

Unveiling Al-Shabaab: A Comprehensive Analysis of Evolution and Influence

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Abstract: *Somalia, in a state of chaos for nearly three decades, lacks centralized institutional power. Non-state actors, including the radical group Al-Shabaab, emerged after the collapse of the military regime. This article traces Al-Shabaab's evolution from a guerrilla force to an influential armed organization. Utilizing a qualitative research approach and document analysis, this article explores Al-Shabaab's genesis, organizational evolution, and structural components. Examining Al-Shabaab's organizational structure, the article delves into its Executive Council, Finance, and Justice, Intelligence, and Media/Recruitment departments. Notably, the group's financial strength, justice system, and recruitment strategies are analyzed. The article also discusses Al-Shabaab's transformation over the past decade, emphasizing its Islamist-nationalist roots, radicalization, and recent tactical modifications. The study underscores Al-Shabaab's resilience, organizational prowess, and ability to control territories. Financial pressure, ideological warfare, and effective counterterrorism strategies are identified as crucial factors in addressing the persistent threat posed by Al-Shabaab in Somalia. A comprehensive approach, encompassing military, financial, and ideological dimensions, is deemed necessary for lasting peace in the region.*

Keywords: Al-Shabaab, Amisom, Terror, Somali national army

1. Introduction

Somalia has been a chaotic place for about three decades, with no centralized and legitimate institutional power that holds a monopoly of violence (Ibrahim, 2016; Ingiriis, 2020; Dagne, 2009). Non-state actors filled the power vacuum after the collapse of the military regime. Additionally, the al-Shabaab insurgency was born after Ethiopia's occupation toppled the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which was a moderate Islamist organization. When most of the ICU leaders fled the country, some radical youth wing members stayed behind and re-established a guerrilla warfare-based organization known as Al-Shabaab. Youth nationalists voluntarily joined the fight against Ethiopian troops who, in fact, perpetrated a horrific genocide in many parts of Somalia (NYT, 2008). This human right violations was a result of a longstanding history of hostility between Somalia and Ethiopia, particularly in 1977 when the Somali national army invaded and captured some major cities in Ethiopia. But the history of the armed conflict between Ethiopia and the Somali Islamists dates back to 1994 (Ingiriis, 2018)

Nevertheless, Al-Shabaab deliberately started carrying out hit-and-run attacks in Somalia against Ethiopians, the TFG, and the UN. The United Nations Development Program compound, the Ethiopian consulate, and government offices were the targets of five well-planned bombs that took place nationwide on October 28, 2008. According to Wise (2011), this incident signaled the start of a strategy that would increasingly center on suicide strikes on prominent and government targets. The TFG's vulnerability, the Ethiopian military's weariness, the international community's general lack of interest in Somalia, and the Somali people's dissatisfaction with the TFG's internal limitations due to corruption, mismanagement, and ineptitude were all exploited by Al-Shabaab. Between 2008 and 2010, it seized most of Southern Somalia, but was primarily an urban phenomenon. Because AMISOM forces secured the presidential palace in Mogadishu, they were unable to take

control of Aden Adde International Airport. During this time, Al-Shabaab's finances and riches also grew as a result of the taxes they were imposing on the local population they controlled, the ransom they were demanding from foreign aid workers, and the export of charcoal. Additionally, the growth of its funding allowed it to get some cooperative assistance from young people without jobs at home who were prepared to pay a decent wage for their help. They also engaged women and children in educational institutions. ICT technology has recently been one of the main means by which terrorist elements worldwide are inspired and communicate; Al-Shabaab has observed this development and used it (Saltman, 2008) during this time, Al-Shabaab primarily recruited foreign fighters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, and Kenya (Abdulle & Gurpinar, 2019). Due to their proficiency with technology and languages, those foreigners who connected with other jihadists throughout the globe and propagated the doctrine of fundamentalism also made fundraising methods easier. While its impact appears to be waning at the moment, there is still no denying that it occupies large areas of southern and central Somalia, making it difficult to address without significant military intervention. Nonetheless, they have made an effort to place certain people in prominent political roles in recent years. To weaken the government and its cooperating agencies, for instance, they have attempted to appoint individuals to the cabinet who either cooperate with them or build contacts with them in order to facilitate their tactical operations. This paper seems to comprehensively study the evolution of the group for the recent past decade. However, it also attempts to analyze its structures that enables to function effectively.

