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Understanding the al-Shabaab networks

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The decision by the Australian Government on 21 August 2009 to officially list the al-Shabaab group as a terrorist organisation highlights a subject of growing concern in many Western governments: what is the danger posed by the Somali-based group, and is it merely a regional actor? The question is one of growing salience as stories increasingly surface of young Western (or Westernised) men leaving their homes to fight and train with the Islamic warriors in Somalia. Furthermore, the growing parallels with the 'chain of terror' that British Prime Minister Gordon Brown highlighted, emanating from Pakistan's lawless provinces through Europe's Muslim communities, mean fears are growing that it might result in a terrorist attack on the scale of the Madrid or London bombings.

This article outlines the growing sense of apparent threat in the West from networks linked in some way to al-Shabaab. It offers some brief thoughts on the growing links between what are herein termed 'the Shabaab networks' and whether the threat from them is one than can be paralleled with the threat from the similarly structured al-Qaeda networks.

The Shabaab

Al-Shabaab (the youth) first emerged as the hard-line military branch faction of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) confederation who briefly ruled Somalia until their ouster in late 2006 when Ethiopian forces invaded Somalia with implicit American support. Reports vary as to their exact genesis, with Chatham House reporting that they first rose to prominence in 2005 when a series of assassinations in Mogadishu of ICU members led to a series of reprisal killings by al-Shabaab affiliated individuals.[1] This history is partly supported by a report from the International Crisis Group, who state that there are two histories to the Shabaab. One, that it was created in 1998 by Islamist leader Hassan Dahir Aweys as a crack military unit of the Islamic Courts. The second is that it was created in mid-2006, 'as a special unit of the Courts militia to carry out "dirty war" and later spearhead the insurgency against Ethiopian and Somali government forces.'[2] A further version is provided by the Jamestown Foundation, based on Somali local news reports. It claims that the nucleus of the group was first established in 1996 in the al-Huda training camps in the Bakol state of south-central Somalia, but the group only rose to prominence in 2006 as the spearhead fighting Ethiopian and Somali government forces.[3]

None of this is to say that Islamist extremists had not for a long time been part of the Somali conflict. Al-Shabaab is in fact the latest in a long line of Islamist inspired groups involved in the conflict.[4] However, it was following the ouster of the ICU in 2006 that al-Shabaab became a prominent part of the Somali conflict, and increasingly its international face. They vocally broke away from other factions in the ICU, accusing them of being cowards and of being more interested in 'having a good time in foreign lands' than of truly bringing about the dream of an Islamic state ruled by Shariah law.[5] The group evolved further, increasingly adopting the tactics and rhetoric more commonly associated with al-Qaeda-style groups.

Nevertheless, with ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the West remained wary of getting too involved. The US in particular chose not to get too engaged beyond implicitly backing the Ethiopian effort in 2006/2007 to reinstate the Somali Government. In the US Government and the public eye, Somalia is linked to the events in 1993–portrayed in the film *Blackhawk Down*–when American soldiers got involved in bloody clashes leading to eighteen casualties and US corpses being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. This has led to reluctance in the US and beyond to get too involved in what is seen as a broadly intractable and uncontrollable piece of land. This view is apparently shared by some elements of al-Qaeda: according to documents published by the Harmony Project the group found it a highly troublesome operational environment in the 1990s.[6] However, there is evidence of al-Qaeda connections to both the Shabaab and some of their predecessor Islamist factions.[7] There are also reports of Western forces (particularly American and British) operating on the borders of Somalia and surrounding countries helping sweep up suspected Islamist fighters fleeing Ethiopian forces in 2006/2007.

This is important within the context of al-Shabaab as it helps provide them with fuel for rhetoric reminiscent of al-Qaeda which links their local enemies—Ethiopia and the Somali Government—with the 'far enemy' of the United States and Europe. In al-Shabaab's own words in response to the rise of the ICU, 'the world's crusader forces were mobilised,'[8] and America, 'unleashed its "hunting dogs" in Ethiopia and Kenya.'[9] The use of the crusader imagery further emphasises al-Shabaab's role as a fighter in the global war for Islam, and also highlights their existence as a warring faction above the messy clan politics that have largely dictated Somalia's recent history. This in turn helps make them more attractive to global seekers of jihad. They are able to cast themselves in the same light as groups like al-Qaeda or the Taliban, while also giving them local support as the defenders of Somali dignity from outside invaders.

