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The spread of Al Shabaab

from Somalia to Kenya and beyond



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahidin, known throughout the world as Al-Shabaab (AS), is a powerful and resilient armed group based in Somalia but has also demonstrated its capability to carry out deadly attacks in neighbouring countries in East Africa. AS's long-standing links with Al Qaeda (AQ) also mean that ongoing AS activities and presence could extend AQ's power projection into East Africa and beyond. Key actors in international security and the Global War on Terror have challenged AS directly and indirectly through support to the Somali federal government on the *recognition* that AS represents a threat to international security and the *assumption* that it has expansionist intentions beyond Somalia into the region and possibly beyond.

This assumption is analysed herein based on a full review of the academic and policy literature on AS, of AS statements, a series of interviews carried out with senior Somali and international officials, AS high-level and low-level defectors, followed by an online workshop involving Hub analysts and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). The group's intentions, capabilities and opportunities are investigated in detail and the primary findings are:

- AS has the intention to control Somalia and indeed 'Greater Somalia' – an idealized nation which relates to the geographical area where Somali people live and includes parts of Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Its attacks on foreign interests in Greater Somalia might be in retaliation for what is often a predominantly military presence in Somalia or to expand beyond Somalia/Greater Somalia.
- AS is a resilient organization which has demonstrated its ability to transform itself and its activities when necessary. Its financial capabilities are growing and diversifying and it retains strong communications and messaging capabilities.
- There is little indication that they have the capability of carrying out attacks beyond East Africa, but this cannot be discounted.
- The actions of AMISOM (African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia), upcoming federal elections, and other conflicts in and near the region could all have significant impact on AS' intentions and capabilities.
- Constant and coherent monitoring of the development of a variety of potential opportunities, which could drastically impede or indeed pave the way for an AS expansion, is essential in the short to medium-terms.

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INTRODUCTION

Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahidin, better known as Al-Shabaab (AS), meaning “The Youth” in Arabic, is the largest militant organisation based in Somalia and is also active in neighbouring countries, most notably Kenya. It is one of the most enduring non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in sub-Saharan Africa. It grew and emerged as an independent organisation and leading member of the Somali insurgency in connection with the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia at the time of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Since its founding, AS has had ties to Al Qaeda (AQ). The group has engaged in bombings, suicide attacks and armed assaults, especially against Somali government targets, foreign troops, diplomats, and civilians.

In 2010, Al Shabaab was in control of a considerable portion of central-southern Somalia, building a complex structure of governance in territories under its control. The group physically dominates less territory than it has done in the past. AMISOM assessments estimate the group to have physical control of somewhere between 20-30% of rural south-central Somalia, down from a peak of 80% between 2007 and 2014. The group no longer controls any major cities nor, importantly, seaports.

The international community has identified AS as a major threat to international security, particularly focusing on its established links to AQ and the expansion of its area of activities beyond Somalia into Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Uganda and beyond. The widespread assumption within the international community has long been that, if left unchecked, AS would expand across the region and as such extend the global reach of its ally, AQ. The primary aim of this research project is to interrogate this widespread assumption and examine whether AS is an expansionist NSAG with regional or global intentions. Is it primarily a nationalist group focused on controlling Somalia or is it a complex mix of both nationalist and global agendas?

It is fundamental to clarify the concept of ‘*expansion*.’ This is particularly relevant considering the documented reduction in geographical area controlled by AS and its membership over the past decade. Traditionally, the concept of expansion is quite straight-forward. In the case of AS the issue is more complex. This is primarily because the national borders in the region, which would normally assist in deciding whether an organisation might expand locally or globally, are not of great significance here. AS, indeed, has made it clear that it considers “Greater Somalia”, roughly equated to all of the geographical areas in which Somalis live, to be their area of responsibility.

For this reason, this paper assesses the issue of *expansion* from two distinct perspectives. The first is the question of whether AS is likely to expand *within* the confines of Greater Somalia, regardless of the national territory in question – to AS this is a form of local expansion. The second is whether or not AS is likely to expand beyond the confines of Greater Somalia, either regionally or internationally.

Finally, any assessment of AS's expansionism is based on three factors: intentions, capabilities and opportunities. Effectively, if any of these is lacking, the possibility for a successful expansion is severely reduced, if not impeded outright. For this reason the two facets of expansion, severely reduced or completely impeded, have been addressed separately from the perspective of AS's intentions, capabilities and opportunities to carry out either or both in the short to medium-term.

Methodology

Despite the central importance of this issue, a review of the policy literature and many policy statements reveals that these *assume* that AS has expansionist aspirations and make similar assumptions about its strong links to AQ and its adoption of AQ's global agenda in its public messaging. However, there is little literature actually investigating this. A research team composed of analysts from NATO's Strategic Direction – South (NSD-S Hub), a Somali-Kenyan research organization, Krypteia,¹ and the Conflict Analysis Research Centre (CARC) at the University of Kent, carried out primary and secondary research into the intentions, capabilities and opportunities of AS to carry out an expansionist programme.

This involved a review of the academic and policy literature on AS, examining the work of both Somali and East African scholars and that of international terrorism experts. As will become evident, these two groups of scholars have quite opposing views of AS's position in the regional and international landscape. The research team also carried out an extensive examination of AS statements and videos, collecting data on their stated intentions and their evolution over time. Based on this review, the research team undertook a series of interviews in Somalia with key Somali (MPs and senior government advisors and civil servants) and international policymakers (defence attachés, UN and AMISOM officials), Somali intelligence officers and, crucially, with AS defectors (three high level, three middle level, and five low level). All interviews were carried out on condition interviewees would not be named, protecting them but also allowing them greater freedom in their answers. The entire research process underwent an ethical review by the University of Kent to ensure that it adhered to the four main ethical principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy and justice.

