

The Fighters Factory: Inside Al-Shabab's Education System

15 May 2018



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Introduction

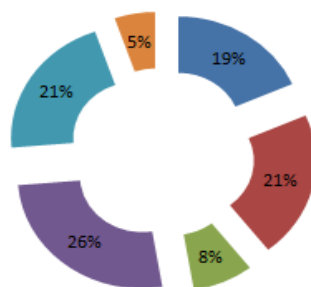
Al-Shabaab was originally formed by individuals who disagreed with or could not make it in the elitist hierarchical system of Al-Ittihad Al-Islamiya (AIAI), which later became Al-I'tisam (AI). Not having a say on the increasingly non-violent Jihad path being taken by AI pushed these individuals to break away and form an organisation that would continue the Jihad without imposing elitist restrictions on upward mobility within the group. Formal qualification was never a requirement to rise up the AS ranks. Instead, belief in the system, obedience, and ability to do the job were and remain the only requirements. Consequently, Al-Shabab has always lacked a large number of senior cadres with higher education, though the original founders were generally better educated - and more often from an urban background - than its current leaders.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the top leadership of the group. The late leader, Ahmed Godane, had an MBA and experience working in the private sector and in local nongovernmental organisations before he set out to establish the group. His successor, Ahmed Dirie, and almost all current leaders, have no higher educational background. This is in stark contrast with other Somali Islamist groups that stress the importance of formal education and flaunt the degrees held by their leaders. For instance, almost all of the executive body of the main Salafist movement in Somalia, Al-I'tisam, have university degrees.

The group disregards formal education and instead emphasises ideological conformity and loyalty to the group's core beliefs. This is clear from the highest education level of 58 mid and high-level defectors who left the group from 2015-18.

High Level Defectors' Education

■ University ■ High School ■ Middle School ■ Primary School ■ Quran ■ No formal education



In order to lay the groundwork for future leaders and ensure a steady stream of ideologically pure fighters, the group has created an educational system that pays for itself and is highly efficient in producing dependable recruits. The Office of Education is headed by influential Sheikh Ali Dhere, who is also the AS spokesman, which shows the importance of this department to the group.

Al-Shabaab has a dual education system. The main branch is the Islamic Institutes system, which is mandatory and is used to create a pool of new recruits to the group. The other is the regular school system, which is optional. The group also has a bush university that produces jurists and Islamic clerics who spread and reaffirm AS ideology.¹

The Islamic Institutes

In late 2016, Al-Shabab banned Somali-style Islamic schools known as *Dugsi Quran* that it does not control in its territory.² Instead, it created an Islamic educational system that is directly run by the group, and known as 'the Islamic institutes' by its subjects. The Islamic schools are based on clan boundaries and paid for by clansmen, under strict supervision by local district *wali* (district commissioner) and *Hesba* (AS police). Clans are allocated quotas of children aged 8-15 that they have to hand over to the special institutes that AS creates for each clan and also pay for the education provided. For instance, in late 2017, a clan living in the area of Baidoa was told to create a second institute and pay 50k USD - paid annually - and provide 100 children to be taught 'Islam'.³ Clan elders are forced to see to it that their fellow clansmen pay the money and hand over the assigned number of pupils. Elders that refuse or are seen to be slow to respond have been imprisoned, according to defectors.



Figure 1 Children at a graduation ceremony in 2017

¹ Interview with a former Al-Shabab regional-level education director, February 2018.

² Interview with a former Al-Shabab district commander, August 2017.

³ Interview with a former Al-Shabab clan elder, April 2018.

Children are indoctrinated in the Islamic institutes and made to understand current affairs through a Jihadi worldview. Additionally, the illegitimacy of the Somali government and the obligatory nature of the AS Jihad are ingrained upon them. Quran teaching is done at a faster pace than in traditional schools in order to make time for Jihadi literature. Most children graduate within two years, with many being sent directly to a training camp if they have passed age 15, the Islamic age of maturity. According to a former child soldier who defected from AS, many of the children are recruited without the knowledge of their parents and without being allowed to bid them farewell.⁴

Some children are coerced into joining military training camps, and defectors have said that many of these children are among the most ideological and fanatical fighters they have encountered.⁵ This is because the children have only been schooled in the AS system and have not been given an opportunity to hear an opposing argument. With no other view to counter the AS narrative, they become the ideal ideological fighters for the group.

