Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, meaning “Mujahideen Youth Movement” in Arabic, is an al-Qa’ida affiliated terrorist organization that seeks to establish an Islamist state in Somalia. In its short history, al-Shabaab has evolved from a small militia group to a formidable insurgent force that once controlled significant amounts of territory. Extending beyond Somalia, al-Shabaab has pursued a global jihadist agenda by launching terrorist attacks in countries such as Uganda and Kenya, and soliciting support from the Somali diaspora and external extremist groups.

Following the 2006-09 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, al-Shabaab rose to national prominence as a symbol of resistance against Ethiopian ‘occupiers.’ Filling the void in the wake of Ethiopia’s withdrawal and the collapse of the Islamic Courts Union, the group rapidly expanded becoming Somalia’s dominant governing entity.1 By August 2010, al-Shabaab controlled the majority of south and central Somalia, and launched its first international attack targeting Uganda’s capital Kampala with multiple suicide bombings.2

However, by late 2011, al-Shabaab’s fortunes had turned. A three pronged offensive led by government-allied African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), Kenyan, and Ethiopian forces, combined with a

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famine in south and central Somalia, forced al-Shabaab to withdraw from Mogadishu and reassess its strategy. Over the next year, internal divisions, a loss of public support, and continued offensives by government-allied forces throughout the country significantly weakened the group. Although al-Shabaab remains a major threat to security in Somalia, today, the group’s resources, territory, and influence have diminished significantly.³


⁴ Information for maps was derived from BBC Somalia maps and other open source material. Estimates were made when information was uncertain or lacking.
Origins

While al-Shabaab emerged as an organization in 2006, the group’s roots extend back to the 1980s and the nascent stages of the militant political Islamic movement in Somalia. In particular, the militant group al-Itihad al-Islam (AIAI) provided a platform for the growth of religious extremism and the training of future al-Shabaab leaders in Somalia.

By 2005, al-Shabaab had emerged as a loose organization of militia leaders running the military wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), a conglomeration of religious courts competing for control of south

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and central Somalia. As of 2006, the UIC had rapidly become the dominant political body in south and central Somalia, taking full control of Mogadishu. Facilitated in part by financial backing from Persian Gulf and Somali businessmen, The UIC’s increasing strength along with the inclusion of extremist elements, was deemed a threat to Ethiopia and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia, based in of Nairobi. In late 2006, with international support, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and ousted the UIC.

The collapse of the UIC led to the emergence of several groups engaged in a bloody insurgency against Ethiopian forces. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab dominated the struggle, and by the time Ethiopia withdrew in January 2009, the group had evolved to become Somalia’s most effective fighting force.

2009 - A Political Vacuum in Somalia

Several independent factors helped facilitate al-Shabaab’s ascendency in Somalia, the most prevalent of which is the failure of various political ideologies and governments to establish lasting law and order. After Siad Barre’s military dictatorship fell in 1991, Somalia lapsed into nearly two decades of clan-affiliated warlordism and the absence of central government rule. During this period, 14 internationally backed efforts, such as the 2000-04 Transitional National Government (TNG), tried and failed to rehabilitate the country – earning it the reputation of the world’s worst failed state.

Following years of fighting, a new order began to emerge in Somalia around 2000. Influenced by political Islam and proselytizing Wahhabi Islamists from the Gulf, religion took on an increasing role in Somali society. Islamic charities and leaders rose to prominence helping facilitate an environment for the increased acceptance of Islamist organizations.

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9 Others groups emerged in the aftermath as well, such as Hizbul Islam (HI), but have eventually been absorbed by al-Shabaab.

10 The clan system is a social structure by which Somali society organizes itself. Every Somali knows his or her clan kinship genealogy through patrilineal ancestors.


