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AL SHABAAB

by Rob Wise

Executive Summary

Al Shabaab is an al Qaeda-affiliated organization that has risen rapidly to prominence in the midst of Somalia's decades-long anarchy. The group has experienced two dramatic transformations in its short history. Originally the small, youth militia arm of a relatively moderate Islamist organization that rose to power in Somalia in early 2006, al Shabaab was radicalized and brought to prominence as a popular Islamist guerilla movement by Ethiopia's invasion in December of that year. However, since early 2008 al Shabaab has undergone yet another transformation, this time from a largely nationalist organization focused on driving out Ethiopia through conventional military means to a hybrid movement that has increasingly embraced transnational terrorism and attempted to portray itself as part of the al Qaeda-led global war against the West.

The Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) Futures Project is a joint study undertaken by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program. The initiative will produce a series of alternative futures regarding the state of AQAM in the year 2025 and generate recommendations to defeat the threat over the long term. Drawing on historical analysis, social science research, expert interviews, and targeted fieldwork, this project will provide to policymakers and strategists a vision beyond the next few years and will consider the trends and shocks that may shape AQAM over the next decade and a half.

This case study is one of several examining the historic evolution and future prospects of al Qaeda and its range of affiliated groups. The purpose of the case studies is to determine the key drivers that have influenced a terrorist group's trajectory over time. Ultimately, these drivers, in conjunction with additional supporting analysis, will be used to inform projections about the future of al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Key Judgments

Emergence: December 2006–Early 2008

- *Foreign intervention.* Foreign intervention, specifically the December 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, had a profound effect on al Shabaab's rise. The only military force willing to resist the Ethiopians following the collapse of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), al Shabaab was able to play on deep-seated Somali antipathy toward Ethiopia to recruit thousands of nationalist volunteers. The invasion also molded the group's operational strategy, leading it to adopt guerilla tactics as a means of resistance. Further, by forcing the ICU leaders who had exerted a level of moderating influence on al Shabaab to flee Somalia, the invasion allowed the group to become even more radical, while at the same time severing its ties to other Somali organizations.
- *Inadequate governance.* Inadequate governance allowed al Shabaab to operate unfettered in large safe havens throughout the southcentral region of the country. Al Shabaab exploited this operating space by building a secure network of camps to train its fighters and establishing a system of taxation and extortion to raise funds. Further, by providing Somalis in these areas with basic governmental services, al Shabaab gained a great deal of goodwill and popular support, which bolstered its recruiting.

Transformation: Early 2008–Present

- *An aligning of interests with AQ.* An aligning of interests with al Qaeda (AQ) core since early 2008 has fundamentally transformed al Shabaab. Both organizations appear to have benefited from this alignment, with al Shabaab gaining increased legitimacy and resources and AQ core gaining a level of influence over the group. As a result, al Shabaab has significantly altered its ideological rhetoric to portray Somalia as a front in a “global war” against the West, while shifting its partnership strategy to draw it closer to the broader AQ movement. It has also altered the makeup of its own leadership, which is now populated with AQ core members, as well as its operational strategy and training, which are now increasingly focused on suicide attacks against civilians both inside and outside Somalia.

- *Information and communication technologies.* Al Shabaab has utilized the Internet to distribute its propaganda to recruits and funders who wish to support the AQ-inspired global conflict. This has led to an influx of foreign fighters as well as funds from a variety of donors.

Full Narrative

Origins of al Shabaab

Since the overthrow of military dictator Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia has existed in a state of perpetual anarchy.¹ Competing warlords and longstanding clan conflicts have prevented any single faction from seizing control decisively enough to effect widespread or lasting stability in the country. Amid a continued lack of effective governance, Somalia has experienced soaring poverty rates, the destruction of infrastructure, ethnic cleansing, near-continual armed conflict, the emergence of several semiautonomous regions, and a series of severe famines.² Since 1991, hundreds of thousands of Somalis have died through violence or starvation while roughly one million others have been forced to flee the country, creating a massive diaspora.³

In the past 19 years there have been 14 attempts at a peace process through either the United Nations or local actors, with few producing any measurable results.⁴ The most recent and lasting was the 2004 creation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a ruling body composed of representatives from Somalia's largest clans.⁵ Under the protection of neighboring Ethiopia, the TFG moved into the southcentral Somali town of Baidoa in February 2006⁶ but was unable to overcome clan politics or exert any level of authority outside of Baidoa.