2. Al-Shabaab's Organizational Structure

Al-Shabaab is distinct in that it consists of multiple organized organizational units that carry out different responsibilities. Its administrative hierarchy, which is capable of carrying out given tasks, may have been inspired

by al-Qaeda. On the inside, however, they are set up and arranged as a system of government with several departments, each of which has a separate job. For example, the court department is where individuals may occasionally go to seek justice, while the finance, intelligence, and executive council departments are organized as well. Adopting this strategy is also considerably more successful than using a unified single entity method.

2.1 Executive Council

The Executive Council's role is unrestricted and primarily focused on policy-making and strategic planning. The group exercises executive power to decide what other segments should do, such as switching department heads and giving one person a position while resigning from another. They also set the timing and location of these actions. Nevertheless, this is the driving force and intelligence behind al-shabaab's movement to seize control of numerous regions of Somalia.

2.2 Finance

Al-Shabaab has established a well-organized, effective, and systematic tax structure that was created in advance in a flexible manner, turning them into an overspending terror group as opposed to an under spending one. Researchers note that al-Shabaab, like any major terrorist or insurgent group, has to expend a lot of time and effort on obtaining funding through both legal and illegal means. Al-Shabaab was profitable extortionists, preying on local businesses in regions under their control, especially those with higher populations. According to the Monitoring Group, Al Shabaab also made between \$70 million and \$100 million annually from extortion and taxes in the regions it controlled, which included smuggling other illegal goods into Kenya and exporting charcoal (UN, 2010) embarrassment for the international community, reports have emerged that Al Shabaab likely benefited from a World Food Program food distribution project in southern Somalia (Gettleman & MacFarquhar, 2010). Another report further details how al-Shabaab extorted \$10,000 per year from international relief organizations for the right to operate in al-Shabaab-held territory (Marchal, 2011). As per a report by the Security Council, the organization receives funding from various sources such as charities, state sponsors, piracy, kidnapping, charcoal trade, smuggling contraband sugar into Kenya, extortion of local businesses and farmers, and other related terror groups like Al-Qaeda. In addition, it receives funding from compelled zakat levies, corporate and agricultural taxes, and transiting vehicles (UN, 2018).

When the collection season begins, which is usually the month of Ramadan, zakawaat is gathered by troops who have been organized from various AS departments with the help of clan elders. The starting rate is one camel out of every 25 camels owned and one goat out of every 40 goats (Hiraal, 2018) There is a system of payment registration that easily tells who is not paid for the previous year. By doing this, it is made sure that pastoralists who spent the previous year outside the AS territory are still required to pay Zakah (Ibid). They created a complex tax system for the approximately 4,000 outlets—which included industries,

banks, the largest money transfer and telecommunications companies in the country, and ordinary stores.

Furthermore, they imposed taxes on a majority of the hotels, telecommunications, and private businesses operating in Mogadishu. There is also evidence suggesting that they derive substantial funds from importers using the port in Mogadishu, which serves as a primary source of income. Nevertheless, while it may still receive financial support from the Gulf and the regions it governs, it has lost access to all its other significant sources of revenue.

2.3 Justice

Because of the ineffective government judicial system, the group primarily ensures that Somali society remains under control, especially in the absence of an effective justice system (Al-Jazeera, 2022). Somalis also have a number of reasons for preferring the sharia-based courts run by al-Shabaab over those run by the government. First, the majority of Muslims believe that Islamic law supersedes all other laws and that it is what distinguishes right from wrong, which is how Al-Shabaab uses it. Secondly, their decisions are usually based on fair hearings no one can buy justice as always happened in the government courts. Nevertheless, there are no signs of corruption or other forms of manipulation. Finally, because the locals are afraid of them, the group has the authority to enforce whatever trail they have reached as soon as possible. On the other hand, the people of Mogadishu and other places are going to their bases in Tortoorow to seek justice for them and pay a small amount as service provision charge. In addition, there are numerous instances that they have mediated and resolved using the principles of Sharia. Though their cruelty has a larger picture than the clear justice image, this does offer them some legitimacy in their justice verdict.

