

Al-Shabab: A Close Look at East Africa's Deadliest Radicals

by Peter Dörrie



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Cover image: Hundreds of newly trained Shabab fighters perform military exercises south of Mogadishu, Feb. 17, 2011 (AP photo by Farah Abdi Warsameh)

AL-SHABAB: A CLOSE LOOK AT EAST AFRICA'S DEADLIEST RADICALS

BY PETER DÖRRIE

More than any other organization, Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedeen, widely known as al-Shabab, has left its mark on the recent history of Somalia. Political and radical Islam have a long history in the country, but no group has survived longer than al-Shabab, and no group has emerged stronger from challenges and setbacks.

More than any other actor involved in the two-decade-old Somali conflict, al-Shabab has demonstrated its ability to adapt. Today, the group has emerged from an existential crisis and looks stronger than it has in years. Though al-Shabab is often referred to as simply a “terrorist group,” the term does not accurately describe the range of the group’s activities. As perhaps the most important spoiler on Somalia’s way toward peace, al-Shabab’s current situation warrants an assessment.

THE GROWTH OF A RADICAL MOVEMENT

The “Mujahedeen Youth Movement” emerged from the ashes of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a federation of Sharia courts that tried to fill the void left by the total collapse of the Somali state in the 1990s. In June 2005, the ICU took control of much of southern Somalia, raising alarm in Western capitals as well as in neighboring countries like Ethiopia.

By providing a basic legal framework and social services, the ICU succeeded in creating domestic support for its political and religious agenda. It was in this period that al-Shabab was recognized as the ICU’s youth wing, even though the group had existed since 2003.

The ICU’s reign over southern Somalia lasted only a few months. A U.S.-backed invasion of 14,000 Ethiopian troops forced its leaders into exile in December 2006. The more determined and radical al-Shabab cadres stayed behind in Somalia, taking over the ICU’s remaining organization in rural Somalia. At the same time a military campaign against Ethiopian troops as well as those of Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) began.

After the Ethiopian retreat in 2009, al-Shabab was able to extend its area of influence. The TFG stayed alive only thanks to the African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM. Its power didn’t extend beyond a few square miles in the center of Mogadishu. In much of the rest of southern Somalia, al-Shabab was able to establish itself as the de facto government.

In 2011 AMISOM and the TFG undertook a concerted offensive that pushed al-Shabab out of many important towns. They were soon joined by Kenyan troops in the south and redeployed Ethiopian forces, putting further pressure on al-Shabab and ushering in a new elected Somali government elected year later. Meanwhile, al-Shabab underwent a phase of internal conflict. Weakened by territorial losses, the group was predicted by many observers to be near its demise.

But al-Shabab has emerged from its crisis and has regained the initiative. Today the group is not only the greatest threat to the existence of the fledgling Somali government. It has also committed high-profile terror attacks against targets in Kenya and Uganda.

As Abdi Aynte, the director of Somalia’s first think tank, the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, puts it, “After years of being in decline, now we are seeing the organization essentially coming back to life.”

THE STRUCTURE OF AL-SHABAB

The incredible resilience of al-Shabab is explained at least in part by its leadership and structure. The group is governed by a central Elders Council, the Shura, headed by the Amir Ahmed Godane. The Shura brings together al-Shabab's top leadership, including military commanders, civil administrators and religious scholars.

Local versions of the Shura also exist in those areas where al-Shabab has territorial control. These institutions incorporate local authorities and clan representatives, headed by the wali, an al-Shabab-appointed governor. They are autonomous from the group's top leadership, within certain limits.

Al-Shabab features a complete set of institutions. The Shura oversees several ministries tasked with military affairs, social services and civil administration. Its armed forces operate with considerable autonomy on the local level but still retain coherence and discipline. Several parallel services exist: Hisbah units, responsible for community policing and manning checkpoints; Zakawat troops tasked with collecting local taxes; and Jabhad forces that serve as mobile units conducting conventional mobile military operations. There is also the Amniyat, al-Shabab's feared intelligence service, which handles clandestine operations and intelligence gathering.

Somalia's local politics are complex and characterized by ever-changing clan alliances. More than anyone else, al-Shabab has succeeded in establishing a system of governance that is able to handle this.

But this shouldn't obscure the brutal determination the movement employs to achieve its political and military objectives. Al-Shabab is currently emerging from a phase of internal conflict. After suffering military losses at the hands of AMISOM, the Amir Godane faced severe criticism from some of his top deputies. The internal opposition included the most prominent foreign fighter, Omar Hammami, a U.S. citizen. As a result, Godane allegedly developed a more authoritarian leadership style, refusing to assemble the Shura to discuss the internal disputes.

