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The Evolution of Al-Shabab

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Summary

At the turn of the century, more than a dozen Jihadi ideologues from almost all parts of Somalia had a series of secret meetings in Mogadishu to form a new Jihadi organisation. Frustrated by both the leaders of Jihadi Salafism in Somalia, Al-I'tisam Bil Kitab Wal Sunnah (formerly Al-Ittihad), and their own lack of influence in the organisation, these youth, some of whom had recently fought in Afghanistan, wanted a purely Jihadi group: Harakah Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen was born.[1]

From 2002, Al-Shabab had significant impact in Mogadishu, killing aid workers, journalists, and officials from the transitional government. Using wealth accumulated from small businesses it ran, the group established itself across the country. Al-Shabab also robbed businesses such as Khat dealers that it considered legitimate targets and quickly amassed weapons and recruits. It was one of the most powerful factions that formed the Supreme Council of the Islamic Courts in 2006.

Taking a significant blow from the initial battles with the Ethiopian army, which invaded in 2006, Al-Shabab became one of the smaller factions within the insurgency from 2007-9. However, by using clever media tactics, bullying, assassinations, and forced mergers, the group managed to become the only armed Jihadi group in Somalia by early 2011. By mid-2011, the group was at the height of its power, governing more territory than any other Somali entity. The then-leader, Ahmed Godane, used his managerial experience to build a relatively effective government and military machine.

Facing pressure from the Somali government and its allies, the group started on a downward trajectory with its loss of most parts of Mogadishu in August 2011. An internal rift that started around this time culminated in the mass purge of top and mid-level members in 2013. This only compounded its troubles, and the group continued its downward slide, losing territory at a faster pace until 2015 when the situation stabilised.

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[1] Ali Adeer (Founding member of AS) in debrief by NISA, January 2013.

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While Al-Shabab is still on a downward trend, it has managed to keep its losses at a manageable rate, a situation favourable to the group's long-term survivability. The Somali government's own downward spiral has aided the group's survivability.

Peak and decline

During Ramadan (at the time July-August) of 2010, Al-Shabab was almost at its peak; it had decided to capture Mogadishu and end the war in the south of Somalia. To that end, it launched Operation *Nihaayatul Mu'tadeen* (End of the Aggressors). The other then-active Jihadi group, Hizbul Islam, was forced to reluctantly take part in the attack despite its differences with Al-Shabab. The groups made few gains, but suffered heavy casualties. This defeat laid the seeds for intrigue and infighting between and within these groups for years to come.

It also made Al-Shabab less willing to tolerate the existence of another Jihadi group in the country: it increased attacks and harassment of Hizbul Islam leaders until the group formally merged with Al-Shabab in late 2010. The Al-Shabab that emerged after the merger was not in any way less radical than before; rather, it moved more towards the internationalist camp as shown by its pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2012. While this helped solidify the influence of extremists, it diluted the power of Godane. His rivals would post online messages about his cruel and dictatorial practices, thereby undermining his legitimacy in the eyes of global Jihadists[2]. This helped ignite the internal purge of 2013 that saw Godane eliminate almost all his opponents and their supporters either by execution or imprisonment. Furthermore, during the purge, he eliminated the Shura Council, thereby making himself accountable to no one.

Ubeyda

The death of Godane in 2014 put Al-Shabab on the brink of more major infighting and implosion as he was almost irreplaceable. Firstly, he was a charismatic and prolific orator; he would release audio messages several times a year and on special occasions. Secondly, his death caused

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[2] Abubakar Al-Zayli, " I am a Naked Warner", Archive.org, 23/07/2013, accessed on 13/03/2018
https://ia800908.us.archive.org/21/items/alnather-sheikh-abubakar-zeylci/alnather-abubaker.pdf

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suspicions of senior leaders to spread, including that of Mahad Karate, then deputy Emir, who was the last person to have slept in the same room as Godane[3].

Ahmed Dirie Abu Ubayda was named as new Al-Shabab Emir in September 2014, per Godane's personal instructions. His contrast with Godane was clear from the beginning: it took him almost two years to release an audio message, and only when it was absolutely necessary as the group was again facing mortal danger from within with the advent of the Islamic State in Somalia. He quickly proved himself as ruthless as Godane. Hundreds of members were arrested for being behind Godane's assassination, with many of them executed in secret prisons.[4]

Dirie, contrary to what was expected of him, managed to hold the organisation together. He did this by continuing with Godane's policies and keeping Godane's cronies in their positions. He quietly removed Karate from his position as deputy Emir, although he kept him as a member of the executive council.