2.4 Intelligence

Being a crucial division within the al-shabaab organization, it is responsible for conducting surveillance and gathering intelligence to facilitate operations such as targeted killings, assassinations, automobile suicide bombs, and other similar crimes. However, nothing can be accomplished effectively without a working intelligence infrastructure, and their strikes significantly affect Somalia or even neighboring countries like Kenya and Uganda. However, the importance of amniyaat which the intelligence unit is under its control shows that they receive the highest base salary in the AS armed forces, with their salaries starting at \$200 per month and financial benefits to assist with their cover if working in enemy territory. According to Hiraal's report, their expenditure is considered to be \$1.5mn. In June 2016, a drone airstrike killed both Mohamud Dulyadeyn, mastermind of the Garissa attack, and Maalim Daoud, al-Shabaab's intelligence chief. Nevertheless, they are spread out over whole Somali regions in particular Mogadishu where they gave significant importance over the other parts of Somalia.

2.5 Media and Recruitment

The local radio stations and newspapers continue to serve as the primary sources and outlets for Al-Shabaab propaganda. On an international scale, the BBC, VOA, and the internet remain major channels for Al-Shabaab news and public relations, enabling global information dissemination, as these sources report the group's successive military gains. At one time, there were a few key Al-Shabaab websites in operation, including www.Almujahid.com and www.heegan.net, but they were eventually shut down. Presently, kataaib.net operates sporadically. It seems that Shabelle Telecom in Sweden provided support for the website, and it was thought to have been updated on a daily basis (Ali, 2008). However, the group used literature, films, and other propaganda materials along with radical doctrines to propagate its message and entice new members, taking use of its sophisticated technological resources and media (Raghavan, 2010). Al-Shabaab's choice to broadcast propaganda movies in Arabic, Swahili, and English shows how the group has changed over the past several years and now primarily recruits from non-ethnic Somalis (Gatsiounis, 2012). Al-Shabaab recruits youth, women, and children (15 years of age and under) as they are more receptive to their message and make convenient messengers for carrying out assaults. The main objectives for Al-Shabaab recruiting, according to the UNSOM assessment, are young people between the ages of 10 and 15. As stated by a Baidoa juvenile respondent, their youth guarantees that they have not yet acquired the capacity to "determine right from wrong." Al-Shabaab specifically targets teenagers who lack education and are unemployed, offering them decent wages, free Islamic education, and marriage (UNSOM, 2013). Nevertheless, friends and family are often pressured to join by new recruits. This strategy guarantees the group's quick expansion and illustrates the coercive methods the group uses to guarantee that growth.

3. Transformation of Al-Shabaab from past-present

Al-Shabaab traces its origins to Islamic movements that emerged during the Islamic awakening period in the 1970s (Jackson & Aynte, 2013). These movements later separated into moderates, represented largely by Muslim-Brotherhood linked Islah Movement and radicals (Baadiyow, 2015). After the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) assumed control of Mogadishu in 2006, al-shabaab emerged. When Ethiopian troops defeated the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), it reorganized as a radicalized group that fought against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian troops who were attempting to assist the TFG in gaining control, especially in the capital, Mogadishu. For most Somalis, the ICU was far more advantageous than the TFG. ICU was able to maintain stability and serenity in the face of Sharia-based legislation. Many Somalis would rather prefer it than TFG, no matter how "nondemocratic" it was, as TFG stood for the top-down "democratization" strategy of Western powers. But ICU itself as a group was not considered as extremist, however, after its fall, some extremist members of it were gathered under the name of Al-Shabaab. Beginning in early in 2008, Al-shabaab experienced a number of significant developments. Despite

having begun as an Islamist nationalist guerrilla force that was primarily concerned with battling Ethiopian forces within Somalia it is generally acknowledged that the movement became more radicalized and became an influential armed organization with broader public support as a result of the occupation and cruelty of Ethiopia (Mueller, 2018). Al-Shabaab did campaigning for its aims, it converted itself into a Jihadi insurgency movement from merely a small terrorist Organization.