While the TFG was being formed in Kenya, major changes were taking place in Mogadishu that fundamentally altered the landscape of Somalia. The capital had been the scene of some of the heaviest fighting throughout the civil war due to the numerous warlords competing for control of various neighborhoods. As a result, lawlessness was rampant for more than a decade, as robbery, rape, kidnapping, and murder became daily occurrences.⁷ Beginning in the late 1990s, however, neighborhood shari'a courts began to spring up in a series of local attempts to impose a degree of law and order.⁸

Although most Somalis are not especially religious and adhere to the relatively moderate Sufi branch of Islam,⁹ the courts were largely welcomed as a way to fill the void left by the disappearance of the official police and judiciary system.¹⁰ The courts became power centers in and of themselves, recruiting their own militias to carry out their frequently harsh judgments.¹¹ Each court was heavily influenced by the ideology of its leader, some of whom were moderate like Sheikh Sharif Ahmed while others were hardliners, such as Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys.¹²

In mid-2004, 11 of the courts merged to form the Islamic Courts Union, led by Sheikh Ahmed.¹³ Their combined strength allowed these courts to mount a serious challenge to the warlords who had held sway in Mogadishu for the past decade. By June 2006 the ICU had crushed those warlords in a series of swift military victories, seized power in Mogadishu, and begun expanding into the countryside.¹⁴ Yet this success brought with it a mixed bag of results for Somalis. In the areas under its control, the ICU was able to impose a degree of order unheard-of in the past several decades. The near-constant warfare stopped, crime plummeted, and businesses reopened, gaining the ICU a great deal of support among Mogadishu residents.¹⁵ However, more fundamentalist elements of the ICU also used this opportunity to impose their vision of strict Islamic law on the areas under their control; in some neighborhoods women were forced to cover themselves from head to foot, the watching of soccer was banned, and those who were perceived as un-Islamic were brutally punished.¹⁶

One particularly fundamentalist faction within the ICU was *al Shabaab*, or “The Youth.” Formed in the first few years of the new millennium, the group began as the militant remnant of a previous Somali Islamist organization, *al Itihaad al Islamiya* (AIAI).¹⁷ AIAI had arisen in the 1980s as a group of Middle Eastern-educated Somali Wahhabis who sought to replace the government of Mohammed Siad Barre with an Islamic state, yet by 2000 only the youngest, most militant members remained. These members, including Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, re-formed into *al Shabaab* and were incorporated into the ICU as the courts’ radical youth militia. As Aweys’ importance grew within the ICU, he passed leadership of *al Shabaab* on to one of his followers, Aden Hashi Ayro.¹⁸ Ayro would lead *al Shabaab* and its roughly 400 fighters as part of the campaign against

Mogadishu’s warlords in early 2006, helping the ICU gain control of the capital.¹⁹

The stunning success of the ICU and its rapid expansion through Mogadishu and into southcentral Somalia was observed with great concern by neighboring Ethiopia, which shares a long history of animosity with Somalia. As the ICU’s power increased, the majority-Christian Ethiopia grew alarmed about the potential for religiously motivated, ICU-sponsored violence within its borders.²⁰ These fears were compounded as radical voices within the ICU increasingly began to refer to a “jihad” against the Ethiopian “crusaders.”²¹ Further, as they drove outward from Mogadishu, ICU forces began encircling and preparing for an attack on Baidoa, the seat of the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government. On December 24, 2006, the Ethiopians responded by sending thousands of troops, backed by armor, artillery, and aircraft, into Somalia.²² The Ethiopian force rapidly destroyed the ICU and took control of Mogadishu.²³

Modern History of *al Shabaab*

While much of the ICU’s leadership quickly fled the advancing Ethiopians, members of *al Shabaab* instead retreated into the swampy south of the country, from where they launched a bloody guerilla campaign against the Ethiopian military in Somalia.²⁴ Throughout 2007 and 2008, using hit-and-run attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, and bombings, *al Shabaab* stymied the Ethiopian advance into the south.²⁵

This success emboldened *al Shabaab*, which was now operating independently of ICU control. Calling for an expulsion of the Ethiopians and the formation of an Islamic state in Somalia, *al Shabaab* rallied considerable support for its cause among the southcentral population, transforming itself into a major military movement that exercised control over a significant portion of the country, including the important port city of Kismayo.²⁶

Since the Ethiopian invasion, battle lines within Somalia have remained relatively static. Though Ethiopian troops were able to push *al Shabaab* into the south of the country, they failed to eliminate the group. Suffering continual harassment, in January 2009 the Ethiopian forces withdrew from Somalia, replaced by several thousand Ugandan and Burundian peacekeepers under the auspices of the African

Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).²⁷ Since its deployment in March 2007, AMISOM has largely restricted itself to Mogadishu, guarding the airport, seaport, presidential palace, and a handful of key neighborhoods in an effort to prop up the Transitional Federal Government.²⁸ Although in late 2008 the TFG struck a treaty to incorporate some elements of the ICU, including Sheikh Sharif Ahmed as president, it has been unable to achieve a great deal of legitimacy or exercise any measure of control outside of a few sections of Mogadishu.²⁹ Al Shabaab continues to operate freely throughout southcentral Somalia as well as in many areas of the capital. Since early 2008, it has increasingly utilized suicide attacks to target not only AMISOM peacekeepers, but the civilian leadership of the TFG.³⁰