In 2013, tensions escalated. Godane's faction moved swiftly and decisively, killing Hammami. Several other internal rivals were also either killed or purged from al-Shabab's ranks. From this conflict, "Godane has emerged stronger in terms of his leadership," says Cedric Barnes, the International Crisis Group's Horn of Africa director. Information collected by the United Nations indicates that Godane has also strengthened his direct control of the Amniyat intelligence branch. In its 2013 report, the U.N.'s Panel of Experts on Somalia came to the conclusion that the internal conflict had no impact on al-Shabab's ability to conduct military operations.

"Al-Shabab is a political organization, despite all the Islamist aura around it," says Barnes. "The fact that there are disputes within the leadership is not unusual. Al-Shabab should not be seen as exceptionally divided." The Swedish Life & Peace Institute even credits al-Shabab with "a degree of ideological consistency and indoctrination" far beyond that of other Somali factions.

Indeed, al-Shabab is the only faction in Somalia's political landscape with a clear and, for the most part, consistent political agenda. The group's members see Somalia as being in existential crisis, under attack and colonized by neighboring countries.

In a [2014 report](#), the Life & Peace Institute quotes one sheikh of al-Shabab as saying, "The country has descended into a sphere of darkness. The country is colonized. The Somali people have become very weak and confused."

Another sheikh sees the renunciation of Islam as the main problem: "The problems began in the time when the Somali people refused to practice Sharia, when women went outside uncovered, when injustice and corruption became something normal and individual rights were not respected."

THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

An important framework for al-Shabab's ideology is the U.S.-led war on terror, which is portrayed as unjust, hypocritical and directed against Muslims in general.

For al-Shabab, the consequences are clear. To improve the situation for the Somali people, a theocracy based on al-Shabab's interpretation of the Sharia must be established, and the invaders must be destroyed. "Their ultimate aim," says Barnes, "is to establish a new caliphate," encompassing all Muslims in all parts of the world and ruled according to the principles set forth by the Quran, Sharia and Sunnah, the practices taught by the Prophet Muhammad.

Currently al-Shabab concentrates on the local and to some extent regional dimensions of this fight. Of particular importance is Daawa, the preaching and ideological indoctrination of Muslims in the region. Al-Shabab perceives itself as a government in waiting. Several experts interviewed by World Politics Review said the group would play "the long game," seeking to weather any setbacks in order to outlast its enemies.

In this context, it is important to point out that al-Shabab is not without local support for its agenda. Its firm stance against outside intervention resonates well with Somalia's prevailing nationalist sentiment. The group also involves itself in clan politics, weighing in on local conflicts. "It would be wrong to say that al-Shabab is popular," says Barnes, "but what it does is align itself to issues that have pertinence to Somali people, and therefore it gets support."

The group's ties with other Jihadist organizations are superficial at best. While being part of the al-Qaida network, al-Shabab's contacts with "al-Qaida central" are only institutional, with little interaction on the operational level.

In Africa, contacts between al-Shabab and groups like Boko Haram, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Allied Democratic Forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo exist. But there are few indications that these extend beyond occasional training missions. Its closest ties are with the al-Hijra network in Kenya, which is also the country where al-Shabab has been most active outside Somalia.

HOW AL-SHABAB IS FINANCED

Another important aspect of al-Shabab's resilience is its lavish financing. The group has set up a robust system to acquire the funds necessary to continue its fight and secure local support.

The most important source of income for al-Shabab is taxation. "Al-Shabab demands money from transport and businesses in the areas it governs," says Mohamed Ibrahim Ali, the owner of a shop in Mogadishu's infamous Bakara market, the country's main commercial center, which Al-Shabab controlled until 2011. The group justifies these taxes with the religious duty of Muslims to give Zakat, or alms.

There is no standardized way to calculate Zakat, and rates can vary between 2.5 percent and 20 percent, depending on the type of product or income. There is also little available information on the size of the economy in al-Shabab-controlled areas. This makes estimating the group's income difficult.

One source of income has been well documented: the production and export of charcoal from southern Somalia. In 2013, the [U.N. Monitoring Group estimated](#) that Somalia exported 24 million sacks of charcoal, up from 11 million sacks in 2011. This represents an international market value of between \$360 million and \$384 million. The trade is completely illegal due to an U.N. embargo.