The movement was simultaneously Islamist and nationalist, attempting to win over various social groups, even though over the previous ten years, Ashabaab has been looking for new ways to survive after losing the public's support due to multiple suicide bombings that have killed thousands of innocent civilians. Even though the group has recently been weaker due to the loss of important cities and their main sources of funding, it is still capable of carrying out killings, bombings, and targeted operations inside Somalia and its surrounding countries (Bacon, 2017).

Al-Shabaab abandoned Kismio and Muqadisho, two significant cities that provided the majority of its funding. Its actions demonstrate a logical, well-thought-out strategic choice to avert a catastrophic conflict with an unexpectedly strong, revitalized AMISOM force that had significantly greater conventional military capabilities. Speaking about the group's departure from Mogadishu, Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim, another al-Shabaab commander, clarified the tactic further: "Now we are saving money, while the enemy pays more and more to secure land it seized, recruit new soldiers, pay for services." Do you honestly believe they can carry on in that manner indefinitely? We are already conducting nightly attacks in Mogadishu". Also after the fall of Kismayo, an al-Shabaab commander said as much: "We got orders from our superiors to withdraw from the city this is part of broader military tactics we have set for the enemy." (ANZALONE, 2011)

Other tactical emphasis modifications made by Al-Shabaab expose their most recent technique. An obvious characteristic of guerilla warfare is the hit-and-run attack. Following al-Qa'ida's lead, the group attempted to fill the dangerous power vacuum left by Godane's death in 2014 by implementing an operational decentralization strategy. Al-Shabaab has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resistance to SFG, US, and AMISOM counterterrorism operations since late 2017. By decentralizing its leadership and operational branches, the organization has been able to alleviate some of the strain from the military and police that they have been experiencing in recent years. The movement is attempting to demonstrate that it is still alive, despite its weakness, as evidenced by the persistence of terrorist acts. Al-Shabaab is also trying to continue its unrelenting attack, which is making the stability and tensions in the region worse. The only ways to reduce the territory that Dacish, al-Shabaab, and its backers now control are through regional cooperation, humanitarian aid, advanced training for Somali military, and targeted counterterrorism operations (Palma, 2019). However, the organization is currently dealing with severe attacks from Somali national army and operating under a lot of strain. However, it appears that ATMIS are

defending their position rather than engaging in any meaningful attacks against the group.

4. Al-Shabaab's Invisible authority

The group has been successful in gaining support for its political agenda in recent years, both at the local and federal levels of government. That being said, credible records indicate that many politicians have some sort of affiliation with this terrorist group. The group in question has been discovered, and some of its members have even carried out bomb assaults aimed against the government. This is essentially when the concerns started. Several prominent politicians and MPS joined the group. Furthermore, the former mayor of Mogadishu, Abdirahman Omar Yariisow, suspected his death to be carried out by government officials. As a result, in the past month, there have been conflicting reports claiming that AlShabaab has de facto appointed the chairman of the chamber of commerce. The assimilation of the group with the government highlights how they can establish a network with terrorist affiliations that represents them within the government. If this is fully implemented, it could ultimately lead to the replacement of the government.

5. Conclusion

This article brought to light several critical findings regarding Al-Shabaab and its ongoing presence in Somalia. First and foremost, despite military efforts to dislodge the group from major urban centers, Al-Shabaab remains a potent force in the region. Its ability to control large swathes of south-central Somalia signifies a troubling and persistent challenge to the stability of the nation. One significant factor contributing to the group's endurance is its well-structured organizational framework. This structure enables Al-Shabaab to adapt, plan, and execute operations effectively, making it a formidable threat. Additionally, its ability to generate funds, especially through illicit means, remains a key driver of its sustainability. Our research indicates that unless Al-Shabaab is substantially weakened financially, it will continue to perpetrate violence and insurgency in the region. Furthermore, the existence of ideological support for Al-Shabaab is another worrisome dimension. This support underscores the importance of not only addressing the group's physical presence but also countering the narratives and beliefs that draw individuals towards its cause. In light of these findings, it is clear that a multi-faceted approach is required to mitigate the threat posed by Al-Shabaab. While military efforts remain crucial, the international community and Somali authorities must also focus on dismantling the group's financial networks and countering its ideological appeal. The road to lasting peace in Somalia demands a comprehensive strategy that addresses both the tangible and intangible aspects of the Al-Shabaab challenge.

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