Corresponding with the rise in suicide attacks, since early 2008 al Shabaab has worked to strengthen its ties to the constellation of al Qaeda affiliates worldwide. It has also altered its propaganda in order to portray Somalia as a front in the global struggle against the West, worked to attract foreign fighters and funds, shifted its operational strategy significantly, and incorporated a number of AQ core members into its leadership. These changes were fully operationalized on July 11, 2010, when al Shabaab launched its first terrorist attack outside of Somalia. The group struck a restaurant and a rugby club in Kampala, Uganda, with coordinated suicide bombings, killing 74 people from a variety of nations who had turned out to watch the World Cup.³¹ Though no further transnational attacks have materialized, al Shabaab has continued to threaten African Union nations and Western interests in Africa, while its war against AMISOM and the TFG continues unabated.³²

Analysis: Key Factors in the Evolution of al Shabaab

Period I: The Emergence of al Shabaab, December 2006–Early 2008

Even though the group was founded several years earlier, the period between the Ethiopian invasion of December 24, 2006, and early 2008 marked the true emergence of al Shabaab. Prior to the invasion, al Shabaab had been little more than a bit player within the larger ICU, largely serving as a strong-arm militia enforcing the courts'

judgments. While certainly violent, the group, with only a few hundred members and little independent power or support, was largely kept in check by the courts. In the space of little more than a year, however, al Shabaab would emerge from the ICU's shadow to become the most powerful resistance group operating in Somalia, flush with thousands of fighters, millions of dollars, and the strong support of the local populace. During this period, both the presence of local conflict and lack of governmental control would serve to drive its emergence as a powerful Islamist-nationalist guerilla army.

Although al Shabaab has been molded by a variety of external forces, its initial period of growth, militarization, and radicalization came as a direct result of *foreign intervention*, specifically the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. While the Ethiopians quickly succeeded in routing the ICU, which dissolved almost immediately under the onslaught, the invasion failed to achieve Ethiopia's goal of stamping out Islamic radicalism in Somalia, and in fact was a primary driver behind the rise of al Shabaab. The Ethiopian occupation of Somalia, from December 2006 to January 2009, would fuel the development of al Shabaab's ideology, recruitment, operational strategy, and partnerships, transforming the group from a small, relatively unimportant part of a more moderate Islamic movement into the most powerful and radical armed faction in the country.

The Ethiopian invasion was directly responsible for the ideological transformation al Shabaab underwent between the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2008. Due to the fact that it was formed by the remnants of the Wahhabi terrorist group AIAI, al Shabaab had always been composed of violent fundamentalists.³³ As part of the ICU, al Shabaab supported ICU's primary goal of imposing shari'a law across Somalia, yet before December 2006 the ICU's ideology was largely tempered by the moderate beliefs of many of its leaders and the nature of its popular support, which was rooted not in its religious appeal but in its perceived ability to bring stability to Somalia.³⁴ As part of the ICU, al Shabaab's ideology was at least somewhat restrained by this moderating influence. However, as the Ethiopians destroyed the ICU militarily, the moderate leadership, including Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, largely fled across the border into neighboring countries.³⁵ At the same time,

many militant Wahhabi leaders such as Aden Hashi Ayro decided to stay and fight as part of al Shabaab.

Without moderate voices to keep them in check, these extremists were given free reign over al Shabaab, hardening the religious ideology of the group significantly. The group became intent on enforcing a much stricter version of shari'a than that practiced by many members of the ICU, under which music, videos, and shaving were banned and perceived crimes were brutally punished by public stoning, amputations, and beheadings.³⁶ The immediacy of the invasion also forced al Shabaab to initially define itself as a nationalist movement, as the majority of Somalis were fixated not on religious struggle but on driving the Ethiopians from their country.³⁷ Most of al Shabaab's propaganda from this time did not focus on any larger religious or ideological struggle, but simply on reclaiming Somalia from the outside invaders and establishing a unified state within Somalia. This dual ideology of Islamist-nationalism would persist throughout al Shabaab's emergence.

The Ethiopian invasion was also a primary driver of al Shabaab's substantial growth between 2006 and 2008. Initially comprising only a small core of former AIAI members, al Shabaab's emergence was marked by a flood of nationalist Somali volunteers incensed by what they saw as Ethiopian aggression against their homeland. While other ICU members abandoned Somalia, al Shabaab's stubborn refusal to flee set it apart as the only organization actively resisting the Ethiopians. The Somali volunteers who flocked to al Shabaab's banner expanded the group's membership from around 400 into the thousands, with much of the Somali population actively or passively supporting the group. Throughout the conflict with Ethiopia, the vast majority of al Shabaab's recruits were young, uneducated Somalis who wished to defend their families and reclaim their country;³⁸ even the dozen or so American-Somali immigrants who joined al Shabaab in 2007 and early 2008 appear to have been motivated primarily by appeals to nationalism and adventurism.³⁹ In the space of just over a year, this recruitment boom had propelled al Shabaab from a small militia to the single most powerful resistance force in all of Somalia.

