



THE GLOBAL STRATEGY NETWORK



**HIRAAL INSTITUTE**  
ADDRESSING HORN OF AFRICA'S SECURITY CHALLENGES

# THE ISLAMIC STATE IN EAST AFRICA



*The Islamic State in Somalia raises its flag in Qandala, Puntland, October 2016*

31 July 2018



# THE ISLAMIC STATE IN EAST AFRICA

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## Summary

The slogan of the Islamic State is *remaining and expanding (baqiyyawatatamadad)*, and at the end of July 2018, the Islamic State in East Africa could claim to be doing both; not in any dramatic way, but sufficiently to be taken seriously by other violent extremist groups, and by government officials. From an unpromising start in 2015, the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) had survived an onslaught by its far more powerful rival, al Shabaab, and had established a secure base in Puntland. Furthermore, towards the end of 2017 and into 2018, it had begun to show operational capacity in Mogadishu, challenging the dominance of al Shabaab in the key battleground against the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).

However, the future trajectory of ISS remains uncertain, and much depends on when and if it becomes capable of mounting major, attention-grabbing attacks in Mogadishu or outside Somalia, and leveraging them to gain more support. Al Shabaab remains far stronger, and ISS will suffer if al Shabaab begins to see it as a greater challenge to its dominance, just as it will if the FGS and its international partners come to regard it as more than a distraction from the main insurgent threat. So far it has carved out some space and established a profile without altering the dynamic of the bigger war.



Potentially, ISS has a stronger appeal than al Shabaab. It is not mired in a static insurgency and does not suffer the lack of political credibility and religious legitimacy that dogs its rival. With a more inspiring leadership, ISS could fire up enough of the dispossessed and alienated youth of the region to cause a major problem. But for now it looks too much like a mini-al Shabaab; overly dependent on clan allegiances - a Darod alternative in the North to the Hawiye movement in the South; too locally focused, and offering little prospect of any major achievement. Its mission is obscure, and it shows little of the vitality, organisational flair and ability to horrify so typical of its parent body.

This could change if experienced fighters from elsewhere in the Islamic State 'Caliphate' joined its ranks and either took over or transformed its leadership. Few have made the journey so far, and there are more appealing destinations than Puntland for the survivors of the war in Iraq and Syria. But it would not take many to change perceptions of ISS and offer a rallying point for Islamic State supporters in DRC, Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania, as well as those in Somalia, and even in Egypt, Libya, Sudan and Yemen. If ISS can establish itself as the main Islamic State group in the Horn of Africa, providing leadership to other Islamic State offshoots and establishing sustainable links to the Islamic State leadership, perhaps through Yemen, it could yet grow to become a real security challenge for as long as the Islamic State brand remains strong.

So far, the prospect is remote, and support for ISS remains limited, fluid, and disorganised; but the FGS and the international community should remain alert and take what opportunities arise to weaken its structure, disrupt its growth and undermine its propaganda so as to ensure that it does not become a major problem. Inevitably, the future of ISS will depend as much on what happens around it as on its own internal development.

## Introduction

By the end of July 2018, the Islamic State had claimed responsibility for around 65 attacks in Somalia and the region.<sup>1</sup> Although al Shabaab has been by far the most dominant violent extremist group in East Africa since its emergence in Somalia in 2007, and remains so, ISS has hung on after its shaky start in 2015, and has begun to make inroads. Regional security services disagree on the extent of the threat that ISS poses, and most observers would say that its future depends more on

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<sup>1</sup> According to Christopher Anzalone, (Tweet 27 July) fifty-five in Somalia and at least two elsewhere (Kenya) by the end of May 2018, and about eight more claims since then. See also Long War Journal, Somali intelligence agency arrests two Islamic State members in Mogadishu Caleb Weiss.

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/somali-intelligence-agency-arrests-two-islamic-state-members-in-mogadishu.php>.

the fortunes of al Shabaab than its own actions,<sup>2</sup> but since mid-2017, most observers would also agree that whatever might happen in the rest of the so-called Caliphate, ISS has the potential to expand its presence in East Africa and exploit the same social, economic, ethnic, religious and political divides that have sustained the undercurrent of instability since before the fall of SiadBarre's government in 1991.

This paper attempts to assess the strength, appeal and likely trajectory of ISS in East Africa, in particular in Somalia, where it has its only physical presence. The paper looks at ISS both as a borderless organisation and as the local representative of a global movement that inevitably impacts different individuals in the different countries of the region in different ways. It looks at the growth and prospects of ISS in Somalia, as well as its links with IS groups in Libya, Yemen and beyond.

The paper concludes with observations and policy recommendations that may be of value in ensuring that the problems posed by ISS and other supporters of the Islamic State in East Africa remain contained.

## Background

International terrorists have seen East Africa as a particularly attractive area for exploitation since the 1990s. Although the fall of the Somali Government in 1991 did not in itself open the door to terrorist groups, the instability that followed highlighted the many ethnic, religious and political divides that existed – and still exist - in almost all countries of the region. The 'Battle of Mogadishu' in 1993, in which two US Black Hawk helicopters were brought down and 20 UN (almost all US) soldiers were killed, showed the potential for asymmetric warfare. Al Qaeda claimed to have had a hand in the battle, and whether or not that is true, there is no doubt that al Qaeda was fully responsible for the mass casualty attacks on the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in August 1998.

Although the biggest terrorist group in East Africa, al Shabaab, has focused primarily on a local agenda, some of its founding members joined the jihadi caravan to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, including its most successful leader, Ahmed AbdiGodane (Abu Zubeyr), who appeared in al Qaeda videos alongside other senior members. Al Shabaab has also attracted fighters from outside the region, even if most have been of Somali ethnic origin, and absorbed al Qaeda leftovers from the period between 1991 and 1996 when Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan. On two occasions, in September 2009 and again in January 2010, Godane applied to be part of al Qaeda, and although bin

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough examination of the al Shabaab-Islamic State dynamic, see Christopher Anzalone: Black Banners in Somalia: The State of al-Shabaab's Territorial Insurgency and the Specter of the Islamic State. CTC Sentinel Vol.11 Issue 3. March 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/black-banners-somalia-state-al-shabaabs-territorial-insurgency-specter-islamic-state/>



Laden did not support any public affiliation between the two groups, al Shabaab nonetheless regarded itself as part of the al Qaeda family. Following bin Laden's death, his successor, Ayman al Zawahiri, accepted al Shabaab formally as an affiliate in early February 2012.

Nonetheless, key members of the al Shabaab leadership were not fully supportive either of the al Qaeda agenda or of the foreign al Qaeda supporters within its ranks, and the tensions between those who saw al Shabaab as a Somali insurgency and those who saw it as part of a global 'jihad' were then, and have remained since, a significant source of the movement's weakness. Foreign members have been treated badly and even killed off, such as Omar Hammami in September 2013,<sup>3</sup> a US citizen and the best known of al Shabaab's foreign recruits. Senior members of the hard line al Qaeda group also ended up dead, whether or not with the involvement of the al Shabaab leadership, such as in June 2011 when Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, a key planner of the 1998 Embassy attacks and the most aggressive and capable of the al Qaeda East Africa contingent, was shot dead at a Somali Government checkpoint in murky circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Zawahiri's public embrace of al Shabaab, little has changed in its orientation. It has remained predominantly a nationalist group, despite mounting attacks, or trying to, outside Somalia including in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.<sup>5</sup> This and other policy and management issues have left its more ideologically driven internationalist members frustrated and vulnerable to the broader embrace and ambitious appeal of the Islamic State, along with other would be 'jihadis' in the region who are underwhelmed by al Shabaab. For so long as al Shabaab was the only game in town, its leadership had been able to crush internal dissent, even if it meant Godane had to kill senior comrades,<sup>6</sup> but the rise of ISS has challenged its ability and opportunity to do so.

## Islamic State overtures to al Shabaab

Like other groups that support al Qaeda,<sup>7</sup> al Shabaab had watched with admiration as Abu Musab al Zarqawi created an effective jihadist movement in Iraq following the US invasion of 2003. Although

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as Abu Mansour al Amriki, Hammami first announced publicly that the leadership was out to kill him in March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> There have been persistent rumours that Fazul Mohamed was set up by the al Shabaab leadership.

<sup>5</sup> In Djibouti, al Shabaab attacked a restaurant in May 2014, killing at least three; In Ethiopia, al Shabaab has failed, though it appeared to have planned to attack a football match there in 2013; in Kenya, al Shabaab has mounted several attacks, mainly in the areas of the country nearest Somalia, but also in Nairobi, most famously on the Westgate Mall in September 2013, when at least 67 people died. In Uganda, its most notable, and its first attack outside Somalia, was in July 2010 when at least 74 people died in two attacks during the World Cup soccer final.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ibrahim al Afghani, a close companion and fellow founder of the group in mid 2013.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.



the complete antithesis of the retiring and poetry-quoting Godane, al Zarqawi showed what could be done by a determined leader in command of a group of motivated militants against a far stronger enemy. Despite his death in 2006 and the decline of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI),<sup>8</sup> al Shabaab often made positive mention of Zarqawi and other AQI/ISI leaders in its propaganda.<sup>9</sup>

When the Syrian revolution took root and the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS-ISIL) emerged in April 2013 as the successor movement to AQI/ISI, al Shabaab continued to watch and admire. As the struggle for control of the ‘jihad’ in Syria between the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, and his former lieutenant Abu Mohammad al Jolani, the head of Jabhat al Nusra, came to a head, Godane and al Shabaab stayed neutral. After Zawahiri ruled in favour of Jolani and subsequently expelled al Baghdadi from al Qaeda in February 2014, Godane kept public silence.<sup>10</sup> Although there was no suggestion that he might break with al Qaeda or challenge Zawahiri’s ruling, he avoided any open criticism of Baghdadi. One may assume that the Islamic State, as it became in July 2014, was popular within the al Shabaab rank and file, and remained so.

As the Islamic State grew in reach and power from mid 2014, it began to make both formal and informal approaches to al Shabaab, seeking to wean it away from allegiance to al Qaeda and instead swear loyalty to the new ‘Caliph’, al Baghdadi.<sup>11</sup> Specific overtures directed towards the al Shabaab leadership accompanied the general widespread distribution of glossy propaganda videos aimed at more general recruits. From early 2015,<sup>12</sup> the Islamic State began also to appeal directly to the al Shabaab rank and file, in particular by having Somali members portray a life that seemed far superior, in jihadist terms,<sup>13</sup> to that offered by al Shabaab.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, some foreign fighters within al Shabaab were in touch with members of the Islamic State from their home countries and heard from them that they were well treated and allowed to plan and execute operations, in contrast to their own lives in al Shabaab, which saw them as second-class members, denied them an independent operational role and often targeted them with arbitrary arrest. But just as al Shabaab was careful not to criticise the Islamic State, so too did the Islamic State hold off attacking the al Shabaab leadership, instead focussing on Zawahiri and al Qaeda.

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<sup>8</sup> Renamed the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Anzalone <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-life-and-death-of-al-shabab-leader-ahmed-godane/>

<sup>10</sup> In correspondence with Zawahiri, Godane proposed treating Baghdadi and his followers with understanding, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/shabaab-leadership-fights-islamic-state-expansion.php>

<sup>11</sup> An al Shabaab foreign fighter who was aware of these overtures.

<sup>12</sup> An article distributed through the Global Front to Support the Islamic State media in February 2015 urged al-Shabaab to join the Caliphate, asking “when will we hear, oh dear brothers, of Wilayat al-Somal?”

<sup>13</sup> For example, by providing an opportunity to fight for global objectives in support of a truly ‘Islamic’ State against a clearly defined enemy.

<sup>14</sup> In May 2015, the Islamic State issued a video appeal to al Shabaab to join its Caliphate delivered by a group of its ethnic Somali members.



It was unsurprising therefore that both before and after Godane's death in September 2014,<sup>15</sup> when various al Shabaab members declared their support for al Baghdadi, the al Shabaab leadership did little about it. In 2015, a number of al Shabaab fighters attempted to go to Syria to join the 'Caliphate', including a number of Kenyans from its foreign fighter contingent. Most tried to leave by sea from Barawe in Lower Shabelle, for example the American foreign fighter Malik Jones who with three other al Shabaab members was arrested by Somali security forces in December 2015. Malik Jones had joined al Shabaab in August 2011 but after four years had become disgruntled with the group and decided that by joining the Islamic State he could do more to defeat the enemies of Islam as he saw them.

### **A case study of an early defector from al Shabaab to the Islamic State**

Jim'ale was a Sudanese trainer sent by al Qaeda to build the military capability of al Shabaab. He had wounds in his left hand and leg from battles in Afghanistan and therefore some credibility and standing as a veteran jihadi. He delivered training courses to al Shabaab officers that could last as long as two years. However, as an internationalist, he was mesmerised by the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014. He renounced his membership of al Qaeda and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi; he also lobbied Godane to do the same. Godane refused; but in honour of Jim'ale's links to Zawahiri, he did not persecute him for his ideas and promised to help him get back home once he had finished the training course that was then underway. When Godane was killed, Jim'ale went public with the deal he had made, which was not welcomed by Godane's successor, Ahmad Umar (Abu Ubeidah). However, after first marginalising him, the al Shabaab leadership agreed to help him get to Yemen, where he joined the Islamic State.

The IS campaign of subversion reached its height in late September/early October 2015 with a flurry of anti-al Qaeda articles in Islamic State media outlets directed at al Shabaab,<sup>16</sup> followed by videos produced by five Islamic State provinces<sup>17</sup> arguing that al Shabaab should acknowledge the illegitimacy of al Qaeda and accept the legal obligation of its members as Muslims to pledge allegiance to the 'Caliph' and join the 'Caliphate'.<sup>18</sup> Al Shabaab reacted by re-stating its loyalty to the al Qaeda leadership and purging suspected Islamic State supporters from its ranks, assassinating some and imprisoning others, including senior leaders.<sup>19</sup> Some foreign fighters left for Syria or Yemen, others were also assassinated or ended up in jail.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Also known as Mukhtarab Zubair, Godane was killed by a US drone strike. He had led al Shabaab since late 2007.

<sup>16</sup> By al Battar on September 23, and by al Wafa on September 27 and 29.

<sup>17</sup> Baraka, Homs, Nineveh, Raqqa and Sinai.

