



The Changing Political and Security Situation in Somalia: *Al-Shabaab* and *Al-Qaeda*

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Harakat Al Shabaab has since their ill-fated Ramadan offensive in 2010 encountered large problems, but has also demonstrated great resilience against increasingly unfavorable odds. Despite predictions that it would collapse and split, *Al Shabaab* has maintained unity even as some of its main sources of income were cut. This brief article will explain why *Al Qaeda* and *Al Shabaab* joined forces, and the current tactical situation of *Al Shabaab*.

Al Shabaab's Unclear Origins

Al Shabaab was created as a means of self-protection by its founders because of disgruntled feelings towards existing jihadi organizations. The exact time of *Al Shabaab's* formation is unknown, with various reports suggesting this took place in 1998, 2003, 2005, and 2006. The confusion about its origins is explained by the fact that *Al Shabaab* started out as a loose network, before formalizing as an organization some time later. This original network had current and former members of *Al Qaeda's* east Africa organization amongst its ranks, and veterans from Afghanistan enjoyed high prestige, giving it clear connections with elements within *Al Qaeda* in its earliest days.

Al Shabaab had also become involved in targeting non-Somali targets inside Somalia's peaceful north (Somaliland), and rose to prominence with the killing of the teachers Richard and Enid Eyeington in October 2003 as well as the attack against a German (GTZ) aid convoy in March 2004.¹

By 2005, the *Al Shabaab* network had consolidated as an organization and participated in the uncoordinated militant campaigns to take control of Mogadishu at the time (the so-called 'Shadow wars of Mogadishu'), supporting the Sharia courts against the warlords, *Al Qaeda* veterans against the United States, and Somali nationalists against Ethiopian agents. The



Shabaab network rose to power when the Sharia courts expanded in 2006, but was only one group amongst many inside this coalition – and certainly not the strongest. Sources in Mogadishu suggest *Al Shabaab* was more unified than other groups, being led by a northerner, Abdullahi Sudi Arrale, who was later detained by the United States and sent to Guantanamo bay.² Despite his inclination to not show his face in photographs, the most ‘media savvy’ member of *Al Shabaab* was Aden Hashi Ayro – although the organization itself denied he was ever their leader.³

Al Shabaab managed to consolidate its position and influence within the Sharia Court system, gaining deputy command of the Sharia Court army, conducting fundraising amongst the Somali diaspora, and gaining responsibilities in the health and youth work activities of the coalition. By December 2006, the Ethiopians intervened and abolished the Sharia courts. However, *Al Shabaab* managed to re-organize themselves to resist Ethiopian forces, at first taking peripheral roles in the fighting but later using suicide attacks and assassinations to gain prominence. By mid-2007, *Al Shabaab* had broken away from the rest of the Sharia Courts, declaring in press statements that ‘they were not fighting as a resistance, but fighting a jihad’ which opposed ‘alliances that the Sharia Courts had made with secularists and Christians, and the participation of ladies with non-Muslim husbands in the opposition’⁴ At around the same time, the current *Al Shabaab* leader, Ahmed Abdi Aw Muhammad ‘Godane,’ assumed command, and the group’s press statements started to appear in *Al Qaeda* related webpages.⁵

Eventually the insurgency campaign waged by *Al Shabaab* was successful, but it was only post the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces in 2009 that *Al Shabaab* expanded into large parts of southern Somalia and filled the new power vacuums. *Al Shabaab* was able to enforce relative order in these southern areas under their control. Crime was less prevalent in these small areas when controlled by western-backed transitional governments whose seldom paid police and army looted the areas despite a high profile UNDP support program for the police. *Al Shabaab* was also active on the internet, being noted for its high quality videos, often commenting on the wars in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, as well as United States, and quoting *Al Qaeda* leaders such




as Osama bin Laden in ways that made them unique in the Somali setting. However, *Al Shabaab* attacks were usually locally focused.

By 2010, *Al Shabaab* launched a large scale offensive in Mogadishu, the last part of central Somalia held by the western backed transitional government. However, the forces of Burundi and Uganda, which had started to arrive in 2007 in an African Union Mission (African Unions Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)), both outnumbered *Al Shabaab* forces, and were better trained. *Al Shabaab* suffered a huge defeat at the hands of AMISOM, especially the forces of *Al Shabaab* commander Muqtar Robow “Abu Mansoor.” This defeat signaled the beginning of the first large scale internal conflict between the *Al Shabaab* leadership.

