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HIRAAL INSTITUTE
ADDRESSING HORN OF AFRICA'S SECURITY CHALLENGES



AL-Shabab's Military Machine



Hiraal Institute seeks to be the premier security think tank in Somalia. Building on the security experience of its members, it aims to promote security throughout the Horn of Africa and a peaceful Somalia.

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Cover image: Screenshot from an AS propaganda video showing an attack in Lego Camp in 2015.

Introduction

Al-Shabab's conventional military wing is known as the *Jabahaat* ('fronts' in Arabic; singular *Jabha*). Its first iteration was formed in 2005 when the group sent a group of 15 men into the Somali region of Ethiopia. At its height in 2010, the *Jabahaat* numbered more than 8000 men.

Every *Jabha* has mine specialists, *Jugta Culus*, medical units, communications, *Da'wa*, registrations, transportation, and media officers.¹ The *Jabahaat* has six main *Jaysh* and two special ones: the regular ones are Jubbas; Gedo; Bay and Bakol; Lower Shabelle and Banadir; Middle Shabelle, Hiran and Galgaduud; and Mudug. The special ones are the Galgala *Jaysh* and the Kenya *Jaysh*. The regular ones have 700-1000 men, and the special ones have 300 men each. On top of this, the reinforcements department has another 500 men. The total number of the *Jabahaat* fighters is therefore at least 5000 men. Their decline is both a reflection of the pressures the group has come against and also its reconfiguration away from a conventional posture to a guerrilla strategy from 2011.

Ranks within the *Jabahaat* are as follows: Emir *Majmu'a*: head of 10 men; Emir *Fasila*: head of 32 men; Emir *Sariya*: head of 99-120 men; Emir *Katiba*: head of 300 men; and Emir *Jaysh* - head of a military region of 700-1000 men.

Recruitment

In its early years, AS relied on recruits from Mogadishu and other urban areas. As it has lost major population centres in the past seven years, most of its new recruits come from the rural areas, specifically the Bay and Bakol regions. This is because those regions are heavily populated, and the group still controls rural areas where most of the population live in the two regions.

Most new recruits are children who have gone through the AS education system, which greatly increases their loyalty to the group. This AS investment in the future will greatly increase the chances of its struggle to continue for at least another generation.

Nevertheless, recruitment was negatively affected by the aerial bombing of an AS training camp in Hiran in 2015; this means that renewed bombing of training camps this year will further hurt recruitment.

Training

Basic training of new recruits is six months, and includes indoctrination courses, small arms courses, and physical exercises. Officer training is nine months. AS officer training includes:

¹ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

how to march through the bush and avoid detection, landmines, etc; how to deploy troops during battles, the order of weapons deployed, and how to retreat.² Another commander who took officer training with 140 other AS commanders says that they were taught guerrilla tactics such as raids, ambushes, reconnaissance, explosives, etc, with the aim of understanding how to bleed out a stronger enemy; the training material was provided by Al-Qaeda.³

Mechanics and driving courses are provided to AS members who the field commanders select for training. The condition is that they should be brave and willing to work under fire without being able to shoot back. Each training course is taken by 40-60 drivers and 8-12 mechanics. Driving lesson is given on very old and unwanted cars. Mechanics must have had 2 years of work at a garage before being given advanced mechanical training by the AS workshop.

Morale

AS members holding mid and high-ranking positions have varying degrees of confidence in the group and its ideals; they are however united in seeing the group as their only choice. While negative opinions of AS policy are widely-held by AS officials, many are afraid to discuss them publicly for fear of persecution.⁴ Their opinions do not translate to defection because, unlike low-level foot soldiers, defecting would mean they would be killed in areas controlled by a government unable to protect its own officials, let alone AS defectors. It is therefore unsurprising that very few officials holding positions have defected from the *Jabahaat*, despite their personal beliefs. They believe that they have a better life and security than do government officials.⁵ Nevertheless, high-level AS members walk around with suicide jackets; the head of defence, Moalim Osman, and Qorgab, the head of AS units in Kenya, have been seen wearing suicide bombs while going on with their regular activities. They fear getting captured and tortured by the FGS and allies.⁶

Low-level AS members are now reluctant to fight and are very afraid of air attacks, which were previously understood to be targeting only high-level members but now target all AS members. This has led many to desert and defect to their clans or homes. Few defect to the FGS because the AS *Amniyaat* has spread false stories about mistreatment by the FGS.⁷ The recent mistreatment of Mukhtar Robow will only further discourage defection to the government.

² Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Katiba in Bay, February 2018.

³ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Sariyya in Gedo, March 2018.

⁴ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Katiba in Mogadishu, March 2018

⁵ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

⁶ Interview with a former Jabha official in the AS Jabha HQ, May, 2018.

⁷ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

A group with the poorest will to fight are the Somali diaspora; most have defected from AS or are in jail within the group; the rest are given lowly jobs or put in early retirement.⁸ This may have more to do with the power struggles within AS and the preference of the diaspora of IS Somalia than with their general apathy towards fighting.

The *Da'wa* officers whose job it is to raise the spirits of AS fighters are assigned to each *Jaysh*; lessons given include the merits of martyrdom and obeying the commanders. As a result, despite the aforementioned morale issues being faced by the *Jabahaat* in general, the average AS fighter is unafraid of the Somali government and its troops.⁹

AS is strict about maintaining an image of invincibility and does its best to conceal battlefield losses. For instance, all the dead are put in a mass grave, and any signs of the burial are erased.¹⁰ This denies the allies the ability to show many dead AS similar to the way the group spreads images of dead SNA and AMISOM troops.

Professionalism

A-Shabab maintains a rigorous justice system that punishes wrongdoing that involves unsanctioned violence against the public. As a result, its troops do not harm the public using its territory, nor do they put up extortion checkpoints. Likewise, AS fighters are compliant with the orders of their commanders; there is no known mutiny in AS apart from defection to IS Somalia.

Fighting tactics

The *Jabahaat* are used in conjunction with the AS *Amniyaat* in the group's wider strategy of defeating the allied forces. While the *Amniyaat* is used to undermine local governance and enforce AS rules in enemy territory, the *Jabahaat* is currently being used to weaken the allied forces' morale and lengthen the duration of the war. Capturing new territory and expanding AS rule was relegated as a priority from 2011 when the group adopted its current posture and retreated its conventional forces from Mogadishu.

The regional *Jabahaat* are used to maintain sieges on population centres that fall to the allied forces by manning checkpoints, laying ambushes, and conducting harassment raids on allied bases. Their main aim seems to be to keep the allies on edge for as long as possible in order to wear them out when the real attack by the special battalion is launched.¹¹

⁸ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Katiba in Hiran, April 2018.

⁹ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Katiba in Bay, February 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The *Jabahaat* are based in the bush near their areas of operations, in small teams and under camouflage in order to hide from aerial detection. Their armed vehicles or ‘technicals’ are hidden in the towns and are deployed as supporting units only when there is a major raid.¹²

The field commanders during battles are the Emir *Katiba* and Emir *Sariyas*. The overall commander will be the Emir *Jaysh*, who is the commander of AS *Jabha* in the region.¹³ If the commanders die in battle, they are replaced by a predetermined list of four men. If all die, whoever nominates himself will be recognised to be the leader during the retreat.

When conducting raids, it is common to receive reinforcements from other regions. For instance, an AS unit that attacked Beledhawo and El Wak in 2017 received two *Sariyas* (200 men) from Abu Zubeyr Battalion and one *Sariya* from Bay/Bakol.¹⁴

Case study: the special battalion

While any regular *Jabha* can conduct a raid or an ambush, AS has a special battalion that is designed to take the battlefield from the enemy and gain much-needed supplies. This battalion has been referred to as Saleh Nabhan Battalion and Abu Zubayr Battalion, depending on the occasion. Every military region contributes 100 men and technicals to this battalion, making it number at least 700. Troops from the different regions are mixed; their phones are taken away; and they are sent to a training camp for 3 months, regardless of their previous training. Members of this battalion make a death pact to win or die, making them especially effective in battles.

In terms of logistics, this battalion has 5 transport trucks and 3 buses that it does not borrow from the military regions. In order to protect them from aerial attacks, they are made to look like civilian trucks while on the road.

Prior to an attack, technicals are hidden under trees as far away as possible from the main body of troops. Men dig foxholes and cover them with branches to conceal them from air reconnaissance. For its own reconnaissance, the group uses night-vision cameras to record target camps at night. The layout of the target is revealed to the fighters on the night of the attack, in order to further reduce risk of leakage.

