



Volume 5, Number 17

September 11, 2011

Islamism in Somalia

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On July 20th, the United Nations declared a famine in two areas of southern Somalia and later extended the designation to five of the country's eight southern regions.¹ In doing so, it incurred the wrath of the Islamist group that controls most of Somalia's southern territory. *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen* ("Movement of the Warrior Youth") began restricting and banning foreign humanitarian organizations in 2009, accusing them of acting as Western spies and Christian crusaders. In response to the exigencies of the drought, it lifted the ban on July 6th, only to impose it again following the UN's declaration. An *al-Shabab* spokesman accused the United Nations of political propaganda in applying the term "famine" only to the territory under its control, claiming that the situation there is not any worse than other drought-stricken areas in the Horn of Africa. Yet hundreds of thousands of Somalis continue to leave their homes in the countryside for Mogadishu, Somalia's capital – from which *al-Shabab* withdrew on August 6th, citing "tactical reasons" – or for Kenyan and Ethiopian refugee camps. Is the Islamist group's popularity waning, and if so, what does this mean for the future of Islamism in the region?

¹ The UN declares a famine when it estimates that at least 20 percent of households in the area face extreme food shortages, acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 percent, and the death rate exceeds two deaths per 10,000 people per day. See the UN News Service, 3 August 2011, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=39225&Cr=Somalia&Cr1>.

Somali Islamism arose in the context of a broader international movement for the revitalization and reform of Islam. This movement corresponded with a political awakening in Somalia following its independence in 1960. As Somalis began studying and working abroad, they were exposed to the teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Wahhabis. Upon returning, they established organizations parallel to those in Arab countries, including *al-Islah*, the Somali branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and *Wahda al-Shabab al-Islami*, also modeled on Egyptian Islamist networks.² These movements did not enjoy popular support until the late 1970s, when they began to oppose the brutal military regime of General Siad Barre, who had seized power in a 1969 coup. Islamist activity was muted until 1975, when Islamists demonstrated against family legislation promising legal and economic equality for women. Numerous clerics were arrested and ten were executed. Islamist activity went underground until the late 1980s, when the Wahhabi-inspired group *al-Itihad al-Islami* (AIAI) was formed. Following Siad Barre's ousting in 1991, a variety of Islamist movements emerged, among which AIAI was the most powerful. It is credited with influencing and training the militants who later formed *al-Shabab*. In the late 1990s, AIAI began disbanding due to internal divisions and, subsequently, a loss of funding following US sanctions designating it a terrorist organization in 2001.

Al-Shabab emerged in 2003 in Mogadishu as a youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a coalition of *shari`a*-based courts formed in the political vacuum following Barre's departure. The ICU became popular for its reputed discipline and good conduct. It employed its own militias and took control of Mogadishu in July 2006 – the first time in fifteen years that the city was under one force. However, the international community feared the ICU would offer a safe haven to *al-Qa`ida* and establish Taliban-style rule. (There were members within the ICU who did advocate extremist ideas, but the degree to which these ideas were accepted among the organization as a whole is unclear.) Six months later, Ethiopia (with US support) led a military mission that overthrew the ICU on behalf of the internationally supported Transitional Federal

² There are several narrative accounts of Somali Islamist movements' origins. For more details, see Afyare Abdi Elmi, *Understanding the Somali Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2010) and International Crisis Group, *Somalia's Islamists*, Africa Report No. 100, 12 December 2005.

Government (TFG). The *al-Shabab* militia, however, continued to fight the Ethiopians and the TFG.

The lack of security since the advent of civil war in 1991 has given *al-Shabab*, which has an estimated seven to nine thousand fighters, political clout. Though Somali people are relatively homogenous ethnically, linguistically, and religiously (over 95 percent are Sunni Muslim), Somali society is organized into kinship-based clans. Islam is seen as a means of overriding clan ties to create a unified national identity. A Somali scholar who visited Islamist-controlled Mogadishu in 2006 saw “euphoria in the streets,” giving him the impression that the Islamists enjoyed popular support.³ The Islamists offered social services, ran the schools and health centers, and, for a tax, provided security to businesses. Despite its relatively small numbers, *al-Shabab* has been able to control much of southern Somalia because clan leaders in those areas have been willing to cooperate with the group.

