Terrorism, War and Conflict, an analysis into the Horn of Africa

Al Shabaab in Somalia; US and UN efforts to reduce violence

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Abstract

Somalia has been one of the UN member countries who lingers from the presence of terrorist groups in its territory, that exert tremendous influence in the daily life of its society and economy. Al Shabaab is well known in the horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia, for its terrorist training and strong affiliation with other terrorist groups in Nigeria and Al-Qaeda. The *Harakat Shabaab Al Mujahidin*, also known as *Al-Shabaab*. has completely controlled the central and southern part of Somalia including some of its important sea ports, which are vital for the country's economy. Although Ethiopian and Somali military forces attempted to rout the group in a two week war between December 2006 and January 2007, Al Shabaab, with its 14,500 militants, still continues to maintain control over strategic locations, not only in Somalia, but also throughout the horn of Africa.[1]

The paper delves into the recent events and attacks either undertaken or influenced by Al-Shabaab, including a snap shot of its threat to humanitarian aid personnel as well as the Africa Union troops who are desperately trying to lower the intensity of conflict along the Somalia Kenya border area and Al-Shabaab's actions to secure financial resources.

Keywords: Africa Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, Harakat Shabaab Al Mujahidin,* Al-Shabaab, United Arab Emirates, United States, United Nations, Ethiopian Military Forces, Africa Union Troops

Introduction

One of the major terrorist groups known to embrace a threatening violence in the horn of Africa is the *Harakat Shabaab Al Mujahidin*, also known as Al-Shabaab. Based in Somalia, it has completely controlled the central and southern part of that country since the second half of 2006. Both Ethiopian and Somali government forces attempted to rout the group in a two week war between December 2006 and January 2007, but Al Shabaab, with its over 14,500 militants, still continues to maintain control

[1] http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html (Accessed on 10/23/2011)

over strategic locations, not only in Somalia, but also throughout the horn of Africa.[2] The objective of this paper is to look deeper into and the attacks either undertaken or influenced by Al-Shabaab, including a snap shot of its threat to humanitarian aid personnel as well as the efforts of the Africa Union troops who are desperately trying to lower the intensity of conflict along the Somalia Kenya border area and reduce Al-Shabaab's actions to secure constant financial resources.

During 2006-2009, the intervention of Ethiopian forces caused the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), to splinter into several smaller organizations.[3] This also marked the flourishing of a number of small extremist organizations; Al Shabaab being one of them, which described itself as an organization waging *Jihad* against enemies of Islam.[4] Hence, Al-Shabaab repeatedly engaged in fights against the Africa Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces. Due to this organization's aggressive attitude and actions against foreign assistance organizations, including not only intimidating, but also kidnapping and killing aid and relief workers, the workers and crisis management experts who are dedicating so much of their energy towards the betterment of the critical situation in Somalia have been forced to exit the country without a possibility of return in sight.

Al Shabaab, its operations and organization structure

Al-Shabaab was founded in 2004 and though long considered a terrorist organization by many countries, including Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden and the UK, was finally formally designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Government on February 29th, 2008. Al Shabaab is characterized as a very decentralized organization regarding the establishment of its agenda and goals. Its ranking members are from a number of disparate clans and the organization is susceptible to clan politics, internal divisions and shifting alliances. The majority of its fighters are interested mostly in the nationalistic battle against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Mogadishu and currently are not supportive of global Jihad, although high ranking leadership is believed to have trained in Afghanistan and orchestrated the bombings in Kampala, Uganda, on July 11th, 2010. However, taking into consideration its methods and its day to day operations, Al Shabaab can be compared to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They also have an opponent group which is the moderate *Sufi* indigenous group *Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a,* located in the southern border areas with Kenya. In August 2005, the TFG troops and their Africa Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) allies managed to wrest control all of Mogadishu from the Al Shabaab militants. This might

[2] http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html (Accessed on 10/23/2011)

[3] An Islamic group of Sharia Courts who has established a stronghold, until 2006, in the Southern regions of Somalia and its predominant population, therefore being a rival organization of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). In addition to the Capital city of Mogadishu, they controlled cities such as: Jowhar,Kismayo, Beledweyne.

[4] http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/27468/World/Region/Ethiopian-intervention-in-Somalia-risks-worsening-.aspx

have been considered as a major success but it also helped Al Shabaab at the same time to expand its ranks and keep up the pressure of violence and attempted control of the remaining regions of Somalia, enabled by the limited success and efforts undertaken by the TFG and AMISOM Troops.

