

## **Radicalization Process in the Horn of Africa – Phases and Relevant Factors**

**by Abdisaid M. Ali**

### **Background**

The Horn of Africa (HOA) as a region with strategic global significance being a major artery and route of global marine transport is one of the regions in Africa where diverse cultures, faiths and peoples of different nationalities make up the most dynamic community in Africa. It is where people of Asia and Arabia landed thousands of years ago to trade and interact with greater Africa. It is one of the oldest known civilizations and according to today's geological evidence, is perhaps where the roots of mankind have evolved from.

More than 3000 years of organized civilizations, kingdoms, written languages, this region is home of the most dramatic African conflicts, where colonial powers faced the most resistance, defeat, and home of the first locations in Africa where colonial powers resorted to using aerial bombardments in order to subdue rebellions. It is, to date, where conflicts, civil wars and major territorial disputes as well ideological disputes remain most dynamic compared to the rest of the black continent.

As of today, the HOA hosts the most violent and unstable militarized states in Africa. The HOA is and will remain a challenge as the roots of radicalization take effect in the region with serious consequences to the rest of Africa. In as much as it was and is a major gateway of global marine logistical route, it is now the gateway of African radicalization.

### **Radicalization Process – Impact on the HOA Institutions**

The threats of violent Islamic radicalization in the HOA cannot be clearly understood without critically reviewing the formations of the very institutions of the HOA. From the colonial periods to the cold war era, brutal and violent history remained the norms of the daily lives of the people and the inhabitants of the greater HOA. The very nature of the changing dynamics of the HOA state of affairs, often for the worse, instilled a culture of violence embedded in the political process of the regional struggle for power.

Today, many natives do not see the radicalization process of the HOA any different than an ideology and a vehicle compounded with hidden agendas of groups exploiting whatever they feel works in order to gain power and domination. Therefore, they resort to a shortcut, by trying to institutionalize radical Islam through the roots of the networks and social fabric of the people of the HOA.

The process of violent radicalization also penetrates the following major traditional, non-formal and formal institutions of the HOA.

### ***The State/Government***

Violent Jihadists will target the governance institutions of the countries by trying to win political dominance either by way of religious Jihad and armed struggle or by if necessary through the ballot box and political challenge. Nevertheless their long term objectives and plans remain the same. The ultimate goal, however achieved, is to introduce political governance based on Islamic theocracy, particularly, that of purist *Wahhabism*<sup>1</sup>.

This strategy started in HOA as soon as the cold war era came to an end. Violent Islamic Jihadists saw this as an opportunity to subdue the nations abandoned by the Superpowers once the conflict between the Superpowers dissolved. The nations of Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Kenya were confronted by violent radicalization movements from thousands of *Wahhabists* trained and educated in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and other Gulf States with significant amount of financial and military resources.

### ***Civil Societies***

The process of violent radicalization also embedded itself through humanitarian civil societies. The collapse of many social support networks due to extended civil wars in the HOA, and in particular, in predominantly Muslim Sudan and Somalia, meant children who now had no meaningful educational support structure were open for indoctrination in the madrasas where violent Jihad and hatred of others was the only lesson they were taught.

### **Embedding in Tribal and Other Social Formations**

The process of radicalization also conveniently took advantage of the existing social fabric of tribal loyalty where a single extremist leader can mobilize his whole sub tribe and tribal alliance. They used the politics of only one alternative: either you follow me or you die. They exploited the divisive nature of the Somali tribal culture, where tribal loyalty comes first, and kinfolk is always chosen over country. Whether being a warlord or a religious extremist, a tribal leader will have no problem mobilizing loyal kinsmen.

The Somali phenomenon of radicalization therefore uses the tribe as a convenient vehicle to mobilize radicalization. In this case, for example, the clans in south central Somalia remain the bedrock of radicalization for the single reason that the top leaders of Somalia's radicalization leaders are predominantly south central Somalia clan leaders, although the ideology purports to transcend clan affiliation, and sometimes is found to be so. There are also cases where other clans who have other grievances use those grievances to rationalize the irrational behavior of radicalization and among them are those in Ethiopia, Juba valley, and North Eastern Kenya.

### ***Opposition, secessionists, and adversaries***

Disgruntled, marginalized or to some extent societies that feel disproportionately mistreated, are readily available fodder for the Jihadist movement in the process of radicalization of the communities. The radical leaders therefore tend to exploit the grievances of these

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<sup>1</sup> According to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabi>: The word "Wahhabi" is derived from the name of a Muslim conservative preacher, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, who lived in the Arabian peninsula during the eighteenth century (1703-1791).

communities and divert these towards radical Islamist movements as means of escape from poverty.

### ***Religious Institutions***

Provided that there are no mainstream religious leaders, mosques and madrasas remain the main recruitment grounds for Jihadists. It is one of the main institutions for the brainwashing the young and the vulnerable.