13 Ibid

14 Ibid
Al-Shabaab’s Relationship with Clans

Clans remain at the heart of Somali society and identity, and understanding clan politics is key to understanding local dynamics and the failures of central governance. Since its inception, al-Shabaab has been critical of clannism, attempting to present itself as above clan politics. During its rise to prominence, al-Shabaab espoused a narrative of “Somali Nationalism” to unify Somalis under al-Shabaab and mitigate clan conflict. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab has engaged in clan-based military and economic alliances throughout south and central Somalia at times.\(^\text{15}\)

In many instances, al-Shabaab intervened in conflicts between clans or backed minority clans against rival dominant clans. Additionally, many top al-Shabaab leaders are also prominent clan figures and al-Shabaab has drawn support from these connections to strengthen the organization’s position in Somalia. (Senior al-Shabaab commander Muktar Robow from the Rahanweyn clan is one such example).\(^\text{16}\)

Conversely, clan rivalries have also caused turbulence within al-Shabaab. For example, during the 2011 famine that ravaged south and central Somalia, some analysts felt al-Shabaab’s blocking of relief agencies caused conflict amongst its leadership, as the clan members of certain leaders, such as Muktar Robow, suffered immensely, while those of other leaders, such as Amir Ahmed Godane’s Isaaq clan did not experience the same fate.\(^\text{17}\)

Governance Structures

In 2010, al-Shabaab controlled the majority of south and central Somalia, establishing centralized governance structures and instituting a chain of command that controlled thousands of fighters and managed territory from the national to the local level. At the national level, al-Shabaab is led by Amir Abdi Ahmed Godane (Abu Zubeyr), who heads the main Shura council - a committee of key al-Shabaab


leaders that ranges from eight to roughly forty members. Under the Shura council are a series of national ministries or “Maktabatu,” which are responsible for the group’s national military, media, financial, and religious/legal operations. This administrative structure is replicated at the regional level, where al-Shabaab divides into regional governing bodies or “Wilaadaya.” In 2010, the size and strength of these regional administrations varied significantly, with the largest footprint in major urban centers such as Baidoa and Kismayo. Today, al-Shabaab largely retains a similar operating structure, but has been forced to adjust to territorial losses.

Al-Shabaab Messaging

While not monolithic in its ideology or goals, al-Shabaab employs several key narratives to present itself as the true and righteous power in Somalia and a unifier of Muslims around the world. Al-Shabaab’s messaging strategy has also proven to be dynamic and innovative, marked by the group’s early embrace of social media and communication in multiple languages in an attempt to attract wider support from the global Somali diaspora.

At its core, al-Shabaab subscribes to an extremely conservative religious ideology, Salafi-Jihadism, which runs counter to Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that has been practiced in Somalia since the 15th century. While Sufism is embraced by many different elements of Somali society, it is
considered heretical by al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{23} Portraying itself in a global battle against non-Muslims, al-Shabaab calls for the reunification of the \textit{Ummah} (global Muslim community) under the Caliphate, a global Islamic state.\textsuperscript{24} In 2009, al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane stated, “We will fight and the wars will not end until Islamic sharia is implemented in all continents in the world.”\textsuperscript{25}

At the national level, al-Shabaab utilizes religious and nationalist sentiments to depict itself as defenders of Islam and Somalia in the face of invading forces.\textsuperscript{26} Tapping into the wave of nationalism spurred by the 2006 Ethiopian invasion, al-Shabaab expanded its ranks from hundreds to thousands, and pushed for the establishment of an Islamic Emirate of Somalia.\textsuperscript{27} The organization initially generated considerable local and international support with this narrative, as many Somalis living in diaspora countries returned to Somalia to fight alongside al-Shabaab against the Ethiopians or provided financial support to the group.\textsuperscript{28}

In the United States, several individuals have either provided financial support for al-Shabaab or left to fight

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alongside the group in Somalia. Since 2007, more than twenty young men have left Minnesota – the home of the largest Somali Diaspora community in America – to fight with al-Shabaab.