The battalion attacks allied camps using twice the number of estimated defenders. The attackers attack in waves; the first wave is expected to breach the defences, and the second wave does much of the fighting inside the base. If the group believes there is heavy armour in the camp, it uses *Jugta Culus* units that are mainly armed with handheld B10s.

¹² Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Sariyya in Gedo, March 2018.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

After the attack on Lego Camp, all SVBIEDs attacking allied bases have been armoured. According to AS defectors who helped make the armoured SVBIEDs, the armour is strong enough to withstand a DShK round, but can be taken out with an RPG.

The attack opens with an SVBIED attack; in bigger camps, two SVBIED attacks are used. Only after the SVBIED goes off does the infantry load its guns. This is meant to reduce the chance of someone unintentionally shooting his gun and raising the alarm before the attack had begun. After the SVBIED, 20-30 RPGs are immediately fired at the camp, and all guns start firing. Every 100 men from each region operate together; waves of 100 are sent into battle, depending on the number of directions from which they choose to attack. Normally, attacks are conducted in a semi-circle in order to reduce instances of friendly fire.

Little mortar support is provided during the battles; in its place, heavy anti-aircraft cannons are pounded at enemy positions. These have a strong suppressive effect on the defenders, as their shells explode on impact, forcing defenders to remain pinned down in their bunkers. The technicals come directly under the field commanders selected by the head of the Battalion. Meanwhile, the AS infantry advances without stopping to tend to the wounded and dead; the medical team takes the wounded to a field hospital 5KM from the battlefield. The hospital is heavily camouflaged with freshly cut branches. Likewise, graves are prepared for the dead.

As these kinds of attacks are carried out with the intention of gaining loot; additional drivers, mechanics, and gun technicians are brought in as needed. Technicals that are hit by RPGs or become faulty have teams on standby to pull them out or fix them; gun technicians to fix heavy guns that become faulty; mechanics to pull captured vehicles, and immediately remove the battery and disable GPS. When a car is captured, because of time constraints, emergency GPS disabling is done: the battery is removed; and dashboard power is switched off in order to kill any tracking device.¹⁵

In a failed attack, mortar support is provided to the retreating attackers, to assist them to save the heavy weapons. Military hardware is considered more important than fighters. For instance, in the Battle of Halgan, the dead and wounded were left behind; troops were given the order to save the technicals, which they did at the cost of 150 dead.¹⁶

All major battles are closely followed via the radio by the AS deputy Emir and chief of operations, Abukar. After the battles, the commanders meet with Abukar and are given directions on how they could improve their skills based on the experience from the battle.

¹⁵ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Every new battalion exists for four months, and conducts two major attacks and one ambush in its lifetime. Once disbanded, the men are given a long vacation and sent back to their regions.

War booty is handed over to the central logistics department including newly captured cars; regions are not allowed to take over cars, but can request them from the central logistics department.

The reinforcements units

This is known as the *Gurmadka Dhexe*. When AS is attacked or is about to attack, this *Jabha* is sent to join the troops already stationed in the regions. For instance, during the El Adde attack, *Gurmadka* sent 200 men, and 600 were sent by the other *Jabhas*.¹⁷ Whenever the number of the *Jabha* goes down, it is beefed up by men who graduate from the camps or are pulled from the other *Jabhas*.

All regions have their own technicals, which they store in secret garages. There is no centralised depot and they are not aware of each other's stocks.¹⁸ The reinforcements go to battle as infantry; they use the technicals already in the areas where the reinforcements are needed.

The Golis Mountains Jaysh

The Golis Mountains are seen as a strategic reserve by AS leadership. It is a hedge against defeat in the south; consequently, half of all heavy ammunition taken from AMISOM and SNA bases was sent to the Golis Mountains in 2017 for storage in secret arms caches.¹⁹ The group uses businessmen who own trucks that work on the Beledweyne-Bosaso road to help smuggle weapons, men and women to Galgala. They drop their cargo near a place called Jiingadaha near Kalabeyr in Bari region. Women are smuggled in because the men spend two year tours in Galgala, unlike elsewhere where tours are 8-12 months.²⁰

There are at least 300 AS fighters in the northern regions, according to AS defectors from Galgala. Foot soldiers travel via Mogadishu-Hargeisa-Erigavo or by road through Puntland. Senior members go by boat to Harardhere, then on a special car to Galkayo-Goldogob-Haud (Somali part of Ethiopia)-Buhodle-Sanaag. No training is done in the mountains; fully trained teams of hundreds of fighters are sent to and from the base from southern Somalia.²¹ Important people are smuggled through Somaliland.²²

¹⁷ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Katiba in Gedo, January 2018.