<sup>18</sup> Initially at least, the Islamic State argued that it was the duty and obligation of all Muslims to obey the Caliph and move to the Caliphate.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Sheikh Bashir Abu Numan, a senior field commander, and Sheikh Hussein Abdi Gedi, a veteran al Shabaab leader, both of whom were killed in November 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Information provided by al Shabaab defectors interviewed after leaving the group.



By January 2016, the Islamic State had realized that al Shabaab would not switch its allegiance from al Qaeda and that furthermore it was detaining or executing any of its fighters who had pledged allegiance to al Baghdadi. It responded by releasing a series of videos that included warnings that it would soon start targeting al Shabaab itself.<sup>21</sup>



*Screen shots from IS videos showing Somali fighters*

By the end of 2017, al Shabaab had successfully silenced all pro-Islamic State voices within its foreign fighter group and had got its top foreign fighter ideologue, the Kenyan Ahmad Iman Ali, aka Abu Zinira, who himself had been rumoured to be on the point of defecting to the Islamic State,<sup>22</sup> to issue a *fatwa* warning that anyone opposed to al Shabaab would be considered *murtad* (an apostate meriting death). By mid 2018, al Shabaab was confident enough to free from imprisonment all foreign fighters who had been suspected of Islamic State membership or sympathy, allowing them to stay with their families in al Shabaab controlled areas, but without regaining any position of responsibility in al Shabaab or having an obligation to fight.<sup>23</sup> This appears to have been a pragmatic move designed to quiet the disaffection among foreign members of the group and free up space in the prisons while avoiding any risk that the ex-prisoners would seek revenge from within the ranks.

Additionally, al Shabaab launched a recruitment drive within the region, highlighting relaxed and apparently satisfied members from outside Somalia,<sup>24</sup> and began to give loyal foreigners more operational control over planning and executing operations. This new approach and apparent reconciliation between the foreign fighters and the senior al Shabaab leadership was further put on public display when al Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Mahmoud Rage released a series of videos in June 2017 calling on Kenyan supporters to form an army and launch attacks in their own country.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The Islamic State released a video in January 2016: 'A message to our Somali brothers' in which two ethnic Somalis in Iraq or Syria warned that the Islamic State would attack al Shabaab for mistreating fighters who had pledged allegiance to al Baghdadi.

<sup>22</sup> Provided by a former Kenyan al-Shabaab member who stated that Ahmad Iman Ali remains firmly aligned to al-Shabaab.

<sup>23</sup> NISA briefing June 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al Shabab's East African Recruitment. C. Anzalone, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 5 Issue 10. October 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/kenyas-muslim-youth-center-and-al-shababs-east-african-recruitment/>

<sup>25</sup> From the Sheikh Ali Rage – June 2017 speech titled 'An Analysis of Events'



*Screen shot from 'An Analysis of Events' featuring Sheikh Ali Rage.*

By this time, the Islamic State, facing pressure from the international coalition fighting it in Iraq, Syria and Libya, was forced to turn its focus to self preservation and could offer little support to those members of al Shabaab who might secretly want to switch allegiance. Additionally, some Islamic State foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria began to look to escape to safe havens in their home countries or elsewhere. This led to a reverse flow of some African foreign fighters back to the continent.<sup>26</sup>

There is concern that this stutteringtrend, though for the moment insignificant, may gain momentum and have severe consequences for Somalia. First, because an operationally capable and sustainable Islamic State foothold in Somalia could further complicate the prospects for stability within the country, providing a hard-line alternative to al Shabaab should the latter be enticed into reconciliation talks; and second, because ISS could provide a refuge and new base for non-Somali supporters of the Islamic State - whether fleeing Syria and Iraq or fresh recruits - who could launch attacks elsewhere. In apparent recognition of this threat, a US airstrike in Somalia in December 2017 was reported locally to have killed around 20 ISS members, including one from Sudan and two Arabs.<sup>27</sup>

## The Islamic State in Somalia

The United States designated Islamic State - Somalia as a terrorist organisation on 27 February 2018, presenting the following rationale:

*ISIS-Somalia was formed in October 2015 after the SDGT (\*Specially Designated Global Terrorist) AbdiqadrMumin (\*designated in August 2016) – then a senior leader of al-Shabaab – and about twenty of his followers, pledged allegiance to ISIS. The group has claimed responsibility for a May 2017 suicide bombing at a police*

<sup>26</sup> The Ethiopian Intelligence Service suspected in June 2018 that some had made their way to Libya and were recruiting Somalis there - among others - from the flow of migrants traversing the country.

<sup>27</sup> Though as of June 2018, according to NISA, the US was not much concerned at the threat from ISS.

checkpoint in Northern Somalia that left five people dead and injured 12 others and a February 2017 attack on the Village Hotel in Bosaso, Puntland, Somalia – a hotel frequented by foreigners – that killed four security guards. Mumin leads the group with Mahad Moalim acting as his deputy. Moalim is also responsible for facilitating shipments of fighters and arms from Yemen to Somalia.

## Association with the Islamic State leadership

On 22 October 2015, along with about 20 supporters,<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Abdulqadir Mumin, an al Shabaab ideological leader in charge of around 300 troops in the Golis Mountains in Puntland, announced his allegiance (*bayah*) to al Baghdadi.



*Mumin pledges allegiance to the Islamic State, October 2015*

The declaration had not been coordinated with the Islamic State leadership and there was no immediate reply from al Baghdadi accepting (or rejecting) Mumin's pledge. Subsequent references to Mumin's group by the Islamic State have been confusing. In January 2016, an Islamic State recruitment video referred only to 'our brothers' in Somalia, a term usually applied to supporters rather than to members of the group. In December 2017,<sup>29</sup> the Islamic State issued a video in which it referred to its 'province' in Somalia, suggesting that Mumin's *bayah* had been accepted. But a subsequent news release in February 2018 omitted the designation of 'province' and referred only to Somalia.<sup>30</sup> The confusion has persisted, with the penultimate issue for July 2018 of al Naba, the

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/shabaab-leadership-fights-islamic-state-expansion.php>.

<sup>29</sup> See Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, Islamic State video promotes Somali arm, incites attacks during holidays. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/islamic-state-video-promotes-somali-arm-incites-attacks-during-holidays.php>

<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the Islamic State claimed 14 attacks between September 21, 2017 and February 1, 2018; three in Bosaso, Puntland and 11 in Afgoye, Lower Shabelle, with 30 alleged Somali government police, soldiers, or



Islamic State weekly newsletter, showing an administrative reorganisation of the Islamic State that makes no mention of Somalia,<sup>31</sup> while the subsequent issue refers to it as a Province of the Caliphate. Nonetheless, whatever the administrative arrangement, the Islamic State regarded ISS as a close enough affiliate to provide it with material support at least until the end of 2016,<sup>32</sup> and Mumin himself harbours ambitions to be recognised as the head of the Islamic State throughout East Africa.<sup>33</sup>

The only visible evidence that Mumin is in touch with any other part of the Islamic State structure is in the broadcast of his propaganda through Islamic State-controlled platforms, and the existence of an Islamic State regional media bureau in Somalia.<sup>34</sup> The announcement of his pledge of allegiance, and other subsequent news, such as the opening of an ISS training camp in April 2016, have appeared through Islamic State outlets.<sup>35</sup> In December 2017, ISS issued a video calling on Islamic State supporters worldwide to attack ‘non-believers’ during the holiday period, suggesting that its messaging was coordinated with the Islamic State media effort, and was part of its global campaign. Even though Mumin has shown no particular ideological opposition to, or variation from, the professed beliefs of al Shabaab, or expressed criticism of al Qaeda, he has adopted the mantle of an Islamic State leader and as such has no regional rival. The northern Somali Federal Member State of Puntland therefore has become home to the sole viable and operational Islamic State-branded group in East Africa.

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intelligence officers killed. See also Christopher Anzalone, *Black Banners in Somalia: the State of al-Shabaab's Territorial Insurgency and the Specter of Islamic State* CTC Sentinel March 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/black-banners-somalia-state-al-shabaabs-territorial-insurgency-specter-islamic-state/>.

<sup>31</sup> Burying the Lede: the Islamic State Downsizes. CTC. 20 July 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/burying-lede-islamic-state-downsizes/>.

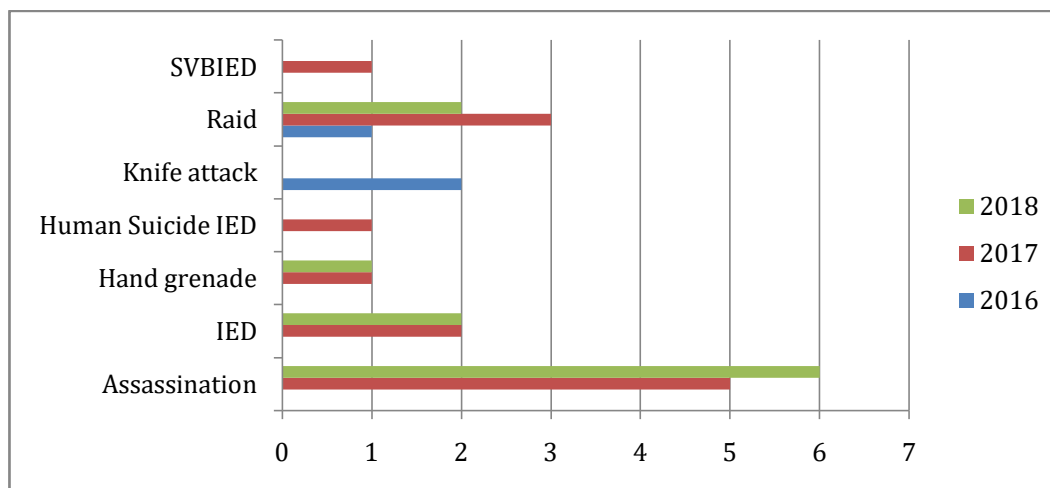
<sup>32</sup> NISA interview June 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Output is small, with about five products in 2017, and a few more by mid 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/07/Down-But-Not-Out.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Such as Amaq and al Furat.





*Tally of ISS attacks compiled by the Hiraal Institute*

## ISS in Puntland

### 1. Overall strength

A report by the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea dated 2 November 2017 estimated that ISS had grown from ‘a few dozen’ to ‘as many as 200’ in little more than a year (to October 2016). It also pointed out the potential for Somalia to become a destination for Islamic State fighters dispersed from other areas of the ‘Caliphate’, though acknowledging that there was scant evidence that this had already happened. In mid 2018, the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) also estimated that ISS had around 200 members throughout the country, almost all with Mumin in Puntland. This figure had not changed since mid February, but NISA said that it was a considerably lower number of fighters than Mumin had had earlier,<sup>36</sup> further suggesting that even the closest observers must rely on informed guesswork in the absence of an accurate count.

In May 2018, the Puntland authorities put ISS strength in the state rather lower, at something over 75, down from a peak of 150.<sup>37</sup> Whatever the actual figure, it is commonly agreed that after an initial influx of recruits, ISS has lost strength through desertions, re-defections and deaths over the last year. Nonetheless, NISA has commented that Mumin remains ambitious beyond Puntland, and the upsurge of assassinations in Mogadishu in 2018 appears to show that even with a static or falling membership, ISS is growing its capacity to attack.

### 2. Recruitment and clan support

As is the case with any political grouping in Somalia, the dynamics and fortunes of ISS will to some extent both rely on and be determined by the attitudes, affiliations and aspirations of the clans and

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> A senior Puntland security official, May 2018.



sub-clans in its areas of operation. Mumin is from the Ali Salebaan, which is a sub-clan of the Majeerteen, which is itself a sub clan of the Darod. The Ali Salebaan is the dominant clan in the Bari region of Eastern Puntland, and it is little surprise therefore that this is where Mumin has his base. Earlier, he had been in the Golis mountains further West, but in November 2015, members of Al-Shabaab North-East (ASNE) who had remained loyal to al-Qaeda evicted him and his followers and he moved to the less fertile but more hospitable Iskushuban district of Bari.<sup>38</sup>

The largely monoethnic composition of ISS, along with the difficulty of travelling to Bari to join up, in particular from areas held by al Shabaab, both for reasons of distance and for fear of discovery, has limited the appeal and thus the growth of ISS. Nonetheless, a Puntland security official commenting in May 2018, said that when push came to shove, almost all Mumin's clan, the Ali Salebaan, would support ISS, and Mumin was attracting new recruits locally. A senior judge in Puntland, also speaking in May 2018, thought that about 70 per cent of the Ali Salebaan supported ISS, half through clan loyalty and half through fear of retribution if they did not. Recruits to the movement joined for money, for power, for revenge against another clan, or because they believed the propaganda. Of four ISS members in their 30s captured earlier in the year, three had been new recruits and one was a former al Shabaab member; all had joined up in Galkayo or Bosaso in Northern Puntland. In April, a further two ISS members were arrested, one was Ali Salebaan, but the other was Rahanweyn.<sup>39</sup> All six were later released, along with five al Shabaab members, reportedly on the payment of bribes to the court.<sup>40</sup>

As a further example of ISS recruitment beyond Ali Salebaan and the type of person attracted to the group, a senior police official in Qandala said in mid 2018 that ISS fighters captured during the battle to retake the town in December 2016 had included six men aged 32-40, with three having higher education. One, aged 34, was the son of a Somali diplomat in Kuwait and an Ogaden/Darod, one was Isaaq with a university degree, and the other was a Gudabirsi/Dir, also with a university degree. These three had never joined any other extremist or insurgent group before joining ISS, and while the other three of the six were all former al Shabaab members, and had no formal education, they too came from different clans: one was a Marehan/Darod, and the other two were Rahanweyn.

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<sup>38</sup> Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244 (2015): (SEMG) Somalia, Sept 2016. <https://undocs.org/S/2016/919>.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Puntland police official, mid May 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Though the rumoured price of £15,000 per head suggests a clan payment rather than an ISS one. The judge was fired.





*Map of Puntland*

However, officials in Puntland believe that ISS can only survive with local support, reflected in the willingness of local people to sell it food, act as guides, or even join its ranks. As soon as that support ends, the group will die.<sup>41</sup> The assessment by NISA in Mogadishu in June 2018 was similar: that ISS was clinging on, and could only be sure of survival into the medium term. Whatever support it had had previously from outside the country had come to an end and it had now to rely entirely on its own resources and the tolerance/support of local clansmen.<sup>42</sup> But the territorial dispute between Somaliland and Puntland over the border districts of Sanaag and Sool, will doubtless divert the attention of the authorities - and the few resources they possess - from the comparatively minor and less immediate problem of ISS in Bari,<sup>43</sup> and this will give Mumin further opportunity to consolidate. But he will have to work hard to sustain his position, even in Bari, and ensure that the Ali Salebaan remains somewhere between supportive and merely tolerant of his presence.