Shabaab's Western outreach

One of al-Shabaab's claims distinguishing it from other Islamist groups is that it is made up of local fighters, but also 'the muhajireen—the mujahideen originating from all over the world.'[10] This element is at the heart of global concerns about the group. In much the same way that Islamist conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq or Kashmir became global locations on the jihadi map which attracted fighters from around the world to join them, Somalia is increasingly being seen in this light. This is something that al-Shabaab have been eager to emphasise, with an increasing rate of propaganda videos translated into English and the growing prominence of clearly Western individuals as spokesmen.

Most prominent amongst these is Omar Hammami, aka Abu Mansoor al-Amiriki, a young American convert of mixed American-Syrian heritage. He was brought up Catholic in a village just outside Mobile, Alabama in the United States. After converting to Islam during high school, Hammami led a relatively normal life, enrolling in the University of Southern Alabama and becoming president of the Muslim Association. He was quoted as saying in the wake of 9/11, 'even now it's difficult to believe a Muslim could have done this.' However, in October 2007, Al-Jazeera first got footage of Hammami training alongside Islamist militants in Somalia. In April the following year, he uncovered himself for the camera and released the first of a number of videos extolling the virtue of jihad and calling on others to come and join. [11]

Using graphics which displayed a new level of technical savvy and with images overlaid with hip-hop sounding lyrics singing the praises of jihad, Hammami's videos were part of a clear campaign by al-Shabaab to reach out to lost Western youth seeking meaning and direction. Their success can be measured by the fact that there has been a noticeable uptake in individuals from the West going over to fight alongside al-Shabaab. While there have been foreign fighters alongside al-Shabaab, Omar Hammami was in the first instance largely an exception. Most were drawn from the ranks of young men in Somali diaspora communities around the world, fired up by anger at the Ethiopian invasion of their country.

In the United States, concerns remain high over the exact whereabouts of a group of around twenty young men from the Minneapolis area who have apparently gone and joined al-Shabaab in Somalia. The group first gained prominence after it emerged that one of their number, Shirwa Ahmed, achieved the dubious honour of being the first-known American suicide bomber when he blew himself up in Northern Somalia in October 2008 as part of a coordinated Shabaab attack involving five different suicide explosions in the Northern Puntland province (a first for the region). Since then, it has been reported that at least two more of the group were killed in clashes, while two other members have been prosecuted in the United States.[12] More recently, the FBI announced that it was investigating whether an attack claimed by al-Shabaab on an African Union base near Mogadishu airport on September 17 was also carried out by a Somali-born American immigrant from Seattle.[13]

The Minneapolis group was for the most part made up of young Somali-Americans, though they counted at least one convert amongst their number. An investigation by the *New York Times* newspaper uncovered how the group were apparently in contact with their friends back home using online conference calls and Facebook to appeal to 'homies' who stayed behind to come and join them. A call which appears to have been heard as the first group who went to fight in late 2007 was followed by a second wave the next autumn. The exact details of what led to the men's decisions are unclear and while much of the radicalisation took place in Minneapolis, the men were apparently drawn to Somalia in the wake of the Ethiopian decision to invade in 2006. The desire to do something for their people, as well as the appeal of jihadi glory in a foreign land appears to have stimulated their interest. [14]

A similar narrative is found in the United Kingdom, where the history of individuals going to fight abroad has existed for far longer, although for the most part it has involved going to Afghanistan and Kashmir, and to a lesser degree Iraq and even Chechnya. More recently, however, the phenomenon

of jihad in Somalia has drawn Britons into its thrall. A number of al-Shabaab videos portraying young Somalis with British accents calling others to come and join the fight have appeared with a growing regularity, including at least one martyrdom video. The first identified UK Somali suicide bomber apparently took part in a suicide attack possibly targeting the Somali Prime Minister in October 2007. The Prime Minister escaped, though some twenty Ethiopian soldiers were allegedly killed. The young man was apparently a 21-year-old Oxford Brookes University drop-out who had left his home in Ealing in West London to carry out the attack.[15] While this was the first reported suicide bomber, instances of Britons in Somalia had shown up previously, with a reporter coming across a pair of Somali-British brothers from North London in Mogadishu in the summer of 2006.[16]