Discords, Weaknesses and *Al Qaeda*

Al Qaeda was a controversial theme inside *Al Shabaab*, and *Al Shabaab* was controversial inside *Al Qaeda*. Many members of *Al Shabaab* were reluctant to join *Al Qaeda*, despite viewing it with sympathy. As Abu Mansoor put it, “We are not them, but they are our friends, and we will help them as far as possible.”⁶ There was also hesitation within *Al Qaeda* towards *Al Shabaab*, as it was not clearly understood what *Al Shabaab* was about. It is important to understand that the *Al Qaeda* members initially operating with *Al Shabaab* were on the periphery of *Al Qaeda*, either from the old and decimated east African cell, and later from *Al Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula. In this sense, *Al Shabaab* was more closely connected with the periphery of *Al Qaeda* than with the centre. However, *Al Qaeda* also changed, going through what Thomas Hegghammer named “The hybridization of *Al Qaeda*,” and the global organization opened up to more local focuses. In this sense *Al Qaeda* moved closer to *Al Shabaab* ideologically, perhaps aided by Ayman Al Zawahiri becoming the new leader of *Al Qaeda* after Osama bin Laden, as Al Zawahiri traditionally favored a more local focus.⁷

The resistance against *Al Qaeda* inside the *Al Shabaab* weakened as it suffered defeats. Much has been said about the so-called nationalist-transnationalist divide inside *Al Shabaab*, where



individuals with a local focus were often claimed to be on the verge of leaving *Al Shabaab*, leading to frequent predictions of its collapse that never materialized.⁸ When interviewing *Al Shabaab* leaders this writer identified a larger sense of pragmatism inside the two groups (one group said to be led by Muqtar Robow, the other by Ahmed Abdi Aw Muhammad ‘Godane’) said to be in confrontation. First, *Al Shabaab* had a surprising ability to achieve conflict resolution within its organization, second, Muqtar Robow was clearly - as can be seen in his speeches - more internationalist than was often believed, while Godane was more locally focused than it was generally perceived. There were clear differences inside *Al Shabaab*, however these differences were often regarding the implementation of Sharia law, applying the harsh punishment standards propagated by *Al Shabaab* in a slower phase, openness to foreign aid organizations, and to strategic issues such as the Ramadan offensive, and later, the employment of regular frontlines versus guerilla warfare.

Kenya and Ethiopia intervene

In October 2012, Kenya intervened inside Somalia and created a buffer zone in southern Somalia. The Kenyans did not manage to inflict a strategic defeat on *Al Shabaab*, and failed to take the strategically important town of Kismayo. It should be noted that the Kenyan intention could have been just to create a cordon sanitaire to protect their own interests. Before this Kenyan intervention, AMISOM forces had literally surrounded the second most strategic part of *Al Shabaab*-held areas - the Bakara market in Mogadishu - thereby destroying a major source of revenue for *Al Shabaab*. The loss of Bakara market might have led to the *Al Shabaab* decision to withdraw most of its forces from Mogadishu in August 2011, although *Al Shabaab* to this day controls parts of two districts in that town.

The greatest defeats suffered by *Al Shabaab* were inflicted by Ethiopian forces, who intervened in force against *Al Shabaab*, first taking control of the capital in the Hiran Valley, then taking control over Baidoa in February 2012, Ethiopian forces then advanced to take control over several other large cities in the Bay-Bakool province, and intervened in central Somalia to help




their Somali allies protect Dhusamareb against an *Al Shabaab* attack, at the same time pushing *Al Shabaab* out of their capital El Buur in central Somalia.

In the face of a stronger opposition coalition, *Al Shabaab* took several measures. Godane announced a change of strategy publicly on an *Al Shabaab* radio station, claiming that the organization should return to guerilla warfare.⁹ Indeed *Al Shabaab*-style assassinations re-occurred in Baidoa and Mogadishu, and *Al Shabaab* attacked the logistical lines of their enemies. The *Al Shabaab* merger with *Al Qaeda* has also been seen as an attempt to reinforce the faltering *Al Shabaab* campaign.