The principal conclusions to the paper were discussed and agreed to in a two-day online workshop (January 28-29, 2021) during which the research team's findings were presented to and discussed by three prominent experts on Somalia. These were: Hussein Sheikh Ali, Director of the Hiraal Institute and former Deputy Head of Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency; Stig Jarle Hansen, Professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences; and Mary Harper, BBC

¹ The Somali-based organization Krypteia was outsourced to support in-country field research.

correspondent and author of *Everything You Have Told Me is True: The Many Faces of Al Shabaab* (2019).

Local, Global or ‘Glocal’

This section investigates the relationship between the understanding and labelling of an NSAG and the implications this has for policy. It builds on the recurring debate on whether NSAGs in numerous geographical areas should be considered local, global or even “glocal” (Henne, 2013). This is directly related to the issue of expansion, as whether a group has local, global, or glocal intentions or capabilities depend on our understanding of how these are distinguished.

The local/global/glocal divide has attracted considerable attention among those studying NSAGs. Particularly since the rise of the global AQ network in the early 1990s, many scholars have debated the question of whether NSAGs in numerous countries (from Nigeria to Algeria all the way to Indonesia and the Philippines) should be understood as primarily local movements or as offshoots of AQ or DAESH. Some have focused on the organizational nature of the AQ network and its relationship to national groups – from the franchise model to a biology-inspired fungal model – while others have focused on the ideology of groups, in particular on whether they aim for political changes within a state/limited geographical area or whether they have adopted global goals.

The literature has tended to examine this question adopting an empirical or factual approach: *Is the group local or global and where would one place it on a spectrum?* This is certainly true in the present case. In Somalia, terrorism scholars in particular have examined the relationship between AS and AQ, the presence of AQ fighters in the hierarchy of AS, the adoption of AQ tactics by AS, its adoption of a global agenda, and other indicators of whether AS should be understood as primarily local (to Greater Somalia) or as a branch of a global movement (see for example Vidino et al, 2010; Shinn, 2011, Henne, 2013, Hansen, 2016).

It is important to note however that analysing whether an actor is local or global is not solely a question of examining the facts on the ground. Recognizing a group as local or global has its policy implications. When a group is recognized as “local” it is also recognized as “relevant” to a political context, while global actors are presented as external impositions or imposters pretending to be “one of us.” This disqualifies their political relevance. Similarly, whether a group is labelled as “global/glocal” can have immediate legal effects. Since the start of the so-called Global War on Terror and in particularly the UN sanctions regime regarding AQ, DAESH, and affiliated parties, any links to AQ/DAESH will have an impact on the kinds of legal and financial sanctions an NSAG is subjected to as well as the kind of military operations that may be authorized against them.

If the labelling of NSAGs by other parties serves political functions and leads to specific policy responses, it is important to note that NSAGs can and have also self-labelled themselves global or

international to serve political functions to their benefit. International or global terrorists are already established entities with a proven capability of carrying out successful terror attacks and thus already have the capacity to cause terror in populations. Claiming to be part of such a global movement can thus be seen as a power multiplier as groups can take advantage of some of the fear and terror that the international group instils. Strategically, claiming to be global terrorists can also rally international attention and, importantly, international support from other groups associated with the network. Greater attention can bring in foreign fighters and/or diaspora members returning to their or their parents' country of origin. Finally, self-identifying as "global terrorists" can offer NSAGs a way of differentiating themselves in a context in which many groups are vying for support or simply attention.

Many agree that global and local are not mutually exclusive attributions and that most NSAGs sit somewhere along the global-local spectrum. Not only will their position along the spectrum evolve over time, but the degree of locality/globality will be varied depending on whether one is examining funding, recruitment, or attacks for example. Returning to the central theme of *expansion*, whether local within Greater Somalia, or further abroad, regionally or internationally, this paper assesses AS's likelihood to expand in three main areas: intentions, capabilities and opportunities.

INTENTIONS

From an empirical perspective, it is first important to assess whether AS intends to expand beyond Greater Somalia and, if so, how far beyond. However, primary research through interviews with Somali and international officials and AS defectors and a review of the academic and policy literature indicates that there remains considerable uncertainty over this question.

On the one hand, opinions state that the AS has clear ‘nationalist’ plans to control Greater Somalia and replace federal and regional government structures. The group intends to replace what they denounce as foreign (un-Somali) and secular (un-Islamic), with a governance based on radical Wahabist interpretations of Sharia which supersedes Somalia’s historical clan structures and divisions (although the group’s attitude to clans has been ambivalent over the years). A clear indication that the group understands itself as a government in waiting is its establishment of a shadow bureaucracy similar to that of a state. Most importantly, AS has also always clearly declared its intentions to force all international actors – and particularly foreign military forces – to leave Somalia. Indeed, as early as 2007, one of AS founding leaders, Mukhtar Robow, declared the group’s intentions “to allow no foreign forces in our land”.²

What is less clear is what AS ambitions may be. Part of the debate stems from the ideal of a “Greater Somalia”, a land which reunites all Somali-speaking populations, including Somaliland, Djibouti and bordering regions of Ethiopia and Kenya. As stated previously, interviews carried out for this project stress that many Somalis, not only those supporting AS, consider these areas as legitimately Somali. Thus, AS cross-border attacks in Kenyan counties of Wajir, Garissa, Mandera, and Lamu for example cannot be understood as an indication of AS intentions to expand its influence and control *beyond Somalia* but are based on an understanding of Somalia which does not correspond to its internationally-recognized borders. Precisely for this reason this paper has been structured to distinguish between AS intentions within *its* understanding of where Somalia starts and ends and any intentions it may have even beyond the borders of an idealized “Greater Somalia”.