At first, Al-Shabaab was run by Aden Hashi Farah "Ayro", appointed by Hassan Dahir Aweys, one of the leaders of Islamic Court Union (ICU) at the time of the organization's founding. After Ayro's death, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow (known as Abu Mansur) became a leader until he was succeeded by Moktar Ali Zubeyr "Godane." The later had the authority to control the food reserves during the drought of 2010-2011. Due to a severe drought and the assassination of its top officials, the organization has experienced a few changes in its ranks and its current leader is Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee'aad, also known as Ibrahim *"al – Afghani."* All Al Shabaab leaders have praised Usama bin Laden and confirmed their allegiances with Al-Qaeda global operations.

Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for many bombing attacks, including various suicide attacks in Mogadishu and in Central and northern Somalia particularly targeting members of the TFG force and its perceived allies. The group was blamed for five coordinated suicide car bombings in October 2008 that simultaneously hit targets in two cities in Northern Somalia, killing almost 26 people, including five bombers, and injuring 29 others. This organization has been also accused by Ugandan officials of conducting the simultaneous attacks in Kampala, Uganda, on July 11th, 2010 which killed more than seventy people. Al Shabaab leaders continuously call upon their rebels to fight against the Africa Union troops based in Mogadishu and throughout Somalia. This terrorist group continues to exert a strong control over strategic locations of Somalia by applying guerrilla asymmetric warfare.

Within the southern and central provincial regions of Somalia controlled by Al-Shabaab are: Bay and Bokool regions, led by Mukhtar Roobow (Abu Mansur), the group's spokesman; south - central Somalia and Mogadishu; Puntland, Somaliland; and the Juba Valley, led by Hassan Abdillahi Hersi (Turki), who is not considered to be a member of Al-Shabaab, but is closely aligned with it. Somalia is ripe to become another terrorist safe heaven and it is believed that it will require an international intervention such as in Afghanistan or Libya to keep this from happening. Al-Shabaab has claimed affiliation with Al-Qaeda since 2007; and its attempts to have stronger ties with Al Qaeda, to promote their ideology and attract *jihadists* from around the world have raised the level of international concern (including the U. S.) that its influence will spread to affiliates in Kenya, Yemen and beyond. According to a report by a Senior American military commander for Africa, three violent extremist organizations - Al-Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb across the Sahel Region of northern Africa and Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria – have attempted to forge an alliance and coordinate attacks against the United States and western targets. The pentagon

confirmed that the three groups had been targeting local government offices, and although they had different ideologies, they still had an alliance of convenience.

In addition to getting a steady flow of dollars from the Somali Diaspora, Al-Shabaab is also impressive in terms of convincing Somalis abroad to return to fight in their ranks of jihad. Two infamous cases are known as the "Minneapolis 8" and the "Toronto 6" two code-named indoctrination projects that were successful in turning into fighters a number of Somali-American young adults. Shirwa Ahmed, a Somali-born citizen, who blew himself up in northern Somalia in 2008, was the first known American Suicide Bomber. Minneapolis 8 was also involved in planning attacks against Austrian Police and attempted an attack during President Obama's inauguration ceremony.

United Nations role in reducing violence

According to a report issued in July, 2011 by the United Nations monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea, the Al-Shabaab generates USD 70-100 million annually through by not only taxing but also extorting Somalia's entrepreneurs and shop keepers in airports, seaports and various marketplaces, by calling it a "religious obligation." It now completely controls Somalia's number one airport and also the world- famous Bakara market. It is widely believed that Al -Shabaab collects revenue also from Somali Diaspora in the United States and Europe and through various Islamic Charities.

Even though the United Nations seems to lack the power and muscle in targeting Al-Shabaab finances, the U.N. monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea in late July 2011, took a number of decisive actions against the group by blacklisting Al-Shabaab members through a "name and shame" campaign. It was thought that making them part of a list maintained by the U.N. would highly affect the group's ability to obtain, finances and other facets of support from their domestic and international partners. The U.N. Monitoring group has also requested that the United Arab Emirates take measures to more closely control their commercial shipments and dealings in the seaports controlled by Al-Shabaab, as they are the major customer for importing charcoal from Somalia; an industry that generates USD 400-800 million annually for the terrorist organization.

The monitoring group has brought this matter to the attention of the administrations of Dubai and Sharjah, and asked them to take "more stringent measures on dhows [sailing vessels] conducting trade" with sea ports controlled by Al-Shabaab.

By mid-2011, the U N officials declared that Somalia had met the technical criteria of famine as it is defined by of death and malnutrition rates. Unfortunately the famine continues to spread, covering a large portion of southern Somalia including areas of Mogadishu and a few farming provinces. Recent figures reveal that about 12 million

people in Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti are in need of USD 1.4 billion in aid. This is the most devastating famine in the last sixty years.