***Al Shabaab*: Not Beaten Yet**

In the current situation *Al Shabaab* is pressured but retains its unity, once again proving all those predicting its collapse to be wrong. However, this does not mean that *Al Shabaab* lacks candidates for defection. Hassan Dahir Aweys, an old-fashioned clannish Islamist from the Ayr clan that more or less had to join *Al Shabaab* when his old faction was on the verge of defeat in 2010, has made clear statements at odds with the rest of the organization. The power centralization processes within *Al Shabaab* also alienated some members of the organization, such as Fuad Khalaf Shongole, although the power of these individuals within the organization is low.

Al Shabaab do however enjoy several advantages, the first being that the current strength of the Somali government forces and the AMISOM forces is insufficient to militarily secure the countryside, which means *Al Shabaab* can operate relatively freely there. The Somali government is scheduled to be reformed in August 2012, and it is not clear what will emerge. The second advantage for *Al Shabaab* is that it has now expanded – into Kenya, through Kenyan recruits, and *Al Shabaab* is clearly able to recruit in Uganda and Tanzania as well. *Al Shabaab* still holds some following in the region and may, as they did in the Kampala bombings of 2010, hit their enemies on their home-turf. The third advantage *Al Shabaab* has is the growth of their regional allies, *Al Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula, and Ansar al Sharia in Yemen.



Some analysts and civil servants have predicted the evacuation of *Al Shabaab* to the north of Somalia¹⁰. However, *Al Shabaab* still has the potential to remain in the south where it is still in full control of large cities such as Merka, Brawa, Jowhar and Kismayo. It is likely that *Al Shabaab* will remain in control of Kismayo until it is forced out. However, it is also likely that *Al Shabaab* will return to its old pattern of assassinations, terror attacks, and guerilla fighting, to remain a dangerous but central player in Somalia.

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For more information, see the conference website at www.counterpiracy.ae.

¹ The network was also accused of being behind the killing of an Italian nurse, Analena Tonelli, however, the evidences for this did not hold up in the Somaliland court system, See Tania Branigan and Andrew Meldrum (2003): “British teachers shot dead at Somaliland school” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 22 October; Staff Writer (2004): “Murdered Britons targeted by Al Qaeda claims Somaliland” *The Scotsman*, 30 March 2004.

² Interview with Shabaab member (2005-2007), Mogadishu 19 December 2010. Interview with ex- secretary Hassan Dahir Aweys (2005-2007), Mogadishu 19 December 2010.

³ Harakat Al Shabaab (Unknown) “The Life of Aden Hashi Ayro Part I” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXRPP_LpKX4&feature=related (accessed 1 of August 2010); Harakat Al Shabaab (Unknown b) “The Life of Aden Hashi Ayro Part II” (accessed 1 of August 2010), Interview with Shabaab member (2005-2007) X, Mogadishu 19 December 2010.

⁴ Stig Jarle Hansen (2008) “Misspent Youth” *Jane’s Intelligence Review 20/10*(2008), 7; See also Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki (2008)“(The American Mujahid In Somalia) - A Message To The Mujahideen In Particular & The Muslims In General” Posted to Jihadist Website 7 February

⁵ Stig Jarle Hansen: “Al Shabaab in Somalia (Jihad and Justice)” Hurst/Columbia University Press (2012, August); London

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups. Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, Vol. 9 (2009). See also Stephane Lacroix, *Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Veteran of Jihad*, in Giles Kepele and Jean- Pierre Milelli (Ed) “Al Qaeda in its Own Words”. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2008).



⁸ Michael A, Weinstein, (2011): “Somalia: Al-Shabaab’s Split and its Absorption of Hizbul Islam” Garowe online , 8 January; Abdi Aynte (2012) “Somalia: Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys and the politics of the al-Shabaab split – By Abdi Aynte” African Arguments, April 4th

⁹ Stig Jarle Hansen (2012 forthcoming): “The Enemy of my Enemy is my Friend?” *Janes Intelligence Review*

¹⁰ SDN (2012): “Mahiga warns Al-Shabaab is Heading to Somaliland and Puntland” April 22, accessible at <http://www.qurbejoog.com/2012/04/22/mahiga-warns-al-shabaab-is-heading-to-somaliland-and-puntland/>