The availability of highly dedicated but lightly armed fighters confronted with a more conventional Ethiopian opponent drove al Shabaab to adopt an asymmetric operational strategy during its emergence, transforming its members from a rag-tag group of armed thugs into a

functional and deadly guerilla army. Following the initial invasion, al Shabaab began a campaign of guerilla raids, bombings, and assassination attempts against Ethiopian forces in the southcentral region.⁴⁰ Frequently, al Shabaab would concentrate its fighters around a lightly held village, use small arms to quickly overwhelm and execute any Ethiopian soldiers protecting it, and then abscond with any captured weapons or supplies.⁴¹ Using these tactics, al Shabaab succeeded in killing hundreds of Ethiopian troops.⁴²

The Ethiopian invasion altered the manner in which al Shabaab partnered with other groups. Before late 2006, al Shabaab had been a subordinate member of the ICU, one of the court's many competing factions.⁴³ The destruction of the ICU by the Ethiopians changed al Shabaab's partnership strategy dramatically. Due to the elimination of most other Islamist factions, as well as its increased size and radicalization, al Shabaab became increasingly solitary. Even when other ICU-remnant opposition groups, such as the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), finally crystallized several months after the invasion, al Shabaab refused to join.⁴⁴ Now significantly larger, more popular, and more radical than other Somali groups, al Shabaab had eclipsed the shattered ICU and therefore had no desire to partner. By 2008, al Shabaab saw itself not as part of a larger Somali resistance movement, but as the entirety of the movement itself, a change wrought by the Ethiopian invasion.

In addition to the Ethiopian invasion, *inadequate governance* over large portions of Somalia played a significant role in the rise of al Shabaab. Since the fall of Mohammed Siad Barre's regime in 1991, much of Somalia has been largely ungoverned. This has given rise to swaths in which militant groups such as al Shabaab can operate freely. Although the Transitional Federal Government has nominal control over the country, the southcentral region in which al Shabaab primarily operates is in reality entirely lawless.⁴⁵ This lawlessness helped to drive the success of al Shabaab's recruitment, training, and fundraising efforts during its emergence.

This lack of governance benefited al Shabaab recruitment immensely when it was forced into southern Somalia by the Ethiopian invasion. In many areas, al Shabaab began providing goods and services that would normally be the domain of governments, including policing, judi-

cial decisionmaking, and welfare.⁴⁶ The level of stability this brought to southern Somalia fostered a great deal of goodwill among the local populace and helped build close relationships with village and clan elders, creating an audience supportive of al Shabaab recruitment.⁴⁷ Further, al Shabaab was able to take control of much of the local radio and print media, allowing the group to broadcast its propaganda to a large number of receptive Somalis. Both this newfound popular support and propaganda capability, which a functioning central government would have made vastly more difficult to exploit, facilitated al Shabaab's recruitment efforts. In conjunction with public anger over the Ethiopian invasion, the exploitation of this ungoverned environment funneled thousands of local Somalis into al Shabaab's ranks.

In addition to its ability to recruit, al Shabaab was able to operate a number of training camps across ungoverned southcentral Somalia with little interference. With no government to challenge them, the group was able to provide military training to their new recruits without devoting great effort to concealment or security. A large small-arms and hand-to-hand combat training camp sprang up in Ras Kiamboni, on the southernmost tip of Somalia, while a kidnapping training camp was established in Eel Aarfid.⁴⁸ These camps and others trained al Shabaab fighters in the skills they would need to prosecute a guerilla war against the Ethiopians. Between 2006 and 2008, al Shabaab was able to continually operate the camps with a high level of impunity, providing itself with a stream of trained fighters and fueling its rise.

Finally, the lack of governance in the south provided al Shabaab with a fertile source of revenue with which to fund its period of emergence. Included in the southern area into which al Shabaab had retreated was the important port city of Kismayo. Control of this area and its port provided al Shabaab with several sources of revenue. While hard numbers are difficult to obtain, estimates are that al Shabaab has been able to bring in roughly \$1 million per month by taxing goods entering through the port and at checkpoints across its territory.⁴⁹

The port is also an important link in the Kenyan sugar trade, providing one of many ties between businessmen in that country and al Shabaab. To supplement its revenue, al Shabaab began extorting the multitude of nongovernmen-

tal aid organizations working to feed the severely food-deprived southern Somali population. In 2009, the UN World Food Program suspended its operations in southern Somalia after discovering that local Somali subcontractors had funneled several million dollars to al Shabaab.⁵⁰ Without any sort of government to stop it, al Shabaab's control over the south provided the group with significantly greater revenue than it had previously enjoyed, serving to bolster the group's growth.