The academic and policy debate on where to place AS on the local-global spectrum has raged since the group first emerged in the mid-2000s. Key scholars of Somalia (such as Abdi Ainte, Mark Bradbury, Afyare Abdi Elmi, Stig Jarle Hansen, Mohamed Hagi Ingiriis, Harun Maruf, Ken Menkhaus, Roland Marchal among others) analyze AS largely as a group focused on Somalia, part of a large fractious puzzle that is its political and security environment today. As early as 2006, Menkhaus referred to the embryonic AS as “Somali jihadists”,³ later stressing that while there were no doubt ties between AS and global networks, local logics and goals were not

² <https://uk.reuters.com/article/idUSL16540328>

³ The NSD-S HUB is reporting the quote verbatim. In accordance with the terminology used in this paper, any reference to the words ‘jihad’ or ‘Islam’ and their derivatives do not refer to any religion specifically.

overshadowed (2013). Hansen (2016:2) in his monograph on AS argues that its “*modus operandi* suggests an organization with a local focus, and its attacks since 2007 have been directly connected to local warfare, even when attacking outside Somalia.” Hansen insists however that AS cannot be understood “only in a local context – it is rather an organization formed by global jihadist⁴ philosophies, local needs to provide some form of rudimentary justice and tactical considerations on behalf of its various members.”

At the other end of the spectrum, scholars and policy analysts focusing on international terrorism have stressed AS’s international focus. Lorenzo Vidino, Raffaello Pantucci, and Evan Kohlmann (2010: 224) assess what they call the “internationalization and sacralisation” of the Somali conflict and an example of AQ turning AS into a ‘glocal’ organization: “operating locally but with a global mind-set.” More recently, the conservative think-tank The Long War Journal (2018) described the group as “al Qaeda’s East African wing, Al Shabaab”.⁵ For the author Caleb Weiss, AS is attacking Somalia but there is nothing in the description that describes it as Somali. In fact, it is a transnational actor fighting a ‘global jihad’⁶ rather than engaged in national or local conflicts. Indeed, AS and AQ are seen as so closely interconnected by some think tanks that a recently alleged plot of an AS member to attack the United States is taken as an indication of AQ’s continuing focus on carrying out attacks on US soil.⁷ In such an analysis, AS is understood as completely subsumed to AQ.

There are ample statements by AS leadership over the years that stress the group’s international agenda and expansionist aspirations. As early as May 2009, then AS leader Ahmed Abdi Godane declared: “We will fight and the wars will not end until Islamic Sharia is implemented in all continents of the world and until Muslims liberate Jerusalem”. In 2015, AS threatened to attack shopping malls in the UK, US and Canada.⁸ Fast forward to 2020, AS leader Ahmed Diriye threatened attacks on France following the republication of controversial cartoons portraying the Prophet Mohammed. Importantly however, Marchal (2009: 382) warns against over-relying on AS statements, arguing that “caution is required” because of the “discrepancies between rhetoric and behaviour”.

It is also worth noting that many AS statements continue to focus on Greater Somalia and justify attacks outside Somalia as part of a strategy to force foreign forces to leave. Recent attacks

⁴ See footnote 3

⁵ [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/somali-markets-targeted-in-shabaab-explosions.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+LongWarJournalSiteWide+\(FDD%27s+Long+War+Journal+Update\)](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/somali-markets-targeted-in-shabaab-explosions.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+LongWarJournalSiteWide+(FDD%27s+Long+War+Journal+Update))

⁶ See footnote 3

⁷ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2020-december-21/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/22/terror-threats-issued-against-british-american-and-canadian-shopping-malls>

against the US military in Somalia and Kenya were presented as part of their campaign “to defend their religion, land and people from all forms of invaders”.⁹ Indeed, an in-depth analysis of AS statements regarding attacks on North-Eastern Kenyan territory revealed three dominant narratives being presented to justify the attacks: revenge for Kenya “invading Somalia” leading to the AS loss of the lucrative port of Kismayo; an “attack is the best form of defence” narrative to pressure foreign military to leave Somalia; and the liberation of “Greater Somalia” narrative.

Interviews with diplomats and international security actors working in Somalia reflect these conflicting viewpoints on AS’s overarching intentions. Overall, the group is viewed as being AQ’s strongest component in terms of its military capability and its ability to generate financial resources. However, further interviews demonstrated an understanding that is far more nuanced, pointing at a multi-faceted nature of AS and the difference between the group’s posturing and reality. Pointing toward an expansionist understanding of AS, members of the international community noted that AS has recently started recruiting Kenyans who are not ethnic Somalis. This was interpreted as a possible signal of AS intention to expand beyond territories associated with Greater Somalia in Kenya. This is also true of other neighbouring countries where interviewees believed that AS could take advantage of regional instability, such as in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, to expand its reach. Finally, interviewees stressed the strong connection with AQ, from numerous references to AQ and global terrorists aims in AS statements to the sharing of resources – financial and human - and intelligence. In exchange for this support, however, AQ is believed by the international community to grant AS autonomy on internal matters related to Somalia. The idea of “Somalia for the Somalis” came up consistently in interviews, and it was felt to be AS real priority.