At the top estimate of ISS strength, Mumin may have had 300 fighters in the (Bari region) districts of Qandala, Caluula and Iskushuban by the end of April 2018. He also had supporters in other Bari districts, such as Bosaso, Qardho, and Bandar Bayla. Iskushuban and adjoining areas have the largest and most sophisticated ISS structures, with Iskushuban being its weapons storage and training area. Timiirshe settlement, located approximately 30 km north-northwest of Iskushuban along the main road to Bosaso, is also an area of support for ISS. It is the hometown of IsseYulux, an (ex-)pirate and relative of Mumin who used to support the Puntland authorities until they fell out over

<sup>41</sup> Mayor of Qandala, mid May 2018.

<sup>42</sup> NISA briefing, end June 2018.

<sup>43</sup> For more on this dispute, see International Crisis Group Briefing 141 of 27 June: *Averting War in Northern Somalia* <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somaliland/141-averting-war-northern-somalia>



payments due to his militia.<sup>44</sup> The Puntland security forces have been hesitant to raid Iskushuban as an incursion by forces comprising ethnicities other than the local Majeerteen sub-clan would be seen as an attack on historical rights, so provoking a united defence. Caluula district, where IsseYulux based the majority of his pirate operations and still has his militias, is a key Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen stronghold, and ISS fighters are able to move through the area in a way that Puntland security forces can not.

A senior police commander in Puntland, interviewed in May 2018, estimated that around 90 per cent of the Ali Salebaan supported ISS, largely in order to use ISS as a way to gain more economic power and political influence in the State as part of a common phenomenon evident in many parts of Somalia whereby clans ally with other groups in temporary arrangements driven by short or mid term commercial or political interest rather than any deeper or long-lasting affinity. Similarly, some Ali Salebaan members support it merely because their clansmen are in charge, regardless of the nature of the group, its actions or objectives. This clan loyalty presents a particular challenge to the authorities; for example, the governor of Bari region was said in May 2018 to have a list of the names of all the key supporters and financiers of ISS, but was unwilling to share it with Puntland security officials out of clan solidarity. In fact the identities of ISS financiers are widely known locally but action against them is problematic because of the political complexities.

But Mumin has also alienated clan members. For example many people in Qandala, a port town captured by around 80 ISS fighters in October 2016 and held for six weeks in its most successful operation to date, left the town on the arrival of the ISS force and later, further encouraged by the growing opposition to ISS among those who had stayed behind, joined forces with the Puntland authorities to push Mumin out. According to a businessman from Bosaso, speaking in mid May 2018, Mumin had alienated many other Ali Salebaan clan members by his highhanded treatment, punishing and even killing people who did not provide support, stealing livestock, and causing the destruction of villages and date trees that had stood for generations in fights with the authorities. Inevitably, local battles affect locals in different ways, for example four Ali Salebaan died during the ISS attack on the Village Hotel in Bosaso, in February 2017: two were members of ISS and two were defending the hotel. Similarly, three Puntland soldiers who were captured and beheaded by ISS in January 2017 on their way home to Bosaso on leave were all Ali Salebaan.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>SEMG report, November 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Further backed up by the Mayor of Qandala, mid May 2018.

But generally, the Bari region is a benign environment for ISS. And at the start of 2018, ISS had organised several training programme for new recruits in Caluula district.<sup>46</sup> Smugglers from Yemen bring plenty of arms into the area, mainly bought from Yemeni soldiers who have no other means to raise money to feed their families.<sup>47</sup> The smugglers do not care whether they sell to al Shabaab, ISS or anyone else who wants a weapon, and there is enough supply to meet the demand.<sup>48</sup> In mid 2018, Mumin had plans to acquire weapons locally in Puntland and Galmudug and to set up an arms and ammunition procurement network that could both buy and transport the materiel to his bases.<sup>49</sup> He was hoping to acquire ammunition for RPGs, AK-47s and light machine guns.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, law enforcement officers in Puntland are demoralised and demotivated. Some received no salary in 22 of the 48 months to mid 2018, with nothing at all in the nine consecutive months to May 2018.<sup>51</sup> Added to this, ISS has been able to intimidate the courts when its members are captured and brought to trial, and has killed witnesses to assassinations or other attacks. On three separate occasions, witnesses have been assassinated merely for remarking that the killers could easily have been captured.<sup>52</sup> This sense of impunity led ISS to assassinate seven people in Bosaso in 2017, including the commander of a local police station.<sup>53</sup>

While al Shabaab has a major presence in Puntland, it is thought unlikely that it would launch another assault on its rival, as it did in March 2016, because of the danger of alienating local clans.<sup>54</sup> Al Shabaab has no major Majeerteen clan figure in the Golis Mountains (South West of Bosaso), which is where its North Eastern Somalia units are based.<sup>55</sup>

As a result of intimidation, clan connections and bribery, both ISS and al Shabaab have support networks within the Puntland governing structures, especially in Galkayo and Bosaso, where the security and intelligence (amniyat) branches of the two groups appear to cooperate. These undercover members pick up new recruits from the airport, act as guarantors for whatever documentation they need, and get them out of gaol if they are captured on their way to join the groups in the bush. As well as judges, police officers are also paid off, and some may in any case be

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<sup>46</sup> NISA briefing, end June 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> NISA briefing, mid February 2018.

<sup>50</sup> NISA briefing, mid June 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Senior judge in Puntland, May 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> NISA briefing, mid February 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



sympathisers or helpers. For example, in mid 2018, the former head of the Qandala Police Station, Mohamed AbdiGurugure, was in jail for importing military uniforms for ISS.<sup>56</sup>

### 3. Foreign fighters

One knowledgeable observer has said that 60 to 80 recruits from Yemen or of Yemeni descent joined Mumin soon after he broke away from al Shabaab.<sup>57</sup> There are indeed many people on both sides of the Red Sea who have family ties on the other, but these numbers are not confirmed, and in mid 2018, NISA held a list of just eight foreign members of ISS, all of Somali origin. This number is unlikely to represent the total however, and some earlier recruits may have deserted or died, such as the ‘Sudanese and two Arabs’ reported to have been killed in the drone strike near Buurgaleh in Southern Qandala district in early November 2017. Various other foreign fighters have been reported to have joined Mumin, including from Somali diaspora communities in Canada, Kenya, The Netherlands, Norway, Sudan and the United Kingdom,<sup>58,59</sup> and in a video release in December 2017, two fighters claimed to be from Ethiopia.<sup>60</sup>

NISA and other security agencies fear that ISS may benefit from the general dispersal of fighters from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq as the central structures of the Islamic State collapse. Foreign Islamic State members can reach Puntland through Libya and Sudan, or by crossing the Red Sea from Yemen. Smuggling groups will take any cargo so long as it pays, and Mumin has no doubt encouraged his smuggler contacts to direct migrant fighters to his bases. Also, researchers in Ethiopia say that some ethnic Somalis have left the region to join radical groups in Libya, and that others who set off from home as economic migrants have been recruited by extremists there.<sup>61</sup> Some may return therefore, radicalised, networked and with fighting skills.

In the past, militant groups in Somalia have been suspicious and unwelcoming of foreigners, often imprisoning or even executing them,<sup>62</sup> but Mumin may be more tolerant, both because he needs manpower and as an expression of the ‘global jihad’ philosophy of the Islamic State. Nonetheless, the predominance of local clan members in the group will limit its appeal and openness to most

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<sup>56</sup>Senior Puntland justice official, May 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Kenyan security official, May 2018.

<sup>58</sup>Interview with NISA, April 2018.

<sup>59</sup>Senior Islamic Courts Union member with Puntland connections, late April 2018.

<sup>60</sup>Joscelyn and Weiss, op cit. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/islamic-state-video-promotes-somali-arm-incites-attacks-during-holidays.php>.

<sup>61</sup> Meeting with the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation, Addis Ababa, May 2018.

<sup>62</sup>See Counter Terrorism Centre at West Point, Harmony Project, “al Qaeda’s misadventures in the Horn of Africa”, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4359101>.

outsiders, especially those from the region who can choose one of the other emergent extremist groups such as the Allied Democratic Front, or go to Yemen. Although Mumin's cautious policy towards outsiders undermines the legitimacy of his group as a true expression of the globalism of the Islamic State, he has behaved so far no differently from al Shabaab in limiting the promotion of outsiders, even recruits from South Central Somalia, to mid-level positions, even while encouraging foreigners to join him.

The perception from outside is that ISS is largely a Puntland group and this is likely to restrict its wider appeal, and despite a growing number of ISS-claimed attacks in Mogadishu, Mumin has not demonstrated a significant capability beyond Puntland. His focus, perhaps of necessity given his limited mobility and resources and urgent need to establish a firm base, has remained local. Nonetheless, the potential for a broader membership remains. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, since 2014 Bosaso has been the primary transit point for migrants leaving the Horn of Africa for Yemen, and with over 170,000 arriving in Yemen between January 2016 and August 2017,<sup>63</sup> there is no shortage of vulnerable people passing through territory where ISS has a chance to recruit them. Furthermore, between March 2015 and August 2016, 32,000 people travelled from Yemen to Somalia.<sup>64</sup> Even if most were Somalis fleeing the war, this was a sizable number and it is likely that the flow has continued.

In late 2017 the US Administration assessed that the threat posed by ISS merited attacking it with air strikes and the intelligence agencies of other countries, including Somalia, bumped ISS up their targeting lists. The fact that Mumin had lived in Sweden and UK, where he was granted citizenship, before moving back to Somalia and joining al Shabaab in 2010, and has a track record as a recruiter, has further increased the anxiety that ISS might become a haven for foreign fighters.<sup>65</sup>

To an extent, the future of foreign fighter recruitment to and influence within the group may not remain under Mumin's control. He will not be able to turn away refugee fighters from Islamic State provinces elsewhere, and these seasoned fighters will exert a charismatic influence on the rank and file. If Mumin wants to maintain control of ISS, he will have to accommodate them, or get rid of them, and as the head of an Islamic State affiliate, he will also have to take account of the views of the Islamic State leadership. An example of his dilemma was provided by the trial in a military court in Mogadishu in July 2018 of a Somali-born (Ogaden/Darod) Russian foreign fighter who had been in Syria before joining the Islamic State in Yemen, and then ended up with ISS, being arrested in early 2018 with an ISS doctor (Marehan/Darod) in ElashaBiyaha, a town just outside Mogadishu on

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<sup>63</sup> Until 2013, it was Djibouti. UNODC Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018 (June).

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM\\_2018\\_Africa\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_Africa_web_small.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> According to NISA in June 2018, while US agencies are not particularly bothered by the potential of ISS, other Western agencies show more concern.



the Afgoye road. The Russian had reportedly written to al Baghdadi complaining that Mumin was a weak leader, operationally ineffective, and was not doing enough to attack in the South of the country.<sup>66</sup> It will be the influence of these more assertive foreigners combined with one or more major attacks in Mogadishu that will transform ISS into a significant challenger to al Shabaab.

#### 4. Finances and Procurement

According to NISA, in late 2015 and early 2016 ISS received money and supplies from the Islamic State via Yemen, but by the end of 2016, this financial support had dried up completely. This left ISS dependent upon voluntary and involuntary contributions from local people, even if collecting the latter risked alienating their support. According to a senior judge in Puntland, all Ali Salebaanbusinessmen support ISS financially, though it is hard to tell who does so willingly, and who does so under duress. ISS is no different from al Shabaab in calling up businessmen and threatening their lives or their livelihoods unless they make a donation. Like al Shabaab, ISS taxes large companies where it has some leverage over their ability to operate. But ISS does not generally tax small and very small businesses, unlike al Shabaab, which does so even in areas of Bari Region, such as Galkayo, and quite possibly Bosaso.<sup>67</sup>

Puntland authorities and NISA officials say that ISS is short of money and resources. While there is no reason to dispute this claim, its outgoings are not high. So far, arms captured from the group are old and unsophisticated, and according to defectors, the salaries paid to fighters in late 2017 were low or non-existent. An unmarried member was lucky to get anything, while a married fighter might get \$50 per month with an extra \$10 - \$20 for each child, depending on age.<sup>68</sup>

ISS access to arms and explosives is somewhat limited, even though it has been able to procure a fairly steady flow from Yemen through its links with smuggling networks operating in North East Somalia. Local security forces report that ISS, like al Shabaab, has reached agreements with clan elders and smugglers that allow them to operate across the Red Sea in exchange for a certain percentage of smuggled weaponry. This is particularly true for networks operating out of Qandala, Murcanyo, Caluula (all Bari) and Laasqooray (Sanaag), which has become the main smuggling centre. While most of the smuggled arms are light and medium weaponry (AK-47s and variants, PKM machine guns, RPGs, pistols, DShK heavy machine guns, and explosives), security sources reported

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.jowhar.com/wararka/maxkamadda-ciidamada-oo-la-soo-taagay-horjoogayaal-ka-tirsan-daacish-ta-soomaaliya.html>5.

<sup>67</sup> A senior Puntland judge, May 2018.

<sup>68</sup> SEMG report, November 2017.



the arrival of at least three surface-to-air missiles in the second half of 2017.<sup>69</sup> Although these reports remain unconfirmed, they are not implausible.<sup>70</sup>

In a specific example of this trade, a Puntland intelligence official described in mid May 2018 an incident that had occurred in mid November 2017 when the authorities captured a boat carrying supplies for ISS. On board were 15 DShK machine guns, 70 AK-47s, and 1000 rounds of AK ammunition. The Puntland authorities believe that by mid 2018, ISS had one hand-held B-10, a 60mm mortar, seven PKM machine guns but no DShK.<sup>71</sup>

## 5. Communications

While ISS has some visibility within Somalia through local news coverage of attacks or arrests, it has failed to come anywhere near the reach or influence on the international media that al Shabaab enjoys. In 2015, when the group first emerged, it received some attention if only because it was linked with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, so appearing to widen the terrorist threat. But other than small incidents reported in the Somali press, international journalists rarely hear what ISS is doing.<sup>72</sup>

Al-Shabaab, on the other hand, has both history and notoriety on its side. It is known for its large-scale, complex attacks that sometimes go on for days, yielding high death tolls and therefore sustained international news coverage; for example, the truck bomb in Mogadishu on October 14th 2017,<sup>73</sup> and the various attacks on the city's hotels and Somalia's administrative centre, Villa Somalia. Al Shabaab's spectacular attacks outside Mogadishu, such as on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi (September 2013), Garissa University (April 2015), a Diallo Airlines flight from Mogadishu (February 2016), garner still more coverage, and as Al-Shabaab is also a regular target of coalition raids and US drone operations, it remains newsworthy from an international perspective.