External Linkages

Al-Shabaab maintains a formal affiliation with al-Qa’ida. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab’s initial appeals for a merger went unheeded by al-Qa’ida’s leader Osama Bin Laden, who believed a public alliance would bring undue pressure on Somalia. However, following the death of Bin Laden, al-Qa’ida’s new leader Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Shabaab Amir Godane released a video announcing the formal merger of the two groups in February 2012.

While the alliance remains in place, al-Shabaab did not adopt the al-Qa’ida name and the relationship has created significant internal rumblings amongst al-Shabaab’s leadership. In April 2012, senior al-Shabaab commander Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys publicly challenged the authority of al-Shabaab and al-Qa’ida, declaring that jihad can be waged in many different ways and by many different groups. Aweys elaborated, “We are in al-Shabaab but its operation is very wrong, we should correct it . . . al Shabaab [sic] and al Qaeda [sic] do not represent the Muslim world, they are only part of it.”

Al-Shabaab has also worked closely with the Yemen-based al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Shabaab leaders have collaborated with AQAP and the group has often acted as a conduit to al-Qa’ida

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for al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab members have received training in Yemen and brokered weapons transfers. In 2012, two weapons shipments reportedly sent by AQAP intended for al-Shabaab were captured off Somalia’s northern coast.

In addition to working with al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, al-Shabaab has demonstrated its ambitions by expanding a presence throughout the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab affiliated extremist groups have sprouted up throughout East Africa; namely the Kenyan Muslim Youth Group (MYC) in Kenya and Ansar Muslim Youth Center (AMYC) in Tanzania. Moreover, after Kenyan forces invaded Somalia in October 2011, al-Shabaab launched an aggressive campaign targeting security forces and civilians in Kenya.

**Al-Shabaab: Strategy and Tactics**

Following the collapse of the UIC and departure of Ethiopian forces in 2009, al-Shabaab initially launched a guerilla warfare campaign designed to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and establish an Islamic state in Somalia. Through local alliances and the use of tactics such as armed ambushes and suicide bombings, al-Shabaab captured large amounts of territory in south and central Somalia. By August 2010, al-Shabaab had gained significant strength and shifted its strategy to employ conventional military assaults and direct engagements with TFG and AMISOM forces. This was particularly true in Mogadishu, where al-Shabaab launched a military offensive during the month of Ramadan [August 2010] that divided the city in half. However, the Ramadan offensive failed to wrest control of the city from the government, and al-Shabaab’s fortunes waned shortly thereafter. Facing mounting pressure from AMISOM and TFG forces in Mogadishu, al-Shabaab conducted a “strategic

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withdrawal” from the Somali capital in August 2011.\textsuperscript{41}

Following its departure from Mogadishu, al-Shabaab faced even greater challenges as Kenya began an incursion into southern Somalia, while anti-al-Shabaab militias, such as Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama (ASWJ), and Ethiopian forces pushed southeast from the Ethiopian border.\textsuperscript{42} To address these challenges, al-Shabaab withdrew from most major cities in Somalia. Some members fled to safe havens like the Galgala Mountains in the semiautonomous region of Puntland, and possibly other countries such as Yemen.\textsuperscript{43} In south and central Somalia, al-Shabaab shifted its strategy back to a campaign based on guerrilla warfare tactics.\textsuperscript{44} On all fronts, including Mogadishu, al-Shabaab increasingly employed irregular attacks ambushing military convoys, assassinating government and military officials, and conducting bombings with IEDs, grenades, and landmines.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite the shift back to guerrilla warfare, al-Shabaab has not been able to stop the advance of allied forces. On 29 September 2012, Kenyan forces took Kismayo, al-Shabaab’s home base from which it generated significant amounts of revenue through the taxation of local economic activities.\textsuperscript{46} In response to the loss, al-Shabaab more than doubled its rate of attacks over the next three months launching over twenty per month against pro-government targets. While al-Shabaab has not sustained this intensity in 2013, likely due to its continued loss of financial resources and public support, it nonetheless retains the ability to inflict significant violence.