It is very discouraging to help a country such as Somalia which has been a failing state for a long time; but the international community has to address seriously a combination of two challenges and growing obstacles in the horn of Africa: the Al-Shabaab influence to the locals and in the same provinces and cities a famine stricken population that is forcibly being held in these areas with very limited food resources. Some members of organizational-Shabaab want to allow western elements to assist in the food supply process in the southern famine areas of Southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle, whereas some hard-line activists don't wish to grant access. Some organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Crescent are expanding a therapeutic feeding program for children suffering from severe malnutrition isolated in rural areas of southern Somalia, but Al-Shabaab may insist on forcing them to scuttle those projects.

According to U.N estimates there were about 3.7 million people in crisis in Somalia with 3.2 million in need of immediate help, at the beginning of 2012. Terrorism training camps, extreme malnutrition among Somalia's citizens and children, Somalia's weak Transitional Federal Government, all coupled with the persisting global financial crisis, depict a grim future not only for the improvement of people's lives in Somalia but also the more difficult situation of reducing the extremist and violent actions of a belligerent organization such as Al-Shabaab which is spreading its influence rapidly in the border areas between Southern Somalia and Kenya including also the tri-border areas between Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental body that establishes a set of restrictions and principles regarding terrorism finance and money laundering has also taken action in its August, 2011 Paris plenary meeting by issuing a statement addressed to financial institutions and charities around the world. The FATF calls upon them to enhance control and monitor carefully their dealings with Somalia. These actions would bring together a number of organizations, policy makers, law enforcement agencies and banking authorities to tackle in a concerted way the question of how to lower the influence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia and in the entire Horn of Africa. This kind of "economic firepower", in addition to an African Union intervention, is likely to be the most effective strategy towards reducing the influence and financial operations of Al-Shabaab in the area. The banks must take on the decisive role of stemming the flow of capital to the organization.

US Actions against Al-Shabaab and State Refugee Camps in Somalia

During the course of last year, the U. S. government has increased its operations against terrorism in Somalia. It has intensified the drone aircraft attacks against Al-Shabaab militias and approved USD 45 million in light weapons' shipments to the African Union, mainly Ethiopian soldiers fighting in Somalia. Since the Operation Gothic Serpent or the "black hawk down" incident in Somalia on October 3-4th, 1993 which caused the death of eighteen U.S. forces, the U.S. has been reluctant to become involved in Somalia. And probably with good reason. Although Al-Shabaab has not undertaken significant offensive actions outside of Africa, it has inflicted great damage in the region, including the killing of a dozen Ugandans in 2010, immediately after Uganda's government decision to send troops to Somalia. Because the U.S. administration suspects and fears that Al-Shabaab will undertake actions against the west, it has outsourced its presence in the Horn of Africa only to African soldiers and private companies during the last two decades. As it often happens, the State Department has encountered disagreements with military officials over the effectiveness of raids and offensive campaigns against the sites suspected of being militant camps and whether these actions would considerably affect Al-Shabaab or bolster its ranks by acknowledging it as an established group against a foreign power.

Currently, the African Union has about 9000 soldiers headquartered in Mogadishu to support Somalia's fragmented and weak army and the country's Transitional Federal Government. According to a number of U. S. officials Al-Shabaab's main aim is to fight against the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). This is more evident once we take into account the nomination of a new Prime Minister Abdiweli M. Ali who was educated in the United States and taught at some of the nation's prominent universities. This nomination is a great step forward if compared to the dictatorship and cult of personality of Gen. Siad Barre, which lasted two decades. After ousting Gen. Barre regime, Somalia experienced almost two decades of lack of government structure that enabled Al-Shabaab to expand its ranks and guerrilla fighters.

Another "hot" region is along the border between Somalia and Kenya. The conflict erupted as Al-Shabaab wanted to take back a slice of territory that was under the control of a militia group allied to the Somali government. In the same vein, Al-Shabaab has embarked on massive campaigns to destroy and break up camps established for the victims of famine in Somalia. The recent border conflict is not doing anything else except sending the population back to the drought- stricken areas, even though Al-Shabaab has showed commitment to supply enough food to feed the people until the next harvest season. According to U.N. officials this is considered as a "nightmare" and according to U.N. workers, "It has been hard enough to access famine victims in Shabaab areas, and now that the people have been scattered, that means more checkpoints, more local authorities to deal with, and more negotiations." During the

end of last year it was witnessed that hundreds of Al-Shabaab fighters headed towards the Southern border between Somalia and Kenya; and within a few days they mounted an offensive against Dhobley, a city known for its regional commodities market. and being under the rule of an Islamic warlord who is French educated The fight in Dhobley was witnessed by the program director of American refugee Committee, who emphasized that "It was a big fight" and he continued that "it's likely to impact humanitarian operations because there are many feeding centers in Dhobley".