Further evidence of the impact of the Ethiopian invasion upon Britain's extremist community can be seen in a statement posted on an extremist forum at the time which attracted some media attention by someone calling themselves Abou Luqman in January 2007: 'The Ethiopians, with….support (from the Christian crusader regimes) and backed by illegitimate Israel (Zionists), have violated the blood of Muslims in Somalia. By committing such an act of terrorism the Muslims in Somalia and nearby lands have responded to the divine call of jihad.' Whether this appeal reached beyond Britain's Somali community, or whether it had any impact is unclear. The same story that reported the quote also highlighted that the Ethiopian Embassy in London had claimed that its forces in Somalia had five Britons in custody, whilst a conflicting separate report said seven British passport holders had been seized in the country.[17]

Beyond the US and UK, stories have emerged of Somali-Canadians showing up in the conflict fighting with the Shabaab, with Abdifatah Mohammed Ibrahim grabbed by a rival militia in March 2009 and then paraded with his Canadian passport in a local courtroom. A year before, Abdullah Ali Afrah, formerly of Toronto, was killed in a firefight with Ethiopian troops.[18] While his death was the first that was officially confirmed, it has been claimed that a number of other Canadian-Somalis have also died in fighting alongside the Shabaab and others have been detained by Ethiopian and Kenyan troops as they were fleeing the oncoming forces.

Outside of the Anglophone world, Sweden has provided substantial numbers of fighters to the conflict. In early 2007, the Somali Government claimed that a number of Swedish citizens were apparently killed as they fled the Ethiopian invasion, while another report claimed a Swede was amongst those killed in a US airstrike in June 2007.[19] In July 2009, the death of another young Swede focused people's concerns on the growing problems emanating from the country and in particular on Sheikh Fuad Mohammed Oalaf, the former Imam of the Rinkeby Mosque in Stockholm. Fuad served as a minister in the 2006 ICU government, before breaking away to join al-Shabaab in the wake of the Ethiopian invasion. Since then, Sheikh Fuad has praised Somalis in Sweden for being the most generous financial contributors to the Shabaab, something that has apparently helped support his rise in the organisation.[20]

The internationalisation of al-Shabaab?

A new trend appears to be emerging: Britain's security services have increasingly raised their level of concern about the possibility of the conflict in Somalia spilling over, with reports indicating that the number of Britons going over to fight has more than quadrupled to at least 100 since 2004. What has particularly alarmed experts is that the men going to fight are no longer

solely of Somali origin. As a prominent Conservative MP and chairman of the counter-terrorism committee Patrick Mercer put it, based on confidential reports he had seen: 'there is now a mixture of British people, from numerous backgrounds, who are heading out there.'[21]

Another report has highlighted the growing prominence of Urdu speakers in Shabaab videos, suggesting that the umma being reached out to is beyond the international Somali community.[22] That judgement is supported by a Shabaab leader interviewed by the BBC who confirmed an influx of foreign jihadists to the region—many thought to be from Pakistan—and welcomed their presence.[23]

Shabaab as the new Jihadi melting pot

While there appears to continue to be a steady trickle of fighters going to Afghanistan, increasingly Somalia and al-Shabaab appear to be drawing these recruits. The UK has already highlighted this concern that a growing number of non-Somalis have been going over to fight.[24] But stories are emerging of others attempting to go and join the group in Somalia. A young Kosovar-Albanian Brooklyn man, Betim Kaziu was arrested by Kosovar authorities and handed over to US custody after allegedly seeking to join up with the Shabaab militia. (He also allegedly tried to get to Afghanistan and Iraq.)[25] He was not the first non-Somali American to try to go and join the fight. Earlier, Ruben Schumpert, a Latino-African-American former drug dealer and prison convert had fled charges related to terrorist activity in the US to join the Shabaab. Having slipped federal authorities, Schumpert telephoned the FBI agent in charge of his case from his new home in Mogadishu. He had threatened the officer and added that he and his Muslim associates would 'destroy everything the United States stood for.'[26] And beyond the Anglophone world, a young Arab-Swede was arrested in France after he had fled fighting alongside al-Shabaab in 2006.[27]