It is important to note that the AS-AQ relationship is not static and neither are the groups/networks themselves. Indeed, just as AQ has evolved in its structure and leadership in the past 15 years so has AS, and experts point to a generational change in the AS leadership which is likely to impact on the relevance and importance of the global agenda in the organization. The initial leadership had strong links to AQ, several of them (including Godane) having fought with AQ in Afghanistan (Hansen, 2016). Over time, these links have diminished and today’s leadership is largely viewed as less internationalist/expansionist than the group’s founders.

Numerous analysts have also pointed out that AS rhetoric and practice may differ and that the international community may be granting too much weight to AS statements. “Analysts have relied on Al-Shabaab’s public statement projecting a desire for global domination and an unequivocal adherence to a fundamentalist Islamist agenda”, Saferworld noted in a 2018 analysis. “But such narratives are not dominant in interviews with ex-combatants, who speak more of local grievances driving their participation.” Similarly, interviews carried out for this project with Somali

⁹ AS press release, quoted in <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Press-Release-Four-American-Crusaders-Killed-In-Somalia.pdf>

intelligence and security officials, political figures and AS defectors point much more to the importance of AS intentions within Greater Somalia.

Mustafa Duhulow, a Member of Somalia's Federal Parliament and former Minister of Information, clearly stated in an interview for this project that AS and its supporters particularly in south/central Somalia are entirely focused on gaining power and that the group's international agenda and links with AQ barely registered as a key aim. Indeed, according to Duhulow and others interviewed, AS has recently turned greater attention to infiltrating the political system, by supporting or even running candidates in electoral processes, as well as the judicial system and other sections of the administration. This would be in contrast with the group's long-standing aim to undermine electoral processes which are seen as corrupt and foreign imposed (International Crisis Group, 2020). Nevertheless, numerous sources indicated that while AS rhetoric continues to oppose the electoral process and continues to intimidate or extort money from those planning to take part, AS also seems to be trying to ensure that some of their allies are elected as well. This is seen as a sign of the primacy of AS nationalist agenda over any global expansionist agenda.

Somali security actors also note that the relationship between AS and AQ is largely overstated. Already early on in the AS-AQ relationship, AQ envoys dispatched to Somalia complained that AS was too focused on Somalia and internal matters, and little appears to have changed.¹⁰ The Director of the Hiraal Institute and former Deputy Head of Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency, Hussein Sheikh Ali, stated that recent research carried out by the institute highlighted that the widely used figures of one third of AS income going to AQ was a gross exaggeration and that the figure was probably much nearer to less than 10 percent. Ali also noted there is only one non-Somali currently in a senior positions in AS, further indicating a secondary role of AS's international agenda. Somali security actors went further by stating in interviews that there is no strategic connection between the two organizations other than statements supporting one another. Even if this is the case, it is important to note that AS's continued public allegiance to AQ carries symbolic value as it extends the AQ network into East Africa and demonstrates their continued relevance. Somali interviewees nonetheless recognize that AS has clear intentions to attack Western targets in Somalia and in the region more broadly. Defectors stated that the group prioritizes attacks on Western targets and that there is agreement across the leadership and the rank and file that foreigners are the first targets of attacks. This priority has indeed been translated into attacks against western targets in Somalia and in the region, including high-profile attacks in Nairobi and in Mogadishu. Once again, however, it is unclear if such attacks are anything more than an indication of AS intentions to force international forces to leave Greater Somalia or whether they have expansionist aspirations.

¹⁰ https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/jns/files/aq_hoa.pdf

CAPABILITIES

In this section, we identify current AS capabilities in order to analyse how sufficient they are to allow for any potential expansion. As before, the question of expansion has two aspects. The first is a potential expansion within and to gain fuller control of the idealized Greater Somalia, while the second is a global expansion to other parts of Africa and the rest of the world.

USAFRICOM's¹¹ recent view of al-Shabaab presents it as the most “dangerous,” “capable,” and “imminent” threat on the African continent,¹² but there is little in terms of academic and policy analysis of AS capabilities. Terrorist groups do not publicize their capabilities for fear of losing their asymmetric advantage. Governments and militaries closely guard their information (and, in particular, the sources of their information) and the burgeoning private intelligence sector commodifies its insights. However, defectors from AS have provided some insight in the past ('Our Man on the Horn: Inside al-Shabaab', 2016, and Saferworld, 2018) and did so again as part of this research.

In order to assess AS capabilities, we have selected the following nine categories: Number of Members, Recruitment, Training, Weapons and Explosives, Leadership/Command/Control, Governance, Intelligence, Communication/Propaganda and Finance.