\textsuperscript{41} Anzalone, Christopher, “Al-Shabaab’s Setbacks in Somalia,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (31 October 2011): 1.


\textsuperscript{45} Azalone, Christopher, “Al-Shabaab’s Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of its Battlefield Setbacks,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (27 March 2013): 1-2.

Recently, on 14 April 2013, al-Shabaab executed an attack targeting Mogadishu’s main courthouse using multiple suicide bombings killing at least twenty-nine people (see table below).47

**Internal Conflicts**

In addition to suffering tactical defeats, internal conflicts have contributed to al-Shabaab’s setbacks. Within al-Shabaab’s upper echelon, there have been longstanding disputes and conflicts regarding goals, strategies, and tactics. Many of these appear to be molded around the discourse concerning globalist versus nationalist agendas. Individuals within the ranks of al-Shabaab’s leadership, such as Ahmed Godane, remain committed to pursuing an al-Qa’ida allied global jihadist agenda while others, such as senior commanders Muktar Robow (Abu Mansoor) and Hassan Dahir Aweys, support a more nationalist and local approach, marked by a wariness of al-Qa’ida’s foreign influence in Somalia.48

Other internal disputes have revolved around tactics. Several top leaders have voiced opposition to al-Shabaab’s indiscriminant killing of innocent Somalis and its monopolistic control over other Islamist movements in Somalia.49 In April 2013, two senior al-Shabaab leaders, Ibrahim al-Afghani and Shura council member al-Zubeyr al-Muhajir, published open letters addressed to al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri requesting his intervention to resolve disputes within al-Shabaab.50 In particular, the letters declared that al-Shabaab’s misfortunes are the result of Godane’s tyrannical rule and that the leader has neglected the teachings of Islam, mistreated foreign fighters, and deprived his critics of basic necessities, among other wrongs.51

In particular, the poor treatment of foreign fighters has resulted in public manifestations of discontent within al-Shabaab best reflected by the situation of former American al-Shabaab commander Omar Hammami (Abu Mansoor al-Amriki). Hammami has accused Godane of mistreating foreign fighters and executing those who pose a threat to his authority. Through a public discourse on Twitter, Hammami asserted that al-Shabaab’s recent losses are largely a byproduct of Godane’s

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49 Ibid.


mismanagement. Al-Shabaab publicly denounced Hammami in turn, and on 25 April 2013, reportedly failed in an assassination attempt on the former commander.

On 30 April 2013, Robow, al-Afghani, and Aweys issued a public fatwa (religious decree) condemning Godane for attempting to assassinate Hammami and breaking Islamic law. Hammami’s current status and whereabouts are unknown, though Aweys asserted in a 17 May 2013 audio recording that the American-born jihadist was still alive.

In June 2013, al Shabaab fighters loyal to opposing leaders fought in Barawe, an al-Shabaab stronghold in the Lower Shabelle region, over the supposed creation of a breakaway faction led by Robow, al-Afghani, and Aweys. On 23 June 2013, Aweys fled Barawe for the safety of the Mudug region in central Somalia, where he reportedly retains strong clan ties. However, Aweys was captured by the Himan and Heeb regional administration and later delivered to the Somali Federal Government (SFG) in Mogadishu.

Following Aweys’ departure, Godane reportedly executed al-Afghani and several other high-ranking al-Shabaab officials in Barawe, and attempted to kill Robow, who was residing in the Bakool region.

Currently, it appears Godane has consolidated control of al-Shabaab by eliminating rivals to his leadership. While internal divisions have weakened the group’s reputation and caused defections amongst its forces, al-Shabaab has continued to execute coordinated attacks throughout south and central Somalia including high-profile targets in Mogadishu. The true fallout of this recent leadership tussle remains to be seen.