Dhobley is just a few miles away from the border with Kenya, and Kenya's military forces have pledged to undertake a military operation if a second attack persists in the coming months. The Kenyan government is also worried that Al-Shabaab may conduct violent attacks inside Kenya itself. During the border conflict between Al- Shabaab and the regional rebel group in support of the Transitional Government, the Kenyan forces were careful not to engage directly in Somalia's internal fighting. Nonetheless Kenya is playing a major role in receiving a large number of refugees fleeing their country and moving to Kenya rather than face being killed directly by Al-Shabaab or indirectly because of drought and famine. It must be noted that Al-Shabaab has single handedly and abruptly closed several of the refugee camps and urged the locals to return to their fields and plant crops right before a rainy season would start.[5]

Under the constraints of having limited troops and human intelligence resources in the Horn of Africa and particularly in Somalia, the Obama administration is facing major challenges towards bolstering the efforts to stabilize the country by strengthening Somalia's weak government which is dealing with a large number of hungry citizens and children. According to UN officials, famine is spreading quickly in Somalia and will continue to do so unless international organizations step up their efforts in feeding the population. Western aid agencies have been facing insurmountable difficulties in areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, and in some areas its fighters have established their own camps to feed the people, sometimes even forcing the population to choose their camps instead of those established by the west or the African Union and perhaps to stay there and starve.

[5] Many international organizations have joined the efforts to increase the aid towards Somalia and its people. Al Qaeda is also added to the long list of the enormous aid industry in the country. According to the Guardian Many Somalis are suspicious to western aid agencies, due to fear of them to have a "side with particular political groups or clans, and bankroll warlords". Although Al-Qaeda has recently come in to Somalia and lend a hand to help the hungry and thirsty people of Somalia. Al-Shabaab, on territories where it has established control; applies a preferential practice towards the international aid organizations, it is obvious that they are willing to allow Muslim Charities, particularly those coming from the Gulf countries and Turkey. According to Dr. Unni Karunakara, international president of Médecins Sans Frontières: "the challenges are often exacerbated when famine is combined with conflict." As a result it is unrealistic to imagine that sending over food or money to procure food is going to resolve the problem. Combating famine is hard, when trying to eradicate or reduce famine in a war torn region, this makes it even more difficult and complex. The situation in Al-Shabaab controlled areas is no different from a difficult and pessimistic region, in which its impossible to conduct the tasks of reducing malnutrition. Interestingly enough, the only places where the United Nations has officially declared famine are regions controlled by Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Somalia's last functioning government fell in 1991 and since then it has been a safe haven for terrorists and Al-Qaeda operatives. The only hope is the current presence of U. S. Special Forces Green Berets in Uganda and Central Africa - who have been stationed in the region since October, 2011. They were sent under the executive order of President Barack Obama to help local forces battle against the Lord's Resistance Army, comprised of 200 rebels orchestrating a campaign of murder and rape, that begun almost at the same time that Al-Shabaab came into existence, about 20 years ago. The U.S. Special Forces will assist the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Southern Sudan perhaps keeps an eye on the deteriorating situation in Somalia. But just monitoring can't eradicate the violence and the flourishing of terrorist elements and extremism in the region.

Conclusion

Al-Shabaab is a clear present and growing danger not only in the horn of Africa but well beyond the region. It will be training terrorists in a growing scale in the coming years. Peace Accords have reduced the violence and brought political violence to its lowest levels in years in Somalia, but simultaneously we see that violence and dramatic decrease of public order and safety has been the cornerstone challenges in all of the horn of Africa. The fall of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from Afghanistan was the first in a series of events that allowed terrorist organizations to gain a foothold, but lack of appropriate intervention has allowed them to grow exponentially. According to Professor Harmon "terrorism is here to stay." We cannot forget the attack of Pakistani gunmen who shot dead two people and maimed three more, nearby the Langley Virginia base, and the attacks against U.S. citizens that are sure to occur in the coming years.[6]

There must be a concerted effort in order to counter terrorist actions and its aspirations in all sectors, including defensive military actions, humanitarian aid, public diplomacy and the use of other means of soft power. We are entering the second decade of the twenty first century with what seems perhaps like apparent victory against terrorist organizations, considering that there has not been a single attack on U.S. soil during the last ten years. Hope remains high that we keep the same level of vigilance not only in a domestic front but also in countries where our presence is highly needed, including the Horn of Africa, a strategic region with persisting problems and long lived challenges awaiting to be confronted and dealt with in near and distant the future. It behooves us to take care of our friends in Africa, for if we do not, the cancer of terrorism may find us yet again.

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