised by Al-Shabaab. A comprehensive de-radicalisation strategy is needed, which draws on the support of clan elders, intellectuals, the media and moderate clerics at home and abroad. The Sharif government is beginning to recognise this. Sharif attended a special meeting on Islam and the Somali conflict in Doha, Qatar, in late March 2010, during which his moderate Islamist vision for the country was widely endorsed. Such high-profile international support by credible Muslim scholars is key to any de-radicalisation campaign. More important, however, are initiatives focused on local mosques and clans. Al-Shabaab has been effective in using mosque study circles (*halaqa*) – often convened between prayers – to radicalise and recruit. The TFG and its moderate Islamist supporters will have to use similar methods to reach the younger members of mosque congregations.

Clan elders need to be mobilised in the de-radicalisation campaign. Normally cautious, pragmatic and conservative, they tend to gravitate towards political and religious moderation, so are potential allies of the TFG. An example is Hasan Haad, a prominent Hawiye leader in Mogadishu, who in recent months has been an outspoken critic of Al-Shabaab. This is extremely dangerous in the current climate. However, nothing undermines Al-Shabaab's influence and credibility more than condemnation from clan heavyweights. Reaching out to such influential figures is necessary if the TFG is to succeed.

V. SHORTSIGHTED INTERNATIONAL POLICY

The Somalia crisis has steadily climbed up the international agenda since 2008, largely because of concerns over piracy and how to deal with extremists who threaten to globalise their jihad. Al-Shabaab is radicalising the large Somali diaspora, recruiting jihadis and raising funds. This has alarmed many states, which view the group as a serious national security threat.⁹¹ The immediate response by many in the Horn and beyond has been to provide military support and to step up efforts to disrupt Al-Shabaab's international support networks. While this can help the TFG fight the insurgency, more is necessary to combat the radical Islamist threat.

⁹¹ In 2009, Lord Malloch-Brown, then the minister for Africa, said Somalia posed a greater threat than Afghanistan to Britain. Jon Swain and Michael Gillard, "Is Somalia the new Afghanistan?", *Sunday Times* (London), 9 August 2009.

Since the debacle of the Ethiopian military intervention, international consensus has crystallised around the need for mutually reinforcing policies focused on security, reconciliation and governance. So far, aid has largely centred on attempts to strengthen the government and give it time to demonstrate it can rule effectively. Progress has been agonisingly slow. The TFG now has many more trained troops, but this is yet to translate into significant military gains. Reconciliation has also faltered. Since the TFG lacks territory to administer, it is still not clear what the international community can do to support its governance.⁹²

The security policy has centred on deploying up to 8,000 African Union (AU) peacekeepers (AMISOM) and training new TFG forces. AMISOM was seen as essential to allow Ethiopia to withdraw and give the TFG time to build up its own military. The strategy met obstacles and is still not fully implemented. After more than three years, only 6,300 AMISOM troops (from Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti), are deployed.⁹³ The force has played a critical role in defending the TFG, especially during the May 2009 Islamist offensive. However, its identification with the TFG, and by extension the Ethiopians, has made it an increasing target of attacks. Without effective and disciplined TFG units, it is not large enough to take and hold territory. However, additional AU forces would present a conundrum for the TFG. While the military capability would be welcome, it would also reinforce a perception among Somalis that the TFG is the tool of foreigners.

Various states have provided direct support to TFG forces. Ethiopia has trained and supplied both TFG and ASWJ security elements. Kenya has covertly trained some 2,500 militia to help the TFG's campaign against Al-Shabaab in the south.⁹⁴ The U.S. provided some 40 tons of arms and

ammunition (through AMISOM) after the May 2009 Islamist offensive.⁹⁵ In May 2010, the EU began to train around 2,000 TFG troops, in Uganda, following French training of 500 troops in Djibouti in late 2009. Uganda has also provided training. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) supported efforts to train and pay up to 10,000 police. While the training may help, critics note that the TFG's biggest challenge is to build a loyal, cross-clan, well-motivated, well-equipped and well-led national army. Because of corruption and inefficiency, it has also failed to pay many of its soldiers.⁹⁶ In the past, many TFG soldiers and policemen ended up selling their weapons and defecting.

Efforts to disrupt Al-Shabaab's international support networks have centred on banning the organisation, sanctioning individual Islamist leaders and reducing support for Islamist insurgents. On 23 December 2009, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its support to insurgents opposed to the TFG. The UK announced in March 2010 that it would place Al-Shabaab on its terrorist list.⁹⁷ That same month, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon told Arab heads of state in Libya the group was a threat to global peace and appealed for its banning.