ISS's targeted assassinations and even its larger attacks, such as on the Village Hotel in Bosaso in February 2017, remain far from attracting the same level of coverage. Even though its occupation of Qandala in late 2016 was widely reported, the impact was smaller and more short-lived than it could have been. ISS failed on that occasion, as on all others, to offer the international or local media footage that could have described the action against an exotic background, made it look exciting, and explained its purpose in propaganda terms. So far ISS videos and announcements have

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with security source, November 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Man portable surface to air missiles (MANPADS) have been moved from Iran to Yemen, possibly involving Somali facilitators, and as local groups, including both al Shabaab and ISS, are known to extort payment in kind from smugglers, some may have ended up in Puntland. The absence of incidents involving such missiles may be because of the absence of air operations in the area, or because the militants do not yet know how to use them.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Puntland security official, late May 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Robyn Kriel, CNN.

<sup>73</sup> Although unclaimed, al Shabaab is widely perceived to have been responsible for this attack.



portrayed a relatively small and rather insignificant group of fighters with little obvious appeal to outsiders who seek to join an energetic, purposeful, and expanding group of motivated, diverse individuals under an inspiring leadership.

The Islamic State is justifiably famous for its propaganda and video production, and although coalition forces have significantly downgraded the capacity of its media division, it still has experienced people who understand how to manipulate target audiences, wherever they may be, and make the most of a bad situation. If some of these experts went to Somalia they could change the image of ISS quickly and dramatically, and pass on skills to local fighters. ISS could also recruit experts from al Shabaab, which has many skilled media officers operating within a sophisticated and well-oiled communications machine. They know the local Somali news market, as well as the regional and international ones, they speak the appropriate languages and even reach out to specific media houses or journalists depending on the story they want covered.

The hunger of the 24/7 news cycle, and the ease of modern communications, especially through social media platforms, provide ISS an opportunity that it has so far ignored. This is unlikely to last, and it is one area where the Islamic State could help without devoting resources that it needs elsewhere. An appearance of success and growth in East Africa could counterbalance Islamic State setbacks elsewhere, and it seems likely therefore that in due course, the Islamic State will find ways to improve the image of ISS. It will be interesting to see what reaction this might spark from al Shabaab.

## 6. Leadership and Structure<sup>74</sup>

- **Sheikh Abdulqadir Mumin** is a former leader of ASNE. He is a clan elder from the Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen/Darod and has largely organised ISS leadership along traditional clan lines. Most of his senior lieutenants are also Ali Salebaan/Darod, although it appears that Mumin has tried progressively to include individuals from South-Central Somalia, including from the Hawiye clan, which dominates al Shabaab. Mumin is a dual UK-Somali citizen and joined al Shabaab in 2010. He is rumoured to be ill.
- **Mahad Moalim Jajab (aka Caaw Geele)**,<sup>75</sup> the former head of Dawa (proselytizing) for ASNE, is Deputy Emir. Like Mumin, he is Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen/Darod. According to the US State Department listing of Moalim as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in February

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<sup>74</sup> From NISA HQ, Puntland security officials, and other observers, May-June 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Mahad Moalim was added to the list of specially designated global terrorists by the United States Treasury Department in February 2018

2018 he was ‘responsible for facilitating shipments of fighters and arms from Yemen to Somalia.’ He defected from al Shabaab in December 2015 when he was deputy head of finance for ASNE in the Golis Mountains. He is based in the Bari region

- **Abdirahman Faahiye Isse Mohamud**, (aka Ahmed Adan, Khalid, Yaquub, and Burane) is also reported to be a deputy to Mumin. He is said to have been behind the suicide attack in Bosaso in May 2017.<sup>76</sup> He is Dishishe/Darod.
- **Abuu Yussuf**, also Majeerten/Darod is a US citizen and in charge of all foreign affairs.
- **Abdihakim Dhuqub** was earlier a schoolteacher and a former leader of al Shabaab in the Bari region. He was the link between al Shabaab and smugglers/pirate groups until 2014/2015. He is Ismail Ali/Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen/Darod and a cousin of Mumin. Dhuqub is the head of political affairs in ISS.
- **Hamza Farey** is head of Dawa, having replaced Mahad Moalim. He is Majeerteen/Darod.
- **Moalim Bashir** (aka Abdullahi Buur) is Majeerteen/Darod and is also reported to be a head of Dawa for ISS.
- **Abdiqani Luqman** is head of military operations. He is either Ali Salebaan/Darod or Leelkase/Darod.
- **Abu Hafsa** is Galjaal/Hawiye and deputy to Luqman. He is approximately 30 years old and a former member of al Shabaab from the Hiran region. He is possibly a recruiter of fighters from southern Somalia in conjunction with an individual known as Jabal.<sup>77</sup>
- **Fahad Aboole** is Ogaden/Darod and the head of ISS logistics.
- **Hamas** is a Jabah (military forces) commander, he is Hawadle/Hawiye.
- **Jafar Dabashan** is also a Jabha commander. He is Osman Mahmoud/Majeerteen/Darod.
- **Abdirashid** (aka Mukhtar) is head of weapons procurement and has links with smuggling and pirate groups operating in North East Bari region (Caluula/Qandala). He is also believed to be head of the ISS Amniyat (intelligence and security branch).
- Other significant members include: Abdiweli Mohamed Aw-Yusuf “Walah” (Ismail Ali/Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen/Darod); Abshir Mahamoud Mire Mahamoud (aka Abshir Gardhere); Jama Ismail Said Salah (aka Jama Dhere); Ahmed Omar Ali “Beerdhagax” (a suspected arms supplier); Abdirahman Yusuf Mahamud Adan; and Mohamed Bile Gash Yusuf.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> SEMG report of November 2017

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/751/work-and-mandate/reports>

<sup>78</sup> From SEMG report November 2017.



- **Isse Mohamed Yusuf** (aka Isse Yulux) is a former leader of the Puntland Piracy Network who officially renounced piracy and joined forces with the Puntland government in 2015. His pirate syndicate was responsible for two successful high-profile hijackings of commercial vessels in 2012 (MV Royal Grace in March, and MT Smyrni in May), and possibly for two more in March 2017.<sup>79</sup> Isse Yulux is a cousin of Mumin, and is Ali Jibrahil/Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen/Darod. While the exact terms of his relationship with ISS remain flexible, Isse Yulux has not shown hostility towards ISS members since their expulsion from Qandala in December 2016.

ISS is not a large organisation, and leadership titles do not signify powerbases within the movement so much as the structure that Mumin would like to impose. As ISS does not control any territory to speak of, the most important members are those in charge of security (Amniyat) and attack planning, but inevitably alongside these go finance, preaching, recruitment and training. It appears that Mumin and his closest aides and fellow clansmen make the key decisions, and that the group is careful to cause enough trouble to be credible, but not so much as to attract a fierce reaction from al Shabaab, the local population or the authorities. In fact, since October 2015, ISS has managed to establish itself as a nuisance but not as an existentialist threat.

## 7. Reports of ISS activity in Puntland to mid July 2018<sup>80</sup>

The tempo of ISS attacks in Puntland has kept the security forces there on alert, but the group's capability to mount a sophisticated, mass casualty attack has not yet developed. Most attacks have been directed against troops and police points in the two main port towns of Qandala and Bosaso. Reporting from the area suggests that ISS was responsible for the following incidents between October 2016, when the group took over Qandala, and mid July 2018:

### 2018

**9 July**, ISS attack and wound a Puntland intelligence officer in Bosaso.

**2 June**, ISS attack the central police station in Bosaso, wounding four.

**15 March**, ISS throw a hand grenade at troops in Bosaso, wounding two.

**24 February**, ISS militants clash with locals in the Dacar area, about 100km south of Qandala.

### 2017

**30 November**, ISS throw a hand grenade at troops on patrol in Bosaso

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<sup>79</sup> Oceans Beyond Piracy: Horn of Africa Piracy Update, April 2017

<sup>80</sup> Gathered from ISS announcements, NISA and other observers. This list is imperfect. For example in early February, the Islamic State claimed only three attacks in Puntland between late September 2017 and the end of January 2018.

**22 November**, ISS militants clash with Puntland security forces in the Jaceel area about 80km South of Qandala.

**5 November**, ISS kidnap nine civilians in Qandala in revenge for a US drone strike.

**24 October**, ISS suicide bomber attacks a police post wounding several.

**19 October**, ISS kill two civilians in Laasqooray in Sanaag region.

**18 October**, a man and his mother accused of spying are abducted and later killed in Canjeele, a village some 70km West of Iskushuban.

**15 October**, suspected ISS militants enter the town of Laasqooray, hoist a black flag, deliver speeches, and then leave.<sup>81</sup>

**3 October**, ISS attempts to kill the Deputy Chief of Police in Bosaso, killing one and injuring two, including the police officer.

**24 June**, ISS attack a government installation in Qandala, killing four.

**29 May**, ISS attack government posts in Qandala.

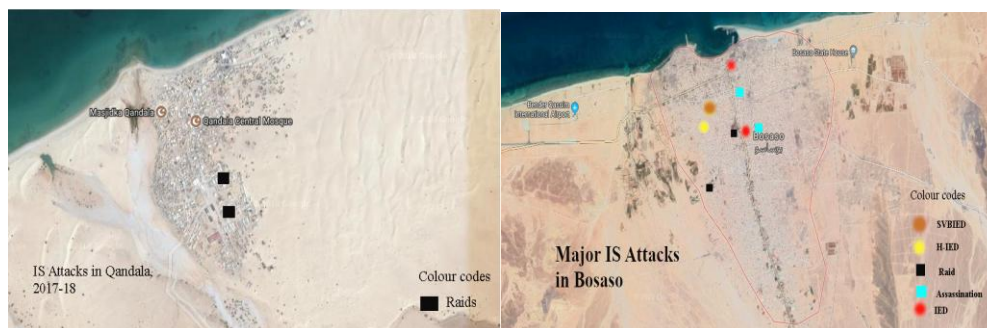
**23 May**, a suicide bomber is stopped at a security checkpoint near the Jubba Hotel in Bosaso and detonates his suicide vest, killing four.

**8 February**, four ISS militants attack the International Village Hotel in Bosaso. The hotel's security guards, helped by a detachment of Port Police guarding a visiting delegation from the UAE, fight them off. Six people, including the four assailants, die.

**27 January**, ISS stop three men at a checkpoint and behead them.

## 2016

**26 October**, approximately 80 Islamic State militants enter Qandala. The militants remain in control of the town until 18 December, when Puntland forces, having come to an agreement with local Ali Salebaan/Majeerteen clan elders and other power brokers, force them to withdraw.



*ISS (Puntland) attacks in Bosaso and Qandala, the Hiraal Institute - July 2018*

## 8. Future Trajectory of ISS in Puntland

<sup>81</sup> Al Shabaab has also made several of these temporary incursions, including in Puntland <https://jamestown.org/program/jahba-east-africa-islamic-state-alters-the-dynamic-of-somalias-conflict/>.



By mid 2018, ISS was struggling. It was disconnected from the rest of the Islamic State, apart from its media operatives, had no territory to rule, a diminishing membership in part because of defections, little capacity to mount operations and poor technical skills. Its close quarter assassins were almost always killed while conducting their attacks, and their explosives were sometimes duds, and never anywhere near as effective as al Shabaab bombs.<sup>82</sup> The group was finding it hard to attract new recruits because it was short of money and life was hard in the areas that it had been able to occupy, with little water and a lack of vegetation; accommodation was generally in caves. Also, some mid-level ISS commanders were giving up on the organisation and encouraging their soldiers to leave.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Mumin was rumoured to be seriously ill. In all respects therefore, his focus was on survival.

By contrast, the al Shabaab group in the nearby Golis Mountains had a far easier time, with an abundance of water and vegetation and a cool climate all year round. Al Shabaab North East (ASNE) has not punished defectors to ISS who have subsequently re-joined al Shabaab, instead restoring them to their previous positions,<sup>84</sup> which may have encouraged some ISS members to risk defecting back. It may be, as in Yemen, that ISS and al Shabaab have begun to live in some sort of harmony while their fortunes are at a low ebb.<sup>85</sup>

In mid 2018, NISA Headquarters was more concerned at the threat from ISS in South Central Somalia, where there had been an unexpected rise in support for the group, than in Puntland, but it cautioned that Mumin could still break out, particularly if US drone strikes and Special Forces raids managed significantly to degrade al Shabaab.<sup>86</sup> Mumin must know that he has a choice, either to focus his attention on building a network in Mogadishu and ensuring that he controls it, or allowing Islamic State supporters in South Central Somalia to act independently, providing them with what support he can, and assuming at least titular leadership of the group. If he does nothing outside Puntland, he is unlikely to attract recruits and money, and as the Yemen war drags on, he will be even less able to look for support from outside. The future of ISS lies therefore in South Central Somalia.

## ISS in Mogadishu and South Central Somalia

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with a senior Puntland police officer, May 2018.

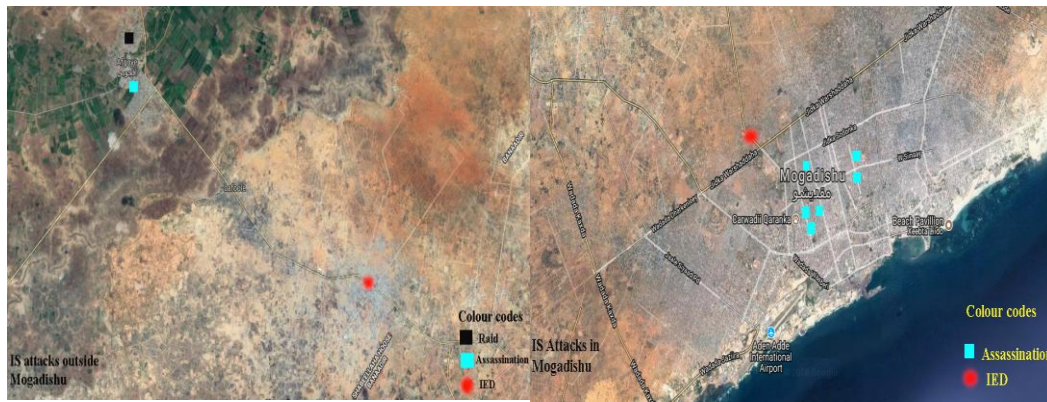
<sup>83</sup> NISA interview, mid June 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with a Puntland intelligence officer, mid May 2018.