### **Fundamental Processes and Factors**

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the HOA has seen many factors that accelerated the radicalization process of the region and asymmetric threat of violent Islam:

#### **Grave Injustice by the Governments of the Region**

The element of state terrorism, inefficiency and general lack of adequate social services accompanied by brutality, dictatorship and warlordism as well as tendencies that appear to the ordinary citizen as catering to the interests of global powers, in particular that of the West, created a sense of alienation and often in the eyes of the jihadist movements, is justification to revolt against these rulers. This feeling of estrangement and disaffection propagates the notion of purist fundamentalism and therefore implant the notion of radical Islam and thus turn the wheels of radicalization in the region.

#### ***A Period of Serious Economic Decline***

Natural catastrophes, manmade disasters and the general decline of the productivity of the community meant rapid frustration of the communities who see corrupt leaders getting wealthy as ordinary citizens' resources dwindle and thus resort to spiritual desperation leading to a mindset that promotes violence and radicalization through Islamic extremism. However, there is nothing Islamic about their behavior and their violent activities are antithesis to everything Islam.

#### ***A Period of Post-Cold War De-Polarization and Harmonization of the Superpowers***

Global powers abandoned Africa and particularly the HOA once the mutual threats between the superpowers subsided. This created a serious security vacuum, to be filled by competing regional interest groups including extremists. This remained a standing factor in providing the extremists the opportunity to retain and claim the strategic landscape of the HOA. Hence the reason that Al-Qaeda leadership settled in the Sudan and Somalia when the cold war ended.

#### ***Social Corruption, Immorality and Abuse***

Among the most critical factors and one of the root causes of the radicalization of the HOA is the rampant immorality that is rapidly spreading in the Horn of Africa. The issue of drug abuse, Chat (Miraa) addiction and readily available cannabis are excuses that push many young and old towards Islamic extremism. This had popularized the support for strict Sharia rule to curb substance abuse and corruption which in part is being blamed to have been allowed by the donor community, the West, who remain committed to fight corruption and substance abuse in their own countries but practice a policy of indifference in the HOA when it comes to the element of corruption and substance abuse, especially Chat which is seen by many Somalis as the most dangerous element that pushed people to support Islamic extremism.

## **AL-SHABAAB AL-MUJAAHIDIN MOGADISHU AS THE EPICENTER OF HOA RADICALIZATION**

This section of the paper deals with and summarizes what is involved in the individual and collective (non-institutional) radicalization of the community of the Horn of Africa, with a focus on the prominent radical groups, led by *Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidiin*.

### **Individual Radicalization Process – The two driving forces**

1. Transformation of the individual to an active terrorist takes approximately 6-18 months from exposure to an extremist camp, provided the individual has already been “conditioned”, that is, has already been through the rituals of indoctrination of hatred towards “impure-Muslims” and non Muslims. This stage normally happens in Madrassas during the teens, as children are taught radical interpretation of *Qur’an*, in most cases by strict Wahhabist teachers trained in Saudi Arabia. These teachers return to their home countries for the sole purpose of turning these young adults to their brand of violent ideology.

The phenomenon of the Madrassas as being critical and active incubators of the past, present and of future Jihadists is not a new. Almost all extremism that is introduced into the Horn of Africa has a direct relationship with the advanced radicalization process of the Middle East and the Arab Peninsula. Migrant laborers who return from the Middle East return with complex extremist interpretations of the Qur’an. This trend generates a process in which the facilities, the means, and the resources to propel radicalization at the individual level as an effective, sustainable and regenerative pool of readily available Jihadists resulting in violence in the HOA.

2. Most of the present Al-Qaeda inspired Somali Jihadist leaders were trained in the Middle East and returned to pass on their knowledge and experience in an environment where the ordinary community and individuals remain gravely oppressed, violated and destroyed by warlords and opportunists in today’s Somalia. Challenges that emerging democracies such as that of Ethiopia, Kenya and the Sudan face as imperfect leaders make mistakes of their own that push individuals to the other side of the fence, and ultimately toward the extremists who are not motivated by material greed and pecuniary gains are a further consequence. This ideological stance appeals to millions of Muslims in the face of corruption, mismanagement and gross injustice. Often, violations of family members by state operatives pushes the rest of the family in a direction of despair resulting in accepting purist Islam as the only solution to the organized state that suffocates the citizen with all of its injustices, corruption and violations of human rights.