Indicative of its severe manpower problems, AS has used children who have not yet graduated from its religious schools to fight battles. In Ramadan of 2017, it deployed children from various southern Somalia schools it ran, with many of them not being aware that they were being sent into battle.

Parents trying to protect their children from the AS recruitment system have resorted to desperate measures. According to residents in AS-controlled territory, some clans have started buying children from poorer clans to take the place of their children. For instance, in one central Somalia AS-controlled town, residents were ordered to provide 40 children. The families that could afford to raised \$1,000 each to buy 13 children from southern Somalia to replace their children. This has in effect created a child slave trade, with the tacit approval of AS.



Figure 2 A child holds his graduation certificate in 2016

⁴ Interview with a former Al-Shabab member, June 2017.

⁵ Interview with a former Al-Shabab military commander, January 2018.

Regular schools

In order to appear to be doing some public good, AS also runs regular schools that are optional and attended by students whose clans have sent the allocated number of children to the AS recruitment schools.⁶ Students dress in school uniforms that would not seem out of place anywhere in Somalia, and the teachers are fairly qualified; however due to mistrust of AS, parents are unwilling to pay school fees or send their children to these schools. This has forced some local Education Offices to introduce taxes to subsidise the schools, further adding to the already high taxes in AS territory.

These schools teach an AS-designed syllabus, whose latest version is for the school year 1438-1439 (2017-2018). Subjects taught are Arabic; Islamic Education - which is three subjects: Tawheed (oneness of God), Fiqh (Islamic law), Ahadith (sayings of the Prophet); History, Geography, Mathematics, and Somali. There is no teaching of science in most regions, although at least one region has a basic science textbook.⁷ The language of teaching is Somali but text books are in Arabic.

The Islamic schools run by AS sometimes 'steal' promising students from the regular AS schools by offering them a fast-track system. In 6-12 months, students can graduate as a *Da'i* (someone who does Da'wa - recruiters who propagate AS ideas). In the Islamist world, this is very irregular and unacceptable, as one is required to undergo official education to be qualified as a *Da'i*, and has alarmed parents, who mostly chose to send their children to government areas to pursue education. While most sent-away kids are boys, girls whom parents suspect are about to marry an AS man are also sent to other regions of the Somali World. This has caused AS to close down some regular schools due to lack of students.

Emulating the long arm of Al-Shabab's military wings, the AS Education Office is trying to impose its curriculum on areas outside its control by using terror tactics. Some education officials remarked to their staff in mid-2017 (during Ramadan) that the AS educational syllabus will be made mandatory even in areas not controlled by the group, such as in Mogadishu and Kismayo.⁸ The group has started this process by declaring that the education system must be taught in Arabic even in government areas. Given the group's declining fortunes, it is unlikely that it will be able to enforce this policy on a wide scale across the country.

Conclusion

Due to its current woes, Al-Shabab is more focused on oiling its war machine than laying the foundations for effective administrators in the future. However, it has managed to run an

⁶ Interview with a former Al-Shabab regional-level education director, February 2018.

⁷ Interview with a former Al-Shabab district-level education director, December 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

internally accountable bureaucracy despite most administrators in AS territory not having formal degrees. Using fear and coercion, it has managed to implement its policies without much incompetence.

The educational system run by AS will radicalise the population over time, as the public in its territory is regularly ingesting the group's propaganda. Some of the radicalisation is evident in a defector's account of some townspeople in Jamame sympathising with AS tactics in Mogadishu. However, it is unlikely that a vast majority of adults will be swayed by AS; children seem to be the group's primary target, and they are succeeding in planting the seeds of hate in children under their control.