The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in Somalia in 2015 was a major challenge to the existence of Al-Shabab. The leadership skills of Dirie were tested by this existential threat; IS had and still has widespread support among veteran Al-Shabab members, including many mid and high-level members. He was prudent enough to realise that a blanket crackdown would be counterproductive; members who had joined IS were given time to rejoin Al-Shabab; even when defeated, only leaders of IS units would be executed. IS was routed as an entity in southern Somalia; its continued existence in the northeast is due to Al-Shabab's failure to deploy enough force in the north to quash the group at its infancy.

Dirie's tenure has been one of ensuring that what Godane built has not been destroyed. He has succeeded in this regard, and saved the group from disintegrating several times. However, lethargy and low morale has set in among veteran Al-Shabab members due to the length of the war and the constant infighting. As a result, the group has been forced to recruit children and detain passive members until they agree to rejoin active service.

What all these issues indicate is that Dirie has in effect been holding together Al-Shabab by maintaining the status quo within the group. He was further aided by the allies' lack of pressure

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[3] Al-Shabab member interview, March 2017.
[4] Former Al-Shabab police official interview by the author, December 2018.

on Al-Shabab during his earlier years. Opportunities to hit Al-Shabab while it was facing a leadership crisis were missed, and the group was given space to regroup and reorient after losing its most important member, Godane.

Stalemate

The war against Al-Shabab has been at a stalemate since 2015, with a slight territorial gain for the group. As of April 2018, the group controls territory in 11 of 18 Somali regions and parts of Kenya's Coast and North Eastern provinces - total territory that is almost half the landmass of Somalia. Almost all major cities in southern Somalia are besieged by the group, with widespread starvation and inflation causing inhabitants to seek shelter in Al-Shabab territory.

It is in the interest of Al-Shabab to continue the stalemate; the group's leadership is consciously attempting to draw out the war, expecting to wear out the Somali government's international backers. However, the strategy is backfiring on the group as it is losing its own members to war weariness. Nevertheless, the group is successfully spreading rumours that AMISOM will leave the country in 2018, exaggerating AMISOM's gradual process of troop reduction.

The long pause in major offensive against the group has allowed it to gain space to recruit, train, and deploy troops across south and central Somalia, and send already-trained troops to the northeast. It is only the occasional disruption operations by Somali and allied Special Operations forces and allied airstrikes that are keeping Al-Shabab from gaining even more territory than it already does.

Financially, the group is still able to collect taxes in most parts of the country, including in the areas outside its control.[5] Efforts to counter its financial machinery have been disjointed and ineffective. While the federal government has created the Financial Integrity Unit and passed the anti-money laundering bill in 2016, the group continues to enjoy financial freedom and has been unfazed by government efforts.

While giving the group financial and operational freedom, the government has taken a passive attitude to security, relying on virtual green zones in the capital and major towns in the regions. Despite this, Al-Shabab is still able to cross checkpoints and enter the areas the government has

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[5] Former Al-Shabab finance official interview by the author, August 2017.

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selected to defend. This shows that passive defences are incapable of stopping a determined attacker, and that active measures need be pursued.

Probable Outcomes

All things remaining constant, the war against Al-Shabab will continue in its static nature, with a slight advantage for Al-Shabab. While the group is still reeling from a leadership and membership crisis, it is facing disparate and poorly coordinated Somali security forces, making it easier for them to at least keep the status quo, or even gain more territory in the next two years.

However, the slightest improvement in the will to fight Al-Shabab has the potential to change the trajectory and roll back the group's gains. As has been described by defectors, the group uses minimal manpower to hold towns and villages; it moves and focuses its firepower on problem areas and besieging liberated areas. This makes it very easy to wrest control of population centres from the group, but extremely difficult to ensure that liberated areas are normalised.

Only with a sustained and multifaceted strategy can Al-Shabab be dislodged from the areas it controls and denied the ability to besiege liberated areas. Targeting training facilities would help prevent the training of new recruits. However, based on the current political climate in Somalia, it is unlikely that a victory against the group can be attained in the next three years. Save another unforeseen internal purge, Al-Shabab can be assured existence well into the 2020s. However, the group is still deeply damaged by its many internal fights and can barely survive another purge. The Somali government can only bet on Al-Shabab defeating itself as it is in no position to defeat the group.