Period II: The Transformation of al Shabaab, Early 2008–Present

Beginning in early 2008, al Shabaab underwent a series of stark changes. Although it had originally emerged as an Islamist-nationalist guerilla army focused on combating Ethiopian troops within Somalia, over the next two years al Shabaab would seek new means by which to sustain itself. During this period, it rapidly transformed itself from a local movement into an al Qaeda-aligned terrorist group that purportedly seeks to propagate terrorist attacks against Western targets. While the lack of governance in southcentral Somalia continues to provide a haven from which al Shabaab can operate, the changes the group underwent in this period were driven primarily by an aligning of its interests with al Qaeda core and by the emergence of information and communication technology as an effective means by which to gain support. While al Shabaab remains locked in a local conflict with AMISOM and the TFG, the group now appears to be a hybrid of both a nationally oriented Somali guerilla army and an internationally oriented, AQ-affiliated terrorist group.

Since early 2008, an *aligning of interests with al Qaeda core* has fundamentally altered al Shabaab. Over the course of two years, elements of al Shabaab have worked diligently to strengthen ties to AQ core, culminating in a February 2010 declaration that al Shabaab would “connect the horn of Africa jihad to the one led by al Qaeda and its leader Sheikh Osama Bin Laden.”⁵¹ Although the exact dynamics of and impetus for the closer relationship remain unclear, both groups appear to have perceived benefits to such an alignment, with al Shabaab gaining increased legitimacy and resources and AQ core gaining a level of influence over the group.

There has been some speculation that al Shabaab was forced to turn to AQ core because of declining popular

support within Somalia. While there may be some validity to this theory, much of the evidence frequently cited to validate it suffers problems of chronology or causality. For example, some have pointed to the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia in January 2009,⁵² as well as to the adoption of unpopular AQ-style suicide bombings, as the primary reasons for a shift of Somali public opinion against al Shabaab,⁵³ driving the group to turn to AQ core for support instead. However, al Shabaab began to reach out to AQ core in early 2008, almost a year before Ethiopia withdrew. Further, the use of suicide bombers was an effect, rather than the cause, of closer relations with AQ core.⁵⁴ Finally, evidence for a public shift against al Shabaab is largely anecdotal, given the difficulties in conducting reliable public polling in a war zone. While there may indeed have been a shift of local opinion against al Shabaab during this period, one cannot reliably say that this is what drove the group closer to AQ core, and so we can only observe that this aligning of interests occurred. Whatever the reasons, both al Shabaab's quest for closer relations with AQ core as well as the alignment itself have wrought dramatic changes on the group.

Following the Ethiopian invasion and its break with the ICU, al Shabaab became a solitary organization, yet beginning in early 2008 the group began aggressively courting and attempting to partner with the broader AQ movement. Although elements of the ICU (and later al Shabaab) had previously sheltered a small number of al Qaeda in East Africa operatives, including Fazul Abdullah Mohammed,⁵⁵ partnership likely never extended far beyond this.⁵⁶ Now al Shabaab leaders began to release a number of video statements in which they greeted AQ core leaders, praised the efforts of AQ adherents in other conflicts, and excoriated the United States and Westerners for the oppression of Muslims worldwide.⁵⁷

The messages were well received by al Qaeda; AQ core leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Abu Yahya al Libi, responded by praising al Shabaab and asking AQ adherents to fight with or send money to the group, and clips of their responses have featured prominently on al Shabaab-related websites.⁵⁸ Some analysts believe that the partnership with AQ core has conferred additional legitimacy on al Shabaab among the Islamist terrorist community and has brought with it a number of material benefits.⁵⁹ Where once it was content to work

alone, al Shabaab has sought to continue its relevance by partnering more closely with AQ core and the greater terrorist community.

Al Shabaab has, since 2008, undergone a major shift in the public portrayal of its ideology, likely in an attempt to court AQ core and their supporters. Elements of the group's leadership have recast their struggle not as a regional conflict, but as part of the AQ-inspired global war against the West. Since 2008, al Shabaab and its media wing, the al Kata'ib Foundation, have created a number of websites hosting well-produced videos portraying the fighting in Somalia as part of this global conflict.⁶⁰ These videos intersperse scenes of al Shabaab members in combat with messages from Osama bin Laden and other AQ core leaders, promoting Somalia as an important destination for those wishing to combat the West. Al Shabaab's rhetoric has increasingly focused on combating the "far enemy" of the United States and the African Union governments it supports in addition to the "near enemy" of the Transitional Federal Government and allied forces within Somalia.⁶¹ While interviews suggest that many of al Shabaab's troops are "opportunistic" Somali supporters⁶² who are driven by a combination of intimidation and cash bonuses, a core of committed fighters, many of them foreign, appear to be strongly motivated by this new terrorist ideology.⁶³ Once a fundamentalist yet ultimately nationally focused organization, al Shabaab has transformed its ideological rhetoric to reflect a new emphasis on international struggle against the West, likely as a means to draw the group closer to AQ core.