Number of Members

Although official open sources had the number of militants in AS at between 5,000 and 7,000 in 2010, an AMISOM official stated the number could have been as high as 20,000, and this figure is considered much more accurate as it includes not only fighting militants but all persons actively assisting and participating in the organization at any level. It is generally agreed that AS suffered a significant drop in numbers of active militants from 2010 to 2014 as a consequence of the recapture of Mogadishu and cities like Kismayo, Marka or Barawe.¹³ USAFRICOM estimated that the number was anywhere from 5,000 to as many as 10,000 fighters in November 2020.¹⁴

¹¹ United States Africa Command

¹² Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson, transcript, “The Crossroad of Competition: Countering the Rise of Violent Extremists and Revisionist Powers in Africa,” USAFRICOM J22 & SOCAFRICA J2, response to DoD OIG request for information, 20.4 NWA 31, 9/28/2020

¹³ During Operations Linda Nichi (2011) and Indian Ocean (2014)

¹⁴ Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, “East Africa Counterterrorism Operation July-Sep 2020”. November 2020. Pag. 21

Numbers can be misleading, however. While the group has undoubtedly reduced in size, much of what remains is a core of well-trained, experienced and motivated fighters and commanders. Therefore, AS “remains adaptive, resilient and capable of attacking in Somalia and East Africa”.¹⁵

It is probable that this number would suffice to *begin* any expansion strategy to Greater Somalia, but the number would have to increase as the expansion made progress. It is equally unlikely that the number is sufficient to allow any expansion beyond East Africa, further abroad.

Recruitment

During the last two years, AS has endured notable defections as well as massive territorial losses.¹⁶ At the same time, it is facing difficulties in recruiting foreign fighters who seem to be more interested in other Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) where there are better opportunities to be promoted because there are so few non-Somalis in senior positions.

Frustration with living conditions, with no realistic expectation of things ever improving, is one of the main causes of people veering towards joining a terrorist group. In fact, to recruit new militants to replenish their heavy casualties, AS benefits from: structural conditions (such as state repression, corruption, relative deprivation, discrimination and long-standing hostilities between clans; individual incentives (economic, security-related or psycho-social enticements); and actual or implied threats by AS.¹⁷

Despite the restriction of rights and freedoms imposed by this terrorist model on women, there has been a certain *rapprochement*, in particular by providing elements of justice and humanitarian aid. AS has banned Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and punishes, often brutally, the perpetrators of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and domestic abuse (Harley & Khadija, 2018). Attempts have been made to boost both women’s collaboration in encouraging the recruitment of men, and even of women, by offering new skills to the organization such as greater accessibility to certain locations, limitations to being searched, raising less suspicion and obtaining information from other sources, such as other women.

However, the resilience of the AS recruitment capability can be linked to their ability to create terror and coerce people, as well as the numerous forced recruitment of young people and even minors, later incorporated into their own ranks.

¹⁵ Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, “East Africa Counterterrorism Operation July-Sep 2020”. November 2020.

¹⁶ Hubert Hongo, AFRICOM The Counterterrorism Group (CTG) Analysis & Intelligence Report: “New Threats Emerge from Campaign Against Al-Shabaab in Somalia” pag. 2. August 17th 2020.

¹⁷ Khalil J., Brown R., Chant C., Olowo P. and Wood N., “Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia. Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab”, RUSI Whitehall Report 4-18, January 2019. p.14

Should AS begin an expansion beyond the areas it currently dominates, they might have greater difficulties in recruiting new young people into its ranks.

Training

Regarding training, the on-going air campaign to limit AS capability to conduct armed assaults within Somalia and in neighbouring Kenya¹⁸ has also negatively affected its training camps. This difficulty in being able to carry out the training of its militants could explain some loss of effectiveness of its most recent attacks. A possible expansion of AS actions would also be hampered by such air strikes.

Weapons and Explosives

While employing a mix of insurgent and terrorism tactics, AS continues to exhibit dexterity in its use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).¹⁹ Indeed, as far as weapons and explosives go, AS has stable channels both for obtaining weapons and for the manufacture of its own explosives and IEDs. The various import restrictions on components for the manufacture of explosives have as yet not been able to prevent AS from continuing this activity.²⁰ Also, from December 2019 until August 2020, AS carried out six separate mortar attacks on the International Airport complex in Mogadishu, representing the highest number of incidents recorded over such a short period in the last six years.

While the manufacture and subsequent transport of explosives within Somalia or trans-border areas has become routine, the transfer of explosives to countries more distant than Greater Somalia remains a challenge, bearing in mind that in many cases the operational capabilities of the foreign security services are more effective.

Leadership, Command and Control

Although there have been purges within AS in the past, its model of organization allows for and facilitates autonomy, a large field of action and internal organization for each of the 3 different areas within AS: northern Somalia, central Somalia, southern Somalia/Kenya. In fact, these are all supervised in turn by their one intelligence/security wing, Amniyat. This form of organization allows AS being more agile in its decisions and effective in its actions, achieving not only a substantial degree of power but also a certain form of governance of the areas where it is dominant by putting significant effort into delivering services, such as governance and clan dispute resolution.

¹⁸ Hongo H., AFRICOM The Counterterrorism Group (CTG) Analysis & Intelligence Report: "New Threats Emerge from Campaign Against Al-Shabaab in Somalia" pag. 2 August 17th 2020

¹⁹ ACSRT African Journal on Terrorism Volume 8 (January – June 2019) p. 185. December 2019

²⁰ See footnote 18

This model of leadership, coordination and control is likely to be compatible with a potential expansion beyond Greater Somalia to the regional level.

Governance

Once AS dominates an area, it tends to establish a pseudo-government model, guaranteeing basic services such as justice by operating courts (including mobile courts) to punish crime and resolve disputes, security through terror and even, in certain cases, providing other services such as education or humanitarian aid. This model seeks to give it some form of legitimacy and support, especially in isolated areas where the population are wary of the Somali government.