Not all this profit goes to al-Shabab, but the group is involved in all stages of the charcoal trade.

It suffered a setback when it lost control of southern Somalia's main port, Kismayo, to Kenyan troops in 2011. But it continues to control the smaller port of Barawe and several others, as well as important roadblocks and production centers in the hinterland. The U.N. Monitoring Group estimates that al-Shabab made between \$1.2 million and \$2 million per month from taxing charcoal exports from Barawe alone in 2013. It further generated between \$675,000 and \$1.5 million at the Buulo Xaaji checkpoint close to the Kenyan border.

This profitable trade wouldn't be possible without the cooperation and involvement of a wide range of actors. Some of these are ironically the professed enemies of al-Shabab. Kenyan troops control the port of Kismayo, but their intervention may have even increased al-Shabab's income. Kenyan business interests lobbied their government to ignore the U.N. ban on the charcoal trade. Most of the charcoal produced in Somalia is exported to countries in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. The business networks that enable al-Shabab to trade charcoal intersect with those it uses to procure weapons and launder money. "By having networks and shell companies involved in the charcoal trade," states the [2014 Environmental Crime Crisis report](#), "militias or terrorist groups can ensure an income independent of military success on the battlefield, enabling them to regroup and resurface again and again after apparent military defeat." For al-Shabab, this has certainly been the case.

Other sources of income include the levying of taxes from aid organizations. This goes hand in hand with the regulation of NGO activities in areas controlled by al-Shabab, as the group enforces strict rules of engagement for humanitarian organizations. It has banned various organizations outright. Others ceased operation to avoid conflict with U.S. anti-terror financing laws.

Al-Shabab is also known to run extortion rackets against Somali companies. The most prominent case is that of the remittance company Dahabshiil, which reportedly was forced to make \$1 million annual payments. Some business owners contribute voluntarily to al-Shabab's cause, and voluntary private contributions also come from Somalis abroad. It is difficult to estimate the sums involved, but the U.N. has detailed at least one case of voluntary remittances to al-Shabab worth \$100,000.

Al-Shabab can likely at least match the Somali federal government's 2013 budget of \$110 million. At the same time, al-Shabab has been able to reduce its costs after vacating several large towns in the face of a combined government and AMISOM offensive. This has helped al-Shabab to keep up military pressure on AMISOM, the federal government and other potential adversaries.

AL-SHABAB'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Despite its territorial losses, the group still controls vast areas in southern Somalia, and the military effort to defeat al-Shabab is currently a stalemate, says Stig Jarle Hansen, an associate professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and author of the 2013 book "[Al Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012](#)." "Al-Shabab's conventional capacity is not good enough to defeat AMISOM in open battle", he argues, "but I don't think that AMISOM can defeat al-Shabab wholly either, because AMISOM can't secure the countryside. They are simply not large enough."

Al-Shabab's conventional equipment is standard for an African insurgent group. Kalashnikov-type assault rifles abound, as do rocket-propelled grenades and large-caliber machine guns and anti-aircraft guns mounted on pickup trucks. In propaganda videos the group has shown fighters carrying MANPADS shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles. But these weapons are either not operational or the group lacks the training to deploy them, and frequent raids by Kenyan aircraft on al-Shabab installations go completely unopposed. There is some limited use of mortars and sniper rifles, but they are either deployed ineffectively or only in a limited geographical area, indicating a severe lack of training on these platforms.

Taking a page from insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, al-Shabab has developed considerable proficiency in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), refining its capacity to produce

and deploy them to deadly effect. IEDs are used especially in ambush situations, where they are deployed against vehicles, followed by small-arms and heavy-weapons fire. Al-Shabab is now able to manufacture and deploy IEDs that are effective against armored vehicles, challenging one of AMISOM's main military advantages.

In its 2013 report, the U.N. estimates that al-Shabab has 5,000 men under arms, a figure that Hansen thinks is too high. But he agrees that the fighting force has retained its operational readiness even after several key military defeats over the past three years.

This is in part because the group is able to replenish its pool of fighters. In contrast to the government, it pays its forces regularly, with wages ranging from \$100-\$500 per month, depending upon clan affiliation and rank. This makes the group a financially attractive option for recruits. Al-Shabab also provides assistance to veterans and families of its "martyrs."

Another factor in al-Shabab's recruitment success is its effective propaganda and alignment with common Somali grievances. "Ethiopia and Kenya," two countries that have deployed troops under the AMISOM mandate, "are not very popular here," explains Aynte. "Their presence is a continuous source of recruitment for al-Shabab, because there is a large majority of Somali people who view Ethiopian and Kenyan troops in Somalia as colonizers and aggressors."