### **The Consequences**

The above two phenomenon clearly explains how *Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaahidiin* came into being. It is a direct product of the above two major processes. Its influence is exponentially exaggerated by the fact that it responds to the elimination of what the ordinary people see as injustice. Removal of road blocks, punishing those that exploit the community and responding to the security needs of the ordinary Somali citizen. These are quantifiable results that matter to the ordinary Somali. The *Al-Shabaab*, meaning “The Youth”, carried a vibrant tendency and a simple message for the young to join. Propulsion of extremist Islamic justice which they

believe is the only motion that can be imposed with impunity and which any Somali can understand. The formal and organized forces of Al-Shabaab is estimated to be more than 1000 well armed individuals with a reserve pool of more than 3000 active and passive youth sympathizers who make up future hard core of the movement.

The radicalization process of the individual Muslim citizen of the Horn of Africa is a process of choosing one or the other evil. A choice of either supporting false democracy claims of repressive regimes, dictatorships, corruption and human rights violations and humiliation in extended poverty or an extremist religious movement that is equally brutal but responds to submission of the individual to serve it and be part of the machinery of open barbarism, and Islamic extremism.

The trend and momentum has been and will be towards the later. The pace, intensity and influence cannot be accurately forecasted, but the general situation, unless corrected, appears to favor gradual radicalization of the individual resident of the HOA. The rate of Islamic expansion tends to accelerate the radicalization of the society by more than 10-15% of Muslims who submit to extreme interpretations of the Qur'an. This equates to more than 10 million individuals by the end of this decade, of which more than 1 million of these could be well armed Jihadist forces in the Horn of Africa. This is especially true, if Islamic parties win elections to govern in Somalia, Ethiopian-Muslims, Kenyan Muslims and Djibouti, Eritrea and Sudan.

Interestingly, in the eyes and the mind of the ordinary Muslim in the Horn of Africa, there is clear polarization of intent. You are either supporting opportunistic secular regimes or religious purists. Under the shadows of democracy claims and in the eyes of the Jihadists seen as servants of the West's global strategic interest, the failure of regimes of the Horn of Africa to deliver basic respect for human rights, the ordinary Muslim in the Horn Of Africa chooses to serve movements that claim to 'serve' God, Islam and humanity however fake and false it is. It appeals to the simple and the shallow mind of the oppressed masses. Poor governance in the Horn of Africa therefore is a dynamic and a potent contributor to the rapid radicalization of the Horn of Africa.

Of course, the Horn of Africa regimes are seeing accelerated radicalization as a critical motivator to stimulate Western support for the regimes, both for money and for security. Therefore, most regimes of the Horn of Africa keep the issue of radicalization going without being a serious threat to their hold to power and resource flow from the West.

### **Radicalization of Traditional Religious Groups**

The international partners as well as governments of the Horn of Africa have betrayed the peaceful, mainstream, traditional and folk Islamic traditional institutions that kept a check on radicalization of Islam in the Horn of Africa for generations. Most of these mainstream (traditional) religious leaders ended up becoming recruiters for Islamic extremists as the problem of extreme corruption and injustice as well as betrayal has become the norms while chronic poverty accelerated by both manmade and natural disasters increased the suffering of the ordinary masses of the Horn of Africa. Inadvertently, the majority of traditional Muslims had to surrender to the extremist camp. These are events which are contributors to the rapid radicalization of the Horn of Africa.

## **Deprivation of the Intellectual and Elite Community**

The element of ignoring and sometimes depriving the Horn of Africa's intellectual and Western educated scholars to participate in the popular politics of the nations of the Horn Of Africa has been a serious stumbling block towards social development and promotion of democracy and suppression of corruption in the Horn Of Africa. While some of the regime leaders see these intellectuals as threat to their rules, the Islamic extremists see them as agents of the West, morally corrupt, and culturally insensitive, who promote immorality through freedom and rights of the individual.

These scholars who often invest in private newspapers, radio stations and TV outlets to promote trade and open democracy often face punishments from all sides. A trend that conveniently serves the radicalization camp by way of propaganda in suggesting that the whole idea of freedom of the press and democracy is a farce, serving narrow interests of the West and corrupt regimes and not a genuine platform to advance the people of the Horn of Africa. In fact, the newspapers and TV outlets and radio stations were some extent were successful during the short-lived ICU era of Somalia, save some restrictions of movies and other TV shows seen as immoral. The restrictions of the freedom of the press in Somalia by the TFG for example, seriously impacted the process of counter-radicalizing the nation of Somalia.

Al-Shabaabs' campaign to murder, assassinate and exile thousands of Somali intellectuals, created a reluctance in the international communities to hire high profile Somali intellectuals, Somali professionals and Somali development experts, a situation that forced most of the elite and educated Somali workforce to abandon Somalia as they became targets for the extremists and were also shunned by the United Nations bodies and other NGOs working in Somalia. A case in point being a number well founded complaints by numerous Somali intellectuals for being shunned or refused or fired from high profile jobs for being a liability to the organizations as they were potential targets for assassination.