Official and public opinion towards the Somali Islamist insurgent groups is less hostile in Arab countries than in the West. A section of the Arab media continues to refer to the insurgency as *Al-Muqawamah al-Somaliyah* (the Somali resistance), an emotive characterisation that has deep resonance in the Middle East.⁹⁸ However, the mood

was a cleverly-designed stratagem primarily to advance Ogadeni clan interests. Sharif recently took the unprecedented step of writing to ask the Kenyan president to hand over the force to the TFG so it could be integrated into the regular army. Nairobi flatly declined. Crisis Group interviews, Nairobi, January-March 2010. It has raised concerns in Ethiopia of an Ogadeni-dominated local administration in southern Somalia, which might support kin in the Ogaden National Liberation Movement. See fn. 73 above.

⁹⁵ The U.S. also reportedly provided intelligence support to TFG security services Jeffrey Gettelman, "U.S. Aiding Somalia in Its Plan to Retake Its Capital", *The New York Times*, 5 March 2010. While the media has tended to exaggerate the level and extent of U.S. support for the TFG, the U.S. government has stepped up its support since 2009, despite frustration with the government's performance and largely because it is keen not to see it fall. However, U.S. Somalia policy is still primarily driven by counter-terrorism concerns, which are not necessarily coordinated with broader TFG efforts.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and AMISOM officials, Nairobi, April-May 2010.

⁹⁷ Australia and Canada intend something similar. The U.S. designated them terrorist organizations in 2008.

⁹⁸ The influential left-leaning London-based pan-Arab daily, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, which views itself as the voice of the Arab street (*al-shari' al-arabi*), is one of the major media outlets that has helped to popularise the Somali insurgent groups as Arab na-

⁹² The international community gives the presidency and other transitional institutions modest support, but there is little it can do to improve the administrative capacity of a government that does not administer much territory.

⁹³ Nigeria, Malawi and Ghana eventually pledged troops but for a variety of reasons delayed deployment. In June 2009, Nigeria again pledged 800 peacekeepers. "Nigeria to send around 800 peacekeepers to Somalia", Reuters, 25 June 2009.

⁹⁴ The operation has seriously strained the once good ties between the Sharif government and Kenya. The plan, according to credible sources, was first conceived by former Somali Defence Minister Gandi, with his Kenyan counterpart, Yusuf Haji, an ethnic Somali and fellow clansman. The aim was to recruit a largely Ogadeni force from both sides of the border and deploy it in the Jubba Valley to challenge Al-Shabaab. The even more ambitious hope was it could form the nucleus of a regional Ogadeni clan enclave, (Jubbaland), modelled on Puntland. Supporters said the dispute is between far-sighted leaders who want to speed up federalism and those within the TFG reluctant to break with the centralised model. Kenya, they said, is assisting those who favour the "building blocks" approach. Critics said it

is increasingly less charitable at the official level, especially towards Al-Shabaab. If in the past the group was viewed as a counterweight to Ethiopia worthy of Arab support, it and its brand of extremist Islamism is now seen by most Arab governments as a serious threat. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt and Sudan are some of the most concerned states, in part because dozens of their own nationals are now actively fighting in its ranks.⁹⁹

A legal ban is certainly a deterrence and potentially disruptive, at least in the short term, but unlikely to significantly dent Al-Shabaab's capacity to recruit, radicalise and raise money, mainly because it is a highly secretive and adaptive organisation. More uncertain, however, are the potential political implications. Arguably, the extremists would welcome a ban as reinforcing the us-versus-them dualism at the core of their theology. It might even help them consolidate and popularize their global jihad agenda. A ban might also make it more difficult to reach out to elements amenable to some form of a political settlement.

Beyond diplomatic pressure, the international community has done little to promote reconciliation. Its main political representation on the ground, the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS), has been sluggish in its response to the insurgency. Rhetorically, it continues to acknowledge the need to engage less hard-line elements, but it has done little to lead or facilitate that process, focusing instead on mobilising support for the TFG.¹⁰⁰ Its continuing dialogue

tionalists resisting foreign occupation. Al-Shabaab has been clever to tap into pan-Arabism, often going to exaggerated lengths to cement its credentials. Throughout the Ethiopian military occupation, even liberal and conservative international Arab newspapers like *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* consistently used the term *al-muqawamah*. However, most mainstream media outlets are beginning to use the more neutral *al-mu'arada* (the opposition), including Qatari-based Al-Jazeera.