Since 2007, *al-Shabab* leaders have pledged allegiance to *al-Qa`ida*. However, the strength of this association is a matter of debate.⁴ Until recently, the groups’ ties appeared mainly ideological. Like *al-Qa`ida*, *al-Shabab* has actively recruited foreign fighters, particularly from Somali populations in Western countries. Western recruits’ passports and language skills make them valuable, and their deaths bring more attention to the group’s cause. Many of *al-Shabab*’s recruitment videos employ American cultural signifiers like slang and rap music, and are narrated by Omar Hammami, a.k.a. al-Amriki, an American who uncovers his face, speaks English and vows with a smile to kill “all the enemy” and help establish an Islamic caliphate. He has recorded simple, catchy rap tracks to accompany footage of young men carrying weapons through the outback and preparing for a battle; one rap includes the lines, “Word by word, [George] Bush said the truth:

³ Elmi, 154.

⁴ For two differing views, see Adam Kahan, “Al Shabaab’s Rise in the al Qaeda Network,” 9 August 2011, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/kahan-shabaab-rise-qaeda-network-august-9-2011>; and Christopher Anzalone, “Dangerous liaison? Evaluating relations between Al-Shabab and Al-Qaeda,” *Open Democracy*, 13 August 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/christopher-anzalone/dangerous-liaison-evaluating-relations-between-al-shabab-and-al-qa>.

You're with them or you're with the Muslim group.”⁵ The videos promise glorification in the name of Islam.

The June 8th killing of *al-Qa`ida* operative Fazul Abdullah Mohammed in Mogadishu and the July indictment of Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, an alleged *al-Shabab* liaison to *al-Qa`ida*, offer evidence of operational ties between the organizations.⁶ Yet *al-Shabab* reportedly turned down an offer by Ayman al-Zawahiri to change its name to *al-Qa`ida* in East Africa. Despite its diaspora networks and jihadi rhetoric, *al-Shabab* has not attempted to extend its reach beyond Somalia. Foreign recruits, including three Americans who became suicide bombers, have so far been involved only in attacks related to developments within Somalia. And while on July 11, 2010, *al-Shabab* claimed responsibility for twin bombings that killed more than 70 people watching the World Cup in Uganda, these bombings – the group's first and only major attack outside Somalia – were linked to a domestic agenda: they were intended to pressure the Ugandan government to withdraw its soldiers from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), an ally of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

Furthermore, *al-Shabab*'s poor handling of the drought situation – particularly its limitation on international humanitarian aid – has tarnished its image and reportedly exacerbated a division in the leadership. The group's general leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who is trying to forge closer ties with *al-Qa`ida* in the Arabian Peninsula, seems to have been behind the ban on aid, against the advice of his deputies Muktar Ali Robow and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys. Additionally, the UN's Special Representative for Somalia suggested that *al-Shabab*'s funding has decreased significantly, due in part to instability in the Middle East and North Africa, where some of its financial backers reside.⁷ With its withdrawal from Mogadishu, *al-Shabab* appears to be losing its influence.

Yet the international community should not expect Islamist movements to fade from the political scene. Islam is a strong part of Somali identity and cannot be ignored in the state-building

⁵ For the video, see Rageh Omaar, “From Minneapolis to Mogadishu,” *Al-Jazeera English*, 15 July 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/ragehomaarreport/2010/07/201071583644674720.html>.

⁶ FBI, 5 July 2011, <http://www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2011/accused-al-shabaab-leader-charged-with-providing-material-support-to-al-shabaab-and-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula>.

⁷ UN Press Conference, 10 August 2011, http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2011/110810_Somalia.doc.htm.

process. As the scholar Andre Le Sage points out, Somali Islamist movements' ideologies and objectives "cover a wide spectrum of political philosophy."⁸ *Al-Islah*, for example, promotes Islamic values through non-violent means. Perhaps with *al-Shabab* losing ground, Somalis and the international community can find more flexible ways to incorporate Islamic values into a functioning government system. Until then, the hope is that humanitarian aid can be extended and increased. The drought is expected to last another six months, until the next harvest season in January 2012.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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⁸ Andre Le Sage, "Prospects for *Al Itihad* and Islamist Radicalism in Somalia," *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 27, no. 89 (September 2001).