<sup>85</sup> By contrast with ISS strength of 200-300, ASNE was assessed to have 450-500 fighters in Puntland in March 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/black-banners-somalia-state-al-shabaabs-territorial-insurgency-specter-islamic-state/>

<sup>86</sup> NISA interview, late April 2018.





*ISS (Mogadishu) attacks in and around Mogadishu, the Hiraal Institute – July 2018*

## 1. Overview

Islamic State influence in Somalia is not restricted to Puntland. In fact the first attack claimed by IS in Somalia, in April 2016, was an IED attack against an African Union convoy in Mogadishu.<sup>87</sup> By the end of May 2018, IS propaganda outlets had claimed responsibility for the targeted killings of eleven Somali government officials and security personnel in Mogadishu.<sup>88</sup> The arrest in late April 2018 of an IS operative with bomb-making equipment in the capital no doubt prevented a twelfth, and there were two more assassinations in June.<sup>89</sup>

As of July 2018, ISS had begun to establish strongholds in Bakaara in Mogadishu and in ElashaBiyaha just outside the capital on the road to Afgoye,<sup>90</sup> and al Shabaab leaders were concerned that they had lost the operational initiative to ISS in Mogadishu.<sup>91</sup> As an example, al Shabaab organised an attack in the city but was surprised to find a video recording the operation posted on the Internet by the Islamic State-affiliated Amaq news agency. Al Shabaab discovered that the Amniyat members it had sent to conduct the operation had defected to ISS. Other al Shabaabamniyat officials assigned to Mogadishu have done the same, so making it easier for ordinary al Shabaab members to leave without discovery.

An al Shabaab defector estimated in July 2018 that more than 90 per cent of al Shabaab members whose motivation was ideological supported ISS,<sup>92</sup> but it was still fear of discovery that held them

<sup>87</sup>Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, Long War Journal, Islamic State highlights ‘first camp of the Caliphate’ in Somalia. 25 April 2016. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/islamic-state-highlights-first-camp-of-the-caliphate-in-somalia.php>.

<sup>88</sup> Caleb Weiss, Long War Journal, Somali intelligence agency arrests two Islamic State members in Mogadishu 24 May 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/somali-intelligence-agency-arrests-two-islamic-state-members-in-mogadishu.php>.

<sup>89</sup>Hiraal Institute Incident tracker: <https://hiraalinstitute.org/somalia-security-incidents-up-to-may-2018/>

<sup>90</sup>NISA interview July 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with a former al Shabaab regional-level Head of Education, early April 2018.

<sup>92</sup>While it is impossible to quantify the number of al Shabaab members who joined the group for ideological reasons, or developed an ideological belief in its objectives, it is likely to be at least a third of the overall membership.



back from defecting. He believed therefore that ISS would continue to encroach on al Shabaab ground in Mogadishu, further helped by the fact that the city was big enough for its members to find space to build and consolidate their networks, and al Shabaab too weak to prevent them from doing so.<sup>93</sup> He claimed that all Mogadishu-based ISS operatives had been sent there from ISS in the North or were directed from there. Mumin was accepted as the undisputed leader of ISS throughout Somalia, including by Islamic State supporters in Mogadishu.

Since late 2017, ISS has also been active around Afgoye, a town about 30 km to the South West of Mogadishu, claiming responsibility for nine attacks there by May 2018. As in Mogadishu, these were all close quarter assassinations of alleged FGS employees, including members of NISA. For example, IS claimed responsibility for the assassination of a soldier in November 2017, and of a NISA officer and a clan elder in February 2018. Although al Shabaab is also active in Afgoye, it has

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<sup>93</sup> Though the defector added that al Shabaab still managed to kill more ISS supporters than the other way round.

not laid claim to these murders, suggesting that the ISS capability is real.<sup>94</sup>

### **The early days of ISS in the South of Somalia as told by a defector (May 2018)**

The foundation of ISS was the result of severe discontent within al Shabaab that had its roots in the 2013 purge. Before the purge, the al Shabaab leaders in Barawe - Ibrahim Afghani and Sheikh Burhan – were advised to flee to the bush as Mukhtar Robow and Abu Mansur al Amriki had done. However, they refused, expecting that their seniority in al Shabaab would protect them. Their miscalculation proved fatal, and they were unceremoniously executed, and their supporters arrested. Learning from this, individuals who had spent time in jail in 2013 and other sympathisers of the purged leaders gave their allegiance to al Baghdadi in response to overtures to them from the Islamic State.

Al Shabaab officials in the Jubba regions (for example: Abdirahman; Hussein Abdi Gedi; Abdulwadud; Abu Nu'ma) made it into the bush and started recruiting their friends. The leadership of al Shabaab reacted by ordering the immediate execution of any Islamic State supporter, including any who were wounded. Only those who surrendered unconditionally were to be spared.

The men who escaped into the bush did so for a variety of reasons, including political opposition or fear for their future. Helped by Ogadeni nomads, the defector, with two Sudanese fighters, and an al Shabaab colleague who was later killed near Bosaso by the al Shabaab Amniyat, managed to reach ISS in Puntland. At that time, ISS was very weak, and had only \$3,000, received from 'a brother' who had promised to give more as numbers increased.

It appears that al Shabaab had encouraged Islamic State supporters to go into the bush and had then sent under-cover amniyat officers to join them, as all the founding members in Southern Somalia were assassinated by one of their own men. Al Shabaab also sent 700 members of the Abu Zubayr brigade of special troops to the areas where Islamic State supporters had gathered. It not only succeeded in defeating the 40 Islamic State members in battle, it arrested hundreds of suspected sympathisers - these were any member of al Shabaab found travelling towards ISS held areas without a valid reason or permit. Some of those arrested had already been appointed leaders of the southern ISS branch and were on their way to rendezvous with their troops.

Note

The defector estimated that up to 500 people remained in gaol in mid 2018 for being ISS members or sympathisers (other estimates put the number at 200). But many of the leaders of southern ISS have been let out, perhaps because al Shabaab is not aware of their importance, and most of these have subsequently defected to the FGS, or to the regional member states, or made their way to join ISS in Puntland, or even the Islamic State in Yemen.

## **2. Clan dynamics**

As in Puntland, clan dynamics play a part in the ability of ISS to survive in the South of the country. It relies mainly on the Ogadeni/Darod, many of whom live in Jubbaland and have suffered widely at the hands of al Shabaab. The Ogadeni see al Shabaab as a Hawiye organisation that does not represent their interests and is indifferent to the harassment, false arrests, and even killings that they endure at the hands of the amniyat. In the Jubba areas, no one can question al Shabaab rulings, and

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<sup>94</sup> C. Anzalone, *Black Banners in Somalia: the State of al-Shabaab's Territorial Insurgency and the Specter of Islamic State* CTC Sentinel March 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/black-banners-somalia-state-al-shabaabs-territorial-insurgency-specter-islamic-state/>



the amniyat acts with complete impunity. A defector who had been in an al Shabaab prison in Kunya Barrow in Lower Shabelle region said that of the 20 prisoners held there, 15 were Ogadeni, one was Hawiye, two were Rahanweyn, and one was Marehan/Darod. The one Hawiye prisoner received better food and far better treatment than the others, and once released was given \$10,000, as opposed to the \$300 given to the others. Ali Diyar, the most senior Ogadeni Shabaab member, had his battalion of 500 men disbanded because of his suspected sympathies with ISS. His men were mostly Ogadeni and Sheikhal from the Somali part of Ethiopia, and were more loyal to him than they were to al Shabaab. Al Shabaab therefore spread them more widely through the organisation, so making it harder for them to defect or plot en masse.

### **3. Reports of ISS activity in Mogadishu and the surrounding area to mid July 2018<sup>95</sup>**

#### **2018**

**27 July**, ISS claim the assassination of a policeman in Mogadishu.<sup>96</sup>

**24 July**, ISS claim an IED attack in Elisha, 20km South of Mogadishu, killing or wounding 14 soldiers.

**21 July**, ISS claim the killing of a policeman in Baad Market, Mogadishu.

**21 July**, ISS claim the killing of a Ministry of Finance official in Bakaara Market, Mogadishu.

**19 July**, ISS claim the assassination of an alleged intelligence official at Sinai Junction, Mogadishu.

**14 July**, an ISS IED targets policemen in Daynile, Mogadishu, killing four and wounding one.

**29 June**, ISS kill two tax collectors in Moga.dishu.

**22 May**, ISS kill a traffic officer in Mogadishu.

**14 May**, ISS kill a NISA officer in Bakaara Market in Mogadishu.

**7 May**, ISS kill a man it describes as a security agent in Mogadishu.

**27 February**, ISS kill a government official in Afgoye.

#### **2017**

**20 December**, ISS attack soldiers in Afgoye, killing one.

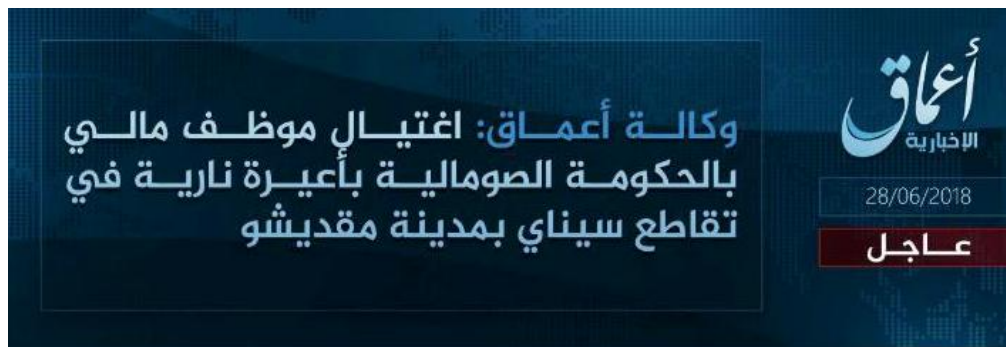
**4 August**, ISS kill an intelligence officer at Towfiq Junction in Mogadishu.

**28 March**, ISS kill an intelligence officer in Mogadishu.

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<sup>95</sup> Gathered from ISS announcements, NISA and other observers. This list is imperfect. For example in early February, the Islamic State claimed 11 attacks in Afgoye between late September 2017 and the end of January 2018. ISS is also accused of claiming attacks in fact carried out by al Shabaab.

<sup>96</sup> At first reported to be a finance officer.



*An Islamic State claim of an attack in Mogadishu on 28 June 2018*

#### **4. Future trajectory of ISS in Mogadishu and South Central Somalia**

By mid 2018, ISS had established itself in Mogadishu and the surrounding area and had built a sustainable attack capability. While ISS is clearly not in a position to match the scale and impact of al Shabaab, particularly its suicide vehicle borne improvised explosives device attacks, it has shown that it has enough support to mount close quarter assassinations, and to do so even in areas with a strong al Shabaab presence such as the Bakaara Market. Although ISS had not attacked beyond Mogadishu and Afgoye by mid July 2018, it is undoubtedly true that it has supporters elsewhere, and many within the ranks of al Shabaab. This support extends also into Kenya.

NISA believes that the main inhibitor of ISS expansion in South Central Somalia remains al Shabaab. But if al Shabaab continues to alienate clans,<sup>97</sup> disappoint its foreign recruits, and suffer leadership losses from drone strikes and Special Forces operations, then ISS is likely to prosper. Furthermore, if al Shabaab follows the course of many insurgencies into negotiations and conventional politics, then ISS will draw away those ideologically motivated al Shabaab members who are fighting for an (unrealisable) ideal. For so long as the centre of ISS gravity remains in the North of the country, its impact on Somali politics and security will be marginal; but if it begins to grow into an operationally successful terrorist group in Mogadishu and other key population centres in the South, then the prospects for peace become dimmer still. ISS must realise that even a minor attack in Mogadishu is worth ten in Bosaso, and it will therefore be doing what it can to build its network and capacity there.

#### **Al Shabaab reactions**

Al Shabaab will be as aware as ISS of the importance of Mogadishu. In Puntland, al Shabaab members have established a degree of coexistence with ISS, and even, according to some reports, a basic level of cooperation in key areas such as Bosaso. But al Shabaab cannot afford to cede more ground in the South.

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<sup>97</sup>For example, through the forced recruitment of children.





There have been so far three phases of al Shabaab reaction to the emergence of Islamic State sympathisers in the South of the country: an initial wary tolerance; a ruthless campaign of elimination; and more latterly, the supervised release of prisoners reflecting a sense that the danger had passed. This may now give way to a fourth phase of renewed extermination of ISS in Mogadishu and Afgoye, but al Shabaab may have left it too late.

As the support for Islamic State grew in 2014 and 2015, largely driven by its propaganda videos,<sup>98</sup> the al Shabaab leadership became alarmed at the possibility of mass defections in the South, which they saw as far more damaging than a possible challenge in Puntland. The attacks and arrests that followed prompted the disjointed and uncoordinated declaration of allegiance to al Baghdadi by the 20-30 defectors in the North under Mumin and by 30-40 men in the South, led by a Rahanweyn clansman, Abdul Wadud.<sup>99</sup> The response from al Shabaab was swift and effective and most al Shabaab leaders with Islamic State sympathies decided to keep their heads down. Even so, al Shabaab jailed some commanders thought likely to defect before they could rally rank and file defectors. Those already in the bush, such as Bashir Abu Numan<sup>100</sup> and Mohammad Makkawi Ibrahim, a Sudanese al Qaeda operative who is believed to have killed John Granville, a USAID official, and his driver in Khartoum in January 2008, were routed out in a series of large-scale operations and either imprisoned or killed.



*Mohammed Makkawi killed by al Shabaab for supporting IS*

For almost two months, the operational focus of al Shabaab in the South was entirely directed against the Islamic State threat. Likewise, the al Shabaab leadership sent 500 men to Puntland in

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<sup>98</sup> ISS defector report, 10 May 2018

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Numan, an al Shabaab commander, defected to the Islamic State in late 2015 and was subsequently killed by al Shabaab security. In the following April, Mumin named ISS's first training camp after him in Puntland.