The group encourages clan elders to support the recruitment process, sometimes paying more than \$100 for supplying fresh fighters. The U.N. has also documented cases of forcible abductions of child soldiers. This usually happens when communities resist voluntary recruitment.

Training consists of three months of basic training at locations close to the recruitment areas. Specialized training, for instance in IED production or guerrilla warfare, is offered to selected recruits based on military needs. The Amniyat, which combines the roles of intelligence service and special forces, has its own separate recruitment and training processes. These include courses in intelligence collection and targeted assassinations. All recruits are also subjected to thorough ideological indoctrination.

As for military strategy and tactics, according to Aynte, "al-Shabab is realistic about its ability and its capacity to regain control of large parts of the country including the capital. They clearly don't have the capacity to do that." Instead, the group employs a quite successful strategy of "overstretching" its enemies.

Al-Shabab avoids open engagements with AMISOM, relinquishing control over key population centers if attacked. This leaves its military forces intact, including hidden weapons caches that it leaves behind. It then proceeds to cut off the towns "liberated" by AMISOM from the hinterland, harassing troops moving in and out of them as well as stopping all commerce and trade. As a result, prices for food items and other necessities increase. Federal government troops that are supposed to uphold law and order often display unprofessional behavior. Overall, this strategy denies the population any "post-liberation" benefits and often skews public opinion against al-Shabab's enemies. It also forces AMISOM to commit considerable forces to holding territory, without allowing it to deal important losses to al-Shabab.

"The situation is really 'out of the frying pan into a fire,'" says Hassan Aden Issack, a 23-year-old shop owner from Hudur, a town that was liberated by AMISOM in March. "People can't get food, clean water and health care since al-Shabab began blocking the city this year. Food prices are high here. . . . Life is hard, and people began to die from lack of food and water."

At the same time terror attacks, especially in Mogadishu, have surged. This is the domain of the Amniyat, which has proven its deadly effectiveness at this type of operation. It conducts targeted assassinations and suicide missions almost on a daily basis, including against high-value targets like the presidential palace.

“The use of terror,” explains Hansen, “is very strategic. Terror is probably more important for them now. It gains them attention, and it shows they are alive without deploying a lot of forces.” It also undermines the credibility of the Somali government. All Somalis interviewed by World Politics Review judged the government based on its capacity to provide security.

“Over the past year and a half we have seen a sharp increase in the number of attacks, high-profile attacks,” says Aynte. “I’m forced to avoid certain neighborhoods. My movement is very limited. And every time I’m traveling outside this compound where I live and work, there is a security escort with me.”

Yahya H. Ibrahim, president of the Somali International University in Mogadishu, agrees. “Every time before you go from your home,” he says, “you have to look at the two sides of your gate. You change your route to work every day.”

The experience of violence is immediate and real for locals. In an interview with World Politics Review, Mogadishu resident Aden Muhayden Salad says he experienced several al-Shabab attacks. “The latest was a suicide attack by al-Shabab against a government building this year. I was driving near the government building attacked by the militants with a car bomb and guns. I got out of my car and took cover in a nearby complex. When I came out I saw dead bodies and body parts lying on the ground.”

This type of “Mumbai-style” attack, which sees fighters attacking a building with bombs and firearms, has become a signature operation for al-Shabab. The most infamous example was the attack on the Westgate shopping center in Nairobi, Kenya. “It is a kind of suicide mission, they don’t plan to leave,” says Hansen. “They hold and kill as many as they can inside the building.”

CONCLUSION

None of the experts and locals interviewed by World Politics Review for this article thinks that a defeat of al-Shabab in the short term is realistic. They all agree that to achieve this goal, a military approach won’t suffice. “It’s about inclusive politics,” says Matt Bryden, a former coordinator of the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia, “both in the capital Mogadishu and in the emerging federal states.” Bryden makes clear that al-Shabab has never succeeded because of its own strength, but because of the weakness of its enemies.

Barnes agrees. “At the moment . . . the alternatives are no better” than al-Shabab, he says. Neither the federal government, nor the local clans and regional administrations can offer the Somali people security and a reliable framework. Instead of focusing too much on military solutions, he says, “more attention should be paid to the social context, why al-Shabab is so firmly rooted in Somalia.” For Western governments, this should include an honest assessment of their own involvement and allies in Somalia over the last decades. □

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