At the same time as young Muslims from around the world are apparently being drawn by al-Shabaab's zeal, there have also been instances of young Somalis living in the West being drawn into plots targeting their home nations. Amongst the five failed suicide bombers who attempted to carry out the second wave of copy-cat bombings on London's transport system, two, Yasin Omar and Ramzi Mohammed, were Somali asylum seekers. Furthermore, the majority of the support team later incarcerated for helping the failed bombers were also of Somali extraction. More recently in Canada, Somali-Canadian Ali Mohamed Dirie pled guilty in September 2009 to charges that he was involved in a terror plot in Toronto. He had been arrested on a separate charge of trying to smuggle guns into the country and was then charged while in custody on further charges that he was involved in the so-called 'Toronto 18' plot. So far, four men, including the ringleader, have pled guilty. A further six remain on trial and the men are alleged to have been plotting to bomb buildings in Toronto.[28]

Thus far, it seems as though these two separate strands—Westernised Somalis radicalising to the point of getting involved in violence at home and the lure of al-Shabaab as a jihadi battlefield—have not intermingled. It appears that the spark of al- Shabaab, moving from simply condemning the West to actually sending fighters to back up its words, has not occurred. It is as though al-Shabaab's conflict in Somalia is simply rising in appeal to the global umma of young disenfranchised Muslims seeking jihadi glory. And unlike the previous waves who were drawn to the fight and were primarily young Somalis who were in part drawn into going back under clan or ethnic

affiliations to fight after the invasion of the crusader Ethiopian army, these young men are drawn instead increasingly by the zeal of jihad.

The danger is that once trained and inspired by conflict on the battlefield, these young men might then return home and become the cause of further trouble. As has been shown before, radicalised young men do not always need an outside commandment to reach the conclusion that they should carry out action. In the UK alone, the cases of Nicky Reilly, a young convert who attempted to carry out a suicide bombing in May 2008 in Exeter and the attempted car bombings by Bilal Abdullah and Kafeel Ahmed in June 2007, both appear to be plots which were largely hatched by the perpetrators with no direct outside push.[29]

Furthermore, there might be evidence that Shabaab's anger towards its external enemies is growing. The American raid earlier in September which targeted Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an apparent top level al-Qaeda suspect who was believed to be linked to numerous al-Qaeda plots in the region as well as being a key Shabaab operator, led to threats of retaliation from the group. A Shabaab leader states that: 'The United States is Islam's known enemy and we will never expect mercy from them, nor should they expect mercy from us.'[30] The group had used the death as an opportunity to call for more foreign fighters to come and join their cause.[31] Nabhan was apparently a key interlocutor and trainer for foreign fighters who went to Somalia, with a number of those involved in the Minneapolis group apparently identifying Nabhan as their trainer.[32] It has been reported that the earlier mentioned Seattleite who carried out the suicide bombing against African Union troops was part of an operation to avenge Nabhan.[33]

Concluding remarks

At this stage it would seem unlikely that al-Shabaab would attack the West. Their priority appears to be primarily domestic and their grip on Somalia is by no means complete. It would seem an unnecessary distraction to encourage too much outside interference from the West whose forces and attention are primarily engaged in Afghanistan. However, a number of disturbing trends are clear.

First is the possibility that the Shabaab will allow its training camps to become places of refuge for international jihadists seeking recruits or 'sub-contractors' in training for international terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda. This model might replicate the apparent relationship between al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Toiba in Pakistan.

Second is the potential risk of the increasing internationalisation of al-Shabaab and those who are drawn to it. The numbers of non-Somalis being drawn to al-Shabaab is increasing. This growing diversity means that should al-Shabaab or someone else decide to utilise this network of radicalised warriors, they would have a wide variety of potential operatives to call upon. This reflects a growing internationalisation of the cause, something which increases the possibility of discussion turning from the creation of a localised caliphate to a globalised one.

And finally, there is a growing discussion between al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab. High-level al-Qaeda leaders like Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri and Abu Yahya al Liby have all singled out 'the lions of Somalia,' while Shabaab has increasingly adopted al-Qaeda-style tactics and rhetoric while thanking the leaders for their support.[34] Whether this means the two

are working hand-in-hand and that al-Shabaab's leadership has decided to take on al-Qaeda's agenda of attacking the West wherever they find it remains unclear.

What is clear, however, is that we are likely to see an increase in Westernised Muslims appearing on the battlefield in Somalia. Eventually we will see some of these men come home. Whether they come home to carry out terrorist attacks, or mobilise the networks which sent them to conduct activity back home remains uncertain. It would not be surprising, however, if there was an increase in localised targeting of Western interests. Such attacks might assuage their sense of grievance without attracting too much external military intervention.

Endnotes

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