¹⁸ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

¹⁹ Interview with a former Jabha official in the AS Jabha HQ, May, 2018.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with a former Amniyaat commander in Puntland, September 2017.

²² Interview with a former Jabha official in the AS Jabha HQ, May, 2018.

The Kenya Jaysh

The *Katibas* in Kenya number in the hundreds of fighters. The troops based in Boni Forest are on 12 month tours and receive 2-3 months of rest. Many of them are non-Somali Kenyans.²³ Ayman is head of AS in Lamu; AS head in Mandera/Elwak is Sharif Lenkulul, both come under Qorgab.²⁴

Jugta Culus

Its smallest unit is a squad of 15 men armed with three PKMs and three RPG-7s. It used to be two of each, but the system was changed around mid 2017 in order to provide more firepower to the infantry. B10s, sharpshooters, mortars, 106mm recoilless rifles, and DShKs are provided only to the *Jugta Culus* units. These units function independently or with the *Jabahaat*. *Jugta Culus* may lay smaller ambushes, but major ambushes are mounted together with the *Jabahaat*. Likewise, every raid on a major base involves the *Jugta Culus* units, whose firepower is needed to break through defences.²⁵

During battle times, the *Jugta Culus* comes under the *Jabha* Commander of whichever unit it is sent to support. Smaller battles such as ambushes require one field commander; however, larger engagements will see several field commanders reporting to the commander of the *Katiba*.

The Fursaan

The *Fursan* are the rapid reinforcements for emergency situations. It is always on the heels of the *Jabha* when it is about to conduct operations. However, it is mostly used as a rear guard and enters the battle once the first waves of *Jabha* troops are exhausted.²⁶ It is also used as reinforcements for the *Hesba* (police). The *Fursan* would engage in paramilitary operations such as laying of ambushes for khat trucks; jobs that the *Hesba* could not do and the *Jabha* would rather not do.

The *Fursaan* receive no special training from the *Jabahaat* and no extra training as the *Hesba*. As such, it is a glorified *Jabha*, working in both cities and rural areas. The units are armed like *Jabahaat*: every squad has one RPG-7, one PKM, and 10 AK-47s.

Conclusion

The strength of AS is based on its security and intelligence power, its military strength, and its political stability. The group has successfully adapted to government attacks, which are usually

²³ Interview with a former Jabha official in the AS Jabha HQ, May, 2018.

²⁴ Interview with AS Commander in charge of war booty, January 2018.

²⁵ Interview with a former Al-Shabab Emir of a Sariyya in Gedo, March 2018.

²⁶ Interview with a former AS Fursan Emir in Mudug, March 2018.

announced months in advance and known to AS intelligence. Towns and villages under threat are evacuated of important officials and heavy weaponry months before the allies make their move. Troops are then mobilised and sent to face allied attacks in large numbers with the aim of harassing them; the group does not attempt to hold territory against an allied attack; it wants the allies to be stretched thinly in order to reduce their effect. Towns liberated from the group have almost all been turned into virtual islands that are accessible only by air or sea.

The *Jabahaat* has had a successful history in terms of winning battles. Its efforts have resulted in the allies abandoning liberated areas in the past two years. Currently, the deadliest anti-*Jabahaat* and anti-AS actor in Somalia is AFRICOM, which has forced the group to slow its attacks as it figures out how to adapt to the new reality on the battlefield. Without AFRICOM's efforts, the situation would have been more dire than it already is.

Although the *Jabahaat* officials may be tempted to defect to the government, the *Amniyaat* has guaranteed that they would not be safe in most government areas, thereby discouraging flight of talented leaders. This and the investment in the youth means that AS will be able to continue its guerrilla war into the foreseeable future.

Actions that could be taken to weaken the *Jabahaat* include:

1. Expanding government control to reach the village level in heavily-populated regions such as Bay, Bakol, and Lower Shabelle.
2. Closing down AS schools without hurting the children.
3. Improving security in government-held areas to encourage defectors.
4. Continuation of AFRICOM's actions and not declaring a hasty victory if AS loses most of its territory.
5. Training FMS and FGS troops in essential skills to win hearts and minds at the local level and create local support for the government.
6. Improve coordination of FGS, FMS, and international operations to effectively degrade the *Jabahaat*.