The other side of the coin being, that most of these Somali intellectuals will remain unmotivated by the corruption of the complaints against the majority of the International organizations working for Somalia projects. This factor therefore remains one of the convenient elimination processes of able and competent Somalis who give way to corruption in international aid. And this remains a propaganda tool for the extremists, thereby promoting radicalization elements and processes in particular in Somalia.

## **Radicalization of the Community Structure**

There are a number of direct contributors to the radicalization of the community structures in the Horn of Africa. Recruitment of elders by the extremists and massive human rights violations including displacement, indiscriminate bombing of civilians during conflicts, and excessive use of power are the main negative impacts that drive communities towards radicalization. During the current ongoing conflict in Somalia, some communities run away from the Somali and Ethiopian forces and are neither afraid nor intimidated by Al-Shabaab unless one is accused of assisting or being an informant of the TFG or the Ethiopian government. Insensitivity on the part of opposing parties can seriously impair community confidence and results in failure to win the hearts and mind of the very community that was to be served.

Grass-roots support for radicalization by the community is often a reaction to the brutality and insensitivity of the formal institutions rather than appeasement or surrender to the Jihadists.

Extremists and Jihadists often present themselves as defenders of the community. And there are numerous examples where unfortunately, the formal institutions of the governments such as that of Somalia and Ethiopia remain to be rather on the objectionable side of the table as soldiers' loot, kill and commit immoral activities against the community. This does drive the foot-soldiers and rank of the community to join the ad hoc Jihadists and the organized groups such as Al-Shabaab as legitimate response to defend dignity, moral standards and motivates the community to provide material and moral support for the Jihadists.

This has been one of the strongest Al-Shabaab foundations and remains to be so as the historical base of all indigenous global movements and the local communities. Winning the hearts and minds of the community does yield concrete results of solid support for such movements. Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab's exploitation of the community has been instrumental in gaining rapid acceptance by the community and therefore grassroots support for the radicalization of Somalia.

## **External Influences Fueling Radicalization of the Region**

### ***The Internet***

The 21<sup>st</sup> century communications technology remains one of the critical tools of radical Islam propaganda. The internet has become the primary radicalization recruitment medium. It is the global Afghanistan in the way Al-Qaeda is using it. Somalia's success in communications technology has fostered the propulsion and utilization of violent radicalization. More than 5 prominent militant Islamic extremist sites exclusively run by Somali Jihadists exist today.

### ***Global Jihad***

The global Jihad as reported world wide through Satellite TV had created the opportunity for the Horn of Africa regional extremists to be influenced. The war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian and calls for Jihad in the Middle East does impact in promoting radical Islam in the Horn.

### ***Somali Remittances, Islamic Financial Institutions***

Most of the Somali remittance companies, although legitimate and the only reliable way of delivering seriously needed financial remittances services also remain the only natural financial conduits of the extremists as well. It is very difficult to decipher the financial flows that may end up in the hands of the extremists. But it does deliver.

### ***Flaws in anti-Jihad***

Extensive mistakes have been made in the past in countering extremism in the Horn of Africa. This has resulted in massive civilian casualties mainly of innocent civilians. In particular that of low tech armed conflict against the extremism does result in significant civilian losses which influences the population to turn towards radicalization and support for the extremist elements.

### ***Global Power & Interest***

As global resource competition grows, the Horn of Africa has significant natural resources of interest. This in turn has attracted powerful nations and thus creates defensive attitudes amongst the indigenous communities who feel their resources are the target and they are

punished for being the native owners of these resources. This has become a counter-productive measure against combating extremism and the spread of radical Islam among the Muslim natives of the Horn of Africa. In particular, the Ogaden, Oromia and the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean (including Zanzibar) inhabitants have the feeling that the Christian world is against them.

### ***International Aid: Dependency Trends in Radicalization***

Many religious extremists believe that international aid is a deliberate effort to keep the Horn of African people dependant on external aid while the region has abundant natural resources that can be tapped into to support the inhabitants. This has created negative notions and rejection of the claims of the regional governments' non-stop call for food aid and other pleas. For many, it is a humiliation that they believe can be eliminated by way of adhering to Muslim fundamentalism by refusing to receive aid from non-Muslim nations.

### ***Foreign Failures to tap into Indigenous Talent***

Thousands of educated and competent natives of the Horn of Africa nationals are refused opportunities to be recruited into the process of national development and positions of power and influence in the international aid business. This had discouraged many able and professional Horn of Africa natives to return and work. A trend which would have had serious impact in reducing radicalization process as these professionals would have had opportunity to interact with the local population and eliminate the deficiencies which lead to radicalization.

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*Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*

*The Author: **Abdisaid M. Ali**, a former cabinet secretary in the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, is an independent consultant/analyst on Horn of Africa. This paper was presented to **Regional Cooperation to Counter Terrorism** COMSEC/UNODC/ICPAT on May 19, 2008 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*