As a consequence of its deepening relationship with AQ core, al Shabaab has undergone a transformation in leadership. Following the death of Aden Hashi Ayro in May 2008, a number of AQ core members were integrated into the group's command structure. Although operational control of al Shabaab's forces is reportedly divided geographically between independent Somali commanders in the Bay and Bookol regions, the southcentral area in and around Mogadishu, and the northern regions of Somaliland and Puntland,⁶⁴ it appears that since assuming leadership Sheikh Ahmad Abdi Godane "Abu Zubair" has attempted to consolidate control of the organization and has installed foreign, AQ core-linked individuals in top positions. This cadre allegedly includes the Saudi Sheikh Muhammad Abu Fa'id as financier and manager, Pakistani-born Abu Musa

Mombasa as head of security and training, and the Sudanese Mahmud Mujajir as chief of recruitment and suicide bombers.⁶⁵ AQ personnel such as Rajah Abu Khalid, who was killed in Mogadishu in December 2010, have even taken on operational responsibilities.⁶⁶ Although it still retains a number of local Somali commanders, such as senior commander Sheikh Mukhtar “Abu Robow,” since 2008 al Shabaab’s leadership has increasingly incorporated foreign members of AQ core.

Throughout its emergence al Shabaab utilized relatively conventional guerilla tactics against the Ethiopian military in Somalia. Since 2008, however, as a result of its growing ties to AQ core, it has increasingly turned to suicide attacks to accomplish its goals. These attacks at first targeted Transitional Federal Government officials and infrastructure within Somalia but more recently have included international civilian targets. On October 28, 2008, with a series of five coordinated bombings across the country that struck government offices, the Ethiopian consulate, and the United Nations Development Program compound, al Shabaab signaled the beginning of a strategy that would increasingly focus on suicide attacks against high-visibility government targets.⁶⁷ As of late 2010 the group has used a combination of suicide bombings and small-arms attacks at least 25 times. It has succeeded in striking the TFG ministers of Interior, Health, Education, and Sports, at least six members of Parliament, and key government-held infrastructure such as the Mogadishu airport, port, and presidential palace.⁶⁸

Suicide bombings previously had been largely unknown in Somalia,⁶⁹ and according to a defecting al Shabaab commander, the dramatic rise in these types of attacks was a direct result of AQ core’s growing influence.⁷⁰ Several of these attacks were carried out by foreigners; Shirwa Ahmen became the first American citizen to act as a suicide bomber when he participated in the October 28, 2008, bombings,⁷¹ and at least two other Westerners have committed similar acts.⁷² Al Shabaab’s first attacks outside of Somalia occurred on July 11, 2010, when suicide bombers set off two coordinated blasts inside a restaurant and a rugby club in Kampala, Uganda, where international crowds had gathered to watch the World Cup. Those attacks were touted by the group as revenge against Uganda for providing troops to AMISOM.⁷³ The attacks were both preceded and followed by announcements from senior al

Shabaab leaders of their intent to continue targeting Western interests abroad.⁷⁴

At the same time, al Shabaab has continued its guerilla war against AMISOM and the TFG, engaging in daily gun battles with government-aligned forces. Though still in part a guerilla army, since 2008 al Shabaab has, as a result of AQ core’s influence, added domestic and international terrorism to its arsenal.

A new emphasis on training in explosives has come to the fore as part of al Shabaab’s alignment with AQ core. Training camps for suicide bombers have been established in Elberde and Mogadishu.⁷⁵ Foreign AQ-affiliated leaders and fighters brought with them a preference for suicide bombing, making training in explosives valuable.⁷⁶ Veteran foreign fighters appear to play a major role in developing al Shabaab members’ explosives skills, serving as instructors in bomb making.⁷⁷ Several foreign fighters and their Somali “students” perished in August 2010 when a car bomb they were building detonated prematurely.⁷⁸ This new, explosives-heavy training regime reflects a shift driven largely by AQ core.