Key Questions for the future of al-Shabaab and Somalia

Al-Shabaab appears to be at a crossroads as internal divisions and the continued advance of government-allied forces have weakened the group. At this critical juncture, several questions emerge for understanding the future of al Shabaab and Somalia.

In Somalia

How will al-Shabaab’s Amir Godane react to additional dissension and what further consequences will Godane’s actions have on the group and its ability to respond to territorial losses?

- Can al-Shabaab withstand further encroachment on its territory, and maintain a safe haven from which to launch attacks?
- Will Robow and Aweys, former top leaders of al-Shabaab, break ranks with al-Shabaab entirely and join the Somalia Federal Government in repelling Godane and al-Shabaab’s remaining members?

What steps can the Somalia Federal Government (SFG) undertake to hasten the demise of al-Shabaab and manage the environment afterwards?

- Are negotiations and the re-integration of less ideologically rigid members of al-Shabaab possible? In addition to the SFG defector amnesty program, what other programs can ensure the demobilization and reintegration of former al-Shabaab fighters back into Somali society (especially in the wake of security threats presented by recent defectors)?
- Can the SFG and other regional administrations avoid a descent into clan politics permitting al-Shabaab to capitalize on any lost momentum?
- What is the future role of Kenya and Ethiopia in Somalia? Can the SFG sufficiently increase its capacity enough in the middle term to adequately provide enough governance and security to allow for the departure of foreign forces (prior to the setting in of any ‘mission creep’)?

In The Horn of Africa Region

How long can Kenya and Ethiopia sustain its military intervention into Somalia?

- Both Kenya and Ethiopia have been able to significantly reduce al-Shabaab’s strength, but these countries have not been able to completely destroy the group. At what point will Kenya and Ethiopia reduce their commitments in Somalia?

To what level is al-Shabaab prepared to expand its struggle outside the confines of Somalia?
Given the mounting pressure within Somalia, does al-Shabaab have its sights set on regional expansion? Is the movement prepared to reconstruct itself as more of an East African al-Qa’ida affiliate, albeit it with a Somali base?

**The West**

*What is the most effective role for the United States and the international community to play in Somalia?*

• After recognizing the new Somali government in January 2013, what further actions can the U.S. and the international community undertake to aid the SFG? Will these efforts provide any further governance advances than past failed efforts to stabilize Somalia?

• What programs or agencies can be most effective in terms of collaboration and addressing Somali issues?

*What is the real threat of al-Shabaab to the West?*

• Despite al-Shabaab’s recent setbacks, will the al-Qa’ida affiliate continue to pose a threat to the West, especially in light of the recent Woolwich attack of a British soldier in the UK which suggests ties to al-Shabaab, Somalia and Kenya?

**Conclusion**

Al-Shabaab once appeared to be one of the most formidable terrorist groups in the world proving capable of governing vast amounts of territory and executing well-orchestrated attacks both inside and outside of Somalia. However, events over the past two years have left the group in a weakened state. Al-Shabaab’s loss of territory and public support, in combination with internal conflict, has greatly reduced the group’s capacity since its peak. This has created hope for the SFG and opportunity for interventions by the international community, such as the Friends of Somalia, to engage the Somali people and help rebuild the country. However, despite it’s setbacks, al-Shabaab still commands territory and fighters, and remains a serious threat capable of destabilizing Somalia and the greater Horn of Africa region, and potentially inspiring attacks globally.
Somalia’s Al-Shabaab: Down But Not Out represents the fifth brief in a Special Issue Brief Series: African Security Challenges. The series is a collaborative project from the Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) and the Navanti Group. The first four briefs in this series, Pardon the Pivot, What about Africa?, Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: No Easy Fix, Northern Mali: Armed Groups, State Failure, and Terrorism, and Origins and Dimensions of Instability in Post-Qaddafi Libya can be found on HSPI website.

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