It is, however, considered unlikely that this approach would achieve the same results further abroad, since its success is generally accepted as being closely linked to its suitability to the local conditions.

Intelligence

AS has a powerful intelligence capability which has proven itself capable of obtaining important information from administrative officials, whether by bribery or threats, or by way of the infiltration of a variety of institutions. This seems to be one of the most relevant AS divisions to design and fulfil its activities.

Exporting this model beyond Greater Somalia would require a similar ability to influence those who possess the information and, as in the case of recruitment, this would require a lot of effort and time. Nonetheless, such expansion cannot be ruled out.

Communication and Propaganda

Anzalone (2016) and Kriel (2018) note the manner in which the group has also, like many other terrorist groups, acknowledged the importance of communications, social and digital media. The group continues to operate two radio stations, numerous webpages masquerading as news sites and social media identities (including Facebook pages for both radio stations). It has also recently moved onto the secure messaging app, Telegram, the latest in a series of adaptations to new technology. AS communications staff are responsive, to the extent that they will brief international journalists such as the BBC's Mary Harper (2018) on operations. They are generally accurate, and provide prompt follow-ups to questions, Harper has added.

AS media strategy is to recruit and radicalize with: "...a well-organized media campaign to radicalize East African youths"²¹ by using a strong propaganda service which uses advanced techniques to allow it to convey its message. The relevance of AS propaganda could also be based on the fact that they fear public scorn more than any counter-terrorism measures.²² Shay (2017) highlights ... "AS's propaganda materials are often released through, and shared on, both pro-IS and pro-Al-Qaeda online forums". Clearly, such capabilities are easily exported across borders at regional, international or even global level.

Finance

Whilst AS may have suffered tactical defeats on the ground in Somalia, as mentioned previously, it has developed an effective and, thus far, sustainable financial model which relies on the 'financial control and surveillance of cash flows'. The result is a model which gives the impression of being financially competent and less corrupt than the central and local authorities it opposes,²³ allowing it to function as a quasi-government in the areas of Somalia that it controls.

AS highly diversified and innovative funding model based on taxation, zakat collection,²⁴ extortion, corruption and bribery imposed on Somalis, and trade-based strategies, yields a significant surplus of funds which AS is investing in various enterprises, including small to medium-sized businesses.²⁵ Thanks to their systems of coercion and terror, they are even able to collect taxes in territories not controlled by them. Indeed, there are cases in which they access Somali fiscal records in order to be able to collect taxes from any company or person in accordance with their business activity or economic capability.²⁶

There is some disagreement amongst the international community about the total amount of income AS garners. Recent reports on AS finances by the Mogadishu-based Hiraal Institute (2018, 2020) claim that the group gathers 15 million USD in an average month, of which half comes from Mogadishu. The report assesses AS to have significant cash reserves, some of which are being invested elsewhere (Djibouti, Kenya and Yemen, and, further afield, Pakistan and South Africa all being specifically mentioned). According to the UN, AS's annual operational expenditure in 2019 was approximately 21 million USD, while AS annual revenue is in the region of 70–100 million USD

²¹ Emilia Bulbeck, Uppsala University "The Path to Persuasion: An investigation into how al-Shabab constructs their brand ..." Pag. 15

²² Hubert Hongo, AFRICOM The Counterterrorism Group (CTG) Analysis & Intelligence Report: "New Threats Emerge from Campaign Against Al-Shabaab in Somalia" p. 5. August 17th 2020

²³ International Crisis Group, 'Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War', Africa Report No. 99, 26 June 2014.

²⁴ Zakat (alms collection) is an annual religious obligation to pay a specific percentage of a person's wealth to the poor. Zakat is usually levied at an annual rate of 2.5 per cent of the net wealth of an individual or business.

²⁵ Philip Kridelka . Letter dated 28 September 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the President of the Security. pp12

²⁶ Isel Van Zyl and Tyler Lycan, Institute for security studies "East African terror groups are exploiting the seas", November 2020. pp 1

per year.²⁷ Such economic solvency greatly facilitates the generation of various capabilities such as the acquisition of weapons or explosives, propaganda, training, or even recruitment by arousing great interest, especially within the underprivileged classes, who see AS as a way to survive or as a way to obtain power which they could never otherwise obtain. However, the level of international concern about resources flowing from the diaspora to fund the conflict in Somalia is almost certainly disproportionate to the actual significance of this type of support.²⁸

Despite military pressure and global efforts to starve it of financing, the group continues to operate effectively. In this sense, the AS fundraising capabilities model could be ‘exported’ to other areas lacking in strong government in the region, on the understanding that, while at first this self-financing model would not be viable, AS would cover the majority of the funding needed to create what the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) describes as the “enabling environment necessary to sustain activities”,²⁹ until the organization itself in the affected country is able to self-finance its own activities.

Summarizing its capabilities, despite significant setbacks, Al-Shabaab remains a capable force which can conduct operations across a broad spectrum, from conventional military operations to terrorist attacks and targeted assassinations of government officials. It shows strong capabilities to continue acting in the current scenario in Somalia and in the cross-border areas adjacent to the territory dominated by them. For this reason, there is little doubt that AS has at least sufficient capabilities to begin an expansion further into Greater Somalia.

Regional level expansion would mean overcoming many difficulties in addition to being exposed to the action of third parties (armed security forces, other terrorist groups or even the local population itself), at a time when they would be more vulnerable. Nevertheless AS has the capability to mount violent attacks of the kind that require time, planning and, critically, funding. Therefore, despite the difficulties and risks, it is considered that AS might have the capability to extend its activities to the regional level.