Several of al Shabaab’s recent shifts have largely been driven by the *growth of information and communication technologies (ICT)* as a means to interact with and gain support from the global terrorist community. ICT technology has, of late, emerged as one of the primary tools for inspiring and interacting with terrorist elements across the globe, a development that al Shabaab has noted and taken advantage of.⁷⁹

The utility of ICT technology in attracting foreign fighters has radically altered al Shabaab’s recruiting strategy. Between 2006 and 2008, al Shabaab recruited almost entirely from local Somali populations who volunteered to fight the Ethiopians. Since then, however, the group has increasingly turned to the Internet in order to recruit ideologically motivated foreigners to its cause. In 2008 the group’s al Kata’ib Foundation began creating a series of well-produced videos, including “Ambush at Bardale,” “At Your Service, Oh Osama,” and “No Peace Without Islam,” that attempted to appeal directly to that foreign audience by playing up al Shabaab’s connection to AQ core, framing the conflict in Somalia as part of the international war against the West, and portraying al Shabaab fighters as effective and successful.⁸⁰

Further, al Shabaab has benefited from the presence of English-language spokesman Omar Hammami, also known as “Abu Mansour al-Amriki.” Born in Alabama to a Syrian father and an American mother, after moving to Somali and joining al Shabaab Hammami rose to become a military commander and the star of his own series of videos, in which he encourages English-speaking foreigners to join the group. These and other videos have been widely distributed across a number of websites and discussion forums created by al Shabaab to encourage recruitment. The group has also used discussion boards to publish positive testimonials from foreigners who have joined al Shabaab, likely in an attempt to convince foreigners that they will be welcomed into the movement.⁸¹

When framing itself as a nationalist movement fighting a fellow African nation, al Shabaab held little appeal to these foreign elements, who appear to be greatly influenced by AQ core’s narrative of a need to resist a Western war on Islam. However, by using ICT technology to portray Somalia as a front in this AQ-led conflict, al Shabaab has been able to successfully target increasingly receptive populations of foreigners who wish to support al Qaeda.⁸² In online forums, al Shabaab supporters have emphasized the group’s “compatibility” with and connections to AQ core.⁸³

This strategy appears effective: since its introduction the number of foreign fighters active in al Shabaab has grown significantly.⁸⁴ These fighters have come not only from across the Middle East and Africa, but from the West as well, and have included both raw, unaffiliated recruits as well as hardened al Qaeda fighters with experience in other Islamist conflicts.⁸⁵ One testimonial from a foreign fighter published on the Internet cites British, Swedish, African, Saudi, Yemeni, and other Arab volunteers, some with experience in Afghanistan, among al Shabaab’s ranks.⁸⁶ Some have suggested that these foreign fighters have been attracted to Somalia primarily because of its status as a safe haven from which they can operate. Yet it is important to note that Somalia had been lawless and largely ungoverned for over a decade and a half before these foreigners began to arrive.⁸⁷ The influx of foreign fighters into Somalia, beginning in 2008, occurred only after al Shabaab launched a concerted Internet campaign purposefully devised to attract them.

Foreigners represent only a moderate percentage of al Shabaab’s several thousand members, but they likely comprise the most hardened, committed, and operationally active component of the group.⁸⁸ While al Shabaab still recruits local Somali youths as foot soldiers, it increasingly does so through coercion. Defecting al Shabaab fighters, many only in their teens, report that they were enticed to join not through ideological appeal, but due either to physical threats or through promised cash bonuses as high as \$400.⁸⁹ No longer a popular guerilla army overflowing with nationalist Somalis, al Shabaab has turned to the Internet as a viable means to recruit ideologically driven foreign fighters to supplement their increasingly unenthusiastic local conscripts.

ICT technology has also been an important driver behind al Shabaab’s fundraising techniques. While taxation and exploitation of the areas under their control continue to provide some funding for al Shabaab, since 2008 the group has increasingly turned to donations from both members of the Somali diaspora and foreign al Qaeda supporters to fund its operations. Although some have speculated that al Shabaab may be benefitting financially from the rampant piracy off Somalia’s coastline, there is little evidence for such a linkage; al Shabaab and the pirates’ areas of operations do not overlap geographically, and there have been no reliable reports of extensive coordination or contact between the two groups.⁹⁰

Instead, al Shabaab has increasingly received funding from outside supporters using the hawala system to transfer money to the group. An unknown percentage of al Shabaab’s funds comes from members of the million-strong Somali diaspora living across Africa, the Middle East, and the West, including the United States. Donations to al Shabaab are a portion of the larger diaspora remittances⁹¹ that send an estimated \$1 billion a year to Somalia.⁹² As noted, the group has used the Internet to collect pledges from diaspora Somalis; in August 2009 it raised as much as \$40,000 from members of the diaspora via an online fundraising forum.⁹³

The Internet has also allowed al Shabaab to reach out to wealthy Arab donors who wish to support al Qaeda’s global struggle. In much the same way as it was able to attract foreign fighters by more closely aligning with AQ core through Internet video messages, al Shabaab has been able to tap into wealthy Salafi networks by using the Internet to

convince them of the group's al Qaeda bona fides.⁹⁴ Some believe that these new backers may now account for the largest percentage of al Shabaab's funding, although the true extent of Arab involvement remains unclear.⁹⁵ Whatever the actual numbers, since 2008 al Shabaab has increasingly utilized the Internet to collect donations to fund its continued activities.