⁹⁹ However, Al-Shabaab's declining Arab support, is unlikely to translate into increased support for the TFG. Views on it remain ambivalent, sometimes hostile, largely because of perceptions it is beholden to Ethiopian and Western interests. Sharif made an extensive Middle Eastern tour in August 2009 to seek Arab aid but returned disappointed and even angry. A meeting in Qatar was bad-tempered and illustrated the depth of Arab suspicions. Sharif was told in no uncertain terms that Arab financial support was conditional, and he would have to reach out to insurgent elements and embark on a broad-based reconciliation drive. Sharif turned down offers of cash, saying he would not have his arm twisted. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, August 2009.

¹⁰⁰ The special representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG), Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, continues to send different messages on this issue. In September 2009, he told the BBC he favoured talks with the insurgents, whether they were extremists or not, and hinted the U.S. had no veto. The interview was widely publicised in the Somali media, where commentators suggested it signalled a shift in his hard-line stance against talks.

with Somali diaspora leaders, civil society, the business community and clan elders, while laudable, is unlikely to be central to resolving the crisis.

In effect, the self-censored and limited engagement strategy is designed to deliberately exclude the insurgency, and as such it cannot help pacify the country. The mounting internal divisions within the insurgency since early 2009 have given UNPOS and the TFG many opportunities to reach out to less hard-line elements. With the right approach and incentives, some leadership elements might have been coaxed and cajoled into accepting a negotiated peaceful settlement. But the best opportunities may already have been missed. The growing international mood of hostility towards the Somali insurgency may mean UNPOS will have even less incentive to embark on such a process.

VI. CONCLUSION

The TFG should try to capitalise on divisions among the Islamists by extending its outreach beyond the traditional "alliance of moderates", i.e. ASWJ, to include the growing numbers of Al-Shabaab "dissidents" and Islamist "nationalists" who are disillusioned with the foreign jihadis. It could present the challenge of ridding the country of the foreign jihadi menace as the supreme act of collective sacrifice demanded of all Somali patriots, of whatever stripe and ideological persuasion. To be sure, the task of creating such a grand coalition would be immensely tricky and of sustaining it even more daunting. Nonetheless, with sufficient Somali will and determination, reinforced by international consensus and goodwill, it would be conceivable.

Success for the local jihadis in freeing themselves from the foreigners could open interesting possibilities and have a considerable impact on the peace process. First, it is likely they would seek to steer Al-Shabaab back to its original ideological and nationalist roots, thus gradually weakening the fanatical element determined to maintain the movement within the al-Qaeda orbit. Secondly, they would also likely strive to strike a balance between ideology and political pragmatism, currently skewed in favour of ideology. Leadership responsive to the concerns of Somalis and amenable to a political settlement might then emerge.

The U.S. ambassador to Kenya, Michael Ranneberger, interviewed on the same program, said Washington opposed talks with Al-Shabaab. The two views were portrayed as "a clash" between the UN and the U.S. See "Somalia: US and UN disagree on talks with Al-Shabaab", AllAfrica.com, 16 September 2009, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200909160818.html>.

If, however, the foreign jihadis fend off the challenge from the local jihadis, the consequences would be profoundly negative for Somalia, the region and beyond. Al-Shabaab's rapid transformation into a wholly al-Qaeda franchise – which has alarmed many in recent months – might become irreversible. Understood from this perspective, the TFG and the international community cannot choose to be bystanders. Lending support to the Al-Shabaab dissidents would be crucial. Empowering them through a process of engagement which offers the right mix of incentives and holds out the promise of political rehabilitation, as many influential voices in the West are beginning to recommend, could prove decisive.¹⁰¹

The international community's reluctance to see utility in engaging leadership elements loosely identified with the pragmatist wing of Al-Shabaab may stem less from a moral aversion to engaging "lesser terrorists" or a doctrinaire opposition to appeasement than to genuine bewilderment resulting from insufficient understanding of Al-Shabaab's ongoing evolution. Plotting the course of that evolution and acquiring knowledge of the disruptive impact on the organisation, its power configurations and leadership, may go a long way toward overcoming that reluctance.

Nairobi/Brussels, 18 May 2010

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Bronwyn E. Bruton, "Somalia: A New Approach", Council on Foreign Relations, March 2010.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SOMALIA



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