²⁷ Philip Kridelka . Letter dated 28 September 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the President of the Security Council.

²⁸ UNDP, Cash and Compassion *“The role of the Somali diaspora in relief, development and peace-building”* Dec. 2011, pp.105

²⁹ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), ‘Terrorist Financing’, Paris, 2008, p. 27.

	CAPABILITIES	G. Somalia*	Regional	Inter/global
Number of Members		Green	Yellow	Red
Recruitment		Yellow	Orange	Red
Training		Light Green	Orange	Red
Weapons and Explosives		Light Green	Yellow	Red
Leadership, Command and Control		Green	Light Green	Yellow
Intelligence		Yellow	Orange	Red
Communication & Propaganda		Green	Light Green	Yellow
Governance		Green	Light Green	Orange
Finance		Green	Yellow	Red

NSD-S HUB Evaluation of AS Capabilities to Expand

Green: more probable. Red: less probable

It is highly unlikely, however, that in the short to medium-terms AS will have sufficient capability to extend its activities internationally or globally. This is not to say that it does not have the capability, in exceptional circumstances, to carry out high profile attacks against international targets at a regional level beyond the confines of Greater Somalia.

OPPORTUNITIES

So far, AS success has been thwarted by a conjunction of several factors, among which are the crucial presence and actions of AMISOM, as well as western support to Somali Special Forces. Indeed, it is important to recognize that AS does not function in a vacuum and that the actions of many actors – the Somali federal and regional governments, regional powers, foreign powers, and international organizations – have enabling and constraining effects regarding the consolidation of its positions and, perhaps at a later stage, the expansion of its activities further into Greater Somalia and beyond.

The question of greatest importance for now is whether the current scenario and any change to it might create windows of opportunity for AS. Some specific opportunities were identified at the time of writing: the potential withdrawal of AMISOM; the existing armed conflicts in the region, and finally, though indirectly, the apparent inability of the country's political elite to reach any kind of enduring consensus and, as a result, of government institutions to deliver services consistently.

The Withdrawal of AMISOM

An eventual withdrawal of AMISOM would seem to present AS with an opportunity but also a quandary. While AMISOM has adopted a less aggressive role than in the period from 2010-2014, it does still support Somali National Army (SNA) operations on the front line, sometimes, such as in the 2019 Operation BADBHADO, to free AS occupied towns in Lower Shabelle. AMISOM remains far more capable and far better equipped than any other local armed organisation in Somalia. As such, it is the only credible force opposing AS on the ground at the moment, and SMEs and interviewees concurred that a withdrawal could allow AS to retake control of large portions of Somalia. Whilst the withdrawal of AMISOM could be portrayed as another victory, it would, however, remove some of AS's *raison d'être*: the only people left to kill would be fellow Somalis. In other words, while this has not previously presented a significant issue for AS, the absence of a visible link between the Somali security forces and foreign 'invaders' might undermine AS's justification.

Furthermore, an AMISOM withdrawal might not necessarily be conducted in good order. The AMISOM TCCs inevitably have a say in the matter. There have been numerous calls in the Kenyan parliament, often subsequent to terrorist attacks in Kenya or military setbacks in Somalia, for a withdrawal from Somalia.³⁰ Also, Sierra Leone withdrew its troops during the Ebola crisis³¹ and

³⁰ The Conversation, 'What Kenya Stands to Lose and Gain by Withdrawing from Somalia' dated 30 April 2020 <https://theconversation.com/what-kenya-stands-to-lose-and-gain-by-withdrawing-from-somalia-133640>

Ethiopia has periodically withdrawn elements of its AMISOM and unilateral contingents when it faces internal security challenges.³²

Whether AS would vindictively pursue TCCs post-withdrawal is a legitimate question which was posed by senior AMISOM interviewees. Defectors and members of the Somali security forces certainly felt they would, especially if those countries include territories which are part of Greater Somalia. All those interviewed felt that AS would not stop at the limits of Greater Somalia if it had the opportunity.

Armed Conflicts in the region beyond Greater Somalia

Instability provides opportunities for AS, as it does for any terrorist group. Therefore, neighbouring armed conflicts could afford a plethora of prospective opportunities. Two main areas, Yemen and Ethiopia, are of concern as they could present occasions for AS to increase its combat power and expand its territorial control.

Somalia has strong historical links with Yemen, often ignored because Yemen does not lie in Africa. However, one possible direct interface between AS and AQ may be with the leadership of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the supply of weapons across the Red Sea. That said, if the Yemen War were to end, workshop participants did not think AQAP leaders would move across to Somalia, nor would AS welcome them.

The SMEs also noted that AS was purported to have attempted to engage with the leaders of the Oromo people in Ethiopia during a period of tension over historic land rights with the Addis Ababa government. While the attempts with the Oromo seem to have so far led to nothing, future engagement with Ethiopian politicians might have significant effects for both Ethiopia and Somalia.

Finally, the most recent crisis in the area, which erupted last November in Ethiopia's Tigray region and is still ongoing, though it is an ethnic/nationalistic one, could provide fertile ground for AS intentions to grow. Several of the SMEs highlighted this possibility during the workshop discussions.

³¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Sierra Leone to Withdraw its Troops from Somalia' ' dated 29 December 2014 http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1862623570&Country=Ethiopia&topic=Politics&subtopic_9

³² African Arguments, 'What Ethiopia's withdrawal from AMISOM means for Somalia ' 27 October 2018

<https://africanarguments.org/2016/10/what-ethiopias-withdrawal-from-amisom-means-for-somalia/>

& Brookings, 'What Ethiopia's crisis means for Somalia' dated 17 November 2020

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/20/what-ethiopias-crisis-means-for-somalia/>

The Fractured Nature of Somali Politics

There is a genuine concern amongst policy analysts, commentators, the international community and Somalis themselves – including the political elite, the security forces and defectors - that the dynamics of Somali politics at this point in time present AS with a chance to retake control of the capital and much of the country, albeit in a creeping and more covert manner than before.

These concerns have grown as the tenure of President Farmajo ended at midnight on 7 February, 2021, without an agreement on a process for the national elections in place. In fact, the route to universal suffrage is still incomplete and the clan-based system of selecting MPs who then select a President is still the norm. The country is currently faced with technically no government and the only 'election process' to install a new one leaves the population with a feeling of being excluded. This situation of lack of legitimacy of the President and the political elites clearly presents AS with an internal opportunity.

AS is already present in Mogadishu. The presence is often subtle, requesting *zakat* with the unstated but well understood threat of violence in response to non-cooperation. It has been speculated that 'hiding in plain sight' may suit AS for the moment, but a change in circumstances in the not-too-distant future might result in a more obvious presence, possibly even including an overt political wing.

For the moment, however, it has been noted that the many politicians who have similar world views to AS would still stop short of declaring alignment with the group. Interviewees, however, definitely felt this could change, and rapidly. As a member of the Somali political elite noted, AS would not exist if the Somali government were not plagued by corruption and clannism. In other words, there is also a symbiotic relationship between AS and the government beyond sympathetic individuals in government. It is, therefore, a reasonable assumption that AS could mount attacks during any eventual national elections, exploiting the process for financial gain and possibly even infiltrating the process.

Given the degree of sympathy that many of the population and, indeed, many of the political elite feel for the AS world view, some feel that a less violent, more service-provision-focussed AS could be a more viable proposition. Clearly, this might have to be surreptitious, since AS's continuing alliance with AQ is one of the principle reasons for the significant international effort to counter it. Somali respondents noted that AS might be moving away from violence already, with some stating that AS attacks often feel like demonstrations, designed more as periodic reminders of capability, rather than genuine attempts to overwhelm the state. Should this transpire to be true, AS intentions to advance into political life could be incorporated into a form of 'taming' strategy with the possible result that they leave violence behind.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the purpose of this paper is to analyse the likelihood of an AS expansionist programme, when considering the concept of *'expansion'* it is fundamental to note that the relevant 'local' territory for AS is Greater Somalia, rather than the internationally recognised borders of Somalia. Therefore, there are in fact two aspects to examine. The first is whether or not AS might begin to expand within Greater Somalia (local expansion). The second is whether or not AS might attempt to expand further abroad, either regionally or globally. In both cases, the likelihood is directly related to the need for AS to have the requisite intentions, capabilities and opportunities. If any are lacking, an expansionist program would be unlikely to succeed.

Based on a review of the academic and policy literature as well as interviews with numerous Somali and international actors, followed by in-depth discussions during the online workshop, what has emerged is that AS has a clear 'local' strategy. Few doubt that AS's primary intentions are to take over all of Somalia. Almost certainly this would include expansion beyond Somalia into Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, which it considers part of its area of responsibility. There is also little doubt that AS intends to expel all foreign military presence from Somalia, be it from regional actors often operating unilaterally, African Union peacekeeping forces or western military outfits. To do this, they have shown intent to attack western and international targets in Greater Somalia and beyond.

As regards to capabilities, notwithstanding significant setbacks over recent years, it appears that, at least in the short- to mid-terms, AS has the necessary capabilities to begin and maintain a 'local' expansion but would be almost entirely lacking in its ability to carry out a realistic expansion beyond Greater Somalia or internationally. This despite its extensive financial resources and communications set-up.

Much of the issues regarding its capabilities are, of course, directly related to whether potential opportunities become realities or not. The actions of AMISOM and the relevant governments might provide or even remove opportunities for AS and, therefore, could all greatly affect an assessment of AS's current and future intentions and capabilities. Additionally, future developments in other regional conflicts, such as in the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia and further afield in Yemen, may also have considerable effects on AS expansionist intentions, capabilities and opportunities.

Even within the more probable scenario of an expansionist programme from AS's current strongholds to take control of more or all of Greater Somalia, the opportunities are very different depending on the geographical area one refers to. Expansion within the borders of Somalia would meet with the least resistance, whereas expanding into Ethiopia or Djibouti would be very difficult indeed at this time.

The possibility that AS could carry out high profile attacks against international targets at a regional level beyond the confines of Greater Somalia must not be ignored. To further complicate matters is an almost diametrically opposite scenario where, depending on the development of the potential opportunities mentioned above, AS might even show greater intention to enter the 'mainstream' political agenda. Should this occur, there would be the need to carefully consider the conditions for entering into negotiations as part of a strategy to 'tame' the group and bring it more under the umbrella of a standard organisation involved in governance.

Regarding any possible expansion further abroad, there is very little likelihood of this happening in the near future as the intentions, capabilities and opportunities are all far from sufficient. Nonetheless, the ability to carry out sporadic attacks cannot be discounted and it would be very short-sighted indeed not to monitor the progress of this organisation very closely.

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