The Future of al Shabaab

Based on current trends, over the next 15 years al Shabaab will likely splinter, dispersing trained and radicalized fighters across the globe. In the short term, the ability of al Shabaab to unseat the Transitional Federal Government is largely irrelevant to the group's future as a terrorist organization. Even suffering numerous suicide attacks and holding only a small area, the TFG and its AMISOM guardians do not appear to be in danger of collapsing. Since mid-2010, the government's position has been strengthened somewhat by agreements signed with Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa, a Sufi militia that has received support from Ethiopia and has recently undertaken an offensive against al Shabaab.⁹⁶

Further, rather than weakening African Union support for the TFG, al Shabaab's July 2010 bombing of targets in Uganda has strengthened it; since the attacks, AMISOM has been brought up to its full strength of 8,000 peacekeepers, and an additional 12,000 have been promised, allowing the TFG to seize several Mogadishu neighborhoods from al Shabaab's control.⁹⁷ Though likely not enough to destroy al Shabaab, these additional troops will serve to severely hamper the group's ability to disrupt the TFG and gain control of Mogadishu. However, even if AMISOM withdrew and al Shabaab were able to seize power, the outcome for the foreign elements most likely to be involved in transnational terrorism would probably be the same, due to internal leadership dynamics.

A rift appears to be growing between al Shabaab factions, which is likely to widen as time passes.⁹⁸ The recent increase in the power and pride of place given to foreign fighters as well as those fighters' emphasis on the transnational dimension of the conflict has reportedly led to a high level of tension between the Somali nationalist faction and the foreign terrorist faction of al Shabaab.⁹⁹ A split between a larger nationalist faction led by Sheikh Mukhtar "Abu Robow" and a smaller, foreign terrorist

faction under Abu Zubair could well occur regardless of al Shabaab's success or failure against AMISOM and the TFG. If the group is not able to defeat the TFG in the next few years, its direction and focus will increasingly be in question, likely leading to fissures between the two factions over whether to target the near or far enemy. At the same time, if AMISOM withdraws and the TFG collapses, this will also likely lead to a rift. With the foreign irritant of AMISOM removed, many nationalist al Shabaab members and supporters will likely abandon the struggle, their goals accomplished. Further, if al Shabaab were to attempt to replace the TFG as a legitimate government, they would likely be forced to become more moderate. The weaker and now more moderate nationalist faction would likely be both unwilling and unable to continue to host the foreign terrorist faction. In either situation, a split between nationalist and foreign factions appears inevitable.

Without the protection of the nationalist faction, the foreign faction will be at the mercy of local clans and warlords, many of whom are inherently hostile to outsiders. During their time in eastern Africa in the 1990s, AQ core found the area to be inhospitable to their operations for a variety of reasons, including combative tribes, a lack of established infrastructure, and scant resources, none of which have changed significantly from that time.¹⁰⁰ Lacking the protection of the larger nationalist faction and too small to effectively carve out their own territory, these foreigners will be forced to flee Somalia. Some may bring their skills and experience to other AQ-affiliated organizations (most likely Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—AQAP—due to its proximity), while others may return to their homes in the Middle East, Africa, and the West. These returning fighters have the potential to create great instability in their home countries if they choose to remain operational, and might represent the nuclei of new domestic terror cells.

Kenya in particular faces risks: the nation shares a porous border with Somalia, has a significant Somali minority population, and is believed to be home to many of al Shabaab's ethnically Somali foreign fighters. High levels of corruption in Kenya and citizens who benefit from Somalia's and the region's political economy of violence have made the country a complicit safe haven for al Shabaab. Further, scholars and civil society experts in the Horn of Africa are concerned about a changing theological landscape, including a radicalization of the Swahili

coast over the next decade. Salafism is displacing Sufism, which has traditionally characterized Islamic practice in Somalia and in the region. In Nairobi, the largest and one of the most important mosques produces a Friday newsletter that is considered quite radical, while funding for Salafi groups has increased at the expense of traditional Sufi groups. Meanwhile, northeastern Kenya is experiencing “creeping radicalization” as are other parts of East Africa. AIAI remnants are operating in Ethiopia’s volatile Oga-den region, attempting to radicalize the population. If al Shabaab dissolves, the potential for radical fighters to turn their attentions elsewhere in East Africa is high.

However, while ethnic Somalis operating in the Horn may pose a risk to regional stability, it is the foreign fighters who are not ethnic Somalis who represent the greatest danger for future transnational terrorism. Former al Shabaab fighters, especially Westerners, who join other AQ affiliates, present a significant danger, as these groups could use their access to travel and familiarity with the West to facilitate future attacks of their own. Although the foreign elements of al Shabaab may eventually be driven from Somalia, their diaspora likely represents a far greater danger for transnational terrorism than the organization itself currently poses.

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