March 2016 in an unsuccessful attempt to wipe out Mumin and his small band of supporters, but the group became separated and a large number were intercepted and defeated by Puntland security forces. Nonetheless, by mid 2018, although Mumin was still operating in the North, so too was al Shabaab, and it believed that it had contained the threat both there and in the South, where it began to allow actual and suspected IS sympathisers to leave prison and return to the ranks. It also freed foreign fighters, allowing them to live with their families unmolested in al Shabaab controlled areas.<sup>101</sup>

However, ISS still had a leader whose task it was to link the group in the North with the group in the South,<sup>102</sup> and, as seen above, enough supporters in the South to mount attacks in Mogadishu and beyond. Also, according to NISA, despite the global decline of the Islamic State, the number of its supporters in Jubbaland began to increase at the beginning of 2018.<sup>103</sup> For example, in February 2018, NISA received news that a group of Islamic State sympathisers in the Elasha-Biyaha district of the Lower Shabelle region intended to join ISS in Qandala; and in late May 2018,<sup>104</sup> unverified – and possibly inaccurate – press reports emerged that al Shabaab had punished five Kenyan and two Tanzanian rank and file members who had been caught watching Islamic State propaganda.

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<sup>101</sup>NISA briefing, June 2018.

<sup>102</sup>Believed to be Mohamed Gacamey (Ogaden/Darod).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>Star, 31 May 2018: Two Kenyan al Shabaab fighters executed for spying for KDF.

[https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/05/31/two-kenyan-al-shabaab-fighters-executed-for-spying-for-kdf\\_c1766612](https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/05/31/two-kenyan-al-shabaab-fighters-executed-for-spying-for-kdf_c1766612)



An account of Al Shabaab action against Islamic State supporters in Southern Somalia:

Jason Warner & Caleb Weiss: “A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia” CTC Sentinel, November 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-legitimate-challenger-assessing-the-rivalry-between-al-shabaab-and-the-islamic-state-in-somalia/>

*“Soon after the overtures from the Islamic State began, in September 2015, al-Shabaab arrested five of its own pro-Islamic State members in Jamame, a town in the Lower Jubba Region. In October 2015, the Amniyat arrested at least 30 more pro-Islamic State al-Shabaab fighters. A month later in November 2015, al-Shabaab executed five former leaders of the group, including Hussein AbdiGedi, who was formerly al-Shabaab’s deputy emir for the Middle Jubba Region but who had recently become the leader of a small pro-Islamic State faction based there. Later in November 2015, the Amniyat initiated large-scale arrests of al-Shabaab members with Islamic State sympathies across southern Somalia in the towns of Jilib, Saakow, Jamame, Hagar, and Qunyo Barrow, including some foreign fighters from Egypt and Morocco. Fast forward to late March 2017, and al-Shabaab reportedly executed at least five Kenyan members of the group for pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in the Hiraan region, and a month later, two prominent al-Shabaab commanders, Said Bubul and Abdul Karim, were also executed for switching their allegiances.”*

## ISS in Somaliland

### 1 Facilitation networks

The relevant stability of Somaliland has made it less vulnerable both to al Shabaab and ISS attacks, but according to the Somaliland security authorities, people from there have left to join both groups, whether in Somalia or their affiliates in Yemen.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, NISA in Mogadishu believes that ISS has established links with human traffickers based in Somaliland and regard it as something of a collection point and transit hub for new recruits.<sup>106</sup> The Somaliland authorities have confirmed this, reporting that ISS has recruited supporters to act as facilitators and has even set up businesses to fund its activities and channel support from Libya and Syria. The authorities assess that as at mid 2018, efforts by ISS to procure weapons had not been successful, but they add that the group has not given up and is still seeking to establish reliable supply networks. They also report that several fighters from Somaliland have managed to reach ISS in Puntland, encouraged to join up by on-line

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with senior Somaliland intelligence official, May 2018

<sup>106</sup> NISA interview, late April 2018.

recruiters.<sup>107</sup> Others have been induced to provide financial support. In addition, fighters have arrived in Somaliland en route for Puntland from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Iraq and Syria, as well as other areas of Somalia.

## **2 Future trajectory of ISS in Somaliland**

As for the direct threat to Somaliland, the authorities say that while inspired by the internationalist agenda of the Islamic State, ISS has also adopted local targets, for example threatening to disrupt the Presidential elections in November 2017 by attacking politicians and inciting conflict between clans. There are no obvious links or allegiances between the clans in Somaliland and ISS, and perhaps for this reason al Shabaab supporters there are more ready to identify with ISS aims and objectives than they would be elsewhere in Somalia where the clan identity of the two groups is more important. There have been instances of al Shabaab supporters receiving payments from ISS.<sup>108</sup> In response, Somaliland has taken action to counter the threat by collecting intelligence both inside and outside Somaliland to help it identify and eliminate ISS influence. Given the territorial disputes between Somaliland and Puntland, it is perhaps unsurprising that Somaliland is ready to accuse Puntland of giving ISS the space to operate. The Somaliland authorities also believe that ISS has been training suicide bombers who will be directed to attack targets outside Somalia.

## **The Islamic State in Kenya**

### **1 Overview**

As of mid June 2018, the National Intelligence Service of Kenya (NIS) considered the Islamic State a potential rather than an immediate threat to the security of the country. Although there had been by then two Islamic State-inspired attacks, one in Mombasa and one in Nairobi, it appeared that for the moment Islamic State priorities lay elsewhere. Islamic State had sent no experienced fighters to Kenya to establish operational cells, though it had encouraged the radicalisation and recruitment of Kenyans, and had facilitated their travel to other theatres such as Libya, Somalia (Puntland), Syria, Yemen and, more recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>109</sup>

However, by no means all Islamic State supporters in Kenya have tried to travel abroad to join the group, and those who have stayed at home have expressed their aspiration to carry out attacks locally. The two low level attacks referred to above showed a certain degree of capability, despite being organised and executed apparently without any external support.

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<sup>107</sup>While the identity of these recruiters is not clear, it is likely that they were either Islamic State supporters who encouraged their contacts to join the Islamic State wherever they could, or individual Somalis encouraging their friends or friends of friends to join ISS. In Puntland It is unlikely that ISS itself has developed an on-line recruitment capability.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with senior Somaliland intelligence official, May 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Provided by a Kenyan security official involved in the debriefing of a number of detained IS supporters.



## 2 Recruitment Trends

Since 2015, the Kenyan authorities have noted a trend among university students, in particular those studying Engineering, Computer Science, Information Technology and Medicine, to join the Islamic State. Their engagement with the organisation has been largely online via social media platforms, where potential recruits are prioritised by the Islamic State according to their skill sets, knowledge of 'jihad', and commitment to the Islamic State worldview. In 2016, NIS discovered a radicalization and recruitment network that reached across a number of universities in Kenya, and was particularly active at Moi University in Eldoret, Western Kenya, sending a number of students from there to join the Islamic State in Libya.<sup>110</sup>

Most of these students were academically bright but not well off financially. Some were attracted to social media sites and WhatsApp groups by the offer of low interest loans with flexible repayment schemes. It is said that a condition of the loan involved conversion to Islam, with the 'loan officer' then engaging the subject in a process of gradual radicalisation and an introduction to the ideology of the Islamic State.<sup>111</sup>

### **A Kenyan Islamic State supporter describes the recruitment process:**

He began following pro-Islamic State websites and Twitter accounts such as *khalifa news*, *khalifayetu* (In Swahili) and *Amaq*,<sup>1</sup> and having been identified by Islamic State recruiters as a supporter began to receive private messages from an Islamic State supporter who claimed to be in Sudan. He was then invited to join private Telegram groups that included Islamic State supporters and fighters from across the World, including the Middle East, Africa and Europe. It was in these private groups that he was urged to make *hijra* and join the Islamic State in Libya

## 3 The Abu Fida'a network

In May 2016, the Kenyan police announced the arrest in Kenya of Mohamed Abdi Ali, aka Abu Fida'a, and in Uganda of his wife, Nuseiba Mohammed Haji, and another woman on suspicion of planning a mass casualty attack. The police also named two other people implicated in the plot, as detailed below.

Abu Fida'a was one of the most important Kenyan online university recruiters and his wife was also active in this respect. Abu Fida'a targeted medical students in particular,<sup>112</sup> and controlled a network of other recruiters and facilitators who assisted the travel of recruits to join Islamic State affiliates in

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<sup>110</sup> Provided by a school administrator at Moi University who reported to anti-terror police the trend of students leaving the school and travelling to Libya to join IS.

<sup>111</sup> Provided by a Kenya security official involved in tracking recruitment trends in Universities.

<sup>112</sup> Provided by an anti-terror police officer involved in the case against Abu Fida'a.

Libya and Syria as well as in Somaliland. In 2014 and 2015, when the flow of foreign fighters towards the Islamic State was at its height, Kenyans were able to join the caravan with little problem by flying from Nairobi to Istanbul and then crossing the Turkish border into Syria. One Kenyan known to have used this route was Mohamed Atom, an associate of AbdirahimAbdullahi, one of the al Shabaab supporters who attacked Garissa University in April 2015.<sup>113</sup>



*Abu Fida'a and his wife UmmuFida'a in 2016.*

At the time of his arrest, Abu Fida'a was conducting research into the use of anthrax as a biological weapon.<sup>114</sup> Two associates, Farah Dagane Hassan and Hiishi Ahmed Ali, both medical interns, were also involved in his plans and fled to Libya after they learnt of his arrest. Both died in a US airstrike in March 2017. All three studied medicine together at Kampala International University before returning to Kenya. Abu Fida'a was then appointed to Wote Hospital as an intern while the other two went to Kitale. UmmuFida'a was also a student at Kampala International University, and was still there at the time of her arrest.<sup>115</sup>

Most members of Abu Fida'a's network were medical practitioners, the majority of whom were arrested soon after he was. They included a Malindi-based doctor, AbudullahAdulqaniAllin, who was arrested in October 2016, and two medical interns at Malindi hospital: Shukri Mohammed Yerrow and AbdulrazakAbdinuur. Yerrow had graduated from Saratov Medical University in Russia in 2015. Yerrow and Abdinuur were believed to have been planning to travel to Puntland to join ISS at the time of their arrest. Abu Fida'a's network is said to have had links to senior ISS figures in Puntland,<sup>116</sup> as well as Islamic State supporters and fighters elsewhere, including SamatarUllah,<sup>117</sup> a UK-based Islamic State supporter arrested in 2017.

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<sup>113</sup> Provided by associates of AbdirahimAbdullahi who were interviewed after the Garissaa attack and identified Atom as one of his associates recruited by IS.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Provided by an ATPU officer involved in investigating the Abu Fida'a case.

<sup>116</sup> Information obtained from the exploitation of Abu Fida'a's laptop and telephones after his arrest.

<sup>117</sup> Media reports: <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/cyber-jihadi-hid-terror-data-cufflink-sentenced-insert-years-jail/>





But while describing the gang as part of ‘an East African terror group network that has links to ISIL’, and saying that Abu Fida’a had been helping to recruit Kenyans to join terrorist groups in Libya and Syria, the Kenyan police gave no details of any structural affiliation between his network and the Islamic State.<sup>118</sup> It is possible that the gang was associated with members of Jabha East Africa, but neither the Islamic State or ISS or Jabha East Africa has claimed any responsibility for the disrupted plot.

#### 4 Key Incidents in Kenya

The Islamic State has claimed two attacks in Kenya, both in 2016. These attacks were not well executed or coordinated and demonstrated a lack of training as well as of technical and financial support. The attackers were not under the direction or control of the Islamic State leadership, but carried out the attacks after pledging allegiance to al Baghdadi through an Islamic State telegram channel. It appears that the only training they received was online and comprised basic advice on operational security, including secure communications, and possible methods of attack.<sup>119</sup>

On **11 September 2016** a three-member female Islamic State cell consisting of TasnibYaqubAbdullahi Farah, Fatma Omar Yusuf and Mariam (snu) attempted to burn down Mombasa Central Police Station. The women gained entry on the pretext of reporting a crime – the theft of one of their cell phones. As they were in the reception area, they lit a petrol bomb and tossed it at the police officers behind the desk. They then attempted to stab a police officer before being shot and killed.<sup>120</sup> The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack on the following day through its affiliated news agency, Amaq. During the planning and execution of the attack, the cell maintained some level of telephone and communications security; for example, they left their cell phones at home when meeting to avoid surveillance. Additionally, they used encrypted telephone messaging applications to communicate with one another whenever they wanted to share operational information. They posted their allegiance to al Baghdadi through one of its Telegram channels before launching the attack.<sup>121</sup>

On **27 October 2016** Abdimahat Ibrahim Hassan stabbed and attempted to take the gun of a Kenyan police officer manning the outer perimeter of the US Embassy in Gigiri, Nairobi.

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<sup>118</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-36198561>

<sup>119</sup> As above.

<sup>120</sup> Official account of events from the Kenyan Police in Mombasa.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with a security officer involved in the investigation into the attack.

Abdimahat was shot and killed during the altercation.<sup>122</sup> The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, again through Amaq.

## The Islamic State elsewhere in the Region

From 2014 to 2016, Islamic State activity in the region beyond Somalia revolved around the radicalisation and recruitment of supporters, and the facilitation of their travel to the group's established theatres of operation. However, with the increased pressure on the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and Libya, movement to these areas has become increasingly difficult, but given that ISS in Puntland has not done much to attract non-ethnic Somali fighters, most Islamic State supporters do not see it as an obvious alternative destination, looking instead for options closer to home.

### Jabha East Africa

A group calling itself Jabha East Africa announced its allegiance to al Baghdadi in early April 2016. It comprised disaffected members of al Shabaab, most likely from its foreign fighter contingent, and strongly criticised al Shabaab for its treatment of its Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ugandan members, calling on them to join the new group.<sup>123</sup> This call was repeated in July when Jabha East Africa issued another statement that suggested it had bases 'on the border of Somalia' and 'deep in Tanzania'. It said that its ultimate goal was to reach 'the Muslim lands of Zanzibar'. The strength, range and capability of Jabha East Africa, also known rather expansively as the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda,<sup>124</sup> is unclear, and some experts argue that it has no real existence.<sup>125</sup>

In one of its videos, Jabha East Africa refers approvingly to the teachings of Sheikh Ahmed Iman Ali, Abu Zinira, appointed by al Shabaab as the head of its Kenyan fighters in Somalia in January 2012. Abu Zinira had been head of the Kenyan Muslim Youth Council, which became indistinguishable from al Shabaab by 2012.<sup>126</sup> Rumours that Abu Zinira may split with al Shabaab seem highly unlikely to be true, given that he has repeatedly made public statements in support of al Qaeda and al Shabaab; and even if he did move away, it is by no means certain that he would ally with ISS while its leadership remains unable to offer him sufficient support to guarantee his safety and survival and increase his standing. Reports that he pledged allegiance to al Baghdadi in September 2016 are unverified.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Official account of events given by the Kenyan Police.

<sup>123</sup> See Jihadology for the full text. <https://jihadology.net/category/jahba-east-africa/>.

<sup>124</sup> Jason Warner, CTC Sentinel, January 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/sub-saharan-africas-three-new-islamic-state-affiliates/#reference16>

<sup>125</sup> Interview with NIS official mid 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al Shabab's East African Recruitment. C. Anzalone, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 5 Issue 10. October 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/kenyas-muslim-youth-center-and-al-shababs-east-african-recruitment/>.

<sup>127</sup> Jason Warner: Sub Saharan Africa's Three 'New' Islamic State Affiliates. CTC Sentinel, January 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/sub-saharan-africas-three-new-islamic-state-affiliates/>



## Tanzania

The forested parts of Kibiti District in Tanzania have traditionally produced and harboured political radicals; in fact most Tanzanians who have joined al Shabaab in Somalia are from this area.<sup>128</sup> As of 2014, extremists in Kibiti began a string of assassinations targeting police officers, local government leaders and politicians and from a base in the Amboni caves the group began to commit bank robberies in Tanga and Dar-es-Salaam to fund its activities.<sup>129</sup> The attacks reached a crescendo in 2017 and led to an aggressive response from the Tanzanian Government.<sup>130</sup>

Following the Tanzanian Government offensive in mid-2017, the Amboni group split in two with a number of operatives leaving the country for the DRC via Kigoma, while others stayed behind to fight the Tanzanian state. The group that went to the DRC joined the Allied Democratic Front (ADF) in Eastern Congo,<sup>131</sup> while what remained of the Amboni group, unable to withstand the pressure, moved to Mozambique and joined the so-called al-Shabaab<sup>132</sup> group in Cabo Delgado Province. Both groups are reported to support the Islamic State, though there are no known organisational or other direct links between them and IS.

## DRC/Uganda

### 1 The Allied Democratic Front (ADF)

Information about the membership and objectives of the ADF is scant and often reflects the narrative of its adversaries rather than a factual analysis based on knowledge of the movement,<sup>133</sup> but in 2017, the ADF in DRC began to emerge as a new destination for would-be Islamic State recruits in Africa. Though the Islamic State certainly does not regard the ADF as part of its Caliphate, and many would describe it more as a criminal enterprise or local rebel group than a terrorist one, some ADF members have expressed support for the Islamic State and the Islamic State could well see advantage in having a territorial foothold in sub-Saharan Africa. DRC is easy to reach, both for new recruits and for experienced fighters from Iraq, Syria and other areas where the movement is under

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<sup>128</sup> Provided by an al-Shabaab defector from Tanzania.

<sup>129</sup> Provided by a security official in Tanzania involved in CT operations.

<sup>130</sup> Tanzanian media reports <https://www.tzaffairs.org/2017/09/violence-in-kibiti/>.

<sup>131</sup> Provided by a Tanzanian security official involved in CT operations.

<sup>132</sup> There is no known affiliation between this group and its homonym in Somalia.

<sup>133</sup> For a thorough account of the different and conflicting perceptions of the ADF see Titeca, Kristof and Fahey, Daniel. (2016). The many faces of a rebel group: the Allied Democratic Forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *International Affairs*. 92. 1189-1206. 10.1111/1468-2346.12703.

pressure from ground troops and airstrikes, and the ADF has already gained recruits from Kenya and Tanzania, as well as Uganda.<sup>134</sup>

The stated goal of the ADF is to overthrow the Government of Uganda and establish an Islamic State, though it has done nothing much in pursuit of either objective. It started in Western Uganda but many members moved to North Kivu, DRC, in the 1990s,<sup>135</sup> splitting the movement in two between an active operational group in Eastern DRC that directs attacks against government forces and has close links with illegal trade, and a network in Uganda and beyond that aims to attract new recruits and raise money, including through operating businesses. On top of these two groups sits a leadership that promotes a global appeal under a 'jihadist' banner, though primarily with a view to mobilising recruits and collecting funds. The level of interaction between the Uganda group and the DRC group is unclear, though it seems slight at most, as is the degree of control exerted by the leadership.

Uganda security authorities estimate ADF strength at around 500.<sup>136</sup> It has links to Tanzania, as demonstrated in 2015 by the arrest there of its leader, Sheikh Jamil Mukulu,<sup>137</sup> who, at the time, had two Tanzanian wives, and has business interests throughout East Africa. His arrest denied the group a leader just when it faced an influx of Tanzanians fleeing the assault of the Tanzanian government. This may have encouraged the group to switch its focus from Uganda to global 'Jihad'.

In 2016, ADF members are said to have reached out to the Islamic State in Libya and Syria to discuss a formal relationship between the two groups; but no agreement had been announced by July 2018, although talks were said to have gone well.<sup>138</sup> Speaking at the Fifth Head of Intelligence and Security Services of Member States of IGAD and EAC in Entebbe in May 2018, Col. Kaka Bagyenda, the Director-General of Uganda's Internal Security Organization, said that there was proof that the Islamic State was collaborating with the ADF in DRC.<sup>139</sup>

For ADF to be recognised as an official province of the Islamic State it would have to agree to a more distinct ideology and to have the Islamic State oversee its activities. This would require a greater investment of resources than the Islamic State currently has available, but it would gain a safe

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<sup>134</sup> Obtained from detainee debriefs of would be Kenyan Islamic State recruits to the ADF.

<sup>135</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307553179\\_The\\_many\\_faces\\_of\\_a\\_rebel\\_group\\_the\\_Allied\\_Democratic\\_Forces\\_in\\_the\\_Democratic\\_Republic\\_of\\_Congo](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307553179_The_many_faces_of_a_rebel_group_the_Allied_Democratic_Forces_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_Congo)

<sup>136</sup> Interview with member of Uganda's Internal Security Organisation. Though some critics say that the Ugandan authorities overestimate the strength and activities of ADF for political reasons, for example they claim the opposition politician, Aggrey Kiyingi, has ADF links.

<sup>137</sup> <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Interpol-confirms-Mukulu-arrest-in-Tanzania/688334-2707406-4vw7xz/index.html>.

<sup>138</sup> Obtained during 2017 debriefs of a Kenyan would be recruit who was arrested en-route to join the group.

<sup>139</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/201805240576.html>.



base in Africa, well protected from ground and air attack, and a launch pad for attacks across the continent.<sup>140</sup> However, a major obstacle to any merger between the Islamic State and ADF, apart from their divergent objectives, is Sheikh Jamil and those ADF members who still support him.<sup>141</sup>



*Screenshot of video released by ADF during Eid 2017 urging foreigners to travel to DRC and join them. The speaker is likely not Congolese and is more probably Tanzanian.*

## 2 ADF attacks

The following attacks have been claimed by or ascribed to ADF since 2016:

**30 March 2016**, Joan Kagezi, a Ugandan lawyer and prosecutor was assassinated in Kampala. At the time of her death Kagezi was the Assistant Director of Public prosecution Service and head of the International Criminal Division. Kagezi was involved in the prosecution of 13 individuals accused of taking part in the al Shabaab attacks in Kampala during the World Cup soccer final in July 2010 in which at least 74 people died.

**26 November 2016**, Major Mohammed Kigundu, a former ADF commander who was working with the Ugandan Government was assassinated in Kampala.

**17 March 2017**, Andrew Felix Kawesi, a former Inspector General of police was shot in a Kampala suburb.

*Note: These three killings and that of Ibrahim Abiriga (below) were similar to the murder of some half a dozen Sheiks in Uganda since 2012, quite probably by ADF members. Some were former members of the group.*

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<sup>140</sup> Obtained from conversations with a regional CT analyst.

<sup>141</sup> Analysis provided by a Kenyan CT official tracking the Islamic State – ADF talks.



**7 December 2017**, the ADF attacked and killed 15 United Nations personnel in what UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres termed the worst attack on UN peacekeepers in recent history.

**8 June 2018**, Ibrahim Abiriga a Ugandan MP and SaidiButele, his brother, were assassinated in Wakiso district on the outskirts of Kampala. The Ugandan Government blamed the ADF.

## **Mozambique**

### **1 Al Shabaab Mozambique/Ahlu Sunnah wa-Jamo**

The origins, leadership and objectives of al Shabaab Mozambique are obscure, but in May 2018, a small group of people presumed to be members of al Shabaab Mozambique appeared on a Telegram channel with an Islamic State-style flag saying that they would soon swear allegiance to al Baghdadi.

It appears that following the 2017 assault on their bases in Kibiti District, a number of Tanzanian radicals joined the al Shabaab group in CaboDelgado in Northern Mozambique, not far from the common border.<sup>142</sup> This may have led to the group becoming more radical and mounting more attacks. For example, on 10 October 2017, the group carried out coordinated attacks on the district police command, a police post, and a Natural Resources and Environment Police patrol station, killing two police officers.<sup>143</sup> On 27 May 2018, the group carried out a pre-dawn attack on Monjane village in CaboDelgado, beheading about ten people including the village Chief.<sup>144</sup> On 5 June 2018, the group hacked seven people to death and burnt houses in the village of Naude in the Macomia district of CaboDelgado. On 6 June 2018, the group killed five people in Namaluco village in the Quissanga district of Cabo Delgado.

The two leaders of the group are NuroAdremene and Jafar Alawi, both Mozambican nationals who had undertaken courses in Islamic studies in Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, in addition to receiving military training.<sup>145</sup> In January 2018, the group released a video statement on social media urging Mozambicans to join them and help set up an Islamic State. They said that they would soon announce their allegiance to al-Baghdadi.

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<sup>142</sup> The 'al Shabaab' group may also be associated with or identical to AhluSunnahwaJama, a radical group that has been attacking targets in Cabo Delgado. See for example: [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mozambique-violence-insight/beheadings-in-mozambique-mark-islamist-threat-in-new-gas-frontier-idUSKBN1KF11A?utm\\_campaign=trueAnthem:+Trending+Content&utm\\_content=5b584a3d04d30147fd051141&utm\\_medium=trueAnthem&utm\\_](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mozambique-violence-insight/beheadings-in-mozambique-mark-islamist-threat-in-new-gas-frontier-idUSKBN1KF11A?utm_campaign=trueAnthem:+Trending+Content&utm_content=5b584a3d04d30147fd051141&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_)

<sup>143</sup> Media reports: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/06/c\\_136661030.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/06/c_136661030.htm)

<sup>144</sup> Reports from Mozambique state media.

<sup>145</sup> <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/authorities-name-2-mozambican-suspects-for-leading-mocimboa-attacks-link-them-to-tanzania-sudan-saudi-arabia/>



*'Al-Shabaab Mozambique' members promoting an Islamic State.*

## 2 Future Trajectory

Some of the Tanzanian members of the al Shabaab group are in contact with ex-comrades who escaped to DRC and there have been discussions about a possible alliance with ADF as well as with IS.<sup>146</sup> The group also has links to Tanzanian fighters in Somalia.<sup>147</sup> There are other signs of a fluidity of membership and regional appeal. For example, three local members of the Usafi Mosque in Uganda, which was raided by police in late 2017 over links to terrorist activities,<sup>148</sup> were arrested in Mocimboa da Praia District in Cabo Delgado Province in January 2018.

As with ADF in DRC, the Mozambique al-Shabaab group is based in a heavily forested area with the additional advantage of being close to the sea. Furthermore, the area is rich in natural resources, including large natural gas reserves.<sup>149</sup> These characteristics may make the area attractive to the Islamic State.<sup>150</sup> However, as at July 2018, there was no known communication between any Islamic State affiliate and the group in Mozambique,<sup>151</sup> which remains relatively small and lacks experienced

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<sup>146</sup> Provided by a Tanzanian CT official.

<sup>147</sup> In January 2018, Tanzania and Mozambique signed a memorandum of understanding to collaborate in the fight against the militants. The MOU called for greater intelligence sharing and joint CT operations against the group.

<sup>148</sup> Media reports <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/-Ugandans-Mozambique-terrorism-ESO-CMI-Museveni-/688334-4566430-y2iv6rz/index.html>

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza>

<sup>150</sup> Assessment by regional based CT analyst.

<sup>151</sup> According to a Tanzanian security official to date the al-Shabaab in Mozambique have no known links to ISIL in Syria or Iraq.

members. Additionally, it has few modern weapons and relies in the main on machetes to carry out attacks.

## **Ethiopia and Sudan**

While Ethiopia faces several internal and external security threats, the Islamic State has not been one of them. The murder by the Islamic State in Libya of two groups of Ethiopian migrants in April 2015 was a shock to the nation and it is unlikely that ISS would be able to establish an active cell in the country without the security authorities finding out. The National Intelligence and Security Service assessed in May 2018 that ISS had no presence in the country.

Sudan, on the other hand, has had at least 70 nationals and possibly twice that number leave to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq,<sup>152</sup> and others have probably joined affiliated groups elsewhere, including ISS. Islamic State recruiters were reportedly still active in Khartoum in June 2018.<sup>153</sup> Defectors from al Shabaab in Sudan have contacted their friends in the movement and encouraged them to follow their lead in going there, saying that Sudan would not prosecute people so long as they did not plan or mount attacks against Sudan itself, and this group may gravitate towards ISS. As at June 2018, the Sudanese authorities did not believe that they had any active ISS members in the country, though they do acknowledge that Islamic State supporters transit the country on their way to Libya, where they track the well-established Islamic State presence.

## **Libya**

Given the large numbers of migrants that leave East Africa in an attempt to get to Europe or the Gulf, it is likely that some may be radicalised before leaving, and others may become radicalised on the way. But what evidence there is suggests that the radicalisation process most commonly happens in Libya. The usual route for all migrants from Kenya and the surrounding area is by road to Uganda, then to South Sudan, into Sudan, and then to Libya.

Along with Somalia, Libya is certainly the African country with the highest frequency of Islamic State-related activity. While the Islamic State claimed 10 attacks in Somalia during Ramadan 2018, it claimed 12 in Libya. In the first week of July 2018, the Islamic State carried out nine attacks in Libya but only two in Somalia. For its supporters in East Africa who want action, Libya provides the most

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<sup>152</sup> In October 2015, the Sudanese authorities said that 70 nationals had joined IS. A more realistic number was 150 by October 2017. See R. Barrett, *Beyond The Caliphate*. <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>.

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65753>.



attractive and accessible option, whether as a destination in itself or as a way station towards Syria or Iraq. By contrast, ISS in Puntland looks constrained and constraining.

Recent Islamic State propaganda has encouraged its supporters either to attack at home or to join up in areas that are easier to reach than Syria and Iraq. For most Kenyan recruits, this means choosing Libya.<sup>154</sup> As an example, in May 2017, three Kenyans and a Somali were reported to have been arrested in South Sudan on their way to join Islamic State in Libya.<sup>155</sup> The four men said that they had been assisted by the so-called Magafe Network,<sup>156</sup> a group of people smugglers operating from Libya that has recruiters in several areas of East Africa, and preys upon both economic and politically radicalised migrants.

The Magafe Network is primarily a criminal racket that extorts money from the families of migrants whom it holds captive en route,<sup>157</sup> selling those who cannot pay.<sup>158</sup> But the Kenyan security authorities also identify the Magafe Network as the key facilitator for Kenyans wishing to join the Islamic State.<sup>159</sup> In March 2017, they arrested Ali Hussein Ali, described as an Islamic State recruiter in Kenya and Somalia, and two associates: Ibrahim Abasheikh Mukthar and Abdi Mohamed Yusuf. According to the police, Ali Hussein Ali was born in Somalia before moving to Kenya and then to South Africa, Sudan and finally Libya, where he joined the Islamic State; he also had links to al Shabaab.<sup>160</sup>

A reverse flow from Libya has also been noted, with three Kenyan women arrested in Egypt on their way home in August 2017.<sup>161</sup> These three look like deserters who found themselves unwillingly entangled with the Islamic State on their way to Europe, but the truth of their intentions and what happened to them may take many months to emerge. Their journey was also from Kenya, through

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<sup>154</sup> Interview with NIS June 2018.

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/05/3-kenyans-somali-refugee-arrested-en-route-libya-join-isis/>

<sup>156</sup> Magafe is a Somali word (never miss), but despite this locally coined name, the network is run by Libyans.

<sup>157</sup> <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001234538/wanted-terror-suspects-linked-to-isis-recruitment-arrested-in-malindi>

<sup>158</sup> Kenyan security personnel identified the Magafe network as the key route to transport ISIL operatives to Libya. Additionally, the network has been involved in the selling of 'migrants' to the Libya slave markets.

<sup>159</sup> Investigations carried out by Kenyan authorities have revealed that the majority of Kenyan recruits captured en route to join IS in Libya used the Magafe Network to facilitate travel.

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001234538/wanted-terror-suspects-linked-to-isis-recruitment-arrested-in-malindi>

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenyans-lured-to-Libya-by-Isis-brought-back-/1056-4127468-ouu1k8/index.html>

Uganda into South Sudan, Sudan and then Libya, with the Magafe Network involved on the final leg.

## Yemen

IS in Yemen has been a key factor in the development of ISS in Puntland, as can be seen from the many references to Yemen throughout this paper. In 2015, the Islamic State leadership had seen Yemen as a natural place to expand, despite the heavy presence of al Qaeda, and, as it lost its territorial holdings in Syria and Iraq, as a place to recover and regroup.<sup>162</sup> A former director of the Puntland Intelligence Agency has said that ISS received military supplies, training and financial support from the Islamic State leadership through its Yemen branch in early 2016,<sup>163</sup> and other sources have claimed that ISS received at least two significant injections of money in late 2015 and early 2016.<sup>164</sup> There are also reports of Islamic State leaders going from Yemen to Somalia, and also of their returning as the situation in Yemen deteriorated, but the Puntland authorities have been unable to verify this. The UN Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Team has also reported that ISS receives material and non-material support from Yemen.<sup>165</sup> Nonetheless, a senior serving NISA officer said in June 2018 that all financial support for ISS from the Islamic State leadership via Yemen had ceased in December 2016, and this would accord with other assessments that by then both Islamic State ‘core’ and Islamic State in Yemen had their hands full with more pressing issues.<sup>166</sup>

It seems highly likely that ISS has worked with smugglers and sympathisers in Yemen to get whatever arms and equipment it can afford, regardless of its uncertain status as a recognised province of the Caliphate. The traffic across the Red Sea may have diminished since the imposition of a Saudi led naval blockade in 2015, but this is aimed at the supply chains of the Houthi rebels and despite the blockade, the UN reckoned that migrant flows across the Red Sea from Africa hit an all time high in 2016 with 117,000 arrivals, and showed no sign of slowing in the first months of 2017.<sup>167</sup> As the UN report pointed out, there is also a significant reverse flow of people from Yemen to the Horn, and over the centuries, families have populated both sides of the Red Sea down into Kenya. Inevitably, there have been many reports of fighters going both ways, most commonly from

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<sup>162</sup> In mid May 2018, IS encouraged its supporters, including those in Syria, to move to Yemen.

<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/isis-has-stepped-up-its-campaigns-in-yemen-egypt-and-afghanistan-the-coalition-fighting-it-should-be-worried-1.733239>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/intelligence-official-islamic-state-growing-in-somalia/3316326.html>.

<sup>164</sup> For example, Gregory Johnson, a noted scholar on IS Yemen, in a contribution to this paper.

<sup>165</sup> November 2017 report

<sup>166</sup> For an account of the decline of the Islamic State in Yemen see Elisabeth Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy in Yemen, Middle East Institute, July 2018.

[https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/MEI%20Policy%20Paper\\_Kendall\\_7.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/MEI%20Policy%20Paper_Kendall_7.pdf)

<sup>167</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM\\_2018\\_Africa\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_Africa_web_small.pdf)





Somalia to Yemen including in late 2017 and possibly into 2018,<sup>168</sup> but their origins, intentions and final destinations are uncharted.

The Yemen war has created odd alliances, and the decline of both the Islamic State in Yemen and the local al Qaeda branch (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular) has prompted a virtual truce between them, most likely because the leaders have lost control of their organisations and the relationships between the two groups are now determined by local attitudes and interests. It is likely that no group operating along great stretches of the Yemeni coast objects much to the outflow of arms into Somalia, whoever ends up using them. The long and porous Yemeni coastline appears to pose no problems for Yemeni smugglers or extremist groups who wish to move goods or people to or from East Africa.

## Conclusion

The main evidence of Mumin's links with the Islamic State has come from his access to and engagement with Islamic State-controlled media outlets. These are Internet-based, and any physical assistance he has had is likely to have come from Yemen as the nearest Islamic State province with worthwhile resources. ISS does not depend for its survival on Islamic State Yemen, nor on any other part of the Caliphate, but it has shown a distinct lack of capacity so far, as well as of resources, and it is only with an injection of energy, finance and expertise from outside that it is likely to break out from the rather parochial and imitative activity it conducts in the shadow of al Shabaab. ISS in itself amounts to little, but the association with the Islamic State is what gives it the potential to grow. As al Shabaab declines or remains static, ISS could pick up the next generation of East African extremists, but only if it begins to look more like part of the Caliphate and less like part of the local insurgency. Measured against the agenda of al Shabaab it offers nothing, but if measured against the radical extremist agenda of al Qaeda, it could attract those members of al Shabaab – and other radical dreamers – who realise that the insurgency will never usher in a golden dawn of Islamist Utopia.

Mumin must therefore play on dreams, but so far he has displayed none of the charismatic qualities that he was presumed to have as a key al Shabaab recruiter; and if he cannot appeal to people's imagination, he must give way to new leaders, or impress them with his terrorist skills. No one will be persuaded by better-crafted attacks in Puntland, but if ISS gets help with mounting larger and more effective attacks in Mogadishu, or even against international targets beyond Somalia, and improves its media image and outreach, it may have a better chance of taking actual and ideological

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<sup>168</sup> Gregory Johnson.

ground from al Shabaab. If so, the al Qaeda reaction will be a significant factor in its success, but by the look of it, al Qaeda has little sway over the current leadership of al Shabaab, which is likely to be flatfooted in its response.

Mumin will face the same problem as leaders of al Shabaab in having foreigners accepted in the movement and persuading financiers and tribal elders that Somalia should be a battlefield in the global 'jihad'. The level of insurgency at present allows many people on both sides to make money and to leverage their political influence. A stronger ISS could upset this balance without providing any constituency with a better opportunity than they have at present. The ideological appeal of ISS is weak, in part because it is not the Islamic State. Apart from the lack of charismatic leadership, according to defectors it also lacks the sense of excitement and newness that made the Islamic State such a draw. It is just an alternative for al Shabaab fighters who want to leave the movement but do not want to give up fighting altogether nor take the chance of defecting to the FGS.

In Afghanistan, the relationship between the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan province is instructive. In some areas the two groups operate together or leave each other alone, whereas in others they compete for territory, resources and recruits with all the lethal tools at their disposal.<sup>169</sup> The majority of Islamic State Khorasan recruits are people who have left or otherwise might have joined the Taliban.<sup>170</sup> Their decision to join one group rather than the other depends on opportunity, tribal considerations and only occasionally ideology; and the challenge for the groups is in looking sufficiently different from one another while sharing objectives and relying on exactly the same social, political and economic drivers to supply new members.

At present the same is true in Somalia. Though much smaller than Islamic State Khorasan, ISS has to present an image that is distinct from al Shabaab, and somehow make itself an attractive alternative, especially to potential recruits from outside Somalia. The defeat of the Islamic State in its main strongholds in Iraq and Syria - and the effective collapse of the 'Caliphate' - has robbed ISS of a credible claim to be part of something far larger, and forces it to make more noise across the region in order to attract attention. As yet it is not strong enough to do so. But al Shabaab has also suffered, and it is as far from retaking any major conurbations in Somalia as it ever has been. To regain momentum and see off any challenge from ISS, al Shabaab must also launch more attacks and show that it is still the dominant force fighting the FGS and its allies.

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<sup>169</sup> See for example, Dr A Giustozzi, Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad? CRPA December 2017. <https://www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2017/12/15/Enemies-or-Jihad-Brothers-Relations-Between-Taliban-and-Islamic-State>.

<sup>170</sup> See also, M. Dupée, Red on Red, Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 11 Issue 1, January 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/red-red-analyzing-afghanistans-intra-insurgency-violence/>.



For the FGS, this presents a dilemma in that attacks on al Shabaab may lead to a stronger ISS, and vice versa. The ideal would be for the two groups to fight each other, or for the FGS and the Federal Member States to conduct a more effective campaign to address the underlying reasons that allow the two groups to survive. For the moment, ISS exists only in Somalia; no other like-minded regional group is known to have established ties with its leadership, its camps remain hard to reach, and its objectives Somali centric. Even foreigners who would like to leave al Shabaab might rather join a group outside Somalia than ISS so as to fight for more than the local interests of its leaders.

Nonetheless, Somalia is likely to remain the epicentre of Islamic State-related activity in Eastern Africa for the foreseeable future. First, the weakness of Somalia's local and federal government structures means that the group will continue to find the space to establish roots and grow; and second, the instability in Somalia will still produce the majority of extremist recruits. But ISS will continue to struggle in the South of the country, except in Mogadishu, especially if seen as a Darod alternative to the Hawiye al Shabaab. In most of Somalia Al-Shabaab has the advantage of a relatively large conventional army and an effective security apparatus, both of which it was able to use in 2015 and 2016 to neuter incipient support for ISS. However, in Mogadishu the diversity and density of the population will allow ISS the space to grow. Also, the ease with which al-Shabab members, specifically amniyat operatives, can defect in Mogadishu will provide ISS a steady stream of recruits with experience in urban guerrilla warfare and fund-raising techniques, especially through extorting local businesses. The increased tempo of ISS attacks in Mogadishu is likely to continue or accelerate.

One factor that may affect the trajectory of both groups is the health of their leaders. Both Mumin and Ahmed Diriye (Abu Ubaidah), the leader of al Shabaab, are said to be seriously ill, and new leadership will inevitably lead to operational and other changes. New leadership in the parent organisations - the Islamic State and al Qaeda - may also have an impact. But most influential will be the policies adopted by the leadership of the FGS and other States of the region. ISS and al Shabaab survive in a political, economic and social environment that allows them space and provides them support; it is only a change in those conditions that will see them wither and die.

## Recommendations

1. All policy planning in terms of reconciliation or targeting should include consideration of the likely impact on the strength of ISS to ensure that actions intended to weaken al Shabaab do not risk strengthening ISS.
2. In Somalia, where ISS has the best opportunity for growth, local clans should be engaged in a genuine political process that includes the condemnation of extremism. Both ISS and al

Shabaab have exploited clan politics and have managed to grow in rural areas where there are clan conflicts.

3. Likewise, standards of urban governance in Somalia, especially in Mogadishu, need to improve in order to deny al Shabaab and ISS the opportunity to usurp the role of municipal and federal authorities, in particular in the dispensation of justice.
4. The FGS should emphasise both the parochial nature of ISS and its reliance on an alien ideology that is at odds with the culture and traditions of all Somali people.
5. The FGS should intensify cooperation with the authorities in Somaliland on the issue of preventing the supply of weapons and recruits to ISS.
6. The FGS should approach Saudi Arabia and UAE as the main protagonists in the Yemen war to monitor any traffic in men arms or other support destined for ISS.
7. Given the traditions of interconnectivity between Islamic State supporters, the FGS should be alert to signs that ISS members are in individual contact with Islamic State supporters elsewhere.
8. The countries of the region should aim to exchange more information and take joint action against organised criminal gangs, especially related to people smuggling, otherwise ISS is likely to recruit new members and extend its operations beyond Somalia.
9. The countries of the region should be alert to Islamic State attempts to provide an ideological underpinning to local rebel groups.
10. The countries of the region should remain alert to the possibility that Islamic State supporters from Iraq, Syria, Sinai, Libya and Yemen, may see Somalia as an area in which they can regroup and rebuild.
11. The countries of the region, and in particular Somalia, should be alert to the possibility that al Shabaab may attempt to internationalise its fight in order to counter the globalist appeal of ISS and attract recruits from other thetars of 'jihad'.
12. The international community should be alert to the possibility of Islamic State fighters travelling to Somalia.
13. The international community should reinforce recent moves in East Africa to reduce bilateral tensions with a common strategy to ensure that ISS